Cohabitation: Looking Through a Keyhole

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COHABITATION: LOOKING THROUGH A KEYHOLE

by

MARY JOY TORRECAMPO

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the Major Program in Studio Art in the College of Arts and Humanities and in The Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Fall Term 2014

Thesis Chair: Carla Poindexter
Abstract

Initially, my developing body of work aimed to redesign the traditions of representational painting, specifically the female nude, to depict the contemporary notions of lesbianism and femininity in an honest and empowering manner as a form of identity and not as vehicle for voyeurism. As an artist who paints the female nude and identifies as a woman and a lesbian, I examine the preexisting notions of the male gaze and the effect of socialization as it pertains to my work. The act of looking from the point of view of a woman, which is not synonymous with a “female gaze”, or from the point of view of a lesbian, is not a birthright, but a conscious effort to constantly question the way we see and produce pictures and realizing that the male gaze permeates most images of female nudes. By the nature of my sexuality and my exposure to existing male-produced images, do I see the female nude through the male gaze or is there a gaze that is essentially female? Does it matter either way if the image is aesthetically compelling?

My paintings neither attempt to conform to the male gaze or debunk it, nor do I attempt to prove the existence of a female gaze. Like Edgar Degas, I wish to look through a keyhole—a form of voyeurism—to see people outside of their public façade.
Dedication

For Edgar Degas and the impressionists—over a century later, thank you for the inspiration.

For Carla Poindexter—thank you for your guidance as my mentor and committee chair. For my friends—even through my terrible social skills, I am truly lucky to have met you all.

For myself—good for you.
Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to those who made this thesis possible. To my committee, I thank you all for your patience and support, but most importantly, thank you for being the people I admire and respect. Carla Poindexter—after my first class with you, I was fully convinced that engineering was never my future. I can’t thank you enough for the time and effort you’ve put in me. Kevin Haran—you taught me how to see and draw when I knew nothing. Your control of line and color inspire me to make work. Dr. Ilenia Colon Mendoza—your excitement and passion for works of art inspired a young engineering student to pursue a studio art major. Dr. Claudia Schippert—your knowledge inspires me to seek a better understanding of my art and myself.

Also, thanks to: Ke Francis for always knowing what to say; Robert Reedy for the constant reminder that only 5% will make it; and Dennis Ahearn for fueling my competitive nature.

Thank you to my parents for supporting my decision to choose art over engineering. Thank you to my friends for being hard working artists—you all motivate me to be better.

Finally, Amy—thank you for doing your best to be understanding and supportive. You’re an amazing “partner”, and an even better person.
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Cohabitation

“What an odd thing a diary is: the things you omit are more important than those you put in.”

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed*, p. 130

Cohabitation is a visual diary of the relationship between Amy and I. At a time when I thought a two-figure composition would be the logical next step in improving my technical ability in painting, I saw no other choice than to depict my own relationship. I did not intend for it to be autobiographical, but of course I did not intend for it not to be either. Realizing the growing autobiographical nature of my work, I became wary of how I composed images. What images do I want to include in the existing conversation of the gaze? I think of Edgar Degas’ bathers, and how I am drawn to them regardless of his alleged misogynistic attitude.

The controversy of the “male gaze” did not consciously play a part in my work until midway through the series during the writing of this thesis. It is not the overriding focus of this series although it is an unavoidable subject in the examination of my undertaking—I am personally too modest to overly sexualize anyone, but regardless, the depiction of the nude and subsequently, the male gaze, is rooted in art history.
Figure 1. MJ Torrecampo, *Again*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 28 x 36 in. Collection of the artist.
Again

As the present day media continues its obsession with sexuality and the homosexual community gains momentum in its quest for positive representation, I found inspiration within the impressionist and post-impressionists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec’s 1893 painting *The Bed (Le Lit)* (see fig. 2) led to my series’ first painting, *Again* (see fig. 1). His ability to portray two women in a sensual, not sexual, manner was refreshing. As a part of the Bohemian scene, he depicted two women prostitutes, presumably lesbian, in a quiet moment in bed, covered by blankets up to their faces. Their bodies lie on the same physical plane, faces turned towards one another. Alternatively, *Again* explores many more dichotomies—the active artist and the passive model, the seated figure and the sleeping figure, the nude and the clothed.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 2. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *The Bed (Le Lit)*, 1893, oil on cardboard, 21.26 x 27.76 in. Paris, Musée d'Orsay. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by WikiArt)
Painting an image of a person is by definition objectifying them.¹ The depiction of one’s back to the viewer, head in the shadows, and light source from the right highlighting the gluteus are signs of sexual objectification; however, I also used myself as a model posing as the partially nude figure in the foreground. How do gender, sexuality, and the inclusion of the artist as a model change the dynamics of an image?

Without context, there is no concrete evidence of the type of relationship represented between the two figures. Because the image follows in the traditions of depicting the female nude in painting—a passive figure to be viewed—it prohibits the viewer from relating it to identity politics. The focus is neither on gender nor sexuality, but on the interaction between two people. Bare buttocks are present. Cleavage is present. Faces are hidden and cropped. On the other hand, neither figure is flaunting her sexuality or availability. The image is almost banal—one is sleeping, while the other is getting dressed.

