

The Esthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art*

Carol Duncan

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In this essay, I am using the term erotic not as a self-evident, universal category, but as a culturally defined concept that is ideological in nature. More specifically, I am arguing that the modern art that we have learned to recognize and respond to as erotic is frequently about the power and supremacy of men over women. Indeed, once one begins to subject erotic art to critical analysis, to examine the male-female relationships it implies, one is struck with the repetitiousness with which the issue of power is treated. The erotic imaginations of modern male artists—the famous and the forgotten, the formal innovators and the followers—re-enact in hundreds of particular variations a remarkably limited set of fantasies. Time and again, the male confronts the female nude as an adversary whose independent existence as a physical or spiritual being must be assimilated to male needs, converted to abstractions, enfeebled or destroyed. So often do such works invite fantasies of male conquest (or fantasies that justify male domination) that the subjugation of the female will appear to be one of the primary motives of modern erotic art.

In Delacroix's *Woman in White Stockings* (1832), for example, an artist's model (i.e., a sexually available woman) reclines invitingly on a silken mattress. The deep red drapery behind her forms a shadowy and suggestive opening. The image evokes a basic male fantasy of sexual confrontation, but the model does not appear to anticipate pleasure. On the contrary, she appears to be in pain, and the signs of her distress are depicted as carefully as her alluring flesh. Her face, partly averted, appears disturbed, her torso is uncomfortably twisted, and the position of her arms suggests surrender and powerlessness. But this distress does not contradict the promise of male gratification. Rather, it is offered as an explicit condition of male pleasure—the artist's and the viewer's.

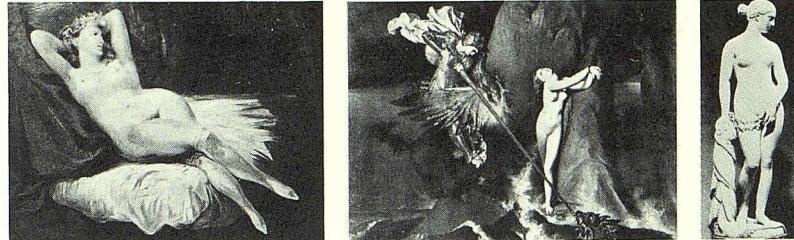
The equation of female sexual experience with surrender and victimization is so familiar in what our culture designates as erotic art and so sanctioned by both popular and high cultural traditions, that one hardly stops to think it odd. The Victorian myth that women experience sex as a violation of body or spirit or both, and that those who actively seek gratification are perverse (and hence deserving of degradation), is but one of many ideological justifications of the sexual victimization of women devised by the

modern era. In the 20th century, the theory and practice of psychology has given new rationalizations to the same underlying thesis.

The visual arts are crowded with images of suffering, exposed heroines—slaves, murder victims, women in terror, under attack, betrayed, in chains, abandoned or abducted. Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827), inspired by a poem by Byron, is a *tour de force* of erotic cruelty. Ingres' *Roger and Angelica* (1867) also depicts woman as victim. Here, an endangered and helpless heroine—naked, hairless and swooning—is chained to a large, phallic-shaped rock, immediately below which appear the snake-like forms of a dragon. This fantastic but deadly serious statement documents a common case of male castration anxiety. But the artist-hero (he is Ingres-Roger) masters the situation: he conquers the dangerous female genitals. First he desexualizes Angelica—reduces her to an unconscious mass of closed and boneless flesh; then he thrusts his lance into the toothy opening of the serpent—Angelica's vagina transposed. Given the fears such an image reveals, it is no wonder that Ingres idealized helpless, passive women. The point here, however, is that neither Ingres' fears nor his ideal woman were unique to him.

Americans, too, thrilled to images of female victims. Hiram Powers's *The Greek Slave* (1843) was probably the most famous and celebrated American sculpture in the mid-19th century. Overtly, the viewer could admire the virtuous modesty with which Powers endowed the young slave girl, as did critics in the 19th century; but covertly, Powers invites the viewer to imagine himself as the potential oriental buyer of a beautiful, naked, humiliated girl who is literally for sale (he specified that she is on the auction block). The narrative content of this sculpture supports the same underlying thesis we saw in the Delacroix: for women, the sexual encounter must entail pain and subjugation, and that subjugation is a condition of male gratification. But even in paintings where nudes are not literally victims, female allure is treated in terms related to victimization. For Ingres, Courbet, Renoir, Matisse and scores of other modern artists, weakness, mindlessness and indolence are attributes of female 'sexiness'. Germaine Greer's description of the female ideal that informs modern advertising could as well have been drawn from modern nudes:

