

An examination of Psychoanalytical and Feminist theories upon the historical works of artist Tintoretto and artists Tiepolo and the contemporary work of Joan Semmel.

The aim of this study is to critically and theoretically analyse the influence of the gaze upon the female body through the analysis of a Sixteenth Century painting, an Eighteenth Century painting and a Twentieth Century painting. This study will make connections with each painting to show how society has changed in the way the female body is portrayed, by utilizing historical, theoretical and critical writers and their theories. It will also be important for this study to examine the influences of Feminism, which is a collection of movements and ideas which have aided women to establish and defend their political, economic and social rights, in order to gain equality to the male gender. It will be important to touch upon the Psychoanalysis of the images that will be discussed during the discourse of this study.

Through the history of art, the gaze is a notion that examines the act of looking between the active and the passive.

“In the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. . .”¹

Throughout this study it will be crucial to understand the terminology of ‘the gaze’ as:

“... not the act of looking itself, but the viewing relationship characteristic of a particular set of social circumstances.”²(Sturken, 2001, p.76).

¹ Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies*, London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2001.

² Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: an Introduction to Visual Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001.

The gaze has been used in many academic theories, but this study will only examine the paths that directly link to those surrounding Feminist theories. Feminist theory plays an important role in the development of visual imagery, specifically the implications of how men look at women, and how women look at both themselves and other women; enabling a more in-depth and truer social understanding of the gaze. Feminism insists on developing the role of gender and the way in which women are perceived within modern day society. Using these concepts will aid the way in which this study understands and examines historical images of women.

Within the realms of Feminism, the psychoanalytical theories of the gaze became influential in the way that images were created and understood. Mulvey's work suggests that there is a sexual imbalance in the pleasures of looking at the female and her body (scopophilia),

“...pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.”³

It will be important that these areas are considered and critically analysed throughout the discourse of this study, aiding the interpretations and social effects of the images that are to be examined. This study will establish a relationship between historical artist Tintoretto's, (Italy, 1518 –1594) painting entitled, *Susannah and The Elders* (1560-62), with historical artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's, (1696-1770) painting entitled, *A Young Woman with a Macaw*, (1760) and lastly with contemporary artist Joan Semmel's, (1932) painting entitled, *Me Without Mirrors* (1974). These chosen images demonstrate the changing fixation of the female body throughout history.

“Semmel's work is the encounter between a woman artist engaging in self-representation and a masculine tradition.”⁴

³ Jones, Amelia., ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Oxon: Routledge, 2006.

Semmel's strong sense of femininity and self in this work depicts beauty as being wholesome and honest, which is strong enough to stand alone as art in its own right. She is encouraging women to look at women and at the same time isn't afraid of men looking at her; there is no portrayal of vulnerability, as she is allowing both genders to view her naked body. Semmel's encouraging the acceptance of the female body as a whole, not solely dependent on the shape, size or age of the body. This relates to Tintoretto's painting, *Susannah and The Elders*, where Susannah is looking at herself in the mirror, therefore accepting she is a woman looking at her own body. Berger believes by looking at herself in the mirror she "...joins the spectators of herself..."⁵, therefore proposing that she is treating herself as an object, and a sight to be looked upon. This is demonstrated in Semmel's work in more depth from the perspective of her paintings. As a female viewer you are invited to view her body as your own, whereas the male viewer is invited to look upon the female form with interest, whether that interest be with or without a sexual agenda. This oscillating viewing position can be seen to take influence from both Feminist and Psychoanalytical theories.

Rose implies that, "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at."⁶, which makes strong psychoanalytical links to the three images being examined, as these women are upon first observations the objects of the viewer's desires.

However, with Semmel's work neither the female nor male is invited to see her face, Berger states, "To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized by one self."⁷ Implying that

⁴ Meskimmon, Marsha, *The Art of Reflection: Women artists' self-portraiture in the twentieth century*, London: Scarlet Press, 1996.

⁵ Berger, John, *Ways Of Seeing*, London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972.

⁶ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 2001, p. 12

⁷ John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing*, 1972, p. 54.

Semmel is confronting the stereotypical idea that women are objects. She does this by allowing the viewer to pretend her body is ours from the use of perspective, we are forced to look down on the body and by doing this she is altering the relationship between the viewer and her body.