As the artist, I have placed Amy’s buttocks for display delegating her as an object of my own desire, but in my role as the model, there is a feeling of quiet resignation. It represents the same two worlds Pierre Bonnard, a French post-Impressionist painter, had difficulty merging—his feelings for his wife Martha and his passion for art.²

In the center of the image, the shadow of the foreground figure is cast onto the background figure. The contour lines on the shirt and bed frame provide some structure and stability to an image that would otherwise be the transition from one color to the next. The


perspective entertains the possibility of the viewer standing in the same room as the two figures; however, the tight cropping of the face, hands and legs would suggest otherwise. The outside viewer would be standing too close to the two figures to not suggest his/her presence.

The contrast between the jagged paint application caused by the palette knife and the softness of the brush separates the two figures from the painted environment. The movement of color used to depict the figures is reminiscent of computer display resolutions and pixels, which can be attributed to my use of photography and the ability to zoom in and out of an image on a computer screen. It creates rhythm and life in an otherwise flat surface. Unlike Philip Pearlstein’s equal treatment of figure and object as compositional tools (see fig. 3), I place a higher importance on the living and the human condition.

Figure 3. Philip Pearlstein, Two Nudes and Couch, 1965, oil on canvas, 59.25 x 76.75 in. New York, Center for Figurative Painting. (photograph provided by Artnet)
Figure 4. MJ Torrecampo, *Stay*, 2013, acrylic on dropcloth, 36 x 28 in. Collection of the artist.
Stay

Paying homage to Edgar Degas’ Bather series, Stay (see fig. 4) further explores the relationship between the two figures and the viewer’s interaction with them. The overhead light hits the furthest nude at the apex of the composition as she bends down to dry off her leg; the other figure is only clad in her underwear. She is seated in the darkness of her own shadow facing away from the viewer. The door is open—an invitation to look. But the perspective is low—the point of view of a child, a vertically challenged person, or a seated figure identical to the foreground figure looking up at the nude drying herself. The voyeur is already depicted in the image denying the viewer the power of the gaze. There already exists an unequal relationship between the two women in the image; I offer no place for a male or female viewer to occupy. Unlike Tintoretto’s *Susannah and the Elders* (see fig. 5), the viewer is not looking at the drying nude with the seated nude.

Figure 5. Tintoretto, *Susannah and the Elders*, c. 1555, oil on canvas, 57.87 x 76.38 in. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by WikiArt)
What if the seated figure was male? Consider the tension Degas’ created in his painting, *Interior (The Rape)* (see fig. 6). Although the narration behind *Interior* remains a conundrum to art historians, it perfectly illustrates Berger’s description of the social presence of men and women. “A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you…A woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her”.  

Even though *Stay* portrays an active viewer/passive object relationship, a female viewer does not have the same social presence as a man.

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Figure 7. MJ Torrecampo, *Kamayan*, 2014, acrylic on dropcloth, 28 x 36 in. Collection of the artist.
Kamayan

Originating as a class assignment to create a visual response to the word ‘food’, *Kamayan* (see fig. 7) is out of place in the series with its depiction of a genre scene. I chose a safe approach and portrayed a casual scene due to the link between food and sexuality. I steered away from innuendos to avoid the risk of misinterpretation. As evidence of my prudent nature and my scrutiny of the concept of the male gaze, both figures are wearing underwear but not the lacy variety created for male pleasure. Neither figure has the suggestion of symbolic power over the other. The title is a nod to my Filipino culture. Kamayan is a Filipino tradition of eating food with one’s hands—an act rarely done in a social setting and typically with only those whom I am comfortable.

The image marks a shift in the power dynamic between artist and model with which I was oblivious at the time. There is a distinct difference in the relationship between the two figures, but there is also a harmony in the image. They are presented as equals. Since I gave Amy the freedom to pose herself, she did so with the knowledge that a camera placed approximately ten feet away from her will capture her image. As we prepared to photograph, I watched Amy sit with an unusually proper posture at the table. Her left arm covers most of her upper body and her crossed feet rest on the stretchers of her seat. Similarly, I also posed myself with that information in mind. With my knowledge of the gaze influencing my objective I attempted to capture a “keyhole” image similar to Edgar Degas. I slouched to appear to be in a more natural pose although I might have overcompensated in an attempt to deflect the gaze. I used my left arm to strategically cover my nipple, because at this stage in my series, I was following the American social norms of censoring women’s nipples in public.
Figure 8. MJ Torrecampo, *Toleration*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 36 in. Collection of the artist.
Toleration

*Toleration* (see fig. 8) appears to be a political image or a form of propaganda painting. Although the root of the image relates to a social issue, my main motivation was not to take a political stance. Equipped with a standing position suggesting a strong attitude of strength and a confrontational look aimed at the viewer, the intended audience is not the general public, but Amy. *Toleration* was born out of an argument about the negative effects of homosexual visibility in an intolerant world.

Typically projected onto the subject by the viewer, the gaze is reciprocated by the subject in this painting. The artist is challenging the viewer to attempt to objectify her and to comment upon her nudity. As the subject and artist, I dominate the canvas, but enough white space exists within the composition that I am not contained by the space.

The use of an awkward, slightly smaller than life-size canvas was out of convenience and availability. I already had the stretcher made for a different panting; however, I used it in order to keep my feelings toward Amy fresh in my mind. I struggled with the photographic distortion of the figure and correcting the proportions, but the option of reshooting the reference photograph was not a possibility. Reshooting means I would have to wait until the following morning to photograph and my reaction and sensitivity towards the issue would fade.

