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Human Creatures

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Human Creatures

By

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B.F.A., Columbus College of Art & Design, 2010

A Thesis Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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This thesis entitled:

Human Creatures

Written by Erica Day

Has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Abstract

Day, Erica (M.F.A., Department of Art and Art History)

Human Creatures

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Francoise Duresse

In this thesis, I address the questions and issues that are central to my work as an artist. I discuss my primary motivations in the creation of this project, along with an explanation of the process that led to its completion. I provide historical context for my work, including specific references to artists, movements, and writers that have been influential. In addition, I consider the current cultural climate and social backdrop in which this work exists. The themes and subjects that are addressed will continue to inform my practice in the years to come.

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I.

Introduction

Over a period of two months, I made four separate visits to Colorado's premiere adult fantasy-themed hotel, where I photographed four different combinations of people in various positions and states of sexual arousal. Bodies in the mirror above the bed became the focus of my Mon Chalet excursions, and the material gathered in these sessions served as a starting point for my thesis painting, *Human Creatures*. Working in a life-sized scale, I began with the central focal point, a woman in spotlight being pleased by her lover. Drawing from the Octagon-shaped bed and symbolism of the figure eight, I created a spiral pattern reminiscent of bodies in a whirlpool. Caravaggio's use of dramatic light, gritty realism, and co-extensive space served as inspiration for the painting.

In the months that followed, I relied less and less on my photographic references, injecting more objects, figures, invented color and reflected light into the scene. As I worked, rhythms of color and light emerged alongside the repetition of patterns and forms. References to the natural world began to reveal themselves in the numerous tattoos of my models: constellations, leopards, spirals and scorpions. With a nod to Romanticism, I brought in more references to the natural world through the additions of rose petals, female power symbols and animal-inspired underwear strewn across the floor. The painting ceased to follow the rules and guidelines I had initially set, replaced by an internal logic emphasizing duality, repetition, and lurid complimentary colors.

In the creation of this painting, I was confronted with questions around the representation of the female body, the role of beauty in figurative painting, and the relationship between art and

porn. The bed became a stage for desire, longing, individual personalities and power exchanges. The elevated perspective, made possible by a mirrored ceiling, imposed an omnipotent point of view on the scene of the orgy. This shift in vantage point led to a leveling of the characters and abstractions in the bodies depicted, like a map of disproportionate desires and ambiguous relationships. The orgy is almost over, and my characters remain as both sexual objects and sexual subjects. Looking down at this pile of flesh, I didn't want it to be clear who was in charge. As the writer of feminist blog "Marx in Drag" Mimi Schippers explains; "It's no longer men dominating women; it's about women deploying their sexual subjectivity to re-arrange the gender dynamics of fucking. In other words, power is no longer in the hands of men-even in the minds of straight men. Instead, power is something that is negotiated between and among men and women."

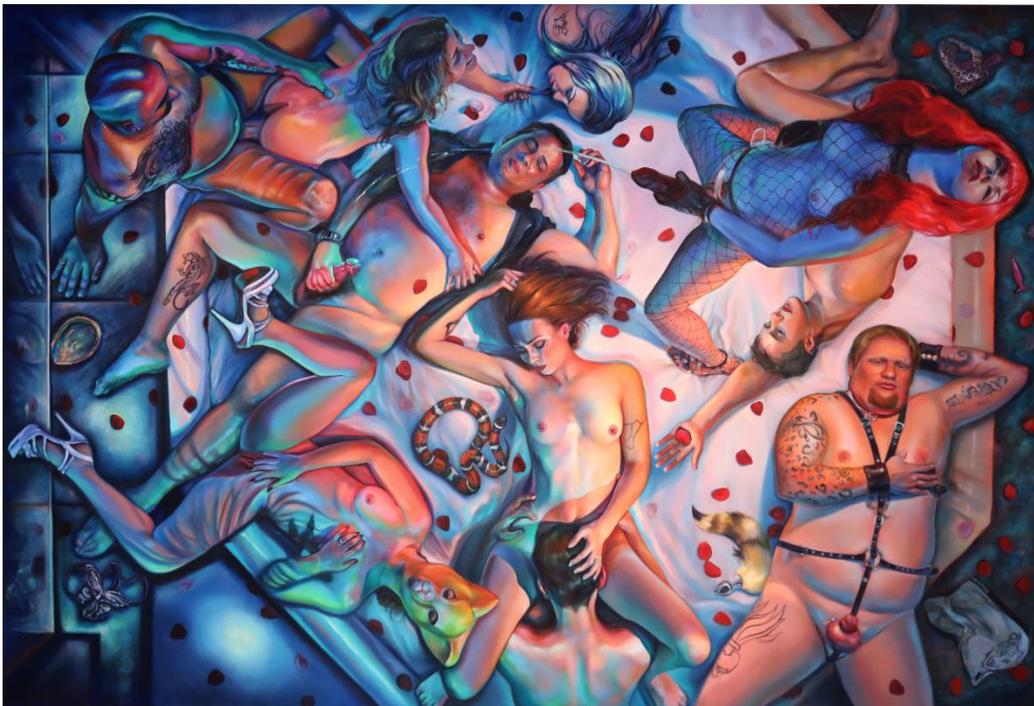


Figure 1

Erica Day, "Human Creatures" (c. 2017)

II.

