

‘The Erotic Gaze...(Within the Gender Maze)’

Dawn Hunter, paintings
Myrix, drawings
James Oberschlake, paintings
Todd Reynolds, watercolors
Kim Taylor, paintings
Donna Tellerico, paintings

Curated By Daniel Brown

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The so-called “interventions” of the 1980s into art history and art criticism have rejuvenated and refreshed both fields, with lasting influences. Feminists, Marxists, Freudians, economic determinists and new historians examined art from these newer perspectives, and put art back into the sociological, historical, and psycho-political contexts into which the art was made.

Feminist interventions were the newest and least traditional. Art had, presumably, always been created by men for men (Ethnocentric and Phallic cultures), but, how we look became identified with race, class and gender. Every nude female portrait, odalisque, whatever, was made for what feminist writers such as Linda Nochlin called “the male gaze”. This idea could be transformed into an entire culture. An Ingres nude, for example, was painted for the pleasure of the leisure-classed European white male. (How pornography would affect a culture is implicit in this intervention). But Manet’s Olympia, Degas’ The Absinthe Drinker, and Manet’s Bar au Folies Bergere both intensified the gaze, and began to flip it back from the female model to the gazer (or to the culture). With Impressionism’s introduction of art made of and for a new middle class, came the introduction of the examination of the demimonde of the ballet, the opera, the cabaret. The implied voyeur/exhibitionist quality is very clear during this era (as it is in Japan’s floating district’s ukiyo-e prints. Degas and Toulouse-Lautrea picked up from Manet.

The Erotic Gaze takes its conceptual framework from the ideas expounded in the male gaze. Forty years later, Western Culture has experienced near revolutions in changes in gender roles, workplace models, politics, business, the arts. Feminism has changed the ways in which we live and look. Younger Americans (under 35) are educated with diversity, and sensitivity to differences in background and gender. A new acceptance of gay rights has further refreshed our culture and our ways of seeing.

This exhibition presents six artists’ ways of looking at contemporary ideas of gender, sexuality, sensuality, and the human form. Three women and three men present varying

contemporary looks at what the millennial male and female look like, and what we look at, and how these are interpreted; much has changed, particularly the inclusion of women artists' own self-examination. America's sexualized culture needs a look at the erotics of gender (the morphing of gender roles is implicit in the work and the genders of those creating and then looking at it.)

Donna Tellerico's lonely individuals transition from the Impressionist solitary figure to the contemporary. Her cinematic figures beg for narrative structure and some sense of belonging; at the edges of night, these generally solitary figures are painted with the exhibitionist voyeur/viewer in mind. The edginess of the work, the very painterly style, and the implicit sexual tension/danger lurking within points towards the German Expressionist coded night-life of the 1920s, and to the English and American club scenes of the 1980s. Tellerico brings the show its overture and presents its themes, including its expressionist tilt.

Kim Taylor, James Oberschlake, and Todd Reynolds enter into deeper examinations of the erotics of contemporary male and female identity. The influences of German Expressionism, DeKooning, Giacometti and Francis Bacon are particularly telling in the artists' choosing of expressionist representation rather than the contemporary reemergent classical realism. Narcissism, sexuality, and extreme isolation coalesce in these artists' works, which also convey the sense of identity slipping and submerging into flesh, raw sexuality, grotesquerie. Taylor's paintings introduce a fresh idea of the gaze: a woman examining the ideological, identity-formation, and sexual ambiguity of contemporary women, an entirely new and post-feminist art. Identity unravels into an erotic mass. Reynolds' intelligent portraits are rich in art historical reference, yet disturbing in the ambiguity of both gender, sexuality, and identity. He suggests the movement away from the erotically charged androgyny (Mick Jagger) toward either flagrant pre-cultural sexuality or a post-cultural loss of these traits. Reynolds' Modern Man series present the exhibition's intentions entirely: working from the large heads of Giacometti, with their implication of isolation and urban anomie, these portraits read as either male or female, neither or both. Eliminating hair entirely, the facial features could be a hybrid race of androgones, and look to an unknown, possibly genderless, future.

Oberschlake develops Reynolds' themes further into the realms of mythology and spiritoreligious myth. His figures are otherworldly, Blakean, reminiscent of Greek myths, while suggesting, at times, a kind of UR-male in this newest work. Oberschlake takes Reynolds' themes and develops them in extremis.

Dawn Hunter also switches the gaze entirely from one gender to another. She examines certain erotico-sexual stereotypes through her prostitutes, but both juxtaposes them with images from American cultural conservatism and/or iconic portraits of elderly/"respectable" men and women integrated within the same picture as the near cinematic pornographic stage sets she creates to shine hot lights upon the erotic, the sexual, and gender relationships between and amongst women. For whose gaze are these images created? Is the introduction of a female pornographer/videographer/director liberating or an inevitable development of cultural egalitarianism run amok? What transpires when confident women artists place their gaze upon cultural stereotypes of women? Hunter's extremely sketchy painting style reminds us of the drawing boards from fashion magazines, and exaggerates this filmic quality in her pictures.

Hunter's implication of the male gaze as integral to her work is particularly effective, and works to create scenes which seem like film stills. Hunter forefronts sexuality, presenting a depraved culture in which female sexuality is equated with prostitution as well as with power: some of the future of the gender maze lies in her work. Kim Taylor's paintings bring this same hawk eye to bear on female sexuality, sensuality, and neo-eroticism.

Myrix is a Cincinnati (male) artist whose drawings celebrate the "macho" side of contemporary male gay culture. We include these drawings to add another dimension to The Erotic Gaze, as artwork made by a man with reasonably clear intent to please a gay audience is not only a new addition to the gender equation (the male gaze upon the male nude), but also because the audience for such representationally heroicized work is just as likely to include working, mainly corporate, females, luxuriating in the erotic play of the male nude. We are intrigued by the use of the decorative tattoo around and about some of these male figures, usually designed to showcase the male buttocks, as a contemporary form of ornament, usually a female trope in Western art and Culture. Such have the genders changed, and begun to morph one into the other.

The androgyny of the 60s – Mick Jagger's swaggering appeal to both genders – no longer is the dominant erotic ideal. Rather, we are witnessing a transformation both to extremes of ideation and representation (the female bodybuilder, the effeminate or effete male movie or rock star) as the effects of feminism and mass communication not only bring "outsider" looks into the mainstream, but create a new mainstream in the bargain. The audiences for the erotic gaze are larger, if not clearer; we live in an era of incomplete change, of flux rather than permanency. The Erotic Gaze ... Within The Gender Maze begins to go beneath the surface in examining our relationships to physicality, sexuality, social identity, and gender boundaries. Fluidity appears to be the norm at the moment, but a visually rich fluidity it is.