Left to right: Eugene Delacroix. *Woman in White Stockings*. c. 1832. The Louvre; J.D. Ingres. *Roger and Angelica*. 1867. The National Gallery, London; Hiram Powers. *The Greek Slave*. 1843. Marble. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



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Her essential quality is castratedness. She absolutely must be young, her body hairless, her flesh buoyant, and *she must not have a sexual organ*.¹

That is, in the modern era, woman's desirability increases as her humanity and health (relative to male norms) are diminished.

The need to see women as weak, vapid, unhealthy objects—while not unique to the modern era—is evidently felt with unusual intensity and frequency in bourgeois civilization, whose technical advances so favor the idea of sexual equality. Indeed, as women's claims to full humanity grew, the more relentlessly would art rationalize their inferior status. For while literature and the theatre could give expression to feminist voices, the art world acknowledged only male views of human sexual experience. In that arena, men alone were free to grapple with their sexual aspirations, fantasies and fears. Increasingly in the modern era, artists and their audiences agreed that serious and profound art is likely to be about what men think of women. In fact, the defense of male supremacy must be recognized as a central theme in modern art. Gauguin, Munch, Rodin, Matisse, Picasso and scores of other artists, consciously or unconsciously, identified some aspect of the sexist cause with all or part of their own artistic missions. Art celebrating sexist experience was accorded the greatest prestige, given the most pretentious esthetic rationales, and identified with the highest and deepest of human aspirations.

Nudes and whores—women with no identity beyond their existence as sex objects—were made to embody transcendent, “universally” significant statements. In literature as in art, the image of the whore even came to stand for woman in her purest, most concentrated form, just as the brothel became the ultimate classroom, the temple in which men only might glimpse life’s deepest mysteries: “A Henry Miller, going to bed with a prostitute [in *Tropic of Cancer*], feels that he sounds the very depths of life, death and the cosmos.”² Picasso’s famous brothel scene, the *Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), where the viewer is cast as the male customer, makes similar claims—claims that art historians advocate as “humanistic” and universal.³ Art-making itself is analogous to the sexual domination of whores. The metaphor of

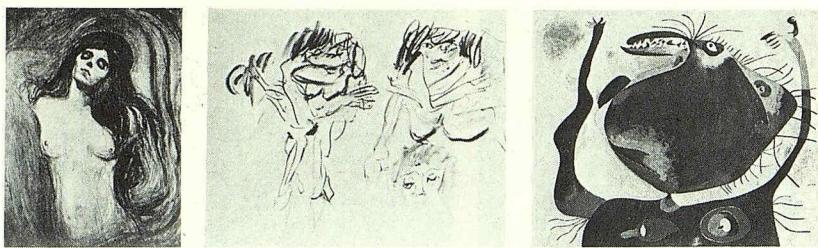
the penis-as-paintbrush is a revered truth for many 20th-century artists and art historians. It also insists that to create is to possess, to dominate, and to be quintessentially male.

I try to paint with my heart and my loins, not bothering with style (Vlaminck).⁴

Thus I learned to battle the canvas, to come to know it as a being resisting my wish (dream), and to bend it forcibly to this wish. At first it stands there like a pure chaste virgin... and then comes the willful brush which first here, then there, gradually conquers it with all the energy peculiar to it, like a European colonist. . . (Kandinsky).⁵

The kind of nudes that prevail in the modern era do not merely reflect a collective male psyche. They actively promote the relationships they portray, not only expressing but also shaping sexual consciousness. For the nude, in her passivity and impotence, is addressed to women as much as to men. Far from being merely an entertainment for males, the nude, as a genre, is one of many cultural phenomena that teaches women to see themselves through male eyes and in terms of dominating male interests. While it sanctions and reinforces in men the identification of virility with domination, it holds up to women self-images in which even sexual self-expression is prohibited. As ideology, the nude shapes our awareness of our deepest human instincts in terms of domination and submission so that the supremacy of the male “I” prevails on that most fundamental level of experience.