Influences

Caravaggio- The Original Bad Boy

In this painting and in past works, I've looked back to Caravaggio as a source of inspiration. Troy Thomas, in his 2016 book, *Caravaggio and the Creation of Modernity*, describes the artist as one of the first modern painters. Caravaggio's work was unprecedented for many reasons. Unlike his peers, who would first draw their compositions onto canvas, Caravaggio preferred to work everything out directly on the canvas. His treatment of light was dramatic, and his refusal to glorify his models was shocking in his time. He did not shy away from sensuality, and many of his early works exhibit homoerotic undertones. Caravaggio's paintings are loaded with contradictions and ambiguity, just like Caravaggio the man. Despite his bad boy reputation and notorious swagger, Caravaggio's depictions of himself were refreshingly nuanced and self-aware.

Light and Dark

It has been said that Caravaggio invented Hollywood lighting. Through pronounced *chiaroscuro*, the emphasis of light and dark, Caravaggio's paintings predicated film noir and the use of spotlights for dramatic effects in cinema. As a tool in painting, light can be used to heighten emotions, elevate the everyday, and radically transform the emotional resonance of a piece. Before Caravaggio, artists had typically depicted their models in natural daylight, favoring light over dark. Caravaggio's seminal works show figures emerging from a black field, an aesthetic that reflected the Counter-reformation theme of the world as a naturally dark place.

Light in Caravaggio's paintings had a metaphorical purpose; hinting at man's inability to fully grasp the divine. This theatricality has long appealed to me, and my thesis painting relies on dynamic artificial light in a dark space. Caravaggio's pronounced approach to light was paired with a radical refusal to idealize his subjects; a critical stance I've taken in my own work.

Against Idealism

"Can you paint some abs on me?" The half-joking question came from Puppy, the heavily tattooed portly male model who occupies the bottom right corner of my painting. I have always kindly refused these requests, on the grounds that I am not a Senior Picture photographer airbrushing insecurities away. Caravaggio also recognized that bodies are awkward, and that pimples, wrinkles, fat folds, body hair, sweat, moles and bones are the things that make us human. He worked in the vein of naturalism, described by John Moffitt as "looking at the rose through world-colored glasses". (8). In Caravaggio's time, this intense level of realism was not well-received by his peers. Members of the Council of Trent felt that art should be more natural than the work of the Mannerists, but Caravaggio, they believed, took it too far.

"This artist shows everything, from dirty fingernails, to the dirty bottoms of feet, to the bruises and worm holes on apples and the holes in pierced ears. Such details were not befitting a decorous representation of sacred personages. A Cardinal's secretary described one Caravaggio painting, the *Madonna dei Palafrenieri*, thusly: "In this painting there are but vulgarity, sacrilege, impiousness and disgust... one would say it is a work made by a painter that can paint well, but of a dark spirit, and who has been for a lot of time far from God, from His adoration, and from any good thought..."

Authorities also took issue with paintings like *The Rest of the Flight into Egypt*, which showcases a partially nude male angel playing music for Mary, Joseph, and the Christ Child. In

this case, Thomas writes, “the sensuous angel exemplifies the ‘dangerous unpredictability’ of Caravaggio’s paintings, which ‘allow space for the unregulated viewer’s wandering eye.’” (51). This dangerous quality is something I find fascinating and have also sought to emulate.

Caravaggio’s earthly depictions of biblical figures were offensive to many, but I believe their lasting effectiveness lies in their specificity. It’s hard to relate to an idealized figure when human creatures are so naturally imperfect. I adhere to the same principle that Caravaggio’s paintings follow; universals tell us nothing, and the real devil is in the details.

Low life Subjects

Caravaggio’s models in earlier secular scenes included con artists, gypsies and fortune tellers. At a time when the lower classes were viewed with great suspicion, this rattled critics, especially after Caravaggio’s untimely death in 1610. The 17th-century critic Bellori thought of Caravaggio as “a rebellious outsider who emphasized “filth and deformity” in his paintings.” (Moffitt 13).

I do not wish to imply that my subjects are “low lifes”, but I will assert that my models are not typically the types of people who are featured in fine art. Thanks to anonymous networking platforms like craigslist and fetlife, I’ve met exhibitionists and kinksters who initiated me into the BDSM (Bondage Discipline Sadism Masochism) community and later became models for this painting. These are individuals on the extreme margins of sexuality, and the subcultures they belong to are viewed by many with suspicion.

Co-extensive Space

Also of ongoing interest to me is Caravaggio’s use of “co-extensive” space. In many of his works, Caravaggio made a point to extend the action of his painting past the picture plane and into the viewer’s space. This interaction is pronounced in paintings like *The Supper at Emmaus*,

where the arms of the figure on the right reach out into our space, and the basket of fruit looks as though it could spill its contents onto the floor we're standing on. Through clever cropping and foreshortening, Caravaggio's paintings became less static and more participatory.

