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HOW IS A RADICAL, CRITICAL AND PLEASURABLE POSITIONING OF THE WOMAN
AS SPECTATOR TO BE DONE ? MARY KELLY.



INTRODUCTION

My Studio practice has been a process culminating in a series of images which make one long work. They are 19 panels, each 56 x 38 cms, which are to be hung side by side.

In them I've chosen to picture moments of pleasure, power and intimacy from my life as a woman with other women including women artists from the twentieth century who have dealt with their sexuality in their work. I've used the device of the series to create a visual description of the kind of a woman I am and the kind of a lesbian I am. I've worked figuratively and in different 'modes of enunciation'¹, to evoke the complex web of emotions, senses, desires and social and historical influences that go to form my sense of myself as sexual. I see my work as a comprehensive Self Portrait, both as a sexual being and as an artist.

In doing so I've hoped to attract and hold the interest of a specifically female audience. This story is for them. I thank the male and female friends who have understood and encouraged me in this endeavour.

1. Thanks to Julie Ewington for her definition or alternative to 'style'.

THE FEMALE GAZE

The portrait of Suzy Solidor painted in 1933 by Tamara de Lempicka is a portrait painted by a bisexual woman artist of a famous Parisian lesbian night club owner.

It seems likely that such a portrait could be construed as having been painted for a specifically female gaze, with the viewer being constructed as female and desiring.

I wanted both to include the painting, because of this construction and its historical connection to my work, and to deconstruct or change the painting, because I disagree with some of its other qualities.

I've attempted to subvert the elite sexual objectification in the portrait by adding the title 'Famous Dykes' and the visual joke of the 'lemons'- a reference to school-girl slang for lesbians, and a reminder that lesbianism has a very real base in popular culture but can easily be appropriated as a subject of 'high' culture.

This is the closest I've come to dealing with the exploitation of lesbianism for voyeuristic intent. I have not gone into the issue of the portrayal of lesbianism for male pleasure.

The gaze of the women in my portraits is particularly important to me. It is crucial that they both invite and interact with the viewer. It is this device that protects them from objectification or the scopophilic gaze. One is asked to interact on an intimate level in a public arena and to respect the integrity of the subjects. The interaction of women on this level gives me great pleasure and perhaps this is why, by identifying my own need for pleasure and attempting to re create it visually and textually, I can hope to answer Mary Kelly's question.





WORKING METHOD

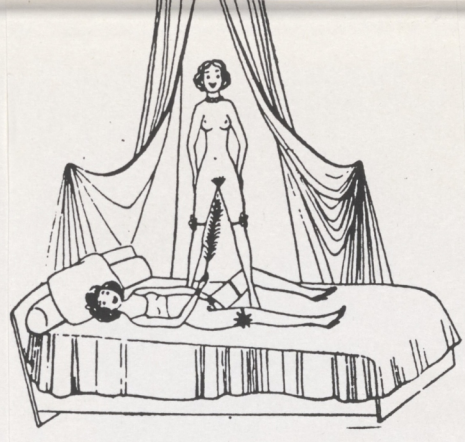
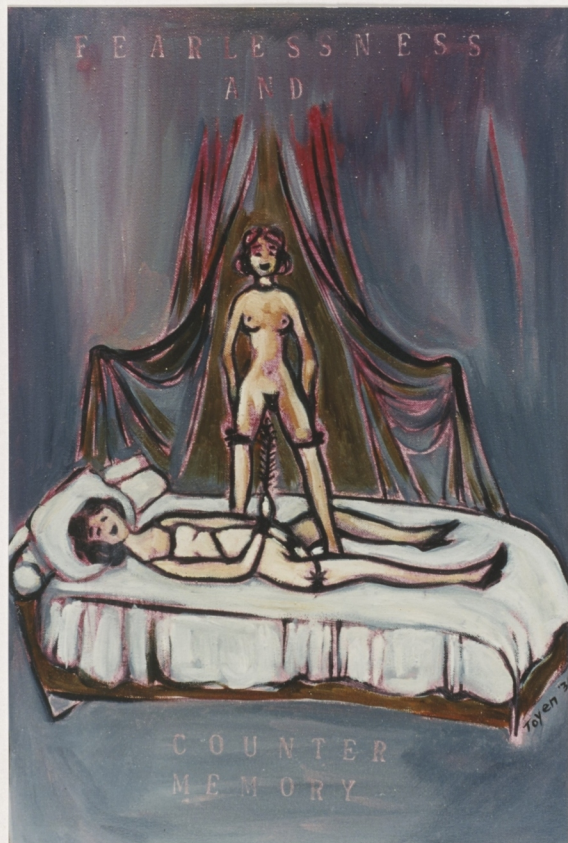
The first half of the year I spent collecting and experimenting with my reference material - photographs of myself, friends and lovers, and images of specific women artists and their work. I worked large, on pieces of Kraft paper and canvas, painting the various images; throwing them together or juxtaposing them separately- attempting to negotiate a relationship between them. While interesting as warm up exercises, they weren't terribly successful as paintings. They did however make clear areas of question. For instance the 'background' to the figures seemed to become problematic. I wanted to concentrate more directly on the faces and bodies of my subjects and it seemed that referencing my subjects through the setting as well, only over complicated the picture.