The inverted black triangle was originally a symbol used in the Nazi concentration camps for the asocial category, although it was later adopted by lesbians in the 1980s as a symbol of pride and solidarity—opposite of the gay pink triangle. With the black paint still apparent on my right hand, I wanted to convey the act of identifying with a specific group to be a conscious, individual choice. In my work the nature/nurture argument is irrelevant. One can choose how to
live. It is not reminiscent of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s search for identity as a woman or Suzanne Valadon’s documentation of age; it is not even my identity as a lesbian. *Toleration* is not about pride; it is about an individual’s choice.
Figure 9. MJ Torrecampo, *Unwind*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 28 in. Collection of the artist.
Unwind

Stemming from my lack of understanding that my earlier painting with two figures on a bed was considered by others to be my “best” painting thus far, I painted a sequel to it (see fig. 9). Analyzing and distancing myself from a painting that resulted from my experiences is a difficult task; however, I knew from critique that the successful aspects of the work related to the overlapping of the figures and the way the viewer’s eyes traveled through the image.

I have never been particularly deliberate with my choices. I relied heavily on my intuition. This was no longer an academic exercise—it was informed by my experiences and growing knowledge. Amy fell asleep after many previous attempts at capturing a moment that was just right, and almost instantly I had the image I needed.

Gone are the pinks, light blues, and violets. Instead of light filtering through the scene, cool blues and dark shadows take over the vertical composition in contrast to Again’s landscape orientation. The central figure dominates the painting. The focal point is the light hitting the shoulder, which directs the eye to the buttocks of the sleeping figure whose face is framed by the triangular negative space created by the arm, thigh, and torso of the foreground figure.

Two women in one image—one is sleeping naked, bare buttocks fully visible. The other is at a state of undressing, but not for the viewer as evidenced by the turned shoulder. The viewer can witness the relationship between two people, but he/she has no room to gaze.
Figure 10. MJ Torrecampo, *Yellow*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 28 x 36 in. Collection of the artist.
Yellow

Inspired by Toulouse-Lautrec’s 1895 painting *L’abandon (Les deux amies)* (see fig. 11), *Yellow* (see fig. 10) marks the first painting in the series to be fully completed outside of the studio. It fails as a nude image because there is too much self-possession. Formally, it contradicts itself. It lacks the softness and tenderness reflected by the two women’s gaze and body language. The paint application is too harsh in the negative space. The colors are too intense and vibrant. It doesn’t work as a “painterly” painting, because it appears unfinished. The foreshortening is too drastic and unnatural for an image presenting a homosexual relationship. Intuition is fallible after all.

Figure 11. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *L’abandon (Les deux amies)*, 1895, oil on cardboard, 18 x 26.63 in. Private collection. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by WikiArt)
Yellow is the first image where both figures are fully naked as well as the first to depict a shared gaze between the two figures. The artist as subject, is too involved with the model in reality and in the painting—literally confined by Amy’s left hand and left leg. Both are lying in a horizontal position. Unlike the previous paintings, which presents the two figures as opposites, *Yellow* presents the two figures almost as if they can be merged into one positive form.

Although it reflects the growing connection between Amy and I, the image is too straightforward. No questions need to be asked. As the viewer, we can come to the quick conclusion that the two figures are in an intimate relationship – which complicates my objectives but also brings up new issues.

The image might have worked better as a black and white photograph in soft focus. Camille Paglia might be correct when she said that “lesbians are boring”\(^4\) in reference to movies made by lesbians for lesbians.

Figure 12. MJ Torrecampo, *Sleep*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 in. Collection of the artist.
Sleep

Browsing through reference images of Amy and myself, I came across a photograph of Amy sleeping alone, engulfed in bed sheets. The quietness of the image attracted me. After multiple paintings of Amy and I, I wanted to know how I would handle painting an image of her alone.

In the painted image (see fig. 12), the lone figure felt unbalanced in the large area. After hours of working on the feet, I slowly lost interest in the image, but I pushed myself until I arrived at a stage of resolution. The loose brush strokes and lack of definition produced a dreamlike atmosphere.

Without the presence of another being in the image, how is the image viewed? Unlike the prior paintings, her feet capture the eye of the viewer and remove the focus away from the buttocks. The lower perspective does not suggest the point of view of another being.
Figure 13. MJ Torrecampo, *Blue*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 28 in. Collection of the artist.
A year has passed since I created the first painting of the series. Although *Blue* (see fig. 13) was photographed in a similar time frame as *Sleep*, it has a more opaque paint handling, resulting in a concrete distinction between the figures and the environment.

Similar to *Yellow*, both figures gaze at each other although more effort is made by the left figure. The left figure lies in a more compromising position. The right arm of the seated figure creates a diagonal that divides the two figures. The two figures do not make any visible, physical contact with each other, but their eyes seek one another. The filtered light and warm blues that engulf the image creates a serene atmosphere.

It is important to note that *Yellow*, *Sleep*, and *Blue* were all painted in the same bedroom I share with Amy rather than in the studio, surrounded by other art majors. I even consulted her in the selection of the reference image. Instead of visualizing the complexity of the gaze and the issue of objectification, the later paintings merely showed an intimate relationship between two women. The influence of photography is more apparent than in the previous works. The three paintings appear to be more contemporary because the images are reminiscent of photographs from Tumblr, a micro blogging platform, than from traditional historical artworks.