In *Victorious Cupid*, Caravaggio's treatment of the winged boy almost reads as a come-on to the viewer. In *Caravaggio's Secrets*, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit write, "The poses and looks in these paintings have generally been recognized as provocative; an accurate enough description if we mean by that a body in which we read an intention to stimulate our desire, not only to contemplate the body but to approach it, to touch it, and to enter into or to imagine some form of physical contact with it." (2-3). For my thesis painting, I wanted the life-sized figures to invade the viewer's personal space in a similarly provocative way. The bird's eye view initially foreshortened the bodies of my models, causing bald heads, knees, and appendages to reach towards the viewer. This forced intimacy creates a sort of voyeuristic tension, where the viewer is implicated in the act of looking.

Self-Portraits and Ambiguity

Caravaggio was a proud man with a lengthy police record, but he was also remarkably self-aware. In many of his paintings, Caravaggio presented himself in a negative light, in the guise of a persona. In *David with the Head of Goliath*, he painted himself as the bloodied and decapitated head. *Young Sick Bacchus* features the artist in Roman costume, accompanied by suggestive fruit, but with sickly green skin that matches the tombstone-like table. Similarly, I've have a hard time resisting the urge to put myself into my work. I appear twice in my thesis painting, once in a very prominent spot as a dominatrix in fishnet, the second time as a mystical blue-haired nymph. For the exhibitionist Caravaggio, the self-portrait was an opportunity to acknowledge unflattering aspects of his true self, however ambiguous. Although the self-

portraits in my thesis painting masquerade in persona, they each contain truths about my true nature.



Figure 2

Caravaggio, "Young Sick Bacchus" (c. 1593)

Jeff Koons

The landscape orientation in my thesis painting functions like a billboard for viewers to enter into, not unlike Jeff Koons's *Made in Heaven* photographs. Despite being lambasted by critics, I love this series. For this series, Koons printed large-scale photographs of himself and former wife-cum-Italian porn star Cicciolina's sexual exploits onto canvas. There is a similar aesthetic running through Koon's kitschy *Made in Heaven* and my *Mon Chalet* painting. The overtly sexual imagery, Koons's gawky body against Cicciolina's sepulchral skin, and the ridiculous Romance-novel backdrops add up to something so unsexy and unsettling, it's hot. There is tenderness between the couple in this dreamlike setting, and it's clear in many photographs that Koons is trying hard to please his wife. The effect of these images on my own

psyche reminds me of a quote from George Bataille; “Extreme seduction is at the boundary of horror.” Jeff Koons is a master of seduction, and I feel guilty for being seduced. This sensation is one that I hoped to elicit within my own painting.

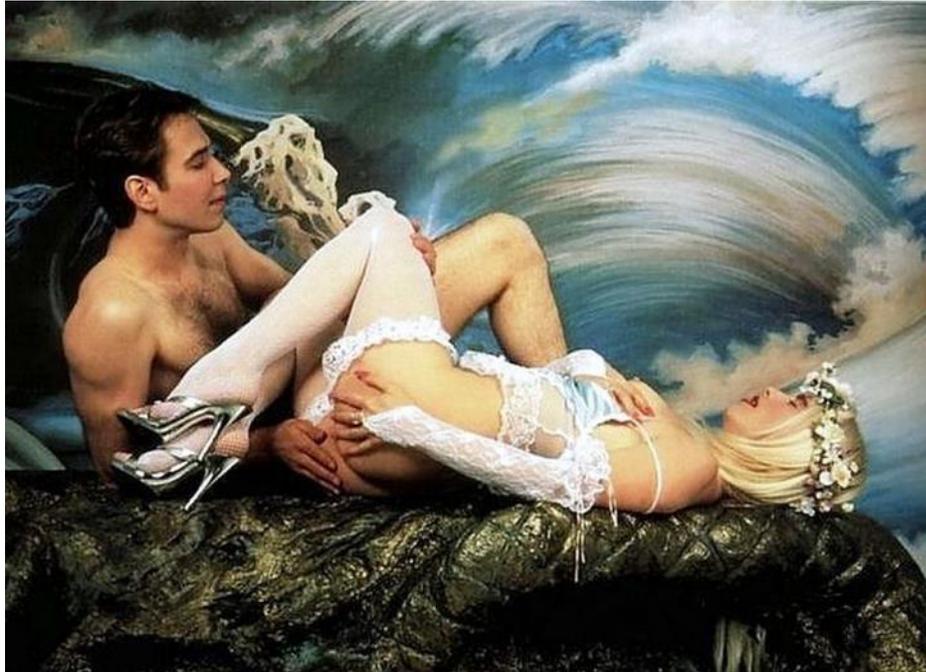


Figure 3

Jeff Koons, “Jeff in the Position of Adam” (c. 1990)

Romantic Affinities

“The artist’s feeling is his law.” – Caspar David Friedrich

My approach to this painting, and to life in general, is unabashedly Romantic. Passion and personal feelings are driving forces behind much of my work, along with my response to the work of others. Through painting, my goal is always to stir the senses. In the process of painting “Human Creatures”, I allowed intuition and emotion to be my guide. Like the Romantics, I’m also fascinated by the bizarre and prone to escapism. “Instead of the here-and-now or drab reality of the status quo, Romanticism almost always values something unattainable or lost, an alternate

reality that challenges or escapes the everyday.” (White, “Romanticism”). This is exactly what I found in Suite #22 at Mon Chalet, a temporary respite from the ordinary world where “fantasy becomes reality”.

A Brief history of Romanticism

The intellectual, artistic, and cultural movement known as Romanticism emerged sometime in late 18th century Europe. In the wake of the French Revolution of 1789, Europeans experienced a wave of social change, political crises, and war. The goals of the Revolution, liberty and equality for the common man, were beginning to take root. At the same time, the modern emphasis on industry and factory work had an alienating effect on many Europeans. In Germany, this feeling of world-weariness was known as “Weltschmerz.”

As disillusionment grew, a new wave of consciousness emerged; one that valued the feelings and imagination of the individual over stoicism and intellectual discipline. Romanticism was a rejection of the excessive rationalism that defined the Enlightenment, favoring instead the intuitions and emotions of man. It was also a reaction against the Industrial Revolution, characterized by a longing to return to nature. In the face of modern isolation, communion with the natural world was viewed as crucial for man’s well-being. The tenets of Romanticism also included a belief in the good of mankind, yearning for unattainable goals and nostalgia for the past, an emphasis on irrationality, the belief in spiritual freedom, an attraction to the exotic, and the exaltation of the hero.

In painting, Romanticism retained many characteristics of the previous neoclassical movement. The academic approach to reality remained largely intact, but the emphasis on creative genius and the emotions of the artist were amplified. While neoclassical art tended to focus on universal values and moral truths, Romantic artists were more interested in expressing

personal inner visions and beliefs. Romantic art was less restrained and marked by an exaltation of imagination, mystery, and fervor.

The Distant, Decadent Past

My thesis painting was fueled, in part, by a longing to recreate the splendor described in accounts of Nero's greatest achievement, the Domus Aurea. Most people remember Nero in the same way they remember the emperor Caligula; as a despicable, incompetent psychopath.

During Nero's infamous reign, he murdered his own mother, kicked his pregnant second wife to death, castrated and married a teenage boy, and may have done nothing but "sat and fiddled" as the Great fire destroyed 10 out of 14 of Rome's regions. But some scholars are looking past these minor character flaws in an effort to re-frame the full scope of Nero's legacy. In the cover story of National Geographic's September 2014 issue, titled "Rome's Bad Boy", historians examine Nero's main redeeming quality: the man was a true lover of the arts and a champion of aesthetic beauty. One of Nero's greatest achievements was the construction of his own private pleasure palace, the Domus Aurea or "Golden House". This massive palace boasted sumptuous frescoes, colonnaded hallways overlooking an artificial lake, and an octagonal room with marble decorations and a mosaicked domed roof, where Nero is said to have hosted wild dinner parties (read: orgies). On special occasions, the emperor would release rose petals from the ceiling onto his guests.

Romantic descriptions of the Domus Aurea haunted me. Like Nero, I too wanted to create my own universe of pleasure and decadence. Enchanted by visions of sweaty orgies and grape-dangling beneath gilded domes, I set out to become the director of my desires. My goal was to stage and paint my modern equivalent, replete with faux rose petals, and there was only one place I knew of that could accommodate an orgy in tacky neoclassical style, Mon Chalet

Hotel. According to online reviews, Mon Chalet is either an oasis for contemporary hedonism or a sad cesspool of degenerates. Perhaps it is both. I like to think of Mon Chalet as a heroic effort, in the same way that I view the Roman Emperor Nero's ambitious but short lived pleasure palace, the Domus Aurea.

III.

Beauty

Defining Beauty

“Beauty can be consoling, disturbing, sacred, profane; it can be exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, chilling. It can affect us in an unlimited variety of ways. Yet it is never viewed with indifference: beauty demands to be noticed; it speaks to us directly like the voice of an intimate friend.”-pg. ix, preface to ‘Beauty’ by Roger Scruton.

In *Human Creatures* and previous works, beauty has been a primary concern. A host of questions will guide my discussion of beauty, the most obvious being; what is beauty? Is beauty universal or subjective? Finally, what is the role of beauty in figurative painting today? Before arriving at any conclusions on beauty, it’s important to define the word and explore its meaning.

To start, Merriam-Webster broadly defines beauty as “the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit.” (101). As Dave Hickey writes in his essay “Enter the Dragon”; “Beauty is the agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder, and any theory of images that is not grounded in the pleasure of the beholder begs the question of their efficacy and dooms itself to inconsequence.” (Beech 22). The quality of ‘beauty’ has been assigned to many disparate things: from people to cars, animals to landscapes, mathematical theories to works of art. Defining beauty, it turns out, is challenging in the same way that defining “truth” is: Something is “true” or “beautiful” because I say it is.

