

Washington University in St. Louis
Washington University Open Scholarship

Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers


College of Art

Spring 2018

Canonical Poses and The Gaze

Sarah Oakley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa>

 Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [Photography Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Oakley, Sarah, "Canonical Poses and The Gaze" (2018). *Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers*. 39.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/39>

This Unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

Canonical Poses and The Gaze

Sarah Oakley
B.F.A. Thesis Painting
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Art
Washington University in St. Louis
May 2, 2018

ABSTRACT:

My work deals with the nude female form and the various depictions that it has taken on. From the early oil paintings from masters like Ingres and Titian, through *Playboy* centerfolds of the 50s-70s, and continuing all the way up to the contemporary nude iPhone selfie, I explore questions of the gaze, ownership, and commodification of the female form. Starting with my painted *Selfie Series* and ending with my embroidered pillows, I touch on a variety of framing devices for the female nude and its representation of sexuality in modern culture.

THESIS STATEMENT:

The female experience is one that is shrouded with expectations and disappointments. In my work, I explore the varying representations of female sexuality throughout history and explore not only the different ways in which we have been portrayed but also for whom. A common thread throughout my works is interrogating the intention behind images of the female nude and the way the figure is depicted throughout different medias. In short, my work poses the question of “Who is this image meant for?” The female nude is not inherently pornographic; it is the intention behind whoever is producing and consuming this image that turns the female nude into something overtly sexualized and out of context. When looking to the history of art, “the female nude is not simply one subject among others, one form among many, it is the subject, the form. (Neads 326)” It is this intrinsic value and connection between the female nude and the development of art history that fascinates me. The female body serves as the birth place, time and time again, for men to project their ideals and own sexuality onto the submissive.



Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538, oil on canvas

Throughout my junior year and into the fall of senior year, I concentrated on exploring female sexuality through the contemporary lens of the iPhone. By focusing on my own personal

experiences as well as those of the women around me, I questioned how many aspects of the self are reduced by sending intimate messages of our bodies through technology. In middle school and high school, and continuing into college, “sexting” has been a hotly debated topic as it is a source of both intimacies between the individual and a partner, but also of public shame and a scorned sense of self.



Violet Velvet, 48”X36”, 2017, oil on canvas

Since this series focuses on “selfies” taken by the subject herself, an interesting dynamic is created through combating the stereotypical male gaze. The cellphone in the hands of the painted figure gives a sense of intention and ownership to the image, that is absent in the *Playboy* centerfolds of the 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s which I reference in my latest works. This calls into question the relationship between the subject and the individual the photo was initially intended

or taken for. I believe this opens the viewer to experience a private relationship that asks them to question their own gaze. Because the modern smartphone has given women a means to produce images of their own sexuality, this series focuses on how depictions of the female has evolved over time through technology and women's rights, stemming from the changing hands of image ownership.



Sarah Oakley, *Flash*, 15"X12", 2017, oil on canvas

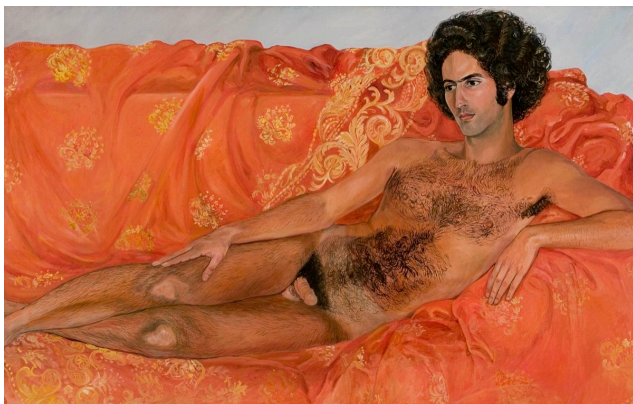


Sarah Oakley, *Red Leather*, 14"X11", 2017, oil on canvas

In this series, I begin each work by collecting images from friends and acquaintances who already have nude or sexually explicit pictures on their phone that they send to me through their own volition. For those who take the picture just with the intent for it to be painted, my only direction to them is to include the phone in the image. This changes the relationship between the viewer and painting because in this instance, I serve as the initial receiver, and therefore the sole interpreter of the subject. I typically break up the space of the canvas starting with the figure and working outwards, beginning with a color palette of two or three paint mixtures. The

fragmentation of space and distorted depths of the background create a central focus on the figure, more specifically the eyes. In the work, *Violet Velvet* (page 3), the downturned eyes seductively look at the phone while also revealing the self-conscious nature of photographing oneself. *Violet Velvet* constructs the female form in an abstracted and expressionistic manner that possesses an organic quality not necessarily found in the more precise nature of my more recent works.

