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History of Western Art

Part Five – Modernism to Post-Modernism

Assignment Five

Exercise Three – 2000 word analysis

The Nude in Art – Have Contemporary Artists Challenged the Depiction of the Nude?

In this essay I propose to discuss the subject of the nude in contemporary art, specifically whether we can be said to have escaped the necessity of portraying nudity other than in an idealised manner for the enjoyment of a viewer who sees the subject within the context of a sexualised framework. In doing so, I shall draw on the artists Lucian Freud and Aleah Chapin and I shall consider how, if at all, their depiction of nudity, nakedness and sexuality contrasts with the analyses of such subjects by eminent writers such as Kenneth Clark, John Berger and Lynda Nead.

Whether for cultural, spiritual, aesthetic or practical reasons, the naked figure has been depicted in art throughout history. For this essay I shall leave aside scientific and medical illustration, focusing instead on the nude in art in the 20th and 21st century.

Naked figures are routinely presented in the context of 'art', be it in galleries for our viewing enjoyment, in advertising to entice us to buy products or services, or for sexual gratification (in the context of pornography).

Kenneth Clark states in his seminal work *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*: "Being naked is simply being without clothes....The nude in art plays a role similar to that of the hero in epic: it provides the means and occasion to figure forth what a particular society takes to be greatest excellence."

Clark goes on to say that "The nude, therefore, "is not the subject of art, but a form of art.... To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word "nude," on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed." (Clark)

When considering the concept of naked versus nude, John Berger places a different emphasis, distinguishing between nakedness and the nude thus: "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself. A nude has to be seen as an object in order to be a nude." He further states that: "Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress. [Nudes] are as formal with their clothes off as with their clothes on." (Berger)

Nead states that "pictures of the female nude are not *about* female sexuality in any simplistic way; they also testify to a particular cultural definition of male sexuality and are part of a wider debate around representation and cultural value." (Nead, *The Female Nude*)

In biblical terms, Eve is blamed for persuading Adam to eat the Forbidden Fruit (in Western Christian teachings, the apple) whereby they learn that they are naked. In Western art, subjects are painted, not as they are but as they are seen by the spectator/owner/patron, usually a man. This can be differentiated from other cultures (eg. Shunga, the Kama sutra), where both parties enjoy each other equally and which, although explicit, are also educational in nature. (British Museum) (Wikipedia).

As Berger observed, “almost all post-Renaissance European sexual imagery is frontal—either literally or metaphorically—because the sexual protagonist is the spectator-owner looking at it” (1972: 56).

In Classical Western art the woman is languid, at rest. She should not show her own passion or energy (Berger).



Titian: Venus d'Urbino (1538)

This can be strongly contrasted by the attitudes, poses and composition of figures in Chapin's work (below) where the woman are strong, full of life and vitality; having fun and clearly celebrating life.



Aleah Chaplin: The last droplets of the day (2015)

Durer paints 'the ideal woman', not an individual but a composite, taking the 'best' parts of several female bodies, then combining them to form the 'perfect' image. It is not an individual but an idealised female. (Berger)

So what of contemporary art? Notwithstanding advances in feminism and the emancipation of women, men continue to represent a disproportionate percentage of artists in major galleries. In a broad analysis comparing the number of female artists and sculptures of female nudes in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Guerilla Girls found that 'the ratio was less than 5% artists to 85% nudes; in 2012, an incredible 23 years later, the ratio is still less than 4% artists to 76% nudes'. Does this necessarily mean that the nude has not progressed?

Following in the steps of Sir Stanley Spencer's revolutionary nudes in the 1930s, Lucian Freud painted a large collection of nudes in the course of his working life. Like his predecessors, many of his subjects are languid, disinterested and in repose. However, unlike earlier artists, Freud's subjects are not overtly sexual; they are not painted with the express intention of enticing the viewer; they are nudes but not erotic or pornographic in the sense described by Nead and Clark. On the contrary, Freud's frequently-painted 'Big Sue' Tilley, is anything but seeking to lure us in with this pose, as she lays fast asleep on the couch, oblivious (at least ostensibly) to the viewer.



Lucian Freud: Benefits Supervisor Sleeping (1995)

Freud did not restrict his arguably rather unflattering portraits to the women in his life. Leigh Bowery, a longstanding friend was a frequent subject for Freud. In its analysis of *Leigh Bowery (1991)* the Tate states "Freud said of Bowery 'I found him perfectly beautiful' (quoted in Bernard, p.19). He also commented 'the way he edits his body is amazingly aware and amazingly abandoned' (quoted in Feaver, p.43). Bowery said of Freud: 'I love the psychological aspect of his work – in fact I sometimes felt as if I had been undergoing psychoanalysis with him ... His work is full of tension. Like me he is interested in the underbelly of things.' (Quoted in Sue Tilley, *Leigh Bowery: The Life and Times of an Icon*, London 1997, p.220.)