Beauty was historically conflated with the values of goodness and truth. Beauty, in Plato’s eye, was a higher ideal that mankind should strive towards. At the same time, Plato also viewed our stance towards beauty as erotic. As Kathleen Marie Higgins writes in her essay “Whatever Happened to Beauty?”; “We are drawn to beauty. Beauty incites ardor. It is a bridge to the sense that reality is lovable.” (Beech 32).The ancient Greeks believed that our appreciation

of beauty is mixed up with sexual desire, and these ideals manifested in Greek statues and images of perfect of men and women.

Whereas the ancient Greeks recognized an erotic impulse at work in the appreciation of beauty, 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant believed that a disinterested, philosophical state was essential to our experience of beauty. Scruton affirms this view in his book *Beauty*, claiming that true judgments of beauty can only come from a place of “disinterested interest”. His belief is that only rational contemplation can lead to sound judgments on beauty and that interest in the subject or object, especially sexual interest, somehow warps our thinking. I tend to side with the Greeks on this issue. My most memorable encounters of beauty have been overwhelming, and hardly ever came from a place of disinterest.

There are two schools of thought when it comes to beauty: one is that it is purely subjective; “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, and the other is that it is socially constructed. I believe that both are true. Beauty involves judgment, and this judgment is very much a matter of taste.

A Matter of Taste

It’s important to keep in mind that attitudes towards beauty are highly subject to location, fashion and the tastes of the time. Our views on color, for example, have shifted dramatically in Western Culture from antiquity. All those milky white Greek statues now held up as exemplars of classical beauty? They were originally painted in garish colors, not unlike put-put golf props.

Today, Western culture is imbued with what artist David Batchelor refers to as “chromophobia.” This trend is apparent in the beige-ness of our living spaces and the limited palette of so many wardrobes. Batchelor argues that color has been diminished and degraded since antiquity out of fear: “a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable.” Color prejudice, he writes, works in two ways: first, it associates color

with “the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological”. (Batchelor 221). Second, color is presented as a superficial element, something trivial and cosmetic. If this is indeed the case, call me a chromophiliac.

My thesis painting is a demonstration of personal taste, which favors a maximalist aesthetic, bold color, and a Boogie Nights joie de vivre. I concede that this aesthetic is not for everyone. The 1970’s have been referred to as “the decade that taste forgot.” I was drawn to Mon Chalet as a backdrop precisely because it had the 70’s décor and loud, deranged color that I find so beautiful. Everything in the semi-deluxe suite #22 was coordinated around a delicious blue-green, from the shag carpeting, to the tinted mirrors, to the fleece duvet on the octagon-shaped bed. If that wasn’t enough chroma, overhead spotlights had the capacity to tint everything below with an alien aquamarine; conjuring water, sky, and sci-fi porn. When I laid down on that octagon shaped bed, my reflection in the mirrored ceiling above struck me as one of the most beautiful things I’d ever seen. I was entranced by the plays of light and color on flesh: celestial blues mingled with the light of the TV, the orange of the fireplace, and myriad other lighting fixtures there to set the mood. My body looked strangely small on the decadent bed, while the god’s eye view set off a stream of free associations: The Sistine Chapel, drone photography, Kanye West’s ‘Famous’ music video, battle fields, bodies preserved in ice, the cave paintings at Lascaux, astronauts floating in space, mermaids at the bottom of the ocean. If I have bad taste, I don’t want to be right.

IV.

Women's Bodies

The Female Nude

At the outset, I knew my painting at Mon Chalet would raise issues around representation and the female body. In Western art, the history of representation has been dominated by male artists painting female bodies. Ingres' bathers, Boucher's sexually available resting maidens, and countless odalisques have been painted by men to titillate male viewers. Too often, these images have demonstrated a narrow viewpoint, tinged with misogyny and a desire to control. Lynda Nead explains the implications of this history in her book, *The Female Nude*: "The representation of the female body within the forms and frames of high art is a metaphor for art generally. It symbolizes the transformation of the base matter of nature into the elevated forms of culture and the spirit. The female nude can thus be understood as a means of containing femininity and female sexuality."

This male-dominated tradition left female visions of themselves largely out of the picture, with notable exceptions in the works of Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun, to name a few. This subject is not without its challenges, but many contemporary female artists, myself included, have taken up the task of revisiting and reimagining the female body. By taking ownership of the female nude within the male-dominated history of painting, I seek to create alternative representations of the female body that resist idealization and containment.

Taking Ownership

The Abject

One strategy taken up by artists in the representation of the female nude has been to focus on the abject. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva articulated the concept of the abject in a

succinct way. According to Kristeva, “Objects that produce abjection are those that traverse the threshold of the inside and outside of the body- tears, urine, feces and so on. The abject, then, is the space between subject and object; the site of both desire and danger.” (). Abjection works by disturbing stable identities, systems, and order. The abject does not respect borders, positions, or rules; it represents ambiguity and the in-between.

Rather than ignoring or concealing parts of the body that may cause unease, I flirt with the abject and seek out the taboo while leaving room for vulnerability. In my thesis painting, a sparkling stream of artificial urine, a butt plug, and sweaty limbs are embraced as objects of beauty. In effect, bodily fluids, messy sex, and sexually ambiguous figures are not scorned, but celebrated.

