Spring 2008

Sexuality: Social and Cultural Constructs of Women Represented through Art

Gayle Shaw Clark
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ABSTRACT

Life is one beauty pageant after another. There is always competition, be it physically or mentally. Societal rules have always determined the constructions of gender both accepted and taboo. My research explores how these social constructs pertaining to sexuality began and how they have been perpetuated throughout history in art. Because of my personal struggles with social constrictions as a woman, an artist, and as one whose sexual identity has been designed from these social constructs, I have explored women’s roles as artists: how women and their sexuality have been portrayed in the past through artworks using various media; how the viewers of these artworks saw the women that were portrayed and society’s reactions to these works of art. My intent here, and in my work, has been to focus on the construction and constrictions of female sexuality, beauty, and competition. I will also be discussing the role of sexuality as content in ceramics and how the influence of ceramic objects from history and the contemporary world has had on my own artwork. My interest also includes how western religious aspects control our sense of our bodies, the vagina for example, as “the yawning mouth of hell,” (Blackledge, 51) and how these ideas form the construction of womanhood.

INDEX WORDS: Sculpture, Ceramics, Sexuality, Gender, Women, Constructs

Georgia Southern University, Thesis
SEXUALITY: SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTS OF WOMEN REPRESENTED THROUGH ART

by

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BFA, Georgia Southern University, 1992

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

Georgia Southern University in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

STATESBORO, GA

2008
SEXUALITY: SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTS OF WOMEN REPRESENTED THROUGH ART

by

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Electronic Version Approved:
May 2008
DEDICATION

This is for Collie, my husband, who, without his tremendous support and encouragement this immense accomplishment would not have been possible. He has supported me every moment throughout this endeavor and among other things, given up many home-cooked meals and many hours of sleep, worried, waiting for me to arrive home. He has been my foundation; my rock.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Julie McGuire and Marc Moulton for their assistance in my journey throughout my graduate career here at Georgia Southern University. I would also like to especially thank my major professor Jane Pleak for her guidance, dedication, and the sharing of her tremendous knowledge with me.

Another thank you goes to Patricia Carter. Thank you for all you have done.

Lastly I would like to acknowledge my mother, Maryann Shaw; for without her talent and inspiration, I would have never known my potential.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I feel how society sees me is who I am. This may sound quite ridiculous to another woman with mounds of self-confidence; one who is truly comfortable with their outer and inner beauty, who owns her sexuality and complete identity; one who can control and turn down the volume of the masses shouting the demands of conformity and turn a blind eye to the gazes of objectification. However, with my experience as a member of the “second sex” who has heard negative comments from many people about appearances during my childhood and throughout my life and having religious views of morality, gender and sexuality drilled into my head since birth, I feel that my identity has been constructed by society. My identity lies somewhere outside this circle.

Sociologist Judy Lombardi, PhD, writes that human beings are socialized to think, believe, value, and behave according to the social constructs of the social systems we live in. Like our body-hood and our physical environments, social constructs act as constraints. Some scholars believe that social constructs are designed to generate human conformity and thus order (Lombardi, 1). Social constructs certainly act as constraints, especially with regard to the female sex and has since the beginning of humankind. These constraints are not only about appearances but also about womanhood. In society women are traditionally viewed as the second sex and have had to endure and accept cultural norms throughout history pertaining to our sexual selves, the sexual gaze and objectification. The construction of gender begins at childhood as we are taught to be ashamed of our genitals, how we are described as the “other” and even diseased throughout history. In the professional world, women are limited in resources, career
choices, and even being told what to wear as nineteenth century artist Rosa Bonheur had to get permission to wear pants in order to participate in painting outside. Bonheur said “I had no alternative but to realize that the garments of my own sex were a total nuisance. That is why I decided to ask the Perfect of Police for the authorization to wear masculine clothing” (Nochlin 1989, 174). She goes on to justify this to the disapproving society of her time by saying “Nathalie [her companion] makes fun of them as I do. It doesn’t bother her at all to see me dressed as a man, but if you are even the slightest bit put off, I am completely prepared to put on a skirt, especially since all I have to do is to open a closet to find a whole assortment of feminine outfits” (Nochlin 1989, 174). This is just one example that attests to the constraints toward women and serves to illustrate the prolific scholarship on this issue.

Linda Nochlin’s landmark essay, Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists was a tremendous inspiration in my creative research. After reading this article, I started thinking about social constructs; women’s place in society. Nochlin’s essay goes into detail about women’s struggles in becoming artists; the thought collective’s restrictions and guidelines on what was acceptable for women to paint and other constrictions set by society. Whitney Chadwick, another prominent scholar in the field, who wrote Women, Art, and Society, supports Nochlin’s findings. “Women’s artistic endeavors were more readily accepted when confined to “feminine” media and executed in their own homes, even if the magnitude of their productions challenged what was considered appropriated a feminine ‘accomplishment’”(Chadwick, 142). Nochlin states that in the nineteenth century, women who were artists had to choose between creating their art and having a family while men were free to participate in love and sex and careers. Women artists
were not supported and lacked encouragement and only few were allowed to enter the academies or other educational institutions for artists. “As long as the woman artist presented a self-image emphasizing beauty, gracefulness, and modesty, and as long as her painting appeared to confirm this construction, she could, albeit with difficulty, negotiate a role for herself in the world of public art” (Chadwick, 127). The few women that were accepted to take part in formal art training were not allowed to study the body in educational institutions; they were not allowed to study or draw or paint the nude. One artist, Jacques-Louis David, reclaimed nineteenth century artist, did allow women, one of whom is Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist who I will discuss later in this paper, to study with him but made it absolutely clear that they would not be allowed to participate in the study of the figure. Ironically, women were studied, drawn, sculpted and painted by men specifically for the male erotic fantasies.

My research on the construction of gender consistently reveals this dichotomy of both delight (learning about accomplishments and progressive women and ideas) and dismay (obstacles and restrictions forced by women though history) and has set my path of research and creative expressions throughout my graduate career.
CHAPTER 2
THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN WESTERN EROTIC ART

The study of eroticism in art and its contextual meaning has not been examined as thoroughly as other subject matter, although this area under discussion has a rich history. In Linda Nochlin’s 1972 essay Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art, she notes that there has been little attention paid to the erotic implication of artworks by scholars and critics. Psychiatrists, since the time of Freud, have investigated psychosexual developments of artists, but the content of erotic works created by artists haven’t had the same stage time (Nochlin 1989, 136). “Erotic art has either been too quickly dismissed as pleasurable for the sake of pleasure alone or it has been torn apart for being politically incorrect” (Mahon, 16). The study of erotic art described the artworks and psychological implications but not by breaking it down into socially determined criteria and constructs of the time. To evaluate sexual artworks critically and objectively, one must understand the context in which they were created; the social and historical context along with the intent in which it was created and the reception it was given, both critically and on its popular basis (Mahon, 16).

In what context has the role of the female subject played in erotic art and fantasy? “When we compare the theorized construct of the female nude with that of the male nude, we find that the female body has often been associated with nature, sexuality and abjection, while the male body has been associated with strength and wholeness’ (Steele, 114).
Figure 1, Gustave Courbet, *Sleep*, 1866
Nochlin says “there really is no erotic art in the nineteenth century which does not involve the image of women and precious little before or after” (Nochlin 1989, 137). Erotic art was ultimately created for men and their desires. The scandalous painting by Courbet, Sleep, fig 1, was painted for the former Turkish ambassador, Khalil Bey. This painting depicts two young, nude lesbian lovers with legs and arms intertwining, lying on a bed sleeping as though tired from a long sensual session of love making. This work was painted not for a woman’s fantasy but for a man’s. There is no art during this time which satisfies women’s fantasies. Women were not even allowed to imagine such things. In fact, for centuries, women were taught not even to bathe, at least not for long periods of time. “Saint Jerome for example, admonished women, especially young women to avoid bathing, since it ‘stirred up passions better left alone’” (Maines, 12). It was always the woman that was the object of desire, and precisely the object that men fantasized about. As Nochlin states:

“As far as one knows, there simply exists no art, and certainly no high art, in the nineteenth century based upon women’s erotic needs, wishes or fantasies. Whether the erotic object be breast or buttocks, shoes or corsets, a matter of pose or of prototype, the imagery of sexual delight or provocation has always been created about women for men’s enjoyment, by men. This is, of course, not the result of some calculated plot on the part of men, but merely a reflection in the realm of art of woman’s lack of her own erotic territory on the map of nineteenth-century reality. Man is not only the subject of all erotic predicates, but the customer for all erotic products as well, and the customer is always right. Controlling both sex and art, he and his fantasies conditioned the world of erotic imagination as well. Thus there seems to be no conceivable outlet for the expression of women’s viewpoint in nineteenth-century art, even in the realm of pure fantasy” (Nochlin 1989, 138,139).