The inclusion of the cellphone places my work from the *Selfie Series* directly in the context of modern representations of female sexuality and the potential for intimacy within sexting. The *Selfie Series* also touches on female relationships and closeness: by entrusting me with these private images the bond between artist and subject is solidified, and ultimately creates a process in which I have very little control over how the subject chooses to represent herself. I then break up the space of the canvas to create a realm that is both simultaneously real and unreal. Like the figure, composed of varying brushstrokes of different viscosities, the background is also collapsible. Though I have no control over the reference photo I have full control over the painting.



Sylvia Sleight, *Imperial Nude*, 1977



Sylvia Sleight, *Philip Golub Reclining*, 1971

Another artist who looks to the relationship between subject and painter is Sylvia Sleigh. Sleigh is a realist painter who became an important part of New York's feminist art scene in the 1960s and beyond. In Sleigh's work, she often removes and replaces the female figure with a male nude, as a means of commenting on the gendered construction of classic paintings. She often uses historical references that I employ in my most recent works, like Ingres and Titian. She was particularly well known for these paintings of male nudes, which challenged the art historical tradition of male artists painting female subjects as objects of desire. In her painting, *Phillip Golub Reclining* (page 5), Here Sleigh references Velázquez' *Rokeby Venus* though employs a gender-reversal, providing an interesting example of a clothed female artist painting a nude male model critiquing the art historical canon. Alternatively, within my own work, I embrace the female nude and implied sexuality of the poses and "display". Though these differ in approach, the themes both Sleigh and I touch on lie in a similar realm of consciousness.



Sarah Oakley, *Miss April*, 42"X96", 2017, oil on canvas

In the fall of senior year, I began looking at playboy centerfolds from the 50s, 60s and 70s. I was struck by the bizarreness of the centerfolds through the emphasized horizontality, but also found a familiarity in these poses. *Miss April* (page 6) exaggerates the horizontality of the

image by elongating the figure into an almost mannequin-like take on the female form. Domesticized intimate spaces with plants, pets, add a certain aesthetic of the “girl next door” stereotype. In the article “Putting the Text in Context: What is Pornography Really About?” the author, Gail Dines, discusses the various ways in which we as a society have transitioned towards an image-based culture. Explaining that because ‘images capture [and construct] your identity... the power of stereotypes lies in their ability to police the behavior of the oppressed and of the ability of the oppressor class to judge the oppressed by their behavior’ (Dines 56). This carries into how continual portrayals of women in these available poses throughout history perpetuates the false understanding that these are the positions women belong in.

In my reading of Lynda Nead’s, *The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality*, I found a strong agreement with the quote, “the material and cultural value of a photograph is reduced by its reproducibility. Unlike the connoisseur of high art, the consumer of photographic art does not possess a unique object... the photograph is devalued as the product of mass technology, popular and vulgar” (Nead 329). It is this overt accessibility to *Playboy* images that made me want to transform centerfold into large scale oil paintings. By changing the original medium of the image, I establish the value of the female depicted while also commenting on the mass production of sexualized images of the female nude for the purpose of commodifying and exploiting female sexuality within the constructs of a patriarchal society. This is apparent in the way in which the camera angle rests upon the model, as she reclines on a bed or couch, with a sheepishly playful smile and potted plant or vase with flower nearby. The camera angle looks down on the figure as if asserting dominance, ultimately putting the woman into a submissive position. Additionally, the gaze of the painted female as she engages the viewer reveals voyeuristic undertones in a manner that can be both sensual and confrontational.



Mel Ramos, *Tucher Tess*, 2013

Mel Ramos, an American Pop artist, is best known for his female nudes painted alongside brand logos. His work functions as commentary on the ways in which capitalism has employed the female body. Alternatively, my work is about the ways in which the female body itself has been commodified, as opposed to how Ramos shows the nude as a tool to advertise other objects. Often imagery is overly sexualized for the purposes of commodifying the female body for the consumption of men, which is inherently problematic. Women are sexual creatures with desires and I believe it is one's right to express their sexuality how they see fit, just as we express various aspects of ourselves and our personalities with the clothes that we wear and how we present ourselves. The area my art explores is when a woman's sexuality is no longer her own but instead projected upon her from a heterosexual male perspective. From the beginning of image making, men have been placing women in sexualized poses and using the female form as

a prop or an object, synonymous with a bowl of fruit used for a still life. With the arrival of photography, many of these techniques invented by historical painters were transferred over to this new media as male photographers often position women in types of “available poses” with a downcast camera angle forcing the woman into submissiveness.