Monster/Beauty

My paintings approach beauty with a sense of humor, creating a cocktail of banality, sexual desire, abjection and indulgence while blurring the lines between the “high” and the “low.” While I’m wary of consumer culture, I also reside within it and take pleasure from aspects of it. Fashion, jewelry, tattoos and make-up are all forms of self-expression, for men and women alike. For me, a complete rejection of traditional femininity is just another form of oppression. In this piece and previous paintings, I was after Joanna Frueh’s idea of monster/beauty: which can refer to a condition or an individual, but is marked by deviation from conventional behavior and representation. Monster/Beauty, according to Frueh, is about artifice, pleasure/discipline, cultural invention, and it is extravagant and generous.” (Buszek 3). The strap-on wielding red-head in my painting may be considered classically beautiful, but her phallic protuberance and power stance is a deviation from the traditional female nude. In the center of my painting, a woman is completely lost in and in control of her own pleasure. In the bottom corner of the painting, a

Ruben-esque man with a in BDSM regalia gazes out at the viewer. These figures revel in pleasure and artifice, toy with gender expectations, and rage against the demure. To quote Linda Nochlin, from her essay 'Offbeat and Naked'; "I like any nude that isn't classical, any naked body that doesn't look like Michelangelo's David or the Apollo Belvedere. For me, as for the poet-critic Baudelaire in the 19th century, the classical nude is dead, and deathly. What is alive? The offbeat, the ugly, the other, the excessive." (Buszek 1). Offbeat and excessive subjects like Puppy are not necessarily easy for viewers to swallow, and this is why beauty remains essential. Beauty is a hook. In the words of Kathleen Marie Higgins, "Beauty provides the comforting backdrop against which one can think the uncomfortable" (Beech 34).



Figure 4

Erica Day, detail, "Human Creatures" (c. 2017)

Sexy Self-Love

My goal in the creation of *Human Creatures* was not to contain or suppress the expression of sexuality and pleasure, nor was it to perpetuate any unattainable standard. Instead, I wanted to revel in the sumptuousness of the scene and the individuality of each participant while putting forth an unconventional sexual scenario. I chose to depict both male and female bodies in a way that was sensual and sexual, subjective and potentially arousing. Everyone involved in this painting consented to pose with gusto, and we enjoyed each other in the process.

It might be argued that my painting objectifies women by putting their bodies on display, or that my exhibitionist models are the product of a pornified patriarchy: a passive fulfillment of the male gaze. When a particular body conforms to the beauty standards of its time, this is an easy charge to make. However, this assumption also denies agency to the woman in question, and I disagree wholeheartedly with the notion that women choose to present themselves based solely on societal pressures and preferences. Many women, myself included, indulge in appearance-oriented rituals and activities not to please others, but because we want to. I relish the sight of myself in stilettos and a fishnet bodysuit, not because I believe I'm inferior without the costume, but because it makes me feel good. Beauty is something we can create and communicate on our own terms, and a genuine enjoyment of one's own beauty should be encouraged, not resented.

The concept of self-love is too often reduced to self-centeredness and conflated with narcissism or self-objectification. Model, actress and artist Emily Ratajkowski beautifully summarizes my feelings on self-love and sexuality in her essay for Lenny titled "Baby Woman". "To me, "sexy" is a kind of beauty, a kind of self-expression, one that is wonderfully female... Why does the implication have to be that sex is a thing men get to take and women give up? Honoring our sexuality as women is messy, messy business, but if we don't try, what do we become?"