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5. “Adult Content,” Tumblr, https://www.tumblr.com/docs/en/nsfw (accessed 24 Oct. 2014). Unlike other social media websites, sexual or adult-oriented content is allowed on Tumblr with the condition that the individual post or entire blog (if it regularly posts adult content) is flagged as Not Suitable for Work (NSFW). Logged-out users or users in safe mode will not be able to view posts tagged as NSFW.
Figure 14. MJ Torrecampo, untitled studies, 2014, acrylic on wood, 12 x 12 in (each). Collection of the artist.

Figure 15. MJ Torrecampo, untitled studies, 2014, acrylic on wood, 12 x 12 in (each). Collection of the artist.
Panel Studies

Nicole, a close friend and fellow art student, asked me how I was supposed to know if I see the female nude from a masculine perspective, if I continue to paint my own relationship. She realized sooner than I did that perhaps I was too close to the subject and subject matter to investigate the issue as an outsider. I asked her if she was willing to model and she said yes. There is pressure in depicting a person nude outside of the university-hired models, especially someone with whom you are familiar.

Nicole

Nicole was wrong in thinking that I would be less protective of her image. I did not pose her myself; I did not want the responsibility. So I asked her to do what she would do if I were not present—unfair for me to ask, but I had no plan. She did mundane chores as I followed her around for over an hour with a camera. The entire time I was hyperaware of her nakedness, and although I typically prefer not to maintain eye contact during conversation, I stared her straight in the eye when she talked—more to do with my prudish nature, than my gender or sexuality.

As the series has progressed the ever-present issue of female objectification, although reasonable, has proven to be difficult to tackle. How much personality and individuality of my model will come through in the painting? Should I highlight the (her?) face to render void the objectivity argument?

At the end of the session, I painted images that hid her face in the shadows. Did I “objectify” (in quotation due to the overuse of the term) Nicole? Sure—in the most basic sense. I painted a crouched female taking up the minimum amount of space. I painted her in corners and edges of the room (without other objects) (see fig. 14). I liked depicting her concentration with
whatever task she busied herself. I did not attempt to subvert existing conventions of the nude. In one image, the way the light hit her spine, defined the right side of her back, and faded onto the side of her breast captivated me. In the other, the light contoured the left side of her body from her shoulder fading to her left hip while the rest of her body is hidden in darkness. Ultimately, for me, the figure alone trumps concept. Of course, I do not live in a vacuum, and the representation of the nude remains an issue in contemporary art, but in this moment, I relished the act of painting and the formal aspects of painting for my own sake.

The Female Gaze

In 2009, an exhibition at Cheim & Reid titled *The Female Gaze: Women Look at Women* uses Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* as a curatorial base showing works by female artists ranging from Joan Mitchell to Lisa Yuskavage in an attempt to address the issue of the male gaze through portraits, self-portraits, and female nudes. The reliance on the biological sex of women and their similarities in subject matter to assume an issue of identity politics belittles the individual achievements of these artists. It also proves that biological sex does not determine the type of image produced.

For example, using soft porn and hyper sexualized images of women, Lisa Yuskavage claims her intention is not for the viewer to desire these figures as she attempts to debunk the male gaze from within (see fig. 16). I agree with Amelia Jones’ comment on Yuskavage’s

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popularity: “.....it both gives you a kind of kitschy soft-core image, but it's art, it's hip…it’s not hip to put a clipping of Hustler on your wall”.7

Figure 16. Lisa Yuskavage, *Fireplace*, 2010, oil on linen, 77.25 x 65 in. New York/London, David Zwirner. (artwork copyright © Lisa Yuskavage; photograph provided by David Zwirner)


Artist as Subject

“In Rembrandt’s portraits, it is more than nature, it is a kind of revelation.”

Vincent Van Gogh, Letter to Theo, July 1883

Following the nude studies of Nicole, I returned to painting myself as the subject (see fig. 15). I have yet to realize what I intend to accomplish when I paint myself, but I always find myself an engrossing subject although not as a form of narcissism. Even when painting Amy and myself, I paint myself with more eagerness and I generally paint myself first. When I need an excuse to paint, I resort to self-portraiture. Is it because I am my own most available model? Sure—but perhaps it’s due to my introvert nature and my desire for self-reflection or to share myself in a way that I am unable to vocalize or write.
The Nude Self-Portrait

The turn of the twentieth century marked a shift away from historical paintings to genre and the modern life as well as the beginning of the first-wave feminism. The conflict between traditional femininity and the new women’s movement provided the space for female artists to use self-portraiture as a vehicle for expression. The challenge is twofold for the female artist who must (1) present herself as a subject while (2) using the image of woman—the very symbol that has historically functioned to deny her subjecthood in dominant discourses. In other words, self-portraits can help us understand “how women do speak in a context where they are chiefly spoken”.