These problems were resolved with the move to smaller canvases and the concentration of one image to each canvas. This allowed intensity of feeling to be heightened in the individual images and encouraged references between the paintings when they were hung together. The background ceased to be problematic, and became an integral part of each portrait. In fact the 'background' became central to the mood of many of the portraits by the use of washes.



I painted 3 canvases at a time with a similar colour wash. The colours chosen were predominately warm; Reds (indian, cadmium and rose) and Yellows (Italian pink and Indian yellow). Three were painted blue as contrast. The colour washes became increasingly important to the work as a whole - providing sensuality, luminosity and tactile references to blood, skin and material.

The portraits were then sketched quickly over the washes, and worked into and over, sometimes before the wash had dried. The warmth of the original wash allowed me to use basic colours; paynes grey, black, white and ultramarine blue, for the portraits. This was important for many reasons; I was able to paint quickly, I was able to refer to my source material - photographs, to exploit the graphic qualities inherent in some images and by emphasizing shadow and light, was able to create a similar atmosphere sometimes found in film stills.



RESEARCH

The research component of my Graduate Diploma which culminated in my essay 'Lesbian Community in Modernist Discourse', proved very valuable. Finding images of women's sexuality produced by other women artists that are not commonly promoted or available was perhaps the most valuable relationship that developed between the research and the studio practice.

The image from Toyen is particularly special because of the humour with which it deals with the subject matter. It is rare in my experience to come upon genuinely humorous visual images of lesbian experience in which the humour is not at the expense of the women involved. It is also interesting to note that the image is one of 'vanilla' experience, not the sado-masochistic experience so often explored by the Surrealists, and with whom Toyen is associated.

Humour was something I thought very important to include in my work, as in my opinion, the use of humour can parallel erotic experience; it can be inclusive, non-threatening and pleasurable.

Most of the humour in my work comes from juxtaposing the images with text, for example I have created a rather private joke with the portrait of my friend Judith and the text 'Jude -the patron saint of lost causes'. However this also refers, on a more general level, to the experience of many lesbians and feminist women of having been brought up in Catholic households or institutions and the contradictions between that dogma and our sexual experiences.

The humour in the expression in the faces can perhaps be read as the enjoyment of transgression, or simply people with healthy senses of humour.

TEXT

The text, an integral part of my work, acts on several levels. Firstly it operates to pull a particular image into the group- while at the same time raising questions about this action. For example the text that goes with the portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe makes reference to what has been left out of her biography; her diverse bisexual history. It therefore puts into question what is posited as mainstream and what is portrayed as marginal in artworld politics. For the mainstream artworld to acknowledge the lesbianism of one of its 'stars' is to open up, perhaps, its reading of her work and also to destroy the heterosexual myth built up around O'Keeffe and Stieglitz, one of the artworlds most famous couples.

It has been argued that the personal/sexual life of an artist is of no concern when looking at his or her work. My view is that when the politics of lesbian sexuality are no longer politics of invisibility in the artworld, then perhaps 'Difference' will be an accepted part of how we look at and learn to read visual images.

By including a portrait of a photograph (by Ansell Adams) of Georgia O'Keeffe, my intention is to refer to the woman as both woman(sexual being) and painter (creative being), therefore linking her to the continuity throughout history of such women. I have not attempted to appropriate her imagery to the 'lesbian' cause but to suggest that it needs to be taken into account when making a reading of her work. I think Georgia O'Keeffe would have thought it quite funny to divorce any part of her sexuality from her sense of herself as a whole person. She therefore enters my self portrait as someone who engenders the concept of wholeness, independence and wisdom.





The text works in a similar way with the portrait of Frida Kahlo, using her own textual strategies to put words into her mouth that have again been left out of her biography. Because Hayden Herrera did not translate (or did not allow) any personal statement by Frida on her lesbianism, I have attempted to be as direct as possible, interpreting the famous Frida 'look' as one of desire for another woman, or as one of acceptance of her own diverse sexuality.

By also including the Spanish translation -I want her / yo la quiero - I am able to acknowledge another 'Difference'- that of culture, and by doing so, suggest the different notions of female sexuality that may be held by women of other cultures.

I WANT HER - I want (the lesbian) (in me). In Spanish it offers a more explicit reading as the I must be either Male or female when possessing the verb. In Western society the statement must be uttered by the (female) speaker to have deviant meaning as its rendering in text allows a neutral possession (and thereby, as with all 'apolitical' opinions reinforce the more conservative reading.)

While most of the text is my own, some of the text is taken from contemporary women writers who are attempting to deal with the politics of women's sexuality. In particular I have used the work of Jyanni Steffensen, an Adelaide artist and writer and extracts from *My lover has a ruby in her navel and cornflakes in her hair* and Janice Raymonds' *A Passion for Friends*.

It is important to acknowledge the link between feminist art and writing and the inter-relationship between them. As Adrienne Rich has noted;

'One serious cultural obstacle encountered by any feminist writer is that each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere; as if each of us had lived, thought, and worked without any historical past or contextual present. In fact, we do have a long feminist tradition which has been built on itself over and over, recovering essential elements even when those have been strangled or wiped out.' *On Lies, Secrets & Silence*. 1984.