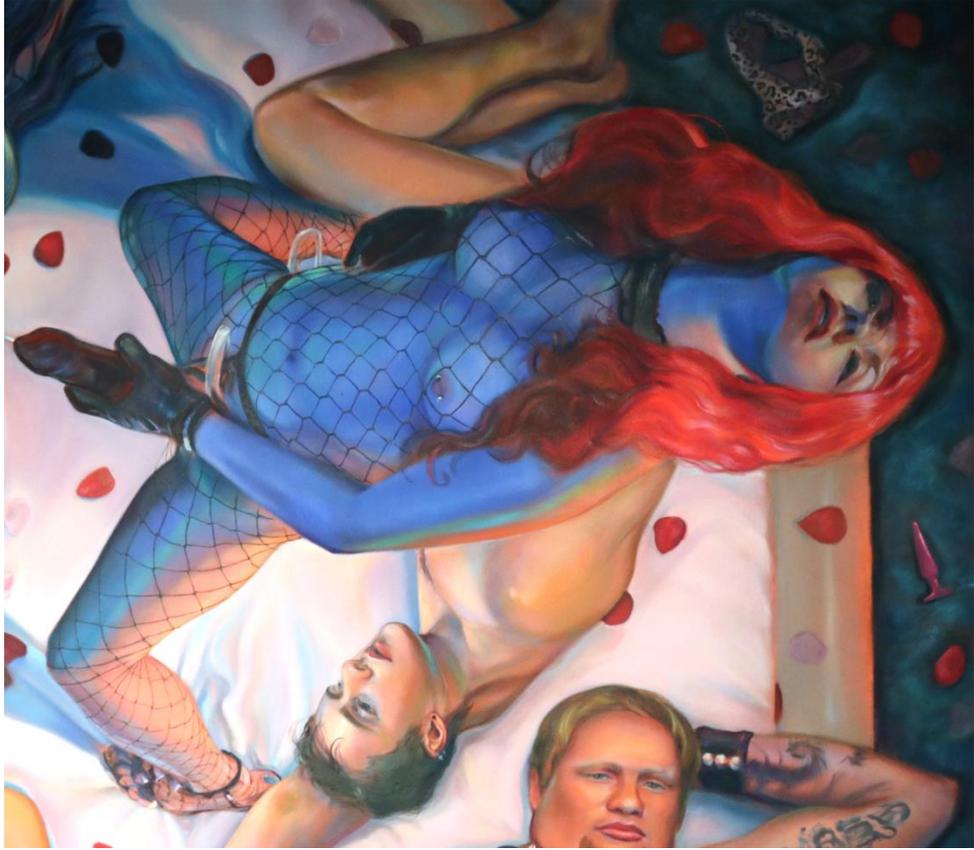


Figure 5

Erica Day, detail, "Human Creatures" (c. 2017)

V.

Eros

Defining Eros

With this painting, I was invested in creating desire while building a sexual narrative that would push up against traditional boundaries and expectations. At Mon Chalet hotel, the polyamorous possibilities are endless. The goal here was to engage primal impulses through explorations of the erotic. The origin of the word “Erotic” stems from the Greek “Eros”, which was the personification of sexual yearning, love, and desire. Merriam-Webster defines “erotic” as “relating to or tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement; sexy, arousing, stimulating, titillating, suggestive.” (394).

Georges Bataille

A key figure in my own conception of the erotic is French theorist, novelist, and philosopher Georges Bataille (1897-1962). Frequently cited in songs by psychedelic gender-bending alt. rock band Of Montreal, Bataille sought to exploit both the transcendental and transgressive aspects of eroticism. In Bataille’s view, the realm of eroticism is a wild grey area defined by a longing to escape the edges of our own egos, to expand beyond ourselves and into the whirlpool of the cosmos. For Bataille, the erotic signals a desire to achieve continuity with other beings, to escape our aloneness, and to become one with everything that is. This vision of eros is at play in *Human Creatures*, where members of the orgy are framed and adorned by animal symbolism, stars, and natural elements. I wanted these figures to seem suspended in space-time like constellations, their bodies echoing the microcosm inside the abalone shell.

In ‘Tears of Eros’, Bataille makes a compelling connection between sex and death, expounding the notion of “la petite mort”, or the “little death.” (39-54). In moments of sexual

release, “the little death” is a fleeting sense of melancholy and a temporary loss of everyday consciousness that accompanies orgasm. This phenomenon accompanies what Bataille refers to as the death of the individual and “dissolution” of the self. Several of the figures in my painting are at this stage, while some have just eclipsed it. I wanted the overall tone to include a hint of this melancholy, without losing the more humorous and lascivious elements.

VI.

Art and Porn

I knew my painting might be perceived or dismissed as pornographic before I painted it. I did not attempt to distance myself completely from porn, nor did I employ the techniques of flat lighting and idealization that are hallmarks of mainstream porn. I wanted my painting to blur the lines between art and porn, but I would argue that it is more erotic than it is pornographic.

“What’s the difference between art and porn?”

“-The lighting.” (Cater, “Comics”).

While there is definitely some truth to this old joke, distinguishing between art and porn is a dubious affair, and the question of what separates the two has yet to be resolved. Just as beauty standards are shaped by the cultural and social values of the times, notions of art and porn are constantly shifting. Like beauty, what qualifies as erotic, pornographic, or obscene is highly variable from one society, era, and individual to the next. Many factors contribute to how a work will be viewed, from cultural values regarding procreation and the role of the family, to beauty standards and engrained taboos, to the influence of religions and mass media.

Problems with Porn

Before discussing the relationship between art and porn, I want to provide an overview of the critique of present-day pornography. Implicit in the controversy around pornographic art is the idea that porn is inherently bad for us. The feminist critique of porn says that it demeans and objectifies women. Others focus on the working conditions for women in the industry, which vary greatly but can include, in unfortunate cases, manipulation and abuse. Mainstream porn is often criticized for promoting unrealistic beauty standards, featuring mostly thin, blonde, hairless

bodies that have undergone massive alterations via plastic surgery. Porn that features heterosexual combinations may also focus too heavily on misogynist scenarios, male pleasure, or on what looks good to the camera, rather than what feels good for both partners. Porn now functions as an educational introduction to sex for many young people, which can lead to warped expectations in real life. These are all valid criticisms with troubling implications, especially given that Americans consume more porn than any other country.