Lucian Freud: Nude with Leg Up (1992)

Bowery's expression is rather desultory, he isn't looking at us, the viewer, attempting to engage our attention. The pose appears relaxed but given Freud's penchant for long sittings, must have been uncomfortable. As with Benefits Supervisor and much of Freud's other portrait work, the emphasis is on the flesh, depicted in all its fulsome, buxom glory. Freud, like his contemporary Francis Bacon, was fascinated by flesh, who, on being asked what flesh represented to him said in his last interview with Francis Jacobetti, "Flesh and meat are life! If I paint red meat as I paint bodies it is just because I find it very beautiful." (Aphelis)

A cause of some disquiet amongst his critics, Freud also frequently painted his mother, Lucie. However, of his subjects he said "My work is purely autobiographical. I work from people whom I care about and think about."

Unsurprisingly Aleah Chapin cites Lucian Freud as one of her inspirations. She describes his figures in uncompromising terms: "They were simple; unidealized figures lounging on beds, their pale flesh painted in big, gooey, confident brush strokes." (Maria Teicher interview). This is an observation well-made and is shared with Freud's many admirers and critics.

US-born artist Chapin won the National Portrait Gallery BP Portrait Award in 2012 for her work, 'Auntie' (NPG). Chapin paints a true to life image of an older woman of whom she says "The fact that she has known me since birth is extremely important. Her body is a map of her journey through life. In her, I see the personification of strength through an unguarded and accepting presence". When discussing her critics and detractors she is sanguine "Not everyone wants to see non-idealised female bodies," she shrugs. "I try not to be affected but it's difficult sometimes." (Telegraph)



Aleah Chapin: Auntie, Oil on Canvas(2012)

This portrayal of 'real women' is a recurring theme in her work; her women are strong, full of life, vitality, emotion. They come in all shapes and sizes, ages, poses and colours, challenging the traditional perception of 'the nude'.

However, before we sit back and consider that we have broken through the barrier of sexism and the need for nudes to meet pre-defined criteria, Chapin's work was not met with approval by all.

Art critic Brian Sewell in his review in the Evening Standard describes the painting as 'Wrong on so many levels'. He states 'Aleah Chapin's Auntie. Silhouetted against a white ground embellished with meaningless blotches of ochre, this ancient crone stands life-size, full-frontal and stark naked, heavy breasts drooping low, skin stretched and sagging, looking as though, par-boiled and with the lividity of death about her lower quarters, she has just escaped from a cannibal's cooking-pot. This is the figurative realism of the new American academic painter — no sympathy gentles the stark observation of every detail, nor is desire roused; instead, this painting stimulates revulsion.' (Evening Standard: 2012)

It would be easy to interpret this as a negative review, however, reading his description it is clear that Chapin, even to the 'revolted' observer has captured elements of her subject in exquisite detail: 'heavy breasts, skin stretched and sagging', 'the lividity of death'. Ordinarily any artist would be pleased to note that they have aroused such strong emotions. Whilst Sewell goes on to critique the image from the perspective of composition/technique/style, ('the body disproportionately large', 'Did Miss Chapin not see that ...she had enlarged this repellent body beyond the scale of the head and given primacy... to the belly-button and the breasts') it is difficult to isolate his displeasure at Chapin as artist from his disgust at Auntie as subject. Is his objection that this is not a portrait, an image not well-executed or just a distasteful presentation of the female nude? Either way, his phraseology remains couched in terms of revulsion, making the nature of his issues with this painting unclear and therefore reducing their value.

For a more positive analysis it is worth reading Daniel Maidman's review of Chapin's exhibition at Flowers Gallery in 2013. Whilst the review is light-hearted in keeping with the Huffington Post style, nonetheless, Maidman makes good points regarding Chapin's skill as an artist. Of Shanti and Heather he writes

"This is a big, confident composition with imposingly large figures. The figures are lit by a soft, flat, frontal light which allows them to be rendered in terms of alternating passages of cool and warm colors, clustering around a middle gray. Texture is produced, especially in the legs, by side-by-side opaque and transparent highlights: some of the highlights are light-colored paint, and others are patches so thin the white panel ground shows through. The figures overall are built up by means of many unblended, slightly curving, parallel brushstrokes. Where the required level of detail falls in the background, paint is unhesitatingly applied in larger, flatter regions.... Her talent and her skills are superior, but they are not what make her special. Her vision is." (Huffington Post: 2013)

In conclusion, it is clear that there do exist works of art that challenge the 'norms' of nude portraiture and that we have moved on from the 1970s, at least in some respects. The fact that they represent a very small proportion of the art being made may be accounted for by a number of factors. Firstly, by the tastes of purchasers; ultimately artists must, in the main, sell their work if they

are to make a living and the whims of purchasers must therefore be borne in mind. If the reaction of critics such as Sewall are to be taken as indicative of the wider public, it seems likely that the art of Chapin (and no doubt Freud if it were affordable) will rarely appeal to the mainstream purchaser seeking something to hang on the living room wall.

Public galleries too, in these days of funding constraints, may find themselves forced to consider carefully whether more challenging works can be accommodated within their need to be inclusive and accessible to all visitors.

Even in these days of emancipation, liberality and sexual freedom, it seems likely that artists such as Freud and Chapin will remain an 'acquired taste' for the casual buyer of art. One hopes that John Berger would have delighted in the works of Chapin and seen her work (among others) as signalling further advances in the treatment of the nude, in particular the female nude, as no longer objects but individuals.

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