As stated by Meskimmon,

“The images does not privilege the spectator by posing the body as a displayed object, rather the image is one of first-person intimacy which actually ‘protects’ the body of the artist from specular dissection.”⁸

Juxtaposing Berger’s opinion that, “...to be naked is to be without disguise...”⁹ implying nakedness revokes control and is merely an enticement to the spectator.

Semmel’s work follows the rule that self-portraiture requires the use of mirrors, as it will produce a more accurately scaled version of them-selves in the mirrors reflection. Meskimmon declares that “...self-portraiture in which the internal rules of the genre require the use of the mirror...it is expected that artists will produce accurate renderings of their features based on their reflection in the mirror.”¹⁰ However, the reflection itself would depict only an imitation of the artist as an object.

⁸ Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection*, 1996, p. 2.

⁹ John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing*, 1972, p. 54.

¹⁰ Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection*, 1996, p. 1.

By applying Berger's theories of mirrors in art, it would suggest that Semmel was using the mirror for vanity, signifying that she was morally condemning herself to give the viewer pleasure.

"The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of women. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her...condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure."¹¹

Feminist research during the 1970's and 1980's was exploring female stereotypes throughout art history. These stereotypes were based on desirable and undesirable forms of femininity; desirable forms being focused around the civilized virgin mother and the undesirable whore or lover. Both of these stereotypes were seen as role models for women and the obtainable object of the male gaze.

Looking at Tiepolo's portrait, *A young woman with a Macaw*, the female object appears to be playing upon the direct gaze of the male painter and in turn the viewer, thereby suggesting an unequal relationship between viewers and viewed. Mulvey's theory illustrates this by stating, "...she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire."¹²

However Tiepolo's female retains a sense of control over her image; her attention directed away from the male viewer and cast longingly out in to the distance. This view can be interpreted in differing ways. Firstly by applying the historical theories of Berger where he states that, "... the woman's attention is very rarely directed... often she looks away...or looks out of the picture towards the one who considers himself her true lover – the spectator-

¹¹ John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing*, 1972, p. 51.

¹² Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2006, p. 48.

owner.”¹³, which implies her indirect view can be seen as submissive and uncomfortable, creating an implied double gaze and her completing her role as object of male desire, a sight to be seen.

Secondly, when applying the contemporary theories and viewing positions of Meskimmon and Mulvey her indirect view can be interpreted as the destruction of her own beauty, causing the gaze to crumble before her. ‘It is said that analysing pleasure or beauty destroys it’.¹⁴

Looking at Tiepolo’s female it is questionable as to whether she’s being portrayed as a sexual object or a motherly figure. It could be argued that one breast on show signifies Tiepolo is leaving the viewer’s imagination to do the work and to bring their own experiences to the painting. The application of Kenneth Clark’s theory (cited in Berger’s, *Ways of Seeing*) states, “...that to be naked is simply to be without clothes, whereas the nude is a form of art.”¹⁵ This suggests that the social overtone of Tiepolo’s painting gestures towards motherly admiration and not sexual pleasure. Furthermore, the way in which the female is posing suggests motherhood as she cradles the Macaw as if it was a child by assuming a motherly stance.

In comparison to Tiepolo’s painting, Tintoretto’s painting, *Susannah and the Elders*, the viewer is denied access to the females gaze, but is invited to gaze upon her body and join her in the moment of her looking at herself. In addition to this, Susannah also has all her finery around her,

¹³ John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing*, 1972, p. 56.

¹⁴ Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2006, p. 45.

¹⁵ John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing*, 1972, p. 53.

suggesting a status of wealth that is also present in Tiepolo's painting. Looking at Susannah it's apparent her head is wrongly proportioned for her body, suggesting this was done purposely to emphasize her curved and voluptuous body implying Tintoretto is empowering the larger bodied women of his time. This can also be demonstrated in Semmel's work, where she proudly depicts the natural female form, encouraging the viewer to partake in the observation of her body; not as an object of desire but as an active subject, therefore empowering women of the twentieth century. This is illustrated by Meskimmon where she states "Semmel's representation of her own body confronts these stereotypical ideas of the female nude. The image does not privilege the spectator by posing the body as a displayed object."¹⁶

The story behind Tintoretto's Painting depicts Susannah bathing, while two old lecherous voyeurs spy upon her. The two old judges advance upon Susannah with indecent sexual requests but when she declines their offer, they become bitter and twisted and accuse her of adultery. By applying Mulvey's feminist theory that the male ego expands from the pleasure of looking at a female and , "...can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from the watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other."¹⁷ Which illustrates the old judges in the painting became so fixated with Susannah's naked body they wanted a higher sexual satisfaction and acted upon it.