Paula Modersohn-Becker

In 1906, Paula Modersohn-Becker, a contemporary of Gauguin, Matisse, and Picasso, painted the first nude self-portrait (see fig. 17) by a female artist and used her own image to examine women’s position at the beginning of the modern era. Surrounding herself with plants and vegetation, her self-portraits show her as the woman-in-nature archetype associated with fertility and passivity. On the other hand, her monumental body takes over the space giving her a strong, physical appearance contradicting the feminine imagery. Griselda Pollock claims that the failure of Modersohn-Becker’s self-portraits is due to the inseparability of the signifier and the signified; the painting works neither as a nude nor a statement of an artist. However, the


contradiction that Pollock noted explains Modersohn-Becker’s struggle to search for her identity at a time when “women” and “artist” were mutually exclusive categories.
Figure 17. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self Portrait*, 1906, oil and tempera on paper, 24.5 x 18.98 in. Bremin, Ludwig Roselius Museum. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by WikiArt)

Figure 18. Suzanne Valadon, *Self Portrait*, 1931, oil on canvas, 18.125 x 15 in. Private collection. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Athenaeum)
Suzanne Valadon

Three years after Modersohn-Becker, Valadon, who modeled nude for other artists most notably Auguste Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec, painted her first nude self-portrait. At a time when the image of a woman’s breasts is solely for the enjoyment of a male audience, Valadon’s self-portraits show the effects of time on an aging woman as her exposed breasts lose their firmness and sexual appeal (see fig. 18). As she continues to paint self-portraits nude from the waist up well into her fifties and sixties, Valadon disrupts the preconceived notion of the female nude as young, ideal, beautiful, and sexually available for men.

Jenny Saville

Emerging out of the Young British Artists (YBAs) with Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, Jenny Saville expanded on the traditions of self-portraiture to raise questions about the contemporary ideals of beauty in the fine arts and in life (see fig. 19). In her large-scale paintings, obese bodies cover the entire canvas, even spilling out of the confines of the rectangle engulfing the viewer with an excess amount of flesh. The bodies cannot be contained within the canvas, rather they push out towards the viewer. She uses her own self, not due to narcissism, but according to Saville, “because the nervousness of revealing is inherent that I’m interested in it - not in showing the world my genitalia. It is about being brave enough with myself to offer up that anxiety. I like my neuroses - they are my living sketchbook. I don't want to work them out”.

Making a bold statement about the female body, Saville defies the conventions of the nude by directing her own gaze at the viewer as she grabs onto her own large body, using it as a vehicle for self-expression rather than an object for the male gaze.
The Artist and the Model

For better or for worse, Amy highly influenced the direction of Cohabitation—from the distant connection in the early works and the intimacy of the final images to the studies of Nicole.

From Rembrandt to Goya to Bonnard, artists obsessively draw and paint the faces and bodies of their loved one. Although often leading to great works of art, the artist/model relationship sometimes results in destruction.

Pierre Bonnard

Pierre Bonnard produced domestic images of pleasure, peace, and paradise shown as ‘slices of life’—not to be confused with the life he actually led. His paintings were a mirage. Central to his paintings was his wife, Marthe, whom he continuously depicted as a young woman despite her age and showed her neurotic bathing habits as scenes of luxury and peace (see fig. 20). His role as an artist changed through time: “in the early nudes, he is the enticed object of the nude’s seduction; in the next, the observer and ostensibly impartial recorder of appearance; and in the last, one whose responses outweigh, overpower and eventually obliterate what he sees.”11 He painted the nude combining his technical knowledge of painting with the world of his own feelings resulting in a conservatism that prohibits him from taking greater risks.

11. Hobhouse, The Bride Stripped Bare, 36.
Figure 20. Pierre Bonnard, *Nude in Bathtub*, 1941-6, oil on canvas, 48.25 x 59.25 in. Pittsburgh, Carnegie Museum of Art. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Carnegie Museum)

Figure 21. Suzanne Valadon, *Adam and Eve*, 1909, oil on canvas, 67.75 x 51.625 in. Paris, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by WikiArt)
Suzanne Valadon

In 1909, Valadon painted *Adam and Eve*, the first painting by a woman to represent a female and male together in the nude using herself and her younger lover, André Utter, as models. Unlike her paintings of women and children, *Adam and Eve* (see fig. 21) is a historical painting of biblical subject matter—an attempt to gain respect for her representation of the male nude. Valadon chose not to render the age difference between Utter and herself in a depiction that acts as a celebration of love in which time ceases to exist.12

In 1914, Utter departed for World War I and Valadon painted her final attempt at the male nude, *Casting of the Net* (see fig. 22), displaying Utter’s athletic body thrice in the same frame as his muscles work to pull and unravel the ropes. It became the first painting to reverse the traditional relationship of the male artist and female model.13

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Nancy Fried

One of the artists to participate at the New York’s New Museum of Contemporary Art 1982 show *Extended Sensibilities*, the first museum exhibit about sexual identity, Nancy Fried uses her own experiences as inspiration to create acrylic paintings of domestic lesbian life on dough sculptures. Men dominate the field of painting. The paintings consist of her then-girlfriend and herself in the bath and other rooms in the home. In a 1997 lecture she wonders out loud, “It’s interesting that the two women are not in the bath tub together” as though she didn’t create the work. I feel the same way when I reflect over my work, as if my own paintings, which I thought were autobiographical, were foreign to me—like I was at the outside looking in.

