

# The Female View Of Erotica

By Dorothy Seiberling

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Erotic art is old stuff. Artists have been turning it out for thousands of years and they'll still be at it long after the Burger Court has passed into oblivion. Yet in this land of die-hard Victorian morality, things erotic continue to muster headlines, monopolize newsstands, and thrive on the blessings of an X-rating. The current season has served up more than the usual dose of erotic fare: at the New School, a big show of erotic art and an X-rated course featuring porn flicks, erotic puppets, and that veteran of police busts, topless cellist Charlotte Moorman; at Hofstra, an exhibition of “The Male Nude” from Pompeii to Pearlstein; at the Janis Gallery, the sexual obsessions of Hans Bellmer. And in *The Times*, John Updike turned up to review a batch of books on erotic art. “Now we stand in a moment,” wrote Updike portentously, “when sex again seems worth studying and celebrating. More, it has become our last uncontaminated act, the sinuous passageway down into the womb where worship is possible.

... At this anxious moment, as a tug of reaction begins to be felt, this set of three volumes offers us a comradely perspective... into the erotic images with which other men have sought ‘to exalt the sense of life.’”

And there's the rub: the current season's erotica is largely concerned with the images made by men—male fantasies, fetishes, and phalluses. So what else is new?

What else but the woman's side of the subject? We all know how woman looks as man's pinup, but as a (female) art historian put it, “How does the person react who feels the prick of the pin?” Well, plenty of those persons are wantin', willin', and waitin' to tell us. It turns out there are lots of Lot's daughters with sex on their minds, and they're not keeping it a sisterly secret anymore. In short, the real news in erotica today is that women are making it.

In New York alone in the past year there have been dozens of shows of women's erotic art—one is on right now at the Zeglen Gallery in SoHo. There have been festivals of women's erotic films, a conference on female sexuality, and a burst of books, articles, and TV talk on women's sexual fantasies.

Coming in the wake of the women's movement, this eruption of female erotica may not seem all that remarkable. But coming almost 30,000 years after what is possibly the first manifestation of female erotica, it is something to think upon. According to a current theory, that prehistoric sex-goddess known as the Venus of Willendorf was fashioned by a woman, probably as an amulet to ensure the maker's fertility. Thus Cro-Magnon Maggie may have been not only the first woman artist, but the first female erotic artist.

Though there have been women artists in almost every age since then, their sexual feelings have remained largely unexpressed or disguised in their art. But one Italian painter, Artemisia Gentileschi, appears to have had intense feelings about *male* sexuality, and well she might. In 1612, at the age of nineteen, she was the prime witness in the trial of her artist-tutor, Agostino Tassi, who was charged with raping her “many, many times.” Since a woman's story in rape cases is always suspect, Artemisia was tortured with thumb-screws during the cross-examination. Ultimately, Tassi was sent to prison and Artemisia was married off to an older man. But she kept on painting, most notably the Apocryphal subject of Judith slaying Holofernes, in which she could vent her feelings of vengeance. In one of her versions, in fact, she signed her own name on Judith's sword. (Some 300 years later, the French-born sculptor Louise Bourgeois carved her own *Femme Couteau*—a woman's body turning into a knife.) As the obverse, however, of her hostili-

ties, Artemisia's erotic fantasies may be apparent in the numerous paintings she produced of women working their sexual charms—albeit in innocence—upon men: those two bathing beauties, Bathsheba and Susanna, not to mention Esther, fainting in all her beauty before King Ahasuerus. True, these subjects were popular among other artists of the seventeenth century, but Artemisia gave them particular emphasis in her work.

For the most part, however, erotic imagery was invisible, if not nonexistent, in women's art until it surfaced in Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings. Or perhaps in the age of Freud certain things in art were finally recognized—indeed, searched for. But apparently not by O'Keeffe herself, and it didn't sit well with her when critics saw sexual symbols in her flowers or likened her *Shelton With Sun Spots* to a male orgasm. “Eroticism!” she exclaimed in cool disdain. “That's something people themselves put into the paintings. They've found things that never entered my mind. That doesn't mean they weren't there, but the things they said astonished me. It wouldn't occur to me. But Alfred talked that way and people took it from him.”

Alfred Stieglitz, O'Keeffe's photographer-husband, did indeed talk that way and liked to tell about her first show at his historic 291 Gallery. He felt elated, he said, to have found “a woman on paper,” but a critic viewing O'Keeffe's work was scandalized. “But Stieglitz,” he protested, “all those pictures say is: ‘I want to have a baby.’” Later critics rhapsodized about the erotic implications of O'Keeffe's art. Even Lewis Mumford succumbed: “She has revealed the intimacies of love's juncture with the purity and absence of shame lovers feel in their meeting.” No wonder O'Keeffe denied the eroticism of her art! But of course she was further plagued by the stigma



of being a woman in a man's field; critiques incorporating the words "woman" and "feminine" amounted to a put-down. (Decades after O'Keeffe was launched, Louise Nevelson ran up against similar male resistance to women in art. Said one male artist to Nevelson, "It takes balls to be an artist." "Well, if that's what it takes," rejoined Nevelson, "I've got 'em!")

Allowing explicit sexual imagery to reveal itself in their work has continued to be a problem for women artists. Louise Bourgeois has been preoccupied with erotic motifs from the beginning of her career, but she managed to conceal them in visual metaphors so that "for a long time, the sexual in my art was not openly acknowledged. People talked about erotic aspects, about my obsessions, but they didn't discuss the phallic aspects. If they had, I would have ceased to do it. It is acceptable to be obsessive because it shows drive. Now I admit the imagery, I am not embarrassed about it."

Since solidarity in numbers attracts greater numbers, there are sure to be many more women artists who will remove the veils from their imagery. But what if they do? What can women add to the plethora of erotica men have produced over the centuries?

For one thing, they can pull some

provocative switches on sexual scenes and symbols purveyed by men. Marge Helenchild's *Breast Wall*, for example, a cascade of pink, puffy protuberances of antiquity, the Venus of Ephesus, seem almost demure. Anita Steckel's photo-collage of a cellist drawing his bow across a female nude translates into plain language the submerged message of the cozy musicale in seventeenth-century Dutch art. And, in a reversal of Magritte's *The Rape*—a woman's face composed of her nude torso—Eunice Golden perpetrates a visual rape by twisting male genitalia into grotesque heads.

Most important, women can tell the story that hasn't been told—their own. And today they are doing just that, putting their faces, bodies, lovers, dreams, and dramas of sex into their art, and inventing personal symbols for this life-pervading force, sexuality. How meaningful and affecting their work is depends on their creative capacities as artists. It takes more than subject matter to make or break an artist. But since for women, repressing erotic subject matter was in fact repressing their own natures, the removal of the taboos may unleash a remarkable creative energy among the female artists of our time.

### Joan Semmel: Sex to Hang Art On

"A few years ago, several of us got together to 'split' a model, only in this case, there were two models, a man and a woman who were involved with each other, so they posed like lovers. That got me into dealing with the subject in an open way. Then other things began to enter, including my identification with feminism. Women have never allowed themselves to admit their sexual fantasies. They have been encouraged to create themselves in terms of male fantasy. I wanted to make imