PUSSY GALORE:
Women, Sex, and the Subject/Object Relation

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Imagine: a woman stands on a crowded street corner with a box around her bare chest; a “cinema” as she calls it. Through a loudspeaker onlookers are encouraged to touch behind the curtain. Men, women, children touch her breasts. The woman behind the box, Valie Export, stands tall as she successfully collapses the dichotomy of women as object and subject.

Performed in ten European cities from 1968 to 1971 “Tapp und Tastkino” (Tap and Touch Cinema) questions women’s roles in movies by conflicting the viewer. Unlike the movies, where the women are objects, placed at an unreachable distance from the viewers, Export stands in front of the crowd as a very human and inescapable object.

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1 Westen, 2010, 132
Women as sex objects in cinema is all too prevalent today. An article in the New York Post reveals the statistics behind the under-and-mis-representation of women in cinema. A study by Dr. Marth M. Lauzen, executive director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University, reveals that females remain extensively underrepresented as characters in film compared to the population. In 2010, “Females accounted for 33% of all characters in the top 100 domestic grossing films.” This is up slightly from 2002 when 28% of all characters were women. Although the percentage of female characters is on the rise, the percentage of female protagonists has declined. In 2002, 16% of protagonists were females, in 2011 it dropped to 11%. Communication Professor Stacy L. Smith, the principal investigator, leaves us with a striking truth, “There has been no meaningful change in the prevalence of women on screen across the five years studied (2007-2012). In fact, 2012 features the lowest percentage of females in the five years covered in this report…”

Author Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, explains women's presence in film. “The woman displayed [functions] on two levels: as an erotic object for the characters within the screen’s story, and as an erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium”

When viewing stills from Export’s performance, I cannot help but think about the times I have objectified myself. Countless times of “getting ready,” dressing up, hours and hours spent on becoming an object like the clothes on my back. By doing so, I have made myself a supporting actresses by being concerned with subjective appearance instead of the thoughts going on in my head.

Although my work does not directly portray images of myself, they are all self-portraits. They are a projection of my experience in a sexual body, and the trappings of finding my gender between the stages of subject and object.

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2 Pavlich, 2014, web
3 Doyle, 2006, 94
Growing up with a mother obsessed with external appearances, I have always questioned motives for pleasing the opposite sex. A woman who loves to wear bright colors, and tight fabrics, my mother craves the spotlight. She is a manicurist, constantly fixing her own nails, and cannot stand when her dark roots grow out from her still too blond 58 year old hair.

When I was nine my mother got breast implants, but I didn't understand what this meant until school the next day. After a vague explanation of the nights events a classmate scoffed at me, “Ha! Your mom got a boob job.” Nothing made sense to me; her writhing in pain, glued to the bed, all for a bigger breast size. Even today, she shoots her forehead full of Botox, making the space between her eyebrows stiff, and all these decisions about her body don't seem like a choice to her, she doesn't even question them.
I went through a box of childhood drawings my parents had in the attic the other day. Evidence of gender stereotypes are littered all over them, it is all too revealing of my five year old mindset, and the values I considered to be important. One drawing in particular stood out to me (figure 2). My mother and I stand side by side, and above I wrote, “Mom it's you and me don't we look prity.” Figure 3 documents, I assume, a school project. My five year old self is framed to what looks to be a mock up magazine, stating that I was the face of Gorgeous Magazine. As a child looking up to someone like my mother, and being given activities like the one to the left, how could I not pay attention to appearance? It swallowed me.

The artist Antony Micallef explores the distortion of a child's mind in a consumer society. Although it is a departure from a directly feminine critique, he still provides nuances of how material possessions, and figures like Barbie, affect a child's perspective. He calls his work, “Like watching a Disney movie which slowly turns into violent pornography…” He adds, “The trouble with pop imagery is that it doesn’t really go deeper than the surface, you have to drag it down and challenge it to make it interesting.”

I wanted to challenge the unexpected weight behind the mother daughter relationship and what it entails, but I needed to “drag it down.” I did so by using a blind contour technique to distort the woman, but the child (a photo of me taken from a family snapshot) was drawn realistically (figure 5). The blind contour technique makes the image seem as if the girl is looking up to a distorted version of the woman, shedding light on the way the child idealizes the female. I added text like Micallef, which creates an internal dialogue, conflicting the pleasure of the sexual image with the desire to be sexualized.