“Art allows erotic fantasy to become reality” (Mahon, 17). As with social constructs of beauty and what is placed on women today, artworks of the past used
perfect bodies and beautiful women as subjects to perpetuate what is beautiful and what is good. Artworks such as Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, fig. 2, painted before 1538, reflects the perfect body and very specific notions of beauty and taste promoted in their day. Just as the media today try to teach women about morality and how we should look and behave, past artists painted the perfect body as a reminder of greater truths, greater beauties. Titian’s *Venus* was painted to excite the viewer but there is also a moral code included about the idea of women. The expression of virginity, chastity and fidelity is easily read from Venus’ prudish gesture, a veiled sex, and there is a pet symbolizing loyalty (Mahon, 17). “For Christians, chastity and virginity are synonymous with excellence” (Drenth, 60). These moral codes may be a bigger “turn on” for men than one may realize. Where there are erotic fantasies, there are also erotic fears including castration anxieties and the fear of disease placed in heads of millions who are members of organized western religions.
Figure 2, Tiziano Vecelli, or Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538
According to Judy Lombardi’s definition of social constructs, they are designed to generate human conformity and order. “The major western religion, Christianity, is famously renowned for being sex-negative and sexist. For centuries the men of the Christian church pushed the notion that sex was not for pleasure, but solely for procreation. Indeed, in their eyes, intercourse for pleasure was contrary to natural law and hence sinful” (Blackledge, 51). According to art historian Lucy-Smith, Christians fear sex and have contempt for the body (Lucie-Smith, 34) and author David Friedman states that the body was seen by Augustine as a curse (Friedman, 39). Religion has had much to do with conformity and order especially with sexuality and sexual representations of the body.

“No single source of sexual images is more important within the modern western tradition than the bible. Indeed, for the west, the biblical paradigm of sexuality and the narratives in which it is incorporated, stands at the center of any understanding of the representation of the body. Our understanding of the body, at least from the Middle Ages to the present, is in terms of (or in spite of) those models of sexuality presented in the Bible” (Gilman, 13).

“The Greeks invented the nude. Christianity brought back the naked” (Friedman, 41). As stated earlier, there was no art created for women and their fantasies in fact. Women were not even allowed to think of such things. Western religion, especially Christianity, discourages women to think of sex, to discuss sex and teaches the negative aspects of female sexuality; that it is to be hidden away, never to be discussed and thus never to be understood. Sander L. Gilman also writes in his book, Sexuality an
Illustrated History, “Female beauty, the sexually attractive female is merely a mask for death and decay” (Gilman, 73). He goes on to say “death has a traditional association with the sexual, specifically with the beautiful female. For Eve’s act, the seduction of Adam let Death into the Garden. The original fault of Eve opens the world for the satanic control of human sexuality and resultant death” (Gilman, 73). Eve’s seduction of Adam created the fall of humanity and therefore constituted original sin. There are other theories of the origin of original sin as described in David M. Friedman’s book A Mind of Its Own a Cultural History of the Penis which reads “but for Augustine the cause and the effect of original sin is lust, the symptom and the disease is the erection” (Friedman, 39). In either scenario, “sexuality was a beast but the Church was the lion tamer” (Friedman, 40). The lion tamer is conformity and order.

In 1495 there was a great outbreak of syphilis or the “pox” which caused other erotic fears; the fear of death from disease. It is noted in Gilman’s book that “for, from the first appearance of the disease, it was seen as caused by God, who has sent it because he wants mankind to shun the sin of fornication” (Gilman, 78). God sent down a punishment for the wicked; ones who were having sexual relations. In Titians, Venus of Urbino, fig 2, the woman is a virgin. Although she is beautiful, which can in itself lead to death, she is without disease therefore she is safer to fanaticize about. She becomes the ideal, one to be desired.

Art has perpetuated the notion of sex leading to death throughout history. From the onset of syphilis, there are many artworks that have depicted a mask of death from sex. Large spots or blisters were drawn or painted on men and women subjects showing disease from sex. Many times it was a sexually transmitted disease and later in the
nineteenth century, masturbation. If these images did not lower the activity of sexual acts there were rules set by the church to try to control sex and desire. Earlier in history “the church declared sex illegal on Sundays, Wednesday and Fridays, as well as forty days before Easter and Christmas” (Blackledge, 51). Also there were illegal sexual positions that were deemed perverse, which is still true today. In the late sixteenth-century, Peter Breughel the Elder’s *Syphilitic with Couple*, fig. 3, depicts a man marked with the external sign of disease with sores and grotesque bumps. The man in this image is fantasizing about sex. Breughel makes the association between perverse sexuality and disease direct in an image of two people having sex in a position measured illegal on the man’s head, as if coming out of his brain. He literally has sex on the brain therefore death awaits him. Is the man in this image recalling a sexual event which gives him the disease or is he sick because of the thought of perverse sex? Either way it is a woman who has caused his upcoming death. “Such diseases are understood as originating with the female, the source of all sexually transmitted diseases and their sequelae” (Gilman, 203). It is interesting that women are the ones that have a sex organ; the clitoris is designed for pleasure with no other functions. For males, the penis has another function; not strictly sexual pleasure therefore it is the female with her sexual desire that becomes the sign for disease.

Images like the one described above surface throughout history suggesting other constructs as well. “The syphilitic skin lesion had an unabated signification for the eighteenth century as the public sign of those who were ‘seen’ as at risk” (Gilman, 203). William Hogarth’s painting, *Luetic Viscount Visiting the Quack*, fig 4, depicts the
the avaricious nobility and the rising bourgeoisie, which ends in disease and corruption. As a moral failing, venereal disease presented society with the overt sign of the failings of the individual” (Gilman, 203).

Another example depicting the disease is portrayed in Goya’s *The Family of Charles IV*, fig. 5. In 1799 Goya was named First Painter to the King and was commissioned to paint a group portrait of the Royal Family in that same year. In his painting, completed in 1800, he shows his disdain for the family and government. “The costumes of the family glitter with the wealth and ostentation of their rank, yet the faces of the King and Queen betray their shocking lack of character. The French novelist Theophile Gautier observed that they look like ‘the corner baker and his wife after they have won the lottery’” (Schickel, 72). Although the family loved this portrait, there was “little about the personalities of this spiteful family that escaped Goya’s eye and brush” (Schickel, 72). If you look closely, the old woman on the left side of the queen has a huge black spot on her face symbolizing disease. There probably was a big black spot or sore on the old woman’s face but Goya made the choice to include it in his depiction of her. Here, the black spot on the old woman’s face may not be symbolizing her failing as an individual in a sexual sense, but of the corruption of the family; the corruption during the reign of King Charles IV.
Figure 3. Peter Breughel the Elder, *Syphilitic with Couple*, 16th Century
Figure 4, William Hogarth, *Luetic Viscount Visiting the Quack*, 1745
Figure 5, Francisco Goya, *The family of Charles IV*, 1800
CHAPTER 4
THE BODY

The female figure and body parts have been painted and sculpted over and over from the beginning of time showing changes in beliefs and social standards including the representation of the vagina. Today, in the western world, the idea of a woman showing her genitals is bound up in sex, pornography or images of women in accommodating positions rather than ones of power and influence (Blackledge, 9). From the time I started working in clay, my focus has been on sexuality and specifically women’s sexuality and body parts. I began creating “sexpots” depicting the vagina in abstract ways but when my work demanded realistic views of the vagina, I didn’t know exactly where to start since I had only seen drawings or illustrations of the vagina. I know this sounds ridiculous but it never occurred to me to look at my own vagina because I was taught that the idea of showing it was wrong, even to myself…it was something to be covered; left undiscovered. It is a symbol of embarrassment and shame; something to paste a fig leaf over. However, it is “yet apparent that women around the world have been lifting their skirts to full effect for centuries” (Blackledge, 9) without shame and with pride.

