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Abstract

The exhibition discussed in this essay contends with the varying levels of objectification and sexualization of women through the photographic medium. The objects selected have been included in order to examine how the varying intersections of race, age, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and of course gender influence the depictions and characterizations of particularly the feminine. The people in the images do not tend to align with the supposedly preferred popular culture definition of the beautiful young woman, and it is their diversions from this type that must involve these images in an analysis of the culture of sexualization that persists around the feminine.

Exhibition Essay

There is nothing novel about the sexualization of subjects or the presence of the nude body in art. From the heroic statues of Ancient Greece to the erotic imagery on Hindu temples, nudity has remained a universal constant of artistic expression. What has changed in the most recent centuries, however, is that sexualization is no longer dependent on the nude and exists on a continuum shaped by a multitude of intersecting factors. The purpose of this exhibition is not to display an array of explicitly sexualized images, but to explore how the identity of the subjects characterized by their gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, and other factors as well as the role of the viewer, contribute to their sexualization, or lack thereof.

Carrie Mae Weems' *Not Manet's Type* features a view of the artist in the nude from the back and through the reflection of a mirror. Though not autobiographical, Weems's image in conjunction with its caption calls to mind her tendency to question the placements and representations of individuals within social constructs of gender and race.¹ She invokes the omissions, mistreatments, and projected characterizations of, particularly, Black women committed by the white male artists she names — Manet, Picasso, Duchamp.

Like Weems, the unidentified nude woman in Edward Steichen's *Torso* has her back towards the viewer. Sitting with her knees tucked into her chest, such reluctance to show her private body parts is not what one would expect of a model who makes a living by posing in front of the camera. Steichen reveals the inner turmoil of the woman who needs to earn her living, but feels shame and fatigue over the constant objectification of her body.² While a

¹ Charmaine Picard, "A Q&A WITH Carrie Mae Weems," *Modern Painters* 26, no. 1 (2014), 67.

² "Torso," Search the Collections, Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed February 4, 2021, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1060347/torso-photograph-steichen-edward-j/>

seemingly private moment, the viewer is still granted a preview of her, suggesting the inevitability of the sexualization of a nude female, especially when it comes to the gaze of a male photographer upon a female subject.

Judy Dater's photograph, *Imogen and Twinka at Yosemite*, on the other hand, depicts the gaze of a female viewer upon a female subject. In some ways, the audience sees their own voyeuristic experience reflected here. Yet, the fact that the double portrait captures two women, instead of a man viewing a woman, questions the status-quo established by classical pieces, like Thomas Hart Benton's painting, *Persephone*, which inspired Dater.³ Additionally, the dynamic between the old clothed woman (Imogen) and the young naked woman (Twinka) reminds us that a woman's perceived sexuality changes as she ages.

Although the nude female body is the focus of the previous three images, nudity is not the only means to achieve objectification. R.P. Whigham's portrait of *Elizabeth, The Living Doll* is a clear-cut example of objectification as her image is physically commodified on a postcard. While her short stature captures the main attention of the viewer, emphasized by the towering chair beside her, the descriptors "doll" and "perfect-formed woman" indicate that her interest to the public eye stems not just from her height, but also her appearance as a beautiful, young white woman.

Another seemingly a-sexual, non-nude portrait is Clarence John Laughlin's *The Auto Eroticists*. The photograph captures a fully veiled woman in a decaying building; the audience sees nothing of this woman's body except the soles of her feet. Yet, the piece is titled *The Auto Eroticists*, and autoeroticism is the practice of sexually stimulating oneself. The unavoidably sexual title shows that even the most seemingly a-sexual, non-revealing women can be sexualized in the public gaze.

Another image that lacks overt sexualization is Jacob Riis's *Ancient Lodger and the Plank She Slept On*. Empathetically revealing the impoverished conditions of New York City slums, the woman in the image was never intended to and continues to evade being sexualized.⁴ One may wonder which of her several identities defies sexualization. Is it because she is fully clothed or because of her low socioeconomic status or is it precisely because she is "ancient"? A shift in one or several of her identities, a young woman or a woman of high social standing, for example, could render new meanings to this portrait.

Janet Delaney's commitment to the preservation of local color takes her to San Francisco's *Folsom Street Fair*.⁵ This image depicts a subject who directly partakes in the city's counterculture, whose projection of gender and empowerment run counter to popular culture's demand and preference for the youthful and "beautiful" woman who is not unhappy to be ogled.

³ Imogen and Twinka at Yosemite by Judy Dater on artnet Auctions, Accessed February 8, 2021, <https://www.artnet.com/auctions/artists/judy-dater/imogen-and-twinka-at-yosemite-18>.

⁴ Edward T O'Donnell, "Pictures vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenge of Jacob Riis," *The Public Historian* 26, no. 3 (2004): 14-15.

⁵ "Janet Delaney," *British Journal of Photography* 162, no. 7839 (2015), 44.

Standing stoically in leatherwear and directing a piercing gaze at the viewer from their clearly aged, though made up, countenance, the subject here presents an interesting alternative to the images of Marilyn Monroe also featured in this exhibition. These images of Marilyn Monroe by Philippe Halsman are outtakes from the photoshoot for Monroe's first *LIFE* magazine cover in 1952.⁶ Monroe's legacy follows her throughout her visual history. Though the images seen here never made the final cut, the viewer's awareness of Monroe's prominent position in American media's considerations of sex and stardom load these outtakes with the weight of the subject's history with Playboy magazine, Andy Warhol's pop art, and her ultimately tragic hypersexualization.⁷

Lastly, Andy Warhol's *Nude Model (Male)*, the only image of a man in our exhibition, raises questions about how gender affects sexuality and the field of vision. Warhol captures this man in a notably open and proud stance, especially compared to the submissive positions of the nude women in the exhibition. That pride is not without complication — the subject is likely gay.⁸ Therefore, his pride is simultaneously bolstered, as a man, yet scorned, as a gay man.

Sexualization in photography is clearly complex and cannot be reduced to a simple binary between the presence or absence of sexualization. As individuals living in an age of photography, these discussions of sexuality and intersectionality are not limited to the museum, but apply to each one of us. Of course, this isn't to say there is a perfect formula between identity and sexualization; someone is not destined to be objectified in every photo they appear in due to a certain combination of gender, age, and other identities. There are a host of factors that contribute to the meanings of images, such as the intention of the artist, the publication form of the image, and the social values of the viewers that were only just touched upon in this essay. However, by being aware of our intersecting identities, we can advocate for social change such as done by Carrie Mae Weems, be cognizant of how we portray and label others, and examine the world in general from a more multifaceted perspective.

⁶ Liz Ronk, "Marilyn Monroe: LIFE Magazine Covers, 1952-1962," *LIFE* (*LIFE Magazine*, January 16, 2020), <https://www.life.com/people/marilyn-monroe-life-magazine-covers-photos/>.

⁷ Liz Ronk, "Marilyn Monroe: LIFE Magazine Covers, 1952-1962,".

⁸ Bethune, Brian. "The Artist Who Eclipsed Picasso." *Maclean's* 133, no. 5 (June 2020): 64–66. <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.scu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=143164467&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

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