

Partial Nudity

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The Jerusalem Artists' House is currently displaying an exhibition of female nudes in which all of the eight participating artists are men. Reading the pre-exhibit publicity, both printed and electronic, I was greatly disturbed by the interface of the topic, which is highly relevant to the feminine discourse, and the male-dominated list of artists. Judging by the text accompanying the e-mailed invitation, the (female) curator is well aware of the issue's complexity. She perceives the exhibition as an opportunity to evoke discussion of the problematic issues involved in representations of female nudity, and "would like to propose guidelines for a possible discussion, inviting viewers to take part in it and make up their own opinions and modes of observation in this controversial field". But is admission of a topic's controversial nature sufficient to provoke discussion, or has the curator actually reaffirmed existing conventions, contemporaneous with the debate aroused, by holding the exhibition under these conditions? It is my belief that the exhibit's prerequisites, linking the representation of female nudity to those who have the right to create such representations, namely male artists, disallow objective or neutral viewing of the exhibition and/or the possibility of reasonable discussion regarding its legitimacy or problematic nature, irrelevant to the specific works of art participating.

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Since the rise of feminism, the depiction of female nudity throughout the history of art has been one of the most complex and charged issues regarding representation of women. In *The Nude: A New Perspective*, author Gill Saunders asserts that over the ages, Western culture has developed two conflicting attitudes toward nudity; the first, originating in Ancient Greece, regards the human body as a celebration of beauty and nobility, evidence of the spirit within, while the second attitude perceives nudity as symbolic of shame and guilt. These contradictory viewpoints converge with regard to the female body, the representation of which may express an unsullied interest in beauty and the human form, but also connotes sexual temptation, original sin and its subsequent feelings of guilt. As opposed to the less popular depictions of male nudity, female nudity has remained a constant and universally accepted genre in Western art since the Renaissance.

Feminist criticism of female nudity in art has several aspects; one of the pivotal arguments takes exception with the depiction of women as sexual objects and the appropriative male scrutiny which is the tool that permits this objectification. Furthermore, representations of the female form commonly depict passive women; passive female nudes as opposed to active, clothed males perpetuate men's superiority and women's inferiority.

In response to those works of art that perpetuate women as sex objects or as sources of inspiration for creative males, many modern women artists have undertaken the portrayal of women's bodies as a type of feminist protest, righting history's wrongs or re-appropriating their bodies. Often deliberating over their artistic form so as not to fall into the trap of duplicating demeaning representations, women artists depict a woman's experience of herself and her body. Nudity is one of the tools that may be used to express these experiences. Yocheved Weinfeld and Pamela Levi, each in her own field, were among the first widely-known women artists to rivet viewers' attention with their provocative representations of women's bodies. Exhibitions such as "Meta – Sex 94", among others, presented works by women artists that "oppose male artists' representations of women as objects on display, their anatomies blurred or even erased", to quote the exhibit's curator. Most of the artists who participated in "Meta-Sex 94" work in non-painting media, attempting to discover alternatives to the traditional drawn depictions of women, while many women artists, in Israel and abroad, choose to focus specifically on painting female nudes. Painters Jenny Saville, Joan Semmel and Alice Neel are just some of the women artists who have been working on portrayals of women's bodies abroad, while in Israel artists such as Hava Raucher, Nomi Bruckmann, Sigal Tsabari and Orit Livneh, to name just a few, work in this genre with significant and relevant impact. One would think that an exhibition focusing on female nudity in painting ought to have investigated women artists' contributions to the body of work in this genre, alongside those of male artists.

It is a well-known fact that in times past, some of the paintings of female nudes were pornographic in origin; upper class men would have their mistresses painted in the nude and allow their privileged friends to view the paintings. Today most pornography is photographic; photography as an art form developed during the nineteenth century and took the place of painting as the paramount portrayer of

reality. The simultaneous rise of abstract art, perhaps in response to these developments, caused realistic portraitists as well to retain a degree of distance from the duplicating, illusionary representations that had been their prerogative in the past. Thus, photographic displays of pornographic nudity may make any accusations regarding painting seem anachronistic, and many of the exhibitions portraying male or female nudity are indeed relevant to the discourse surrounding representations of the human body. However, the prevalent sensation aroused by *Nudes* is one of invasiveness and discomfort, and one wonders why.