Many cultures believe in a power of the vagina and the gesture in lifting skirts to show the female genitals is found in these cultures. “A society’s myths can be seen as statements about vital issues of life, although their truth is not necessarily literal, historical or scientific. Indeed, it has been said that it is impossible to understand the people of a particular society without having an understanding of the mythology” (Blackledge, 14). Lifting skirts in India dispelled evil influences. There is a Catalan
belief in the power of the vagina; it was good luck for fisherman’s wives to display their genitals to the sea before the men go out so the seas will be calm. Russian folklore relates how when a bear appears out of the woods, it can be put to flight by a young woman raising her skirt at it. In ancient Egypt women showed their vagina to the fields they worked in to drive out evil spirits. This in turn made the women capable of working without fear; increasing the yield of their crops. “Across the globe in Papua New Guinea, an Ilahit Arapesh woman can mock and shame a man by flashing her vagina at him in public. The most shameful thing that can happen to a man is to have a woman’s vulva put to his mouth” (Blackledge, 18). This act of raising the skirt is called ana-suromai; vaginal display.

There are many sculptures, statuettes, amulets and figurines depicting ana-suromai. Syria has cylinder seals of some of the oldest vaginal displays that date from 1400 BCE. “These show women either spayed displaying, or lifting their robes to reveal their vagina-gesture that have been interpreted as having sacral significance” (Blackledge, 23). These pieces show a woman’s sense of pride and full of joy by giving us a peek at their vaginas. There is no shame, just dignity. In fig. 6, a small terracotta squatter is touching herself as she gazes straight forward. There are others from Alexandria, Egypt from the second or third century CE where the women are standing proud with one in a full length gown with headdresses who also look straight forward, gracefully raising their skirts. Who these women are is not clear. No one knows if they are goddesses or queens. They may represent Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of joy, love, sexuality, childbirth nourishment, and the daughter of the sun god Ra, or the goddess Isis,
the female principle of Nature who was known for the invention of agriculture. She was worshiped by both Greeks and Romans.

In the nineteenth century, a small terracotta Baubo was found in southern Italy, fig. 7. Baubo was a woman who brought Demeter, the Earth-Mother or Corn-Mother, goddess of fertility, out of her deep depression when she would not eat, caused by the loss of her daughter, Persephone, by lifting her skirt to show her vagina. “On seeing this bold display of womanhood, the goddess laughs, and shocked out of her suffering, accepts some sustenance” (Blackledge, 20). After this act by Baubo, the earth returns to its original state and life continues. The small sculpture of Baubo, sitting on a fat, pregnant pig, a symbol of female fertility, with legs apart with her right leg lifted and supported by her right hand proudly shows her vagina.

The last figure discussed relates to fertility, but there are ana-suromai pieces that were created to drive the devil out. There is an Italian figure, fig. 8, dating back to the twelfth century which stood above the medieval Porta Tosa gateway into the city. She is in a full length gown lifted to expose her genitalia. She is holding a dagger in her right just above her vagina which is plush with pubic hair and she is staring proudly outward to protect her city. Also, the Shelah-na-Gig are sculpted women with a great emphasis placed on the vulva. These figures are vestigial survivals of the old pagan cults found in Irish churches. “The function of such carvings was evidently apotropaic-they warded off ill-luck” (Lucie-Smith, 30). In the seventeenth century, many of these sculpted forms were ordered by churches in England to be destroyed or hidden. “Up until the last century Sheelas were seen as fertility figures-if a woman rubbed or touched them, then her fecundity would be enhanced” (Blackledge, 33). These figures created for fertility
Figure 6, *Small Terracotta Squatter, 2nd or 3rd Century*

Figure 7, *Baubo 2nd or 3rd Century*
Figure 8, Italian Figure, 12th Century
purposes or protection purposes, whatever the intent, showed the female genitalia proudly. It is an icon to be cherished and from where all human life comes.

The breasts play a role of sexuality in artwork as well. How they are painted or portrayed suggests her place, defines her beauty and tells the viewer of her morality. “The firm rounded breasts come to signify the state of grace before the fall. The icon of the “sagging breasts” is used to represent witches, demons, death, the devil” (Gilman, 27).

The virgins, or women with high moral standards, ones set by society, are depicted with beautiful round breasts. This could be the case with Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist’s, *Portrait d’une negress*, fig. 9, as with earlier allegorical subjects previously created in history, however, there are other ideas surrounding the meaning of the bare breast depicted in this image.

Benoist paints a slave in her portrait who was brought back to France by her brother-in-law. She uses this woman as a vehicle for her own purposes. “By depicting a black woman as exotic, servant or slave in the traditional pose and situation of white women, Benoist has turned the *Portrait d’une negresse* into something of an allegory of her own condition of subservience to patriarchy” (Smalls, 4). Smalls goes on the say that this is more of a portrait of Benoist than of a black woman. “That is, the portrait constitutes a visual record of white woman’s construction and affirmation of self through the racial and cultural Other” (Smalls, 4). Considering the reasons why Benoist painted this image as she did, representing herself, the idea of the round beautiful breast and how it is painted, could be saying that she, the artist, is of high morals and of the social standards needed for acceptance.
Figure 9, Benoist, *Portrait of a Negresse*, 1800
Smalls gives several reasons of why the breast is there for the viewer to see. He writes that this painting may be eroticized in order to appeal to the male viewer because he is who a woman painter had to appeal, also “There is typically a sexualizing or eroticizing aspect to allegory as well, specifically when the bodies of women are used” (Smalls, 15). He contends that breasts signify the roles of women as mothers and all it entails; sensuality, nurture, emotional warmth, intimacy and domesticity (Smalls, 15). Benoist may be saying that she is the ideal woman and what true womanhood represents. Smalls also points out that the bare breast could represent the myth that black women are hypersexual. The dark flesh could stir up fantasies as well; dark flesh is erotic. However, if this is truly a portrait of Benoist and not the sitter, the previous two explanations, in my mind, do not fit unless it is painted only to appeal to the erotic fantasies of the male viewer. “Whatever the meaning of the breast, it is the potential for reading an erotic sensuality into the portrait that adds a curious dimension to a work produced by a woman artist with anti-slavery and feminist desires” (Smalls, 15).
CHAPTER 5
THE GAZE

“The subject of the nude in art brings together discourses of representation, morality and female sexuality, but the persistent presentation of the nude female body as a site of male viewing pleasure, a commoditized image of exchange, and a fetishized defense against the fear of castration leaves little place for explorations of female subjectivity, knowledge and experience” (Chadwick, 267). Portrait d’une negresse, as with all erotic art depicting women, brings up other aspects to explore, such as the gaze. Smalls writes of the complicated networks of looking and power relationships at work in this painting.

“The dynamics of viewing and the erotics of the gaze are played out among three protagonists: the black sitter, the (unseen) white artist, and contemporary viewer. The tensions produced by these players in multiple gazed are highlighted in the crisscrossing dynamics of seeing, being seen and not being seen. Benoist’s painting is about viewer location and it raises the question of exactly who is looking at whom and how the view identities with the subject viewed” (Smalls, 22)

“The gaze is where it all begins. ‘Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen’ writes art critic John Berger ‘The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world’” (Friday, 3). To be seen early on is what we all need. We need the loving gaze of our mothers to build our self esteem. As we grow older, the gaze can begin to change from the loving gaze of our mothers that make us feel safe and loved into something less desirable; the gaze of predatory male, the gaze of participants in a non accepting societal game or the gaze that objectifies us. “Perhaps what we hate in men’s stare is that they have seen our worst self-
assessment, or picked up on our fantasy of how we long to look, which is in great part sexual, precisely what we’re not allowed to be” (Friday, 406).

“In most feminist theories of the gaze, the power of the look is erotically inscribed. It is men who supposedly possess the power of the gaze and, as such, women are subjected to it and reduced to objects. Women become, like slaves, commodities or capitalist objects of [possession and] symbolic exchange…in market economy” (Smalls, 22). Ingres artworks, Grand Odalisque, fig 10, and The Turkish Bath, fig. 11, exemplify the idea of women as objects to be controlled. “His exotic odalisques reveal his desire to control matter, from the female body to the very paint he works with” (Mahon, 43,). The Grand Odalisque is seductive but remains a figure for the imagination. The Turkish Bath is also about control. “The erotic power lies not only in the voyeuristic fantasy of seeing these women, but in the fantasy of control, specifically one man’s sexual control and enjoyment of them” (Lewis, 111).