In Defense of Porn

The problem is that pornography is often critiqued as a monolithic genre, with critics leaning towards blanket statements and generalities. It's important to recognize that not all porn is created equal. Examples abound of progressive feminist porn that seeks to highlight female pleasure and desire, from Math Magazine to Eroticfilms.com. Annie Sprinkle's films emphasize female agency and a great slice of amateur porn features real life couples engaged in mutual acts of love. Porn is necessary, in my opinion, because it disrupts the idea of the nuclear family and provides alternative representations of sexuality. It can also serve as an outlet for fetishes and devious desires. I believe my painting does several of these things, and in its own way, *Human Creatures* is an endorsement for sexual experimentation and sexual freedom.

Art/Porn/Erotica

The question of art vs. porn presumes that art and porn are mutually exclusive categories, two separate entities that never overlap. And yet, through the ages, sex has remained the essential subject of the artist. Consider the pornographic qualities of the acrobatic orgies carved in stone at the Kandariya-Mahadeva Temple in India, all those lascivious Greek cups featuring couples copulating in circles, or the vast store of dirty marginalia by medieval monks. More recently, countless works of art and literature have blurred the boundaries between art and porn with great success. For decades, Betty Tompkins has sourced pornographic imagery in her large-scale

photorealistic paintings of genitalia and penetration. Carolee Schneeman's 1965 experimental short film, *Fuses*, also made use of pornographic footage of Schneeman and then-lover James Tenney, which the artist then manipulated and collaged over. Throughout his career, Robert Mapplethorpe's work was ostracized for its pornographic subject matter. Mapplethorpe's highly aestheticized black and white photographs that documented men in the New York S & M scene were particularly controversial, but they still hold value. Painters like Patrick Angus, Lisa Yuskavage, Marilyn Minter, Joan Semmel, and Marlene Dumas have all made work that adds nuance to the relationship between art and sex.



Figure 6

Robert Mapplethorpe, "Self-Portrait with Bullwhip" (c. 1978)

When we do accept that sex is a valid topic for artistic expression, a hierarchical question arises: Is it porn or is it *erotica*? Many have attempted to differentiate between porn and erotica by claiming that erotica leaves something to the imagination, while porn puts it all on display. I believe the distinction has less to do with how graphic an image is, and more to do

with its treatment of power. In a recent *Hyperallergic* article about an exhibition of Cecily Brown's drawings, the author John Yau postures that, "... whereas pornography is about the demonstration of power, and the death of the imagination, the erotic is about the giving and receiving of pleasure and the continual shifting of power." In my thesis painting, both male and female participants are on the giving and receiving ends of pleasure. In some instances, the nature of the relationship between subjects is unclear, allowing the viewer to fill in the gaps with their imagination.



Figure 7

Cecily Brown, "Untitled (Sweetie)" (c. 2000)

The Pornographic Imagination

Instead of asking, "Is it art, porn, or erotica?" perhaps we should be asking, "How does a work successfully manage to defy these categories?" Susan Sontag's 1967 essay, "The Pornographic Imagination" exposes an implicit bias against works of art that provoke intense sexual feeling. Highlighting George Bataille's *Story of the Eye* and Pauline Reage's *Story of O*, Sontag makes a strong argument that a work of art can be pornographic while also having profound literary merit. Sontag's defense of the pornographic imagination in literature can be applied to works of visual art as well.

What distinguishes a book like *Story of O* from your run-of-the-mill smut, according to Sontag, is the author's measured tone, poetic restraint, and acute attention to detail. Reage manages to turn the sadomasochistic decline and obliteration of her character into a transcendent experience. As Sontag writes, "What makes a work of pornography part of the history of art rather than trash is not distance, the superimposition of a consciousness more comfortable to that of ordinary reality upon the "deranged consciousness" of the erotically obsessed. Rather, it is the originality, thoroughness, authenticity, and power of that deranged consciousness itself, as incarnated in a work." (214).

VII.

Conclusion

Human Creatures is a direct manifestation of my own deranged desires. Like Nero, I had an inner vision of beauty that I felt necessary to bring to life. As a representational painter, I turned to the near and distant past for inspiration. Building upon traditions in representational painting, I drew from the use of dramatic light and realism set forth by Caravaggio in the 16th century. This painting resides in the realm of art/porn/erotica, where artists like Jeff Koons, Cecily Brown, and Robert Mapplethorpe have helped legitimize sex as subject matter. As a woman painting women, it was important that my treatment of the female body be grounded in an emphasis on pleasure and subjectivity.

This experience brought the Romantic out of me and led me down a rabbit hole of self-discovery. The process included a great degree of play, more than I am accustomed to, in both the preliminary phases and on canvas. I set out to paint a real orgy at a swinger's hotel, but ended up with an improvised kaleidoscope of flesh. Figures, objects, colors and details were added in as an intuitive response to what was needed.

The strangeness of looking at our bodies in the mirrored ceiling was a profound erotic experience that I wanted to share. The transcendental aspects of eroticism in the writings of George Bataille fueled my vision. As Bataille says, "The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives."

This is a vision that some might regard as tacky or ridiculous, but it is my own nonetheless. This is my dream of sexual freedom and fluidity, where bad girls, sick boys, and monster beauty rules.

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