Twentieth-century art has equally urged the victimization and spiritual diminution of women, shedding, however, the narrative trappings and much of the illusionism of the 19th century. The abandoned Ariadnes, endangered captives and cloistered harem women of 19th-century art become simply naked models and mistresses in the studio or whores in the brothel. In nudes by Matisse, Vlaminck, Kirchner, Van Dongen and others, the demonstration of male control and the suppression of female subjectivity is more emphatic and more frequently asserted than in 19th-century ones. Their faces are more frequently concealed, blank or mask-like (that is, when they are not put to sleep), and the artist manipulates their passive bodies with more liberty and “artistic” bravado than



Left to right: Edvard Munch. *Madonna*. 1893-95. Nasjonal Gallieret, Oslo; Willem de Kooning. *Untitled Drawing*. 1969; Joan Miró. *Woman's Head*. 1938. Private Collection; Pablo Picasso. *Seated Bather*. 1929. Museum of Modern Art, New York; Maurice Vlaminck. *Bathers*. 1907. Private Collection, Kees van Dongen. *Reclining Nude*. 1904. Private Collection.

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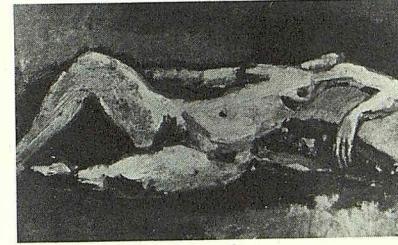
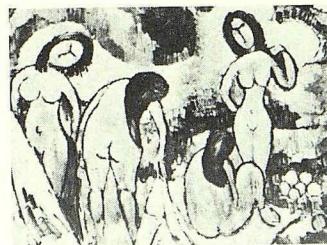
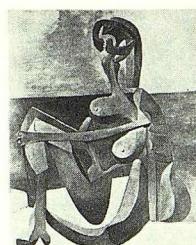
The image of the femme fatale, especially popular at the turn of the century, would seem to contradict the image of woman as victim. Typically, she looms over the male viewer, fixing him with a mysterious gaze and rendering him will-less. Yet she is born of the same set of underlying fears as her powerless, victimized sisters, as the depictions often reveal. Munch's *Madonna* (1893-94), a femme fatale *par excellence*, visually hints at the imagery of victimization. The familiar gestures of surrender (the arm behind the head) and captivity (the arm behind the back, as if bound) are clearly if softly stated. These gestures have a long history in Western art. The dying *Daughter of Niobe*, a well-known Greek sculpture of the 5th century B.C., exhibits exactly this pose. The raised arm is also seen in numerous 5th-century statues of dying Amazons and sleeping Ariadnes, where it conveys death, sleep or an overwhelming of the will. It may also convey the idea of lost struggle, as in the Amazon statues or in Michaelangelo's *Dying Captive* (The Louvre), themselves masterpieces of victim imagery with strong sexual overtones. But in the modern era, the raised arm (or arms) is emptied of its classical connotation of defeat with dignity and becomes almost exclusively a female gesture—a signal of sexual surrender and physical availability. Munch used it in his *Madonna* to mitigate his assertion of female power; the gesture of defeat subtly checks the dark, overpowering force of Woman. The same ambivalence can also be seen in the spatial relationship between the figure and the viewer: the woman can be read as rising upright before him or as lying beneath him.

However lethal to the male, the late 19th-century femme fatale of Munch, Klimt and Moreau ensnares by her physical beauty and sexual allure. In the 20th century, she becomes bestial, carnivorous and visibly grotesque. In images of monstrous females by Picasso, Rouault, the Surrealists and de Kooning, the dread of woman and male feelings of inferiority are projected, objectified and universalized. Yet here too the devouring woman implies her opposite, combining features of both the powerless and the threatening. The women in Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, although physically mutilated and naked (vulnerable), aggressively stare down the viewer, are impenetrably masked, and display sharp-edged, dan-

gerous-looking bodies. Picasso ambivalently presents them with sham and real reverence in the form of a desecrated, burlesque icon, already slashed to bits. De Kooning, in his continuing *Woman* series, ritually invokes, objectifies and obliterates the same species of goddess-whore. Here too a similar ambivalence finds its voice in shifting, unstable forms whose emergence and destruction are accepted in the critical literature as the conscious "esthetic" pretext for his work. The pose his figures usually take—a frontal crouch with thighs open to expose the vulva—also appears in the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (in the lower right figure), which, in turn, derives from primitive art. Like Picasso's figures, de Kooning's women are simultaneously inviting and repelling, above and below the viewer, obscene modern whores and terrifying primitive deities.