Men or women who look at erotic images are also participating in the sensual act; it is always sensual or sexual even if you are only looking. Gilman explains “The observer of human sexuality is, however, also always a participant because he or she is using one of the senses, sight, to experience the sexual act. It is the role of the senses as the marker of the hidden force, the ape within that signifies the presence of human sexuality in the observer as well as in the individuals observed” (Gilman, 67). Friday suggests men look at pictures of nudes or naked women because the human male eye is born with a taste for the female body. Erotic art fills men’s voyeuristic needs while abiding by the rules of society (Friday, 397). It is safe to look at an erotic painting or a sculpture or participate in a sexual act by using only sight; it is acceptable to look if you
Figure 10, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Grand Odalisque* 1814
Figure 11, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *The Turkish Bath*, 1862
cannot touch. “It is quite a tour de force, this fin-de-siècle period of art that gave a Patriarchal gentleman the opportunity to stand at the Exhibitions and safely stare at naked women” (Friday, 398). However, there were many people who considered erotic art in the nineteenth century obscene.
CHAPTER 6
NUDE AND NAKED

“From the mid-nineteenth century, erotic art began to challenge openly the acceptable limits of sexual representation” (Mahon, 16). “From the mid-nineteenth century, traditional erotic art and its timeless heroic and/or moralizing depiction of the erotic body began to be replaced with a new erotic art that spoke to contemporary reality” (Mahon, 17). Images of the past such as Judgment of Paris, fig. 12, or Titian’s Pastoral Concert, fig. 13, were clothed conceptually. They were innocent. The women painted by artists starting from the mid-nineteenth century were real. They were women telling the truth; prostitutes. These women were also ‘nude’ as art historian Kenneth Clark would say. “To be naked is to be deprived of clothes, and word implies…embarrassment. The word ‘nude,’ on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The …image it projects into the mind is…of a balanced, confident body: the body re-formed” (Clark, 23).

“While hints of vaginal iconography do still exist in the west, the general sex-negative mood of western culture suggests that flagrant, flaunting, proud art depicting female genital display is far more likely to be censored or covered up than Commended” (Blackledge, 54). Societal ideas of morality made it difficult for an artist’s work depicting the nude to be accepted unless the hands draped the vagina or it was covered up and modestly and discreetly rendered. These things covered the pubic hair that women naturally own or it was omitted completely by the artist or it was actually removed by
Figure 12, Raimondi, *The Judgment of Paris*, 1520
Figure 13, Tiziano Vecelli, or Titian, *Pastoral Concert*, 1509
women. For Muslim women, depilation is a religious duty; they shave it throughout their entire lives. From the eleventh century ‘De ornatu mulierum’ (On the adornment of women), a text of women’s medicine from Salerno, there is actually a “how to” guide on how to remove pubic hair and how to keep the irritation the removal caused to the skin at a minimum. In the western world today, it is considered to some, more attractive and very sensual or sexual. “Some men and women find a smooth mons veneris more attractive and exciting than the natural ‘origin of the world’” (Drenth, 275). I don’t know if I believe this, but “it is reported that John Ruskin was so shocked by the detail in which his bride differed from the classical nudes he had studied so diligently that he was quite unable to make love to her. The marriage was dissolved” (Drenth, 275). It was totally unheard of and completely shocking to see art where women were depicted with pubic hair.

Pubic hair was rarely painted or sculpted. Earlier I discussed one of ana-suromai women which were created to ward off evil spirits in Italy. This figure included pubic hair, but there have been few depictions of women sporting this natural element of our genitals until paintings by Courbet were created. “Goya’s La Maja Desnuda, fig. 14, is considered a milestone, but even in this pioneering painting the pubic hair is adumbrated rather than actually portrayed” (Drenth, 274).

Erotic art in the past, before images such as The Origin of the World, fig. 15, by Courbet, suggests the attributes of inner beauty and knowledge, grace and modesty, as well as glorifying the perfectly rendering the ideal. With paintings like the one listed above, beauty is replaced with obscenity. Obscene art no longer lets the viewer look and think about the spirit of the nude or naked woman; the viewer is not seduced, he is
Figure 14, Francisco Goya, *La Maja Desnuda*, 1805
Figure 15, Gustave Courbet, *Origin of the World*, 1866
shocked and moral certainty is disturbed (Mahon, 19). The viewer of this image is using his sight to participate in a sexual act. In Courbet’s image, the erotic innocence portrayed in earlier works is replaced with pure sexuality. “Herein lies the key to its erotic defiance of both traditional beauty and the fear of the forbidden and the obscene” (Mahon, 20).

The Origin of the World is the site for all creation and the creation of the artist; it truly is the origin of the world painted realistically; complete with plush pubic hair. Linda Nochlin describes this image with the following words:

“In the case of Courbet’s Origin, this ultimate-meaning-to-be-penetrated might be considered the “reality” of woman herself, the truth of the ultimate other. The subject represented in the Origin is the female sex organ—the cunt-forbidden site of specularity and ultimate object of male desire; repressed or displaced in the classical scene of castration anxiety, it has also been constructed as the very source of artistic creation itself” (Nochlin 2007, 145)

Courbet lays mythological pretexts aside (Lucie-Smith, 204). He was a realist; he did not abide by the traditional rules of construction. He, like other realists, formulated the subject matter of his own time for himself without rules (Nochlin 2007, 82). He did not conceptually clothe his women. His nudes were real, truthful, and unashamed; where the viewer is not in control of the gaze and the women he painted owned their sexuality. Many artists before Courbet and Manet painted women that John Berger has pointed out “could hardly call her sexuality her own. Her nakedness is on a function of her sexuality but of the sexuality of those who have access to the pictures” (Berger, 215).

Traditionally painted, Manet’s Olympic, fig. 16, is very similar to Titian’s Venus or Urbino, fig. 2, discussed earlier in this paper but with one substantial difference. Titian’s Venus is completely submissive. It looks as though she is waiting for a man to
Figure 16, Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863
own her and she will not put up fight for his control over her. Her body does not belong to her…it is for the taking. Manet’s *Olympia* depicts an utterly different woman. “This woman is alert and self-possessed; she looks out of the canvas in a way which makes it plain that she submits to no man” (Lucie-Smith, 134). “What Manet did here beyond pitting his nude against those of the old masters was to establish by her gaze that is not traditional” (Brombert, 78). With very few exceptions the frame was always an un infringeable barrier between painting and the viewer. The gaze was always in the frame; up, down, sideways or any direction except out; out towards the viewer. “Only portrait subjects had the right to invade the viewer’s space, and they were presumed to be personages of repute. No nude ever looked straight out at the viewer, even if her credentials were scriptural” (Brombert, 79). The reaction to paintings like this one was scandalous. “Shrieks of outrage ring where prostitutes were princesses, where a man’s mistress was more likely to be seen in public than his wife and where a perfume of delight wickedness pervaded the atmosphere” (Schneider, 71). This along with the woman in the painting, and who she was, the unfamiliar style had much to do with the scandal surrounding this image as did the same elements the *Luncheon on the Grass*, fig. 17. Manet was forcing the viewer to look at his paintings instead of looking into them. The spacing element was not traditional and he took away the “boxlike space behind the window of the frame, Manet forces the viewer to work at the picture-to fill out the emotional context and to create in his mind’s eye the whole three dimensional setting” (Schneider, 71). The women in these paintings have broken the “fourth dimension” of the box. This style of painting is what makes Manet a modern painter.
Figure 17, Édouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass*, 1863
Figure 18, Édouard Manet, *Nana*, 1877
“Nana, fig. 18, is, unlike Olympia, a modern creature of present-day Paris, according to a contemporary. But, like Olympia, Nana was perceived as a sexualized female and is so represented” (Gilman, 287). In Nana, Hauser, the woman who posed for this painting was an actress and the mistress of the prince of Orange, heir to the throne of the Netherlands and the son of William III. This painting is regarded as a pendant to Olympia—as Goya’s Clothed Maja is to his Naked Maja although, Olympia is a classic figure and Nana is modern woman. “She is no Venus in a modern idiom; she is an entirely new manifestation of feminine beauty. What kindled the senses was a partially dressed woman, and nothing was more exciting than underwear” (Brombert, 384).

The woman in Nana is wearing a corset, which, in my mind constitutes the placement of constrictions on women to fit into the ideals of society. Throughout history, historians thought that wearing undergarments was a sign of modesty. However, it was also a focus of sexual interest in the nineteenth century (Steele, 114). Steele contends,

“Concealed from sight, like the body that it touches, underwear implicitly alludes to the act to undressing, a transition often perceived as a prelude to sexual intimacy. By delaying the sight of the naked body, layers of clothing and underclothing function as a kind of striptease, arousing sexual curiosity by holding in promise the thrill of exposure” (Steele, 115)

Nana is painted wearing a blue corset but the proper women of the day wore white satin corset. White was considered elegant. Women who wore corsets were also considered decently dressed; in accordance with the rules set by society. Roles set by society for women are confirmed everywhere we look. Women must look and act certain ways to be considered of high morals and as I have pointed out, beauty is equivalent to morality.
Sexuality in artworks is present in every medium for many reasons. Next, I will focus on sexual constructs and sexual content in ceramic artwork from the past and into the contemporary.
CHAPTER 7

SEXUALITY AS CONTENT IN CERAMICS

As we have seen through theories of sexuality and its roles pertaining to women using paintings and sculptures for examples, sexuality has been the content for many artists using other mediums historically and today. Women and sexuality have been portrayed in many ways for many different reasons which have played a large part in engineering our womanhood. Throughout history, clay artists have also used sexuality as content to speak visually about sexuality, constructs and the roles it has played on the great stage of life.