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In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, author Andrea Dworkin lists four prerequisites necessary for the proliferation of the pornographic narrative. In *Nudes*, three of these four conditions appear valid:

1. Hierarchy – Power – When one group (men) is placed above another (women).

The pre-exhibit publicity, providing the exhibit's title (*Nudes*) and the list of participating artists (all men), illustrates the exhibit's dichotomous attitude to gender-related issues. Each gender has its delegated role, accompanied by an appropriate system of associations and clearly delineated social indications. Males "create", initiate the works of art and plan their contents, they hire models and request that they sit or recline in certain positions. The male gender is represented in the exhibit by its creations, evidence of its ability and talent, as well as in person – speaking at the exhibition's opening event, at gallery talks and at other opportunities. Members of the female gender appear as objects in paintings, naked and exposed, in positions other than those that the model would have chosen for herself, deprived, along with all other members of her sex, of the opportunity to express her professional capabilities or her thoughts on the topic, thus creating a definite hierarchal relationship between men and women, with men on the "top".

2. Dehumanization – When one human being, through the use of social tools, becomes less human; becomes an "object", or a product that can be bought or sold.

The model in a painting is both present and absent; we have no knowledge of her life, feelings, experiences or identity. Although she is fully present on the canvas, she is actually anonymous, or even "transparent", and thus less human, a type of commodity. The works of art created through observation of her body are for sale, a

fact that turns the model into a participant in the act of barter; the model and her body are the raw materials used in the acts of purchase and sale.

3. Inferiority - Obedience and fulfillment of demands become necessary in order to survive. Members of an oppressed group become versed in anticipating the demands and desires of their oppressors. The dominant group uses this acquiescence as justification of its deeds.

The relationship between a male artist and a female model, in the close quarters of an artist's studio, is potentially quite problematic. Artist and model are together in a small room in a state of inequality; the woman is naked and the man clothed, the woman is passive while the man is active, the woman is an object to be viewed and the man is doing the viewing. Moreover, the two of them are on the artist's territory and there are often differences of age and social class as well; the artist is usually older, belongs to a higher social class and is more established economically than the model. He has no problem paying for her services, while she is usually in dire need of the meager pay she receives. Modeling isn't covered by a contract and models are not entitled to social benefits. This state of inferiority may lead to exploitation or abuse. (Many cases of exploitative or abusive relationships between male artists and female models have been documented; the most well-known is that of Auguste Rodin and the artist Camille Claudel, who was both his model and his mistress.)

Even if the relationships between the artists participating in *Nudes* and their models are not of this sort, and even if they treat their models fairly and respectfully, one cannot ignore the fact that the exhibit portrays only one type of relationship, one that connotes authority and dominance.

Dworkin asserts that these three criteria constitute the basis of the pornographic narrative, and their existence permits the appearance of a fourth characteristic – the use of violence, which is the sole prerogative of the dominant group.

Barring women from active participation in *Nudes* has created the social context, as well as the hierarchal associative mind-set that corresponds to the three criteria that form the basis of pornography – hierarchy, dehumanization, inferiority and obedience, and this is what causes a feeling of discomfort and an atmosphere of invasiveness. Perhaps this is the result of what Dworkin calls the "essential sexuality of male power". Dworkin believes that when women are oppressed, inequality becomes an

experience of sexual gratification, essential to sexual desire, stating that "In pornography I found a map, a geography of male dominance in the sexual realm, with sex clearly defined as dominance and submission, not as equality or reciprocity", and therefore, pornography is a central component in the subjugation of women.

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It is within a male artist's rights to paint a nude female model, and in most cases no complications ensue. However, holding an exhibition that presents a group of male artists who have chosen to paint women in the nude, and that does not provide women artists with any opportunity to actively participate in the discourse, creates a situation that contains discriminatory prerequisites and an inequitable balance of power. Choosing this group of artists to represent such a complex and charged genre implies that the male gender is to be considered dominant, while women are portrayed in a position of inferiority. The unequal and hierarchal relationship between men and women portrayed in the exhibit, even if unintentional, could easily become an event of a pornographic nature, and may indirectly provide a forum for discourse that permits subjugation of women. Stating that the coordinators are aware of the issues involved is not enough, and may be construed as an attempt to cover up their unwillingness to seriously discuss the issue of nudity. Another disturbing issue is the market value and sale of the paintings appearing in *Nudes*, in light of their interface with the pornography industry.

An exhibit that limits itself to the portrayal of female nudity, rather than the wider context of both male and female nudity, ought to have a justifiable reason for doing so. Nevertheless, having decided to focus on the topic of female nudity, the exhibit's organizers ought to have presented viewers with a variety of viewpoints and attitudes. Inclusion of women artists working in the genre would constitute an initial step, which would raise the discourse to more complex levels rather than cause it damage. The option of a lively and vibrant discussion between varying representations of nudity that relate both to the historical aspects of the feminine image and to the current search for relevant points of view, and compare "inside" observation of the female body (women observing themselves) with "outside" observations (men observing women), would benefit all those involved in artistic work, as well as the viewers, instead of causing feelings of discrimination and exclusion.

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