The pronounced teeth in de Kooning's *Woman and Bicycle* (1950)—the figure actually has a second set around her throat—also speak of primitive and modern neurotic fears of the female genitals. The *vagina dentata*, an ancient fantasy into which males project their terror of castration—of being swallowed up or devoured in their partner's sexual organs—is commonly represented as a toothed mouth. The image, which appears frequently in modern art, is a striking feature of Miró's *Woman's Head* (1938). The savage creature in this painting has open alligator jaws protruding from a large, black head. The red eye, bristling hairs and exaggerated palpable nipples, in combination with the thin weak arms, help give it that same mixture of comic improbability and terribleness that characterize Picasso's *Demoiselles* and de Kooning's *Women*. But in addition—and true to Miró's love of metamorphosing forms—the image can be read literally as the lower part of a woman's body, seen partly as if through an X-ray. Inverted, the arms become open legs, the dark, massive head a uterus, and the long, dangerous jaws a toothed vaginal canal. The predatory creature in Picasso's *Seated Bather* (1929) not only has saw-toothed jaws, but several features of the praying mantis.

The praying mantis, who supposedly devours her mate, was a favorite theme in Surrealist art and literature. In paintings by Masson, Labisse, Ernst and others, the cannibalistic sexual rites of this insect become a metaphor for the human sexual relationship, and the female of the spe-



cies becomes the Surrealistic version of the femme fatale. More subhuman and brutal than her 19th-century predecessors, she testifies to the higher level of sexual anxiety and hostility experienced by the 20th-century male. For as women increasingly demanded a share of the world, the defense of male authority became more desperate:

Now become a fellow being, woman seems as formidable as when she faced man as a part of alien Nature. In place of the myth of the laborious honeybee or the mother hen is substituted the myth of the devouring female insect: the praying mantis, the spider. No longer is the female she who nurses the little ones, but rather she who eats the male.⁶

Pictures of nudes in nature also affirm the supremacy of the male consciousness even while they ostensibly venerate or pay tribute to women as freer or more in harmony with nature than men. From the *Bathers* of Delacroix to those of Renoir and Picasso, nude-in-nature pictures almost always ascribe to women a mode of existence that is categorically different from man's. Woman is seen as more of *nature* than man, less in opposition to it both physically and mentally. Implicitly, the male is seen as more closely identified with culture, "the means by which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interests."⁷

This woman/nature-man/culture dichotomy is one of the most ancient and universal ideas ever devised by man and is hardly new to modern Western culture. However, in Western bourgeois culture, the real and important role of women in domestic, economic and social life becomes ever more recognized: increasingly, the bourgeoisie educates its daughters, depends upon their social and economic cooperation and values their human companionship. Above all, the idea that women belong to the same order of being as men is more articulated than ever before. In this context, to cling to ancient notions of women as a race apart from men—as creatures of nature rather than of culture—is to defend blatantly an ideology that is everywhere contested and contradicted by experience. Nevertheless, the majority of nude-in-nature pictures state just this thesis.

In countless 19th- and 20th-century paintings

—Romantic, Symbolist or Expressionist—female nudes in outdoor settings are treated as natural inhabitants of the landscape. Although modern artists have characterized it differently, they agree that this woman-nature realm is an inviting but alien mode of experience. It both attracts and repels the male. It beckons him to step out of rationalized, bourgeois society and to enter a world where men might live through their senses, instincts or imaginations. But the condition of entry—shedding the social identity of the bourgeois male—also entails loss of autonomy and of the power to shape and control one's world. The male artist longs to join those naked beings in that other imagined realm, but he cannot because he fails to imagine their full humanity—or his own. While he values his own instincts, or that part of himself that responds to nature, he regards this portion of his nature as "feminine," antagonistic to his socialized masculine ego, and belonging to that other, "natural" order. Nor can he acknowledge in women a "masculine principle"—an autonomous self that knows itself as separate from and opposed to the natural, biological world. Like Munch before his *Madonna*, he hovers before his dream in ambivalent desire.