![Figure 23. Nancy Fried, Bette Davis Movie, 1977, flour, salt, acrylic, 5 x 6 in. (artwork copyright © Nancy Fried; photograph provided by Jen Graves)](image)

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Identity Politics

We live in a time period of political correctness and self-righteousness. Equality is good. Bigotry is bad. The conversation ended before it began. As my research and my art evolve and as time passes, I am realizing the presumptuous nature of my original intent. It assumes the notions of lesbianism and femininity as a black and white matter in which I, the omniscient artist who is female and lesbian, knows what an honest and empowering depiction entails. Honest and empowering does not necessarily make a good painting; on the contrary, creating an artwork with the sole purpose of celebrating a specific identity is almost banal, in a way that it questions nothing—not that all works of art must result in contemplation. Pertaining to my work, I am less interested in the issue of gender and sexuality and the existence of a female or lesbian gaze and more interested in the actual painting, the figures interacting through gazes and body language, with no care for a viewer. Often times, my own ideology on gender and sexuality distracts me from what my painting is trying to tell me. My purpose is not to disregard the issue of positive lesbian and female representation; however, to exclusively focus on the issue of identity politics limits the audience to those who belong in that social group and will likely agree with the message of the image. I want to be a great artist—not a great woman artist, a great lesbian artist, or even a great Asian-born artist.

Identity politics in the form of celebrating a minority group better fits mainstream media, such as television, film, and music. In 2004, Ilene Chaiken created The L Word, a television series that revolved around an ensemble of queer-identified women paving the way for future queer characters; a show I would never have watched to its entirety had I not been a lesbian. It provided cultural visibility although amongst questionable plotlines.
This is the problem with identity politics in art—women art, black art, lesbian art, and gay art—as well as in the real world. Artists are pigeonholed in their respective minority group. As Dave Hickey said, “We’re interested in public virtue…nobody cares about a woman artist unless they make women art, black people, black art…” The art becomes part of an individual cultural or social identity instead of the impact of one culture to another and the interrelations of different people.

I do not intend to belittle the achievements of artists from the past four decades who chose to work within the confines of their identity, but I merely point out the difference in objectives. I am indebted to my predecessors who gave me the opportunity to create art as a woman. I am an artist who happens to be a lesbian. Intuitively, I began my body of work by painting my girlfriend, Amy, and myself. The paintings fit under the cultural umbrella of lesbianism and feminism in terms of its contemporary subject matter. The issue of the male gaze in representations of the female nude is an older, more traditional argument which inspired me to consider and construct new points of view and arrangements of elements in space with more complex issues in mind beyond mere formalism.

_Feminist Art_

“It’s not the male society, but Mother Nature who lays the heaviest burden on women.”

Camille Paglia, _Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays_, 89

Feminism as an art movement fell in the midst of the transition from modernism to post-modernism where the male continues to be the norm and the female seen as the Other. Even the Women’s Movement—mostly white, middle-class, heterosexual women—itself excluded women of other race and sexuality.

“Feminism is a politics, not a methodology”. To be a feminist artist is to produce art informed by feminist politics. Influenced by feminist politics and male dominated art, my work displays contradictions between the two opposing ideas of representation. On one hand, my biggest influence is the “misogynist” Edgar Degas, while on the other hand I value Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist existentialism and Camille Paglia’s “anti-feminist” feminism—both put the responsibility on the individual for his/her own actions.

Lesbian Art

Lesbian aesthetics changed from being gender-based in the ‘70s to sexually based representations in the late ‘80s and ‘90s. In establishing the early images of lesbian identity and difference, artists used abstractions and symbolism, creating a language only understood by the homosexual community. Amidst the current debates over equality, where does painting belong? Lesbians have been making art for centuries; however, their progress is not well documented or perhaps “lesbian artist” is avoided by male art historians.


Harmony Hammond asked, “Is figuration the best way to reflect the nature of lesbian desire?” Artists in the 1970s and ‘80s were hesitant to depict lesbian sex, because of the lack of control on who the viewer is. To avoid the male gaze, lesbian artists saw abstraction as a solution that resists appropriation and spectatorship, by depicting what the eye cannot see. They focused on materials, such as skin (leather), latex rubber, and wax to suggest erotica and sexuality. It focuses on the feeling more than the actual image. In her body of work, Hammond wrapped rags around an oval bentwood stretcher bar and painted the surface with acrylic paint (see fig. 24). The armature functioned as the skeleton, with the fabric as muscle or flesh. The paint became the skin.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\linewidth]{harmony-hammond-radiant-affection}
\caption{Harmony Hammond, \textit{Radiant Affection}, 1983-84, cloth, gesso, acrylic, rhoplex, latex and foam rubber, wood, 92 x 106 in. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. (artwork copyright © Harmony Hammond; photograph provided by James Dee)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 96.
Being a human who is sexual, is a freedom accorded more to men than women. Abstraction offers a temporary solution to the problem whilst avoiding the problem. Rather than creating the conversation of how gender and sexuality shape visual images, lesbian artists chose not to be subjected to the male gaze by avoiding representational images. Voyeurism is closely tied to figuration. To avoid it is to be oppressed by a male-dominated society.

“Can we use a visual language or image (female body) that has been used almost exclusively by men in the past and give it a new meaning?”


**The Viewer**

During the process of painting, I am the viewer. After all, my visual aesthetics direct the outcome of the image. For the sake of conversation, I prefer a viewer with an opposing and knowledgeable perspective. As much as I enjoy having my ego stroked by confirmation bias, I would rather be enlightened by another person’s insight. I consider my completion of the work as a detachment from that image.

**The Surveyed Female**

“Men act and women appear.” John Berger used this sentence to describe the social presence and actions of men and women. While a man’s presence correlates with power, a woman’s presence relates to her own attitude and determines a man’s attitude towards her. Women, nude or clothed, are aware of being viewed, presumably by a man.