High art calls for, or demands content over hand. The general consensus says that ceramic artists get too caught up in the materials and the processes. “There can be no denying that potters feel, rightly, that pottery, to be authentic, must convey some direct sense of its material, and that even at the limits of finesse the sense of the material as symbol bust never be submerged” (Rawson, 14). Personally, I get absorbed in the processes and materials because of the physical properties of clay, and touch. I choose clay because it relates to sexuality and to the feminine more than any other medium.

I elect clay because of touch. Although touch is considered to be the lowest sense, it is to me, the most sensual and sexual sense. From the Creation, Adam (man) was thought to be the rational and Eve (women) of the senses. Touch is something that I long for…and something that I long to give. The touch of clay is sexual and the touch excites me…working with clay, I know that I will always have a very sensual existence. There is an inseparable relationship between me, my work, my sex, sexuality, and clay.
All of these things molded together create a whole. They create my identity. Clay is also the most versatile of art mediums. I can incorporate many different surfaces working with clay…I can mimic nature with texture or I can give my forms an industrial surface, a hard surface, a soft surface or any surface I want… while manipulating a form using touch.

Any size and any shape are obtainable with clay. Finding the limitations of clay and trying to find ways to push those limitations pushes me as a ceramic artist. It makes me think critically about creative processes. Creating work made from clay makes me think about the execution of my idea and asks how can I create visual interpretations of my thoughts, position, and ideas with this medium that is so very fickle? Clay is problem solving. Clay is critical thinking.

I believe that I have a vision of this medium as a means to create meaningful expressions. Although the act of creating out of clay is very sensual to me I see my work as art that can be judged and interpreted no matter the material. “We must never allow ourselves to forget that pottery, like all art indeed, was meant to occupy a place in an actual world of life and activity” (Rawson, 64). As this writing has shown, I believe that art created from many different media can be referenced to define my thoughts and points. In the next pages, I will be concentrating on clay objects to reference my work and ideas.

Critics and historians say our lack of content keeps us from joining the elite; the ‘elite’ called Fine Art. The Western view of ceramics keeps the studies on the subject out of many art text books because it is considered craft. During my educational career, I remember reading and being taught little about artists who create artwork in this medium.
Contemporary sculptor Martin Puryear says that ceramic artists and artists working in wood would never have to contend with such snobbery in Japan (Hughes, 1). “Ceramics, the medium with the longest art history of any creative discipline (10,000 years as compared to painting’s mere 600 years) does not include the comprehensive study of ceramic history in the education system” (Clark, 359). But Clark also says that “ceramics should not be plugged into an existing fine arts model but create a history tailored to the ceramics community and sympathetic to the nature of the medium” (Clark, 361). I don’t agree with the last statement. Ceramics does have a place in any art history class. The findings and the study of ceramic sculptures and pots help us determine social constructs of women and men and how they celebrated life and death. In the contemporary world, ceramic art, like any other art created from one of the ‘elite’ mediums, has much to say. Furthermore, ceramics has a long history of content which also shows the construction of women in different cultures.

Creating something from clay is an experience; not just a process. In this chapter, Sexuality as Content, I would like to first mention that sexuality plays more than one role; creation, use, and for the purposes of this chapter, the completed work of art. Hot, wet, slippery, drippy, messy, hard, fire, loose, stiff, these are all words that are part of sexual language. They are also, to me as a potter, the language of clay; a language that I use every day in my studio. We are very intimate with objects made from clay. We touch them, we fondle them, we put our lips to them, and several times a day we show them the private side of us. “Clay comes from the earth; it is alive and fertile. Clay is like flesh, and most mythologies use clay as origin in creation myths” (Mathieu, 13). There is no other medium or process as close to sexuality as is clay. Sexuality as content
in ceramics has played a large role throughout history in art and its practices from the earliest civilizations and continues to be an important theme in contemporary ceramics today.

“It’s from ancient times to the present, the human figure has played a significant role in art. Human figures have served to express deeply cherished cultural values, including the construction of women, beliefs about religion, sexuality, politics and personal and social identity” (Robertson, 131).

Looking at art throughout history, there are more clay representations of the body than any other medium because of its permanence. Many other artworks, made from different media have been destroyed by the effects of time. There are female figures numbering in the thousands that have survived the test of time. With large breasts, broad hips and a defined vulva, they are usually associated with the Mother Goddess which is an implication of fertility and recurring rhythms of nature. The mother is the earth and her womb is the kiln. The pots that are taken from the kiln are her children. The firing is the moment of birth and the pots are born from the earth to which they will eventually return. Ceramics has other strong female associations. According to one Greek legend, the first bowl was modeled on Helen’s breast. (Vincentelli, 19)

Although few in number, the oldest sexual representations in fired clay come from Egypt, from as early as the First Dynasty. Fired-clay penises can also be found that were probably meant as votive offerings in fertility rites. There are countless images in Egyptian art of men and women as couples, representations of family life and scenes that beautifully illustrate the tender feelings between lovers, but there are not many representations of sexuality (Mathieu, 21).
The Moche Culture

The Moche inhabited the north coast of Peru in South America from about 600 BC to the Spanish Conquest in the 16th Century. The land was rich in clay the people of Peru were an extraordinary people. Made with millions of dried clay adobe bricks, they built large networks of pyramids and temples. The Moche were also brilliant potters. With the clay that was in such abundance, the Moche made thousands of the most beautiful pots in history and many of these pots are sexual. They were always pots. These sexpots are most often stirrup handle vessels and are not very functional. Because they were used for rituals and as offerings in funerary rites, these pots have been found within tombs. The stirrup vessel is phallic by itself, as any pot with a spout, and using this type of pot the Moche had the perfect form to start with to create these graphic, sexual, erotic pots, fig. 19.

“The very fact that these objects are always pots is significant. Pots are the objects of containment, meant to be penetrated, filled, meant to preserve and protect, to feed and nourish and to generously provide, in themselves metaphorically gendered with female openings and male spouts” (Mathieu, 24).

Sexual acts are found on pots prior to this time, as I have mentioned earlier with the Egyptians, but the majority of sexpots from early civilizations are from the Moche period. The Moche celebrated their sexual impulses and needs with these pots.

Almost any sexual position or act imagined is represented by the sexpots of the Moche. The most common would be female to male fellatio. There are pots where a male figure is masturbating, pots with female masturbation, fig. 20, intercourse between men and women, and homosexual intercourse including lesbian sex, fig. 21. There are
Figure 19, *Vessel*, Peru, circa 600
Figure 20, Moche Culture, circa 100 AD
Figure 21, Moche Culture, *Homosexual Anal Penetration*
pots where a man is performing cunnilingus on his partner. There are pots that represent intercourse between women and mythical animals and pots with non-mythical animals having sex together. There are pots with scenes of women giving birth. Any act one would consider to be private is exploited on these pots. There are also pots that are representations of a man’s penis. Although some of these pots show homosexual acts, most of them are heterosexual acts between two humans and 80 per cent of these pots show heterosexual anal intercourse.

It is clear to see that whether from behind or from the side or from the front, the vagina is much defined. It is without a penetrating penis. The penis is penetrating the anus without intimidation. For many years, it was thought that this type of sexual act, considered taboo, and unacceptable with most religions, was a form of birth control. These pots have been found in tombs of adults and children, so a correlation between the life of the deceased and the pots are unlikely. A Belgian archaeologist and historian named Anne-Marie Hocquenghem has made an interpretation of a vase that was recently unearthed, fig. 22. The drawing on the vase consists of figures; many of them are skeletons, in two strips. The figures are dancing and playing the flute. The horizontal line, considered to be the ground, has a figure, alive, being pulled through by the skeletons to below the earth. There is a couple engaged in heterosexual anal intercourse in the top left hand corner.