I feel these obstacles equally apply to womens art practice. It is for that reason that the work of Romaine Brooks is so important to my finished piece. It is her representation of lesbian women from the 1920's and 30's, especially her Self Portrait (1935), that encourages feelings and knowledge of Continuity for me as an artist and as a lesbian artist.





Other textual references deal with double meanings. For instance CRAZY refers to both a judgement passed against lesbian women often in Western history, and the title of a Patsy Cline song, a favourite in the repertoire of contemporary lesbian singer Jacquie Reid, an artist who works not only within the lesbian community, but also in mainstream jazz circles.



TO THE ISLAND not only refers to the isolation or marginalization of lesbians from mainstream society but also to the journey to the Greek island of Lesbos which is undertaken every summer by lesbians from all over the world. The small village of Scala Erressos on Lesbos is known as the place Sappho lived, worked and loved. The journey to reclaim Sapphic history was crucial to lesbian women artists in Paris in the 1920's and 30's and remains an important link between lesbians in contemporary international subculture.



Tamara de Lempicka's *DUCHESS DE LA SALLE* (1925) is remarkable for its erotic representation of the female Crossdresser, a sign of 'Refusal' in the flourishing lesbian subculture found in the first three decades of the twentieth century. It is interesting that the female Crossdressers mostly came from the wealthy upper classes and occupied a different position to the mainly working class practice of 'passing', or middle class use of masquerade to reach the lesbian bars.



What is interesting to me is the continuing varied use of Crossdressing in lesbian culture. How one dresses depends very much on the audience one expects, whether it be gay or straight, one's personal politics and style, influence of mainstream fashion and very occasionally as identification of very specific sexual preferences. Crossdressing does not necessarily have anything to do with the acting out of 'butch' or 'femme' roles although exploration and exploitation of these stereotypes continue to offer vehicles for erotic expression.

This sign is a sign of power reflected to another woman.

This image documents an international sign of lesbian identity, and acknowledges the political position of essentialism which influences it. While I believe conditioning plays a far greater role in defining who and how we are, female similarity is still seen as lying essentially in the enfolding labia of our vulvas.

How we relate to this knowledge, how we experience our bodies as sexual and reflect this knowledge and experience to other women is of vital importance.

As the concept of essentialism is currently in question and provides the source of some controversy, it is not surprising that this sign is used less frequently in contemporary feminist or lesbian gatherings/ discourse than it was in the early 1980's. The lack of text on this image alludes to, not only its ambiguous underlying presence, but also its displacement as a sign in our community. Perhaps the lips of the Lipstick lesbians have replaced it as a sign of more overtly political ownership of female sexuality?



The issues surrounding women as mothers... the sexuality of the mother... the bisexual connection between mother and daughter... the bisexual needs of women... the lesbian mothers... the lesbians who want to be mothers... the lesbians who dont... the straight women who dont... the lesbians who mother each other... the mothers who are lesbians... the lesbians who are seen as 'fathers'... contracts... arrangements with old friends... gay men... anonymous men... mad dashes with vegemite jars... giggling with legs up on the wall... children of Spanish rapists... of boys that are 21... of older financial men... other peoples children... desperately wanted children... children who mother their mother... the inner child... the nurturing inner mother... the maiden aunt who committed suicide childless... mothers who were never mothered... the perfect mother... my best friend as lover... my best friend as mother... as parent to anothers daughter... my mother... mother myself... myself as wild loving mother.





Thank you to all the beautiful friends who have allowed themselves to be represented in my images. You know who you are and how much you mean to me. Thank you to the Staff at the Art School for all the help you have given and for making me feel welcome, and to Nigel Lendon and the other post grads for having provided support and lots of laughs. Thanks especially to Deborah Singleton, my supervisor, for her insight and care, and to my family, the West Australian mob, the Sydney mob, the Queanbeyan mob, and Anne, Mo and Lou.

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WORK PROPOSAL for STUDIO PRACTICE (as at Feb 1990).

My Studio Practice will take up 70% of the total workload. My aims are to complete a series of self-portraits/portraits;

- a. Examining the place of lesbian identity in the late 19th century through to the 1920's and 30's and relating this prescription to the place of the lesbian in contemporary society.
- b. Referencing the work of artists during these periods who in some way transgressed by questioning or posing questions about the changing place of women in the dominant culture and the representation of women in the modernist period. These artists will include Manet, Frida Kahlo, Otto Dix, Romaine Brooks and some of the women surrealists. Examining 'transgression' within an art-historical parameter.
- c. Placing myself within the picture, and thus dealing with problematics around the 'gaze', imaging female desire and the representation of female sexuality.
- d. Working figuratively, and exploring the placing of the figure within a landscape... How the referencing of body and setting enable me to set up questions, narratives and 'transgressive' situations.

I will be attempting to unite disjunctive time-periods, codified sexual imagery and references to art-historical narrative in the paintings. I am working within the traditions of drawing and oil-painting and so they will govern my art-historical references.

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