Within the centre section of the image the viewer is led to gaze upon Susannah's mirror, however, upon viewing, the viewer is left disengaged and unsatisfied with the empty reflection in the mirror. This leads the viewer to decide where her gaze is projected, is she gazing at herself in the mirror or is

¹⁶ Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection*, 1996, p. 2.

¹⁷ Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2006, p. 46.

she looking towards the peering older man? The psychoanalytical and feminist theories of Meskimmon suggest that the viewing structure of the image has been altered and the viewer is denied the pleasure in looking both at Susannah's reflection. This "alters the relationship between viewer and viewed, thus disrupting simple binary structures...it acts as a visual metaphor for feminist theory."¹⁸ In relation, the historical and contextual writings of Berger suggest that a "...mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of women."¹⁹ Implying because we don't see Susannah's reflection in the mirror as she is not admiring herself, "the real function of the mirror was... to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight."²⁰ Proposing she is aware she is being adorned and is playing into the role of the desired female. This is agreeing with Mulvey's theory that,

"In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*."²¹

Throughout this study, 'the gaze' has been used to define the act of looking towards the female body, from both the viewing position of a male and female. It has presented an emphasis on the issues of the female body being portrayed as a sexual object for the male desire and pleasure. The study has discussed the theories of contemporary feminist writers Laura Mulvey and Marsha Meskimmon and historical artist/critique John Berger on the subject of 'the gaze'. By applying each

¹⁸ Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection*, 1996, p. 3.

¹⁹ John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing*, 1972, p. 51.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 51.

²¹ Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2006, p. 47.

of these writers theories this study has been able to make connections with each image to show how society has changed in the way the female body is portrayed by bringing in Berger's historical idea that, "...it is the spectators looking which shames them...the nude implies an awareness of being seeing by the spectator...they are not naked as they are, they are naked as you see them"²², suggesting as the viewer you interpret the scene individually, you project your own ideas and desires on to the image. Whereas Feminist theoretical writer Laura Mulvey believes,

"...women as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified."²³

She then states when women are, "...isolated, glamorous, on display..."²⁴ they are therefore being judged and sexualised; however, women have their own power over the 'active male'. They can take control by denying the projection of the male fantasy, or they can play to the role of being a sexual object for the male desire knowingly. Meskimmon's Feminist theories agree with Mulvey as she states,

²² Berger, John, 'Ways Of Seeing (episode two - female nude) 1/4', (2008) BBC Television Series, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u72Alab-Gdc> [accessed 25 April].

²³ Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2006, p. 49.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 49.

“The female nude displayed in painting, sculpture and fine art photography and graphics has come to connote beauty, wholeness...”²⁵

Implying that a woman’s body is meant to be a universal metaphor for the desire of the male gender. Meskimmon also argues that,

“The image does not privilege the spectator by posing the body as a displayed object, rather the image is one of first-person intimacy which actually ‘protects’ the body of the artist from specular dissection.”²⁶

Which suggests by confronting the female stereotype control is gained by the female and perhaps leads to the reversing of the roles of active/male and passive/female. This study has examined the influences of Feminism and Psychoanalytical theories from various aspects, which has shown images of women that are presented in ways that accentuate their status as sexual objects, therefore emphasizing that the gaze is part of a desire. This study has provided evidence that the works by Tintoretto, Tiepolo and Semmel all convey different types of ‘the gaze’. Tintoretto applies an indirect gaze upon Susannah, suggesting she isn’t aware she is being looked at which differs with Tiepolo’s use of the direct gaze. His model is posing knowingly for him and is asking to be looked upon by the viewer. However the viewer sees what Tiepolo is presenting as he is in control, he is the artist and the active male. Nevertheless, Semmel is also inviting a direct gaze, but is in control of what the viewer is able to see, by doing this Semmel projects herself as a strong female role. To conclude, this study has discussed the influence of ‘the gaze’ from three centuries and has depicted how the role of the passive female has evolved over the last six years, thus transforming the women from solely being an object of the male desire to an equal to man.

²⁵ Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection*, 1996, p. 2.

²⁶ Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection*, 1996, p. 2.

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