“Hocquenghem’s interpretations suggest that there was a special time of the year, within the natural cycle of growth and regeneration, planting and harvesting, in the life and death of plants and nature, when for a period of time, the dead were believed to come back to life and resurface to share the space of the living. During that special time, the natural order was reversed and all activities had to be reversed likewise, particularly all sexual activities. Only anal intercourse was permitted. This ritual
Figure 22, Moche Culture, *Day of the Dead Myth with Heterosexual Anal Penetration Ritual*
prescription was essential for the natural order to be restored and for the dead to return to the underworld. This practice of various reverse can also be found in other American aboriginal cultures (Mathieu, 27).

When we put our lips to something, it is intimate; a kiss, a sexual act, or, I think, placing your lips to a rim of a vessel is also an intimate act. It is especially intimate when the vessel you are putting your lips to is supporting a large penis with an erection. Some of the vessels created by the Moche were of cadavers with large erections fig. 23. The penis is like a straw one would drink, or suck from. The top of the pot is pierced to make it impossible to drink from the rim. In my early work, these pots were of great influence to me. I created a drinking vessel that forces the user to drink from a phallus, fig. 24. As discussed earlier, there were no erotic paintings in history designed for sexual enjoyment for women. These cups from the Moche culture and my vessels are designed specifically for this purpose. Women can take a liberating role in participating in the erotic. These types of pots also amuse. One pot named “El Clinton,” fig. 25, by the archeologist who found it is particularly funny. It was found at the same time the Monica Lewinsky scandal was being exploited in the news. It has a woman on her knees performing fellatio on a man that is obviously a ruler of some sort. The woman’s head moves back and forth like a bobble head doll you would buy in a toy store. Other examples, from the Moche culture, of forms representing sexuality in which you become intimate are female forms where the vagina is the opening for drinking. But most pots that represent the female body are bowls. Bowls are a form of containment; like the female breast. Marie-Antoinette had a milk bowl commissioned and it is believed to have been formed from her breast. As written earlier, it is believed the first bowl was modeled from Helen’s breast.
Figure 23, Moche Culture, *Cadaver with Erection*
Figure 24, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Flower Cup*, 2007
Figure 25, Moche Culture, *Fellatio Scene with Articulated Female Head*
Looking at past ceramic pots and contemporary pots, there are more representations of the male genitalia than of the female; except from the Moche culture. One example is of a female figure bending over exposing her vagina, fig. 26. She has her hands pulling her buttocks apart to expose a very detailed site. Her clitoris is clearly defined. “This shows the amazing, clinical and precise knowledge of anatomy and the power of descriptive observation on the part of the Moche potters, and that female pleasure was considered by the Moche as an integral part of sexuality” (Mathieu, 35). The sexuality of women in this culture was not to be hidden away like in most Western religions; there are no fig leaves here. Women were not used to give pleasure to men visually or physically. Like the Catalian beliefs of the power of the vagina, the Russian folklore, and Egyptian mythology, the vagina is also being celebrated in the Moche culture. The construction of female sexuality here is far different than the western artworks discussed earlier in this paper. This pot where the woman is showing us her vagina reminds me of Courbet’s *Origin of the world*. This figure, like Courbet’s *Origin*, is showing where all creation of humans come from.

Not all of Moche pottery represents sexuality. There are thousands of pots and around 800 pots use sexuality as content. Among these 800 pots, there are some that show venereal diseases, fig. 27, like the artworks highlighted earlier such as Peter Breughel the Elder’s *Syphilitic with Couple*, fig. 3, William Hogarth’s *Luetic Viscount Visiting the Quack*, fig. 4, and Goya’s *The Family of Charles IV*, fig. 5. However, I don’t believe this pot’s intention is to show death and disease caused by women as in the paintings listed above and discussed throughout this paper.
These pots created by the Moche culture give us an understanding of the constructs of female sexuality in their society.
Figure 26, Moche Culture, *Woman Offering Herself*
Figure 27, Moche Culture, *Venereal Disease Vessel*
Greek Sexpots

Greek vessels are studied in the history of art. Although the regard of the potter was more than that of the painter, they are not studied as three dimensional forms, or as an art form in itself, but studied for the drawings or paintings on the surfaces. Surviving paintings from the Greek and Roman Empire are in poor condition. Therefore historians have relied on vase paintings to decipher the lifestyle of these people. These drawings depict scenes from everyday life and the scenes on the pots entail great myths which illustrate their culture and lifestyle. Even though they are quite beautiful with their intricate drawings, they were functional, used in everyday tasks. “Virtually none of the vases was created for artistic display, as opposed for use” (Johnson, 75). The Oinochoe, a pouring vessel, fig. 28, has a drawing of a man urinating into a vessel held by a young boy. It is like a sugar container with the word sugar written on it which is a bit humorous.

The Greek artists who made these pots also use sexuality as content in their work. The Cleansing Scene, 4th century BC, fig. 29, is of two women engaged in the very intimate act of bathing each other. Is this drawing used for the fantasies of women or of men like Courbet’s Sleep, fig. 1? Perhaps because homosexuality was readily accepted in Ancient Greece and depicted on many of their vessels, the images painted on the vessels do indeed allow women to experience the erotic visually. In the Seduction Scene, 4th century BC, fig. 30, the drawing on the vessel portrays a man and a young boy engaging in a sexual act. The man and boy face each other and place their penises between each other’s thighs where ejaculation transpires outside of the body.
It is more common for the vases to have two boys fondling each other with no intercourse depicted than of a man and boy engaging in sexual acts.
Figure 28, Greece, *Oinochoe* (Wine Tub), circa 480 BC
Figure 29, Greece, *Cleansing Scene*, 4th Century BC
Figure 30, Greece, *Seduction Scene*, 4th Century BC
Sexual Content in Modern and Contemporary Ceramic Artworks

There are many artists and potters with high regard that have used sexuality as content in their work. One artist that everyone who has ever been in a classroom centered around art, or has walked the face of the earth, is familiar with Pablo Picasso. But they are familiar with Pablo Picasso, the famous painter.

However, not many know of his fascination with ceramics. “The most influential contemporary ceramics were those of Pablo Picasso” (Clark, 273). His enthusiasm of the medium was sky-scraping. His art dealer overheard him trying to ‘reel in’ another artist, Henri Laurens: “You ought to go into ceramics! I made a head. It is amazing and you can look at it from all angles, it’s flat. Of course it is the painting that makes it flat. I also did something else: I painted on rounded surfaces. I painted balls” (Copland, 7).

After the Second World War, Picasso began working quite a bit in clay. His mastery in the medium did not include working on the wheel. He did not throw, but he designed the forms, with some being influenced by the Greek vases and pre-Columbian pottery. He has much eroticism in all of his work but the work in clay actually influenced his eroticism in his paintings. He is credited with thousands of pots that he created over a span of about fifteen years. Two examples are shown in figures 31 and 32.

The art history of pottery is rarely tied to the development of the avant-garde. Pottery has tended to be an evolutionary rather than revolutionary medium. Through the years there has been exceptions” (Clark, 157) One of the people that Garth Clark is writing about is George Ohr. “He was an innovator with a repertoire of ideas and forms” (Clark, 157). At the time when
Figure 31, Pablo Picasso, *Priapus*, 1964

Figure 32, Pablo Picasso, *Head*, 1948
he was working. Ohr’s pots were considered ugly. They were broken, torn and twisted. Today they are admired at with great appeal.

He was known as the “mad potter from Biloxi” and a bit eccentric. In 1896 he photographed himself working in his studio that had burned down two years prior. He was working among all of the charred remains with his children running about. He put his children into large vessels and photographed them as well. “The act of putting his children inside his “clay babies” or “fixings,” as he called his pots, evidenced a symbolism in which Ohr saw the act of potting in terms of divine creation” (Clark, 165). Ohr said that no two pots are alike just like there are no two men alike. “Ohr considered his pots as a dual metaphor that linked them with anthropomorphic and theosophical traditions” (Clark, 165).

George Ohr made many pots using sexuality as content. His twisted forms suited the sexual implications of his forms. He made this line of sexual pots, along with other novelty items to sell at county fairs. He made one piece of special interest to me called Vagina Bank in 1900, fig. 33. This piece influenced my piece Pocket Book, fig. 34, and both are about the power of sex and money and desire. In the contemporary world, women’s beauty and sexuality are power. Power is how one gets things done. It is one way women compete to get ahead in a world where resources are so limited for our gender.