Sarah Oakley, *Miss December of Urbino, 1965, 42”X96”*, 2018
oil and acrylic paint on crushed silk fabric, with thread and pillow accoutrements

For my thesis exhibition, I created a two-part piece consisting of an embroidered handmade pillow and a painting on the same gold crushed fabric. I decided to pair an embroidered pillow of the *Venus of Urbino* (page 2) with a large scale painting of a *Playboy* centerfold from 1965. By pairing the pillow and painting near one another, I exaggerated the

small-scale and intimacy of the pillow with the grandness of the large-scale painting meant to overwhelm the viewer. Additionally, I embroidered a relief pillow attached to the canvas in the background of *Miss December of Urbino*, that depicts the background of the painting absent of the figure, as a way of providing contextualization for the painted *Playboy* figure. The painting/embroidery dichotomy allows for me to work



Sarah Oakley, *Venus of Urbino*, 8.5”X13”, 2018, fabric, thread, and pillow accoutrements

on developing a language of mark making that relates to the small-scale style of the embroidery. The connection between the transformation of a mass-produced image to painting is apparent: the female body is often changed, adapted, and compromised to fulfill the desires and expectations placed upon the figure from both a societal and individual gaze. Why not further this translation by making the figure into a pillow, an object whose literal place is on a bed or couch. When looking at the representation of women in art history, erotica and daily social media we see the unchanging persona of a sexualized body waiting for the validating approval of the gaze.



Sarah Oakley, *Detail of Venus of Urbino*, 8.5”X13”, 2018, fabric, thread, and pillow accoutrements

Sarah Oakley, *Detail of Miss April, 1954*, 8.5”X13“, 2018 fabric, thread, and pillow accoutrements

The pillows are also able to function in pairs. Within the pairings I will have two pillows wherein the figures are facing each other, which often requires me to invert the pose of one of the figures. By having the figures face each other a conversation begins between the two and allows the viewer to pick up on the similarities and differences between them. The figures within these pairs come from art history, notably *Olympia*, or the *Venus of Urbino* and pornography, often selected from a database of vintage *Playboy*'s. The *Playboy* figures embody the canonical poses which follow the preceding art history representations of female form. The faces and hands are some of the most intricate details to capture. When deciding what two figures to pair together for embroidery I often try to find variation of the same pose with an additional commonality. For the pairing of *Venus of Urbino* and *Miss April, 1954*, the addition was that both figures are holding flowers. Within the two works one can see different decisions regarding

line thickness and the treatment of color within the form. Venus of Urbino has a much more consistent line quality and use of color. The most notable difference is the treatment of the hair. While the figure on the left is portrayed with sewing thread and implies light in areas where the gold fabric is not completely encapsulated by line, the figure in the right's hair is portrayed using embroidery line, which is thicker, and makes the form of the hair seem more rigid and mass-like.



Sarah Oakley, *Grande Odalisque*, 7.5”X17”, 2018, fabric, thread and pillow accoutrements

In my pillow series, I increasingly became more and more attentive to craft and the meditatively precise quality of the embroidery stitches, while continuing to explore with various sizes, shapes, and fabrics used when constructing the pillows. Once the figure is fully embroidered on the fabric, I stencil and cut out the determined shape. Next I sew the front and back pieces of the pillow together, stuff it, hand sew the remaining seam from stuffing, and then I hand sew the chosen tassels/chord to the edge of the pillow. After the pillow is complete it can function as an individual, unique object. It is in this format that the pillow acts most elevated, as

the singular relationship between the viewer and object forces the viewer to engage with the object on a more intimate level. This calls attention to the delicate and precise nature of the embroidery stitches that fuse and coalesce to construct the final figure.



Sarah Oakley, Back of *Grande Odalisque*, 7.5”X17”, 2018, fabric, thread and pillow accoutrements

My embroidery, and thus the pillows as objects, function in a multitude of ways. Before the figure is transformed into the pillow, one can look at the backside of the embroidery and see the point at where color and form collapse into an abstracted web of tangles and color. Once the pillow is made, however, that treasure is no longer visible as it has become buried beneath the surface and instead exists only in the documentation of the process. These alternate sides also give a glimpse into the process of creation, and emphasizes the artist’s hand. Additionally, the messy quality of the backside alludes to the expressive brush strokes and tangles of color that often arise as a product of my painting process.