Rarely do modern artists imagine naked men in that other realm. When they do, as in works by Cézanne or Kirchner, the male figures tend to look uncomfortable or self-conscious. More often, the male in nature is clothed—both in the literal sense or metaphorically—with a social identity and a social or cultural project. He is a shepherd, a hunter, an artist. Matisse's *Boy With Butterfly Net* (1907) is a magnificent image of a male in nature (or rather a male acting against nature), highly individualized and properly equipped for a specific purpose. In beach scenes by the Fauves and the Kirchner circle, males—when they are present—are not "bathers," i.e., placid creatures of the water, but modern men going swimming in bathing suits or in the raw. They are active, engaged in a culturally defined recreation, located in historical time and space. The female bather, who has no counterpart in modern art, is a naked existence, outside of culture. Michelet, the 19th-century historian, poetically expressed the ideas implicit in the genre: man, he wrote, creates history, while woman:

follows the noble and serene epic that Nature chants in her harmonious cycles, repeating herself with a touching grace of constancy and fidelity. . . . Nature is a woman. History, which we very foolishly put in the feminine gender, is a rude, savage male, a sun-burnt, dusty traveller. . . .⁸

Even in Matisse's *Joy of Living* (1906), where men and women share an Arcadian life, cultural activities (music-making, animal husbandry) are male endeavors while women exist merely as sensual beings or abandon themselves to emotionally expressive but artless and spontaneous dance.

How we relate to these works becomes a compelling issue once their sexual-political content is apparent. The issue, however, is difficult to grasp without first coming to terms with the ideological character of our received notions of art. For in our society, art—along with all high culture—has replaced religion (that is, among the educated) as the repository of what we are taught to regard as our highest, most enduring values. As sanctified a category as any our society offers, art silently but ritually validates and invests with mystifying authority the ideals that sustain existing social relations. In art, those ideals are given to us as general, universal values, collective cultural experience, "our" heritage, or as some other abstraction removed from concrete experience. Physically and ideologically, art is isolated from the rest of life, surrounded with solemnity, protected from moral judgement. Our very encounters with it in museums, galleries and art books are structured to create the illusion that the significance of art has little or nothing to do with the conflicts and problems that touch common experience. Established art ideologies reinforce this illusion. According to both popular and scholarly literature, true artistic imaginations transcend the ordinary fantasies, the class and sex prejudices and the bad faith that beset other human minds. Indeed, most of us believe that art, by definition, is always good—because it is of purely esthetic significance (and the purely esthetic is thought to be good), or because it confirms the existence of the imagination and of individualism, or because it reveals other "timeless" values or truths. Most of us have been schooled to believe that art, *qua* art, if it is

"good" art, is never bad for anyone, never has anything to do with the oppression of the powerless, and never imposes on us values that are not universally beneficial.

The modern masterpieces of erotic art that I have been discussing enjoy this ideological protection even while they affirm the ideals of male domination and female subjugation. Once admitted to that high category of Art, they acquire an invisible authority that silently acts upon the consciousness, confirming from on high what social customs and law enforce from below. In their invisible and hence unquestioned authority, they proclaim—without acknowledging it—what men and women can be to themselves and to each other. But once that authority is made visible, we can see what is before us: art and artists are made on earth, in history, in organized society. And in the modern era as in the past, what has been sanctified as high art and called True, Good and Beautiful is born of the aspirations of those who are empowered to shape culture.

My gratitude to Flavia Alaya and Joan Kelly-Gadol, whose own work and conversation have enriched and clarified my thinking.

1. *The Female Eunuch* (New York, 1972), p. 57.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, 1961), p. 181.
3. Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel, Part I," *Art News* (Sept., 1972), pp. 20-29; and Gert Schiff, "Picasso's Suite 347, or Painting as an Act of Love," in *Woman as Sex Object*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin (New York, 1972), pp. 238-253.
4. In Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley, 1970), p. 144.
5. Quoted in Max Kozloff, "The Authoritarian Personality in Modern Art," *Artforum* (May, 1974), p. 46. Schiff, *op. cit.*, actually advocates the penis-as-paintbrush metaphor.
6. De Beauvoir, *op. cit.*, p. 179.
7. Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies*, 1, No. 2 (Fall, 1972), p. 10.
8. Jules Michelet, *Woman (La Femme)*, trans. J. W. Palmer (New York, 1860), pp. 104-105.

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Carol Duncan is an art historian who teaches at Ramapo College. She has published in *Artforum* and *The Art Bulletin* and her essay "Teaching the Rich" appears in the anthology *New Ideas in Art Education* (edited by Gregory Battcock). She is also on the "anti-catalogue" committee of Artists Meeting for Cultural Change.

Now Women Repossess Their Own Sexuality . . .