Warren Mackenzie is another great potter who has made work that deals with sexuality. His Vases for a Gynecologist’s Office, 1970, fig. 35, are two pots that represent gender; there is one female and one male pot. These pots are so beautiful and simple. The female pot of course has similarities to a vagina and the male pot is of a
Figure 33, George Ohr, *Vagina Bank*, 1900

Figure 34, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Pocketbook*, 2006
Figure 35, Warren Mackenzie, *Vases for a Gynecologist’s Office*, 1970
cylindrical shape with a small hole in the top of it. They are not the ‘in your face’ type of sexpots that I have been discussing so far in this paper. I am drawn to the simplicity of these forms. My current work, which I will be discussing later, has some similarities in the way that these forms represent sexuality in a more subtle nature.

Earlier I discussed how we become intimate with ceramic objects by touching them, fondling them and so forth. I want people to want to touch my work. Although my new work is sculptural, I want the observer to feel the variations on the surface and how the outer lines of my sculptures create a sensual mass. I want the viewers to be drawn in by the curves of the forms and the clean white surface. My intent with my forms is to create an intimate, sensual feeling. Ceramic artist Kim Dickey has created objects that deepen the intimacy between the ceramic object and the user in a totally different way. She has created functional objects that fit very close to the female body. These pieces are inserted between the legs and allow a woman to urinate standing up, fig. 36. They are actually contemporary versions of an 18th century bourdalou. The bourdalou was invented for women to use during church services at Versailles because the Priest, Abbe Bourdalou, would go on for so long.
Figure 36, Kim Dickey, *Pissoirs*, 1994
CHAPTER 8
FEMINISTS EXPRESSIONS

During the late 60s and 70s, many different types of art were being practiced and created.

“The 1970’s were pluralist with a vengeance. New styles and new media included conceptual art, crafts as art, earth art, feminist art, pattern and decoration, performance art, among many others. The pluralism of the 1970’s clearly sprang from the political and cultural upheavals of the late 1960’s. Women, for instance, achieved quantitatively larger representation in the art world than at any previous period in history” (Atkins, 147)

“Many women sought forms through which to valorize women’s experience. The early 1970’s saw an explosion of work which reinserted women’s personal experiences into art practice” (Chadwick, 321). Judy Chicago is probably the first noteworthy artist of the feminist art movement. She and Miriam Schapiro founded the first feminist art program at California State University, Fresno and helped to create WAR (Women Artists in Revolution). “Of special concern to feminist theorists was the historical bias against craft vis-à-vis high art” (Atkins, 93). At this time, both female artists, Chicago and Schapiro changed from creating work with geometric abstractions in sculpture and painting to works specific to women’s experiences and bodies (Chadwick, 321).

Chicago answered Linda Nochlin’s question Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists by saying “What has prevented women from being really great artists is the fact that we have been unable to transform our circumstances into our subject…to use them to reveal the whole nature of the human condition” (Lippard, 17). Art critic Lucy Lippard states “There is no reason why strong women artists cannot emerge from a
feminist community to operate in both spheres, [private and public art] why they cannot in fact, form a trialectic between the female world, the art world and the real world. That is where I would like to be. How to get there is the question” (Lippard, 40-41). Lippard explains the difference between the two spheres by stating “Private art is often seen as mere ornament; public art is associated with monuments and money, with “high” art and its containers, including unwelcoming shit-walled galleries and museums with classical courthouse architecture” (Lippard, 124).

Judy Chicago joined together 400 women-crafts persons, who worked on an installation for six years finally completing The Dinner Party which opened in 1979 at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, fig. 37. Chicago said

“I began to think about the piece as a reinterpretation of the Last Supper form the point of view of women, who, throughout history, had prepared the meals and set the table. In my “Last Supper,” however, the women would be the honored guests. Their representation in the form of plates set on the table would express the way women had been confined, and the piece would thus reflect both women’s achievements and their oppression” (Chicago, 11)

The Dinner Party has toured many cities and has been seen by more than a half a million people. The work consists of a large triangular table with thirty nine place settings. Each place setting commemorates a famous woman, her accomplishments, and is comprised of a chalice, embroidered table cloths, ceramic eating utensils, and ceramic plates referencing a vagina. Chicago writes “These abstract portraits of women of the past were part of my personal search for a historical context from my art” (Chicago, 8). Chicago goes on to say “I thought images on plates would convey the fact that the
Figure 37, Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979
women I planned to represent had been swallowed up and obscured by history instead of being recognized and honored” (Chicago, 8). Great women, no, most women have been eaten up throughout history, some women knowing and others unknowing.

I believe that the historical facts and theories about women discussed in this paper have constructed us sexually and otherwise making it compulsory for us to compete. John Berger wrote, “A woman must continually watch herself. From earliest childhood she has to be taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyed and the surveyor within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman” (Chadwick, 322).
My Early Work

I have many early works using sexuality as content and have drawn influences from many places. For this paper I am including only a couple of early works for detailed discussion because these works entail beginning thoughts of how I could visually represent the constrictions women have placed on them and how society has constructed us. One piece is functional and the other is sculptural. Sexuality and beauty are recurring themes in my work. For me, flowers signify beauty which is desire, love, and power. In the functional piece, which I briefly discussed earlier, fig. 24, I have created a form with clay that represents or encapsulates a botanical image. This flower cup is influenced by the Moche culture and blatantly forces the user to become intimate with it in a sexual way. For women in America and other cultures, exhibiting sexuality is considered taboo. Sexual expression is forced when one fondles and puts their lips to my “flower.” This is a liberating experience.

This artwork consists of three separate pieces. There is the cup, where she has made the top uneven to represent the petals of a flower. It is also formed like this to make it difficult for the user to drink from the rim. I want the user to drink from the stamen, a removable straw, which clearly represents a sexual act when in use. The saucer where the cup rests also has a flower-like feel completing the piece. I have fired this in a salt kiln giving it a worn appearance which also defines the texture on the stamen, around the bottom of the cup and in the center of the saucer. This repeating texture through-out helps to unify this piece. Any time one uses a ceramic object, they become intimate with it by touching it with their fingers or their lips and tongue but I want to take this intimacy to another level; a conscious sexual act.
Figure 24, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Flower Cup*, 2007
My corset series, the one here called *Undressing*, fig. 38, was inspired by Manet’s *Nana*, fig. 18, page 39. The corset, which constitutes the placement of constrictions on women to fit into the ideals of society, was of great influence to my thoughts and expressions. Explored earlier in chapter six, Manet’s *Nana*, is a modern woman wearing a corset. Underwear, including corsets, was a focus of sexual interest in the nineteenth century. It is for me also about how women and their bodies are supposed to be perfect and the lengths one has gone and will go to achieve society’s image of beauty.

Contemporary ceramic artist Kristin Kieffer creates feminine undergarments and lingerie using the medium of clay as well, fig. 39. When I heard her speak about her work, she keenly referred to her pieces as “architecture holding up beauty.” While our intentions of expression and styles differ, her methodology influenced how my corsets were constructed and surfaced. From hearing her talk about her techniques and looking at her extremely intricate work, I was influenced to manipulate and alter thrown forms and to use slip to create patterns on the surfaces of my work.

My corsets are empty vessels because the person on the inside is invisible and without regard because we have become, what Nancy Friday declares, the society of empty packages. We wrap ourselves up in beautiful clothes and make-up to be given a high score of morality and beauty on a scale created by society. Society keeps us as women bound up in the ideals of perfection. My corsets are mostly blue, and blue is one of many colors that were considered in the nineteenth century to be worn by deviant women. Although we may know the story behind Manet’s *Nana*, the blue corset still acts a visual clue as to the identity of the woman. She is a prostitute. As I have written earlier, only women who wore white corsets were considered to be decently dressed.
Figure 18, Édouard Manet, *Nana*, 1877

Figure 38, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Undressing*, 2006
Figure 39, Kristin Kiefer, *Two Sparrows*, 2007
CHAPTER 9

PRESENTATION OF CURRENT WORK BY THE ARTIST

My corset and cup series, discussed in chapter eight, were the true starting point for my new work because they were the first visual expression of my ideas of social and cultural constructs which were sparked by Linda Nochlin’s *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* This article made me look into our past which has led me to discover why women compete and have to compete; why beauty is so important and how sexuality is power. I stated earlier that life is one beauty pageant after another.

I want to express visually all of the readings and research that has enveloped much of my time and has evoked much interest to me. The research complied to create this thesis and body of work has stirred emotions and feelings I thought were absent in myself. I always felt inadequate as a young girl, through my adolescence and into womanhood never realizing that there is nothing wrong with me but what is wrong is society. I never knew women’s past history. I never knew the full extent of sexual constructs, the inequality and the misogyny which have been constituents of my gender since the beginning of time. I just cannot read enough about my past as a woman, a sexual being and as an artist. It is not possible for me to express in written format how unveiling women’s history has made me feel. We may have come a long way, but there is still a long road to travel.

For the female gender, society demands excellence physically. We are all judged from appearances. For girls with inadequate looks, Friday exclaims “Only a daughter raised with a sense of her own identity, lovingly encouraged to find it and wear it, will grow into a woman who can look uncritically into a piece of reflecting glass” (Friday,
I was a fat child and a fat young woman picked on by others and never chosen. Although I am now of average size I will never have the confidence of a thin, beautiful, talented, intelligent woman. “To enter adolescence without looks can be a reversal of such proportions, that many women never recover from their sense of inadequacy. Looks may arrive ten years later, but the reflection is never believed” (Friday, 228).

There were the “chosen” girls I went to high school with that entered all of the beauty pageants and had the dates with the sports elite. Although these girls were smart and funny, in my world growing up, it was more important for one to win a beauty contest than to be valedictorian. I was not of the same visual caliber and could not compete. I never had problems with these girls; many were my closest friends. However, just because I liked them, doesn’t mean that I didn’t secretly want to trip them.
Tripping the Beauty Queen: Competition Between Women

"Tripping the Beauty Queen" is the title to my newest body of work. My thought processes while creating this work entails many issues and ideas expressed in this paper. I have created fifteen beauty contestants to be put on display under bright lights for spectators to view. My aim for this body as a whole is to create a spectacle. This is a competition; something most women and girls have experienced in different aspects of life because of societal rules which, as I have discussed throughout this paper, were created long ago. We are all judged and I have always felt that my identity has been predetermined by my appearance. My sculptures which represent women are all beautiful and sexual. I hope John Berger would say that each one of my pieces can call their sexuality their own like Courbet’s and Manet’s women can. My contestants hold the confidence to compete and compete fairly. Using clay, I have created flower forms to represent my beauty contestants. None are perfect; they all have flaws that can be seen under careful examination but from afar, all wrapped up in a pure white layer of “skin,” they appear to be perfect. Even thought they are flawed, they still have what it takes to stand under the bright lights and be judged.

According to the rules, one must give an appearance of perfection to be allowed to compete. Nancy Friday writes in *The Power of Beauty* that women are not taught how to compete. Pat Heim, Ph.D and author of *In the Company of Women* agrees with Friday and states, “We’ve learned not to fight—but we haven’t learned what to do with stifled angry feelings if we feel slighted” (Heim, 105). We know how to use our beauty in competition, but the doctrine of the second wave of feminism rebukes the use of our beauty and sexuality for advancement or achievement. “Women don’t allow ourselves to
get high on our beauty because of the instilled rules against competition, but men have no such fear” (Friday, 418). She goes on to say “From the beginning of life, nothing arouses competition among females as does beauty, and nothing is more forbidden than open rivalry over it” (Friday, 489).

In the past, women’s competition might be focused on clothes, husbands, children and lifestyle but now we’re also competing at work, politics, and sports, with increasing pressure to have it all and to succeed in every field (Barash, 43). Because of the injustices women have faced throughout history and today we are forced to compete. Today, there are sixty-four million women in the work force and only make seventy-six cents to the man’s dollar. Our resources are limited and women don’t want to bring other women up with them. Lucy Lippard wrote in the early seventies that

“The rare woman who has made it into the public eye tends to reject younger or lesser women artists for fear of competition, for fear of being forced into a “woman’s ghetto,” and thereby having her work taken less seriously. She is likely to say, “I made it on my own, as a person, why can’t they?”; at the same time she will occasionally acknowledge how rough it was to make it as a woman” (Lippard, 45).

Twenty-five years later Friday says this is still the case. “We hesitate to bring one another along as we advance up the ladder, fearing our assist may open the possibility of the other woman becoming our equal, even outstripping us. Our anxiety is based on the belief that, unlike men, we have limited resources and limited opportunity” (Friday, 375). Women compete in ways that are hidden or out of the public eye because we are always under scrutiny. Men compete at work and call it business, but many women can’t seem to leave things at the office. We don’t know how.
Women have learned from childhood to be nice. “Consequently, when they get into a squabble, girls are repeatedly admonished to “get along and be nice.” These are code words for “avoid conflict at all cost”” (Heim, 97). My women are competing openly and unafraid of conflict. They are out to be evaluated.

In creating these pieces, these flowers, I referenced images of actual flowers. I used these images as the general idea of flowers and manipulated them into my own visions. I was also greatly influenced by Georgia O’Keeffe. She said she was not painting sex, but based on my visual interpretation, it looks like she did. I use flower forms to symbolize women by reason of their similarities in the model of beauty and sexuality. These pieces all have sensual qualities but my goal is not to portray women as purely sexual beings but to expose the beauty that all women inherently own. Our beauty may not be on the outside, but on the inside; it may be the ability to talk to people, intelligence, or our presence in a room. No matter what our beauty entails, we are playing the game. Everyone wants to be accepted.

The skin of white represents purity and morality. As a society, I agree with Friday that we have become the society of empty packages. My women are not empty packages. Their forms are strong and need no decoration. They stand with flaws wrapped up in purity and morality; something that has been lost along the way while trying to conform to society’s demands. Discussed earlier, we wrap ourselves up in beautiful garb to distract people from seeing our true identity. It is like a package under a Christmas tree; an object covered and disguised. We are inside the paper that someone will eventually rip open. We are full of fear because the people who unwrap us may be
disappointed with what is inside not unlike children Christmas morning that are
heartbroken when not receiving the gift they highlighted on their lists sent to Santa.
Methodology

Each piece in this body of work was started on the wheel. I threw parts to create large forms and attached them together at the appropriate time. After the basic form was put together, I used hand building techniques such as coiling and slab construction to complete the form. On some of the sculptures I have added slip to create a raised texture or pencils, sticks, stamps or other tools to create a more subtractive texture and to add variation to the surface. I also wanted to use the wheel for these pieces to have the throw marks incorporated in each piece. The throw marks remind me of something having been wrapped up with a wire or heavy string. I wanted to use this element created by the process of throwing to create an implication of constriction. Working on a large scale is new to me. I have used the flower motif throughout my graduate career but mostly by carvings or surface decoration. In the past, I used other forms to represent beauty and its constructs, first by making corsets, fig. 37, and then by creating girdles fig. 40. One of my professors asked me at my thirty-hour review what my idea of beauty was and how could I represent women in a different way or a more beautiful way because all women are beautiful. I replied flowers because they are the most beautiful things in the world to me. Flowers are how I represent women now. One of my graduate colleagues calls me a flower. Beauty is found in many places. The places I find beauty are in the women my flowers represent; they have beautiful souls, they are powerful, and confident. They have the confidence to stand under the bright lights and be judged with flaws. These flowers hold in themselves what I want to hold.

Each flower in this body of work is strong enough visually to stand on its own but work together as a complete body of work. I want people to interact with them. I want
people to want to touch them. I want people to experience the need for touch like I feel the need for touch. I need to create artwork made from clay. Touch is the reason I use clay.
Figure 40, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Girdle*, 2006
CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

I would like to note my admiration for the artists that were discussed who portrayed strong women; the ones who could control and turn down the volume of the masses shouting the demands of conformity and turn a blind eye to the gazes of objectification. My look into our sexual past and the constructs that have been placed on women and it’s rendering through images along with the changes of the representation of women in the latter part of the nineteenth century has given me an energetic surge to continue down the path that started when I first read Linda Nochlin’s Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists. “What is important is that women face up to the reality of their history and of their present situation, without making excuses or puffing mediocrity” (Nochlin 1989, 176). Rooms may still have glass ceilings where competitions of beauty and power are at play and where societies rules are ever changing, but hopefully the doors are starting to open where we will not have to hear “…and the crown goes to…”
Images of Work from *Tripping the Beauty Queen*
Created by Gayle Shaw Clark
Figure 41, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #2*, 2008
Figure 42, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #4*, 2008
Figure 43, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant # 8*, 2008
Figure 44, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #11*, 2008
Figure 45, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #13*, 2008
Figure 46, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #16*, 2008
Figure 47, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #17, 2008*
Figure 48, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #19*, 2008
Figure 49, *Contestant #21*, Gayle Shaw Clark, 2008
Figure 50, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #23*, 2008
Figure 51, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #27*, 2008
Figure 52, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #49*, 2008
Figure 53, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #32*, 2008
Figure 54, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #36*, 2008
Figure 55, Gayle Shaw Clark, *Contestant #42*, 2008
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