In the 17th and 18th century, men commissioned paintings of female nudes to be viewed with his male friends. The European tradition of painting the female nude exploits the female sexuality. Berger claims that [male] artists paint naked women, because they enjoy looking; however, when asked to justify their pleasure in portraying the nude, they retreat to the formal explanation and aesthetic value of the painting. A purely aesthetic vision renders the body of a female no different from a “pile of fruits”.

In the 19th century, prostitution and harems led the artistic interest in portraying the female nude initiated by Jean Dominique Ingres in his 1841 painting, *La Grande Odalisque* (see 23. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 47.

Women were depicted as sexually active and sexually available as they look at the viewer with an inviting gaze. The gender of the viewer and his response were planned during the process of the painting.25

Figure 25. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, oil on canvas, 36 x 63 in. Paris, Musée de Louvre. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Wikipedia)

25. Ibid., 253.
Known for his satirical paintings (see fig. 26), John Currin mixes art history with soft porn to depict his interest in “painting’s guaranteed failure as pornography.”26 His desire for women is evident in his images. Although he claims his intention was not to be sexist, he accepts the criticism against him, but whether it is in a celebratory manner or distancing himself from it is unclear. In his method of painting, painting is definitely guaranteed to fail as a form of sexual desire. Caricature-like women pleasuring themselves and each other through the traditional male gaze is hardly stimulating.

It begs the question: how do women view the female nude?

Objectification is unavoidable in the arts. The mere process of painting a being on to a canvas is one of the basic definitions of objectification, the act of using someone for one’s own purposes. Serving as a cultural icon since the Renaissance, the nude epitomizes the objectification of female sexuality.

Simone de Beauvoir summarizes the idea of representation: “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth”. How do women appear in images created by women? With the majority of images of women in mass media, commercials, and fine arts filtered through the male gaze, we are used to images of women as sexual objects and this lingers in the back of our minds as we compose and create drawings, paintings and other representations of the female nude. As creators of images, can female artists see a world beyond male power and female passivity?

Rosemary Betterton analyzes the two main explanations for the female spectator: socialization and narcissism. She explains that by living in a patriarchal society, women are socialized into thinking that women’s bodies are desirable and accessible. Images of style and seduction are unavoidable, forcing these images to become objects of their fantasy and desire. Socialization also affects men negatively as they are forced into playing their roles of the surveyor. However, socialization does not explain why women respond to the same images differently. Betterton found Suzanne Valadon’s nudes more pleasurable than Renoir’s and I find

27. Ibid., 252.

28. Ibid., 255.
Degas’ nudes more pleasurable than Valadon’s. Knowledge and experience also play important roles in how women respond to visual stimuli. Betterton quotes Degas on his intention to show “a human creature preoccupied with herself…in poses which presuppose an audience…It is as if you looked through a keyhole”.\textsuperscript{29} She claims that whereas Degas’ nudes exude a seductive and sensuous quality, Valadon’s abrupt and harsh contours deny the audience a sexual perspective. Perhaps my perspective is still largely shaped by the patriarchal society or perhaps I place a higher importance on Degas’ superior mastery of form, line and color.

As it pertains to women’s pleasure in looking, narcissism is a form of self-indulgence in which women find pleasure in identifying with an image. Women compare themselves to the ideals of femininity, which is not achieved by most, resulting in a negative self-image. Luce Irigaray argues towards women’s problematic relationship with the process of viewing since visual discourse forces women to become objects and not subjects of their own desire.

In a patriarchal culture, women are forced to see the world with a masculine perspective in the production and consumption of images; however, empathy towards the female nude as a sexual object causes discomfort creating a switch between the masculine and feminine viewpoint. Men produced, through patronage and purpose, most images of the female nude, displaying them as objects of desire, as exotic beings, as the other. Male patrons commissioned male artists. Consciously or subconsciously, we create images based on previously existing images. There is a difference between looking as a woman and the fact of being one. Looking as a woman requires a conscious effort. Being a woman does not entitle one to the ability of looking

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 264.
as a woman. To reiterate De Beauvoir, “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men.”

**The Lesbian Viewer**

How do gender and sexuality shape visual images?

The problem with the feminist approaches that maintain assumptions of normative heterosexuality is that it ignores the issue of lesbians, women who find other women attractive. If women are automatically forced to adopt a masculine viewpoint and a voyeuristic gaze, are lesbians subject to the same discomfort and readjustment as heterosexual women? In her 1978 presentation of *The Straight Mind*, Monique Wittig asked, “What is woman?...Frankly it is a problem that lesbians do not have...Lesbians are not women. Nor are they men...It would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for ‘woman’ has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems”. She encourages lesbians and gay men to break away from gender stereotypes and limitations by saying that “lives cannot be expressed in conventional terms”. Lesbian artists work with a straight mind within heterosexual confines.

*Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art* was the first U.S. exhibition to address homosexuality in contemporary art. As the curator of the show, Daniel Cameron divided homosexual art in three categories:

“homosexual content—stereotyped images of homosexuals created by gays or straights for straight mass consumption; ghetto content—gay imagery easily recognized by an existing homosexual community and market; and sensibility content—work which is

created from the personal experience of homosexuality which need not have anything to do with sexuality or even lifestyle”.\textsuperscript{31}

If placed in one of Cameron’s categories, my work belongs under the sensibility content. Although the subject matter pertains to sexuality, the focus is to examine the gaze as it concerns the relationship between two women. In the analysis of my work, I assess the influence of the male gaze, presumed to be a white, middle-class, and heterosexual male, because of its association with the nude. The general assumption was the homosexual nature of the artist would metaphorically show in his/her work. The art of the ‘70s and the ‘80s were created with the feminist mindset. Wittig, in the form of literature, was able to separate the lesbian identity from the feminist theories before lesbian artists could visually render the lesbian as a different persona from the heterosexual female.

\textit{The Viewer and the Viewed}

Models are often used and manipulated by artists. What occurs in the image when the artist is also the model, the viewer and the viewed? As one of the first female artists to work with the male exclusive realm of the female nude, Suzanne Valadon changed the dominant tradition of the nude as a spectacle. The late 19\textsuperscript{th} century popularized the representation of the modern nude, the woman of everyday life and not a mythological being. Valadon’s treatment of the female nude are engaged in social activities with other women, a topic she chose because of her friendships with contemporary artists such as Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 54.
\end{itemize}
Valadon’s nudes in awkward positions drawn with harsh outlines are direct opposite to Degas’ soft and sensual nudes. Betterton analyzes that Valadon’s technique denies the viewer from translating the image in a seductive manner.32

On the other hand, as a male artist, Degas depicted a female artist as a viewer of images contradicting the presumption of the default male viewer in his print *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre* (see fig. 27). Back to the viewer, Cassatt’s body language and gesture denotes her thoughts on the paintings. The viewer looks at her looking at the painting.

Figure 27. Edgar Degas, *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre*, 1879-80, softground etching, drypoint, aquatint, and etching, 10.56 x 9.125 in. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Metropolitan Museum)

32. Robinson, *Visibly Female*, 265.
The Nonexistent Viewer

Edgar Degas’ nude female bathers were created with a voyeuristic mindset. He wanted the viewer to experience the nudes as if they were “looking through a keyhole”. In a review of Wendy Lesser’s *His Other Half: Men Looking at Women Through Art*, Camille Paglia praises Lesser’s reading of Degas’ bathers as figures of “natural physical gaze” and destruction of the male gaze cliché. She accuses feminists of seeing only what they want to see. They search for offenses against women.

Lesser analyzes Degas’ 1885 *Woman Having Her Hair Combed (La Toilette)* (see fig. 28) as an image of “fleeting sensuous pleasure” experienced by the seated nude, who is not an ideal

Venus. Although a three quarter view of her nude body is visible to the viewer, Lesser claims that there is no feeling of voyeurism present. The viewer is not invisible, looking through a keyhole, but is not existing in the same realm at all. With her eyes half closed, looking away from the viewer and her body appearing to be available, the nude is traditionally a subject of the male gaze; however, Degas gives the viewers a glimpse of this private moment without sexualizing the female nude.³⁴

Was it because I was unaware of Degas’ misogyny when I first viewed his work that I agree with Lesser’s analysis of his works? The bathers lack the self-conscious exterior that women hide behind. Their lack of awareness of the viewer attracts me. They have full bodies that are not seductively posed with the intent to entice the viewer.

I see the figures in my painting as existing in their own world, and by that I don’t mean a fantasyland where everyone accepts lesbianism and gay marriage. They interact with each other using the conventions of the female nude in art. The viewer is in the painting. By doing so, the outside viewer is seeing a woman viewing another woman, not him/her viewing the two women. Is it voyeuristic to look at unaware, naked women? Yes. However, it results in an image of a woman free from judgment, not presenting herself for other members of society.

Conclusion

“Artists are craftsmen, closer to carpenters and welders than they are to intellectuals and academics, with their inflated, self-referential rhetoric”

Camille Paglia, Glittering Images, page xi

Painted during the final year and a half of my undergraduate studies, Cohabitation reflects back-and-forth changes in ideas from a sociopolitical concept to the aesthetics of a static image—I often contradict myself as my ideals and influences shift. From the beginning I made the academic choice to include myself in the popular controversies surrounding representations of homosexuality. Originally, I questioned if my attraction to women forced me to share a masculine perspective of the female nude. It was the wrong question to ask, as the answer is too simple. The process of looking and producing requires a conscious effort, else you resort to the norms of patriarchal representation. Outside influences such as my girlfriend and my peers played crucial roles, whether negative or positive, in the direction of the series.

Reflecting on my actions over the past year, the lack of pre-planning and conscious decisions showed immaturity; however painting is first and foremost a visual experience. I created images without realizing the complications of how a viewer perceived them. I had no idea what I have to say, but I knew that I want to paint. If images, by their mere existence, are unable to attract attention long enough to seek a meaning within them, then they failed as images, no matter the grandeur of its concept and philosophy. But vision and concept is more valued than aesthetics. It requires a higher level of thinking.
Like Paula Modersohn-Becker, I want it all—a woman committed to a relationship and an artist free from society, to be both an intellectual and an artist, and to stand alongside the lesbian community and the art world. Like Pierre Bonnard, I straddle the line between technique and feelings. The polarizing ends of existence and essence in a society obsessed with labels make me question the concept and content of my work. As a lesbian artist painting images of two nude women, the works are inherently political even though homosexuality was never the major focus during the creation of the paintings. I painted the same subject, because it remained intriguing. There is an exciting and challenging aspect in the fear of not knowing.
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