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4: Antony Micallef
The girl in pink
Oil, acrylic, and charcoal on paper

5: Maternal Instinct
ink on paper
Residing in a Sexual Body

“Sex is bound to be a factor in women’s work precisely because women have been sex objects and are much more aware of their bodies than men. Men are aware of their pricks. Women are aware that every movement they make in public is supposed to have sexual content for the opposite sex.”

I grew up always wanting to be older than I was, dreaming of a day when I would be thirteen, then eighteen, to be treated like a woman, for my boobs to grow in. When I was in middle school my dad wanted my sister and I to stop drinking 2% milk, fearful that the hormones would make our boobs to grow too quickly. I remember thinking to myself, “Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad.” The expectations of becoming a woman haunted me for a long time. I knew it was inevitable, but my perception of it was jaded. I couldn’t wait to grow into my body, to be treated differently, romantically, to be kissed, and thought of as sexy. That’s what I thought it meant to grow up.

Once I did grow into my body, instead of embracing it, I questioned it. Wondering why I felt the need to be sexy and where this drive originated from. Why my mother and my friends’ mothers altered their bodies to conform to a standard. Why my friends wore two bras to create a forced line of cleavage on their chest. I wondered about the curves and shape of the body, and why it became more important than a face in advertisement. Lucy Lippard, author of the novel Pink Glass Swan claims that sexuality is linked to the images that we think are sexy. Without a perception of what sexy is, and no image tied to it, women would not be performers in everyday life or in the bedroom. I feel myself stuck in a paradox because of the conventions that tightly wind my body. I don't know if I should cover up the body and all the assumptions along with it, or let it conform to the spectacle.

5 Lippard, 1995, 78
Artist Tracey Emin explores sexuality through a feminine perspective and the pressures of becoming an object. Using her own experiences, she paints the role of women in the bedroom, and the enjoyment and restriction of being treated as a sex-object. She portrays a sexualized nude women, often on her hands and knees, with ironic titles like, “I used to have such a good imagination.” The sexualized drawings make the women objects, but the titles and text she uses questions the woman's role. Often Emin's drawings are done on hotel stationary, further emphasizing that her work draws on true emotion and reactions of her experience.

Like Emin, I’ve explored the female psyche and the aftermath of being treated as an object. However, instead of my current and direct experience of objectivity, I've explored where objectivity spurs from, and why we commit to it. I look to drawings from my childhood, because they reveal the true perspective of growing up. Even the sketchy contour style of the drawing, compare to Emin; both reveal a hidden subconscious, whether it be about sex, or simply the way a child sees the female form.

6: Tracey Emin
Terribly Wrong,
Monoprint on paper
1997

7: pencil on paper
age 5
The Body’s Dependence on Spectator Desire

I’ve been grabbed as a body, I’ve been examined as a body, and I’ve found this attention on only one aspect of my being forces a separation from the self. Although the female form captivates many, it does not function as something interesting by itself. When the body is separated from a narrative or any defining features, it functions for the viewer and not for itself. This happens everyday in advertisements making the body a vehicle for sales.

Art Historian and Critic, Amelia Jones explores the link between theatricality, femininity, and objectivity. She argues that art containing a sexualized female and nothing else lacks, “Precisely in its theatricality: in its acknowledgement that it does not contain its own inherent significance and value, in its overt dependence on, even embrace of, spectatorial desire as a condition of meaning and value…”

The body’s function is simply a show for the viewer and becomes what Jones calls, “Non-art.” If a work contains just a body, it does not evoke further thought about the figure or narrative.

Artist Vanessa Beecroft explores the female body as a separate entity from the self. She hires models and women to stand in a gallery completely nude, asking them not to interact or make eye contact with viewers, but still to act “available.” She dresses them the same, and often gives them wigs, so they become an undefinable mass. Much Like VALIE EXPORT, in “Tapp und Tastkino” the viewer is confronted with real women becoming literal objects.

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6 Doyle, 2006, 115
7 Doyle, 2006, 128
In the figure above, Beecroft's performance from Venice in 2001, the women have their faces covered so they are literally defined only by their body. I also explored this technique to see how the nude body functioned on paper. I found that covering the faces was important to making the body center of attention. Voiding the background of any narrative lead to even more objectivity, something evidently seen in pin-ups. The floating female figure is characteristic of the pin-up, making the woman only for display and observation. She literally becomes an object and is to be scrutinized as one.

In working with the body as the central and only object, I made the colors over-saturated, as I was trying to draw attention to the fantasy associated with the female form. I gave hints of personalization with the grunge inspired hair and tattoos, just to let the viewer wonder about these subjects; however, I consider them a failure. The woman as object is successful when a person stands in front of you as a body, questioning how the viewer sees the female form. The two-dimensional aspect of drawing, does not push this point far enough. Beecroft and EXPORT deconstruct objectivity successfully by collapsing object and subject using a person as the medium. I believe my paintings (figure 9 and 10) became just alternative versions of the pin-up, although they remove the body from a narrative or human setting, they do not deconstruct or question the female as object.

9: body 1
pastel and acrylic on paper
inches
2013

10: body 2
pastel and acrylic on paper
inches
2013
Women As Objects

Michael Fried’s famous essay on minimalism, “Art and Objecthood” read through a feminist perspective, reveals interesting points about the female subject/object relationship. He argues that minimalist sculpture is fundamentally “bad” because without the viewer it cannot stand on its own. Like minimalist sculpture the female nude can be viewed as an object, and without a subject the nude cannot function by itself. The nude is structured on the viewer’s presence, so it becomes an object to look at, instead of a subject to interact with.

Fully surrendering to objecthood, photographer Isabelle Wenzel takes the subject completely out of her work. Much like Cindy Sherman, she uses herself as model and photographer, creating work that is completely controlled by her. Almost always covering her face, Wenzel distorts her body into abstract shapes, wearing stereotypical feminine garb, and often takes the photo in office-like spaces. Roxanne Goldberg from High-Fructose Magazine says, “The bodies are arranged in such a way that coffee appears to be offered on the same platter as sex.”

I have also played with the female as object. I painted a typically feminine atmosphere, the kitchen: on one side a refrigerator, on the other cabinets, and the nude woman in the middle mimics them, becoming just another object in the kitchen. Like Wenzel, there is a similar reference to wallpaper and patterns, a nod to the housewife era. I specifically used yellow to reference The Yellow Wallpaper, a story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, where a woman slowly descends into madness, which can be read as her rejecting the housewife, mother, and wife role. Unlike Wenzel however, I cut the face out blatantly, to reveal the wallpaper behind her, and the body has similar shading to that of the other objects included, further pushing objectivity.

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8 Goldberg, 2014, web.
11: Isabelle Wenzel  
*Building Images series* (2010)  
inkjet print on wood

12: *One of these things is just like the other*  
Oil on masonite  
2014
Women as Subjects

“When private expression is exposed to public interpretation, a certain amount of dislocation inevitable results. This is all the truer of art based on women’s sexuality, which has traditionally been forbidden and devalued subject matter.”

A separation from objectification becomes easier when the female artist uses herself as subject. A personal narrative allows an intimacy that is not seen otherwise; the artist is not concerned with objectifying themselves, but rather telling a story. They automatically become a subject, just because they are telling the story of their personal narrative. Even when the body may be exposed, the female is undoubtably a subject.

Painter Joan Semmel uses her own body to speak about her experience as a woman. Rather than seeing the woman through a distant artist/model point-of-view, Semmel says, “I have explored the use of both the mirror and the camera as strategies with which to destabilize point of view, and to engage the viewer as participant. My new work continues to use the prism of the nude self view, as a way with which to focus on the social and psychological aspects of gender and age.”

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9 Lippard, 1995, 75
10 Semmel, 2006, web
The perspective of Semmel's paintings is what truly makes them successful. Unlike the distance created from an artist/model point of view, we see the world through Semmel's eyes, and it automatically relates to our own everyday experience. Because of this self referential nature of the work, there is an absence of the conventions of beauty.

One painting by Semmel, (figure 14) touches on beauty stereotypes; it is a tryptic that compares the artist's own perspective of her body to that of an idealized figure on the left, and a painting from Willem de Kooning on the right. The comparative nature of this work allows a questioning of the idealized female form in relation to Semmel's depiction of her own body, and how the two do not line up. I question if all three of these perspectives can be compressed into one image, and still be successful. Semmel undoubtably questions the representation of the female form, but I wonder if this questioning can be done by using the idealized woman and keeping the artist/model distance, or if the point of view and stereotypical form will automatically get trapped in objectification.

14: Joan Semmel  
*Mythologies & Me*  
Oil on canvas  
1976
Woman as Subject and Object

Subject and Object are not as distant as we make them out to be. Subject versus object can also be seen as high-art versus pornography. While we think that these are separate entities, often they are both overlapping within the category of the other. A great example of this overlap is Herman Melville's Moby Dick. Sexual innuendos are littered throughout Ishmael's narration, particularly in a chapter called A Squeeze of the Hand. The crew has caught a whale and needs to remove the spermaceti from the head; Ishmael says, “Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other...” Melville suggests that life and sex are inseparable, making the viewer question what is really occurring on the ship.

If these opposites are interconnected, but we reject their association, I then pose the question: can the direct collapse of high art and porn, or subject and object, make the viewer question the women's role within these two (not so) extremes? Collapsing the two is no simple task, easily one can take over and subvert the other. Finding this balance is key.

11 Melville, 2002, 323
Using 30’s to 60’s Hollywood and French film stills, my work draws from the iconic and classic woman. I want to deconstruct the way society understands the ideal woman, all that she stands for, and the attached responsibility and roles of becoming a woman.

In *Happy Times*, I took a still from the 1938 movie *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife*, where Claudette Colbert and Gary Cooper are leaning against a bar, gazing off screen. I painted Claudette nude and her eyes dark, making her object-like, and Gary became defined by the outline of his suit. Claudette's nudity seems unnatural and out of place, posing the question why she is naked, and a curiosity of the relationship between the two figures. She is an object because of the way I painted her, due to the lack of detail and almost barbie like body, but she becomes a subject because of her blank eyes, posture, and interaction to the faded man. This is the first time in my work where I begin to successfully collapse the female as subject and object, but I was missing the tie to childhood, and the process of becoming a woman.

Trying to tie in development, I started using my own snapshots. I collaged childhood photos of my sister and I with over-sexualized women I found on the internet. The body language of the child mimics the woman, inferring the process of growing up, and how this can easily be misconstrued through a child’s eyes. The collages are interesting because of the mimicry, but they do not speak about the female as subject and object, only the process of growing up, and the way children imitate their parents, and the innocence of misunderstanding.
Artist Natalia Fabia integrates toys and saturated colors in combination with sexualized women to question and distort the meaning of innocence. Although she depicts her Hollywood lifestyle, and the fantasy element that surrounds it, the clash of sex and pastel lends itself to a critique on the woman's transition into adulthood. Fabia often paints a singular female woman posed in a sexualized state. Unlike the pin-up however, the women do not make eye contact with the viewer, and they are embedded in an environment.

Integrating toys into my work seemed like a good tie to my childhood, and I liked the way they could connect to a broader audience. I wanted to play with the innocence and sexualization like Fabia, but I dulled down the colors. Although I use pastels, I wanted them to be faded, almost like the child’s ideal of womanhood did not add up to her expectations.
In *My Little Moan(y)* (figure 19) I used a My Little Pony doll to mimic the expression of the woman. Because of the blank-stare of the female's eyes, she seems just as life-like as the doll. This creates a distance between the canvas and the observer, and allows room to question the female's function, and what she is thinking. Including another figure in the frame, diminishes objectification because she is given a narrative and becomes more life-like to the viewer.

I played with transparency in this piece to grant more of a surreal quality to the work. The woman's shirt is transparent, but instead of her skin color showing through, the purple tones of background color becomes the shading for her body. This effect makes it seem that her shirt is not actually see-through, but rather that it's being imagined that way. This begs the question then, who is seeing it that way? Is it the male? The my little pony, wondering the meaning of growing up? The female imagining herself as an object? Or is it confirming viewer desire? All this is very unsettling, and effectively confines the female between the stages of subject and object.
As I continue to explore these techniques I try to remove the toy as a direct reference to a child's perspective. I look to references from my own childhood, shows I repeatedly watched, or music I listened to. *Boob Grab* drew inspiration from the animated series *The Powerpuff Girls*. I didn’t directly want to reference them, but drew from the imagery. This creates undertones of a child's perspective, but it is not so confrontational.

The piece becomes more about the process of becoming a woman, and the expectations that do not add up to the imagined ideal. The woman is being treated as an object directly in the work, but the expression on her face makes it seem that she is questioning her own role within the painting.

20: *Boob Grab*

oil on paper

2014
Afterward

When walking down the street, you notice a girl with her ass hanging out of her shorts, what do you think? Maybe that she's a slut, or that she's, “Asking for it.” The collapse of the woman as person into an object is that simple, but this is not one sided to males. Through my exploration of the female body I have found that women (myself included) are just as responsible as men for making the female an object. Although this exploration is not nearly done, and will continue as I develop as a woman, I hope that my work will draw attention to the predispositions we all have towards the female body, and to the way women are constantly in limbo between the stages of subject and object.

21: Collage 3
Bibliography