Though my art practice has developed and transitioned these past two years from the investigation of the iPhone and selfie culture in framing sexuality in the digital age, to looking at

Playboy's and the art canon's depictions of the female form, the common theme of the portrayal of the female nude lies throughout. By exploring both the historical and contemporary characterizations of the female body, I have started a conversation surrounding ownership, sexuality, commodification and the role of the female nude. I strive to maintain an openness to experimentation while operating on a focused level: the transition from the more erratic and playful style of my early paintings to the controlled and delicate embroidered figures ultimately enriched the way I view making. I now see my paintings informing my embroidery, and vice versa, while I explore different techniques of fusing the impulsive with the ephemeral. Regardless of medium, the exploration and questions of the usage of the nude female form will continue to be a part of my work, as this semester has provided a rich conceptual and material foundation for my future practice.

WORKS CITED:

Dines, Gail, and Karla Mantilla. "Pornography and Pop Culture: Putting the Text in Context: What Is Pornography Really About?" *Off Our Backs*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2007, pp. 56–57. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20838775.

"Mel Ramos." Mel Ramos, Artnet, www.artnet.com/artists/mel-ramos/.

Mendelsohn, Meredith. "The Feminist Artist Who Turned Her Gaze on the Male Nude." *Artsy*, 18 Feb. 2018, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-sylvia-sleigh-turned-gaze-male-nude.

Nead, Lynda. "The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality." *Signs*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1990, pp. 323–335. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3174488.

McCarthy, David *The nude in American painting, 1950-1980*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge ; New York, 1998.

FIGURES:

Figure 1: Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538, oil on canvas

Figure 2: *Violet Velvet*, 48”X36”, 2017, oil on canvas

Figure 3: *Flash*, 15”X12”, 2017, oil on canvas

Figure 4: *Red Leather*, 14”X11”, 2017, oil on canvas

Figure 5: *Sylvia Sleigh, Imperial Nude*, 1977

Figure 6: Sylvia Sleigh, *Philip Golub Reclining*, 1971

Figure 7: *Miss April*, 42”X96”, 2017, oil on canvas

Figure 8: Mel Ramos, *Tucher Tess*, 2013

Figure 9: Sarah Oakley, *Miss December of Urbino, 1965*, 42”X96”, 2018 oil and acrylic paint on crushed silk fabric, with thread and pillow accoutrements

Figure 10: Sarah Oakley, *Venus of Urbino*, 8.5”X13”, 2018, fabric, thread, and pillow accoutrements

Figure 11: Sarah Oakley, *Detail of Venus of Urbino*, 8.5”X13”, 2018, fabric, thread, and pillow accoutrements

Figure 12: Sarah Oakley, *Detail of Miss April, 1954*, 8.5”X13”, 2018 fabric, thread, and pillow accoutrements

Figure 13: Sarah Oakley, *Grande Odalisque*, 7.5”X17”, 2018, fabric, thread and pillow accoutrements

Figure 14: Sarah Oakley, *Back of Grande Odalisque*, 7.5”X17”, 2018, fabric, thread and pillow accoutrements

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Murray, Derek Conrad, and Soraya Murray. "Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity." *Art Journal*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2006, pp. 22–39. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20068437.
- Lai, Alice. "Images of Women in Visual Culture." *Art Education*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2009, pp. 14–19. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27696314.
- Dines, Gail, and Karla Mantilla. "Pornography and Pop Culture: Putting the Text in Context: What Is Pornography Really About?" *Off Our Backs*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2007, pp. 56–57. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20838775.
- Garber, Elizabeth. "Feminism, Aesthetics, and Art Education." *Studies in Art Education*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1992, pp. 210–225. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1320667.
- McCarthy, David *The nude in American painting, 1950-1980*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge ; New York, 1998.
- "Mel Ramos." Mel Ramos, Artnet, www.artnet.com/artists/mel-ramos/.
- Mendelsohn, Meredith. "The Feminist Artist Who Turned Her Gaze on the Male Nude." *Artsy*, 18 Feb. 2018, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-sylvia-sleigh-turned-gaze-male-nude.
- Nead, Lynda. "The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality." *Signs*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1990, pp. 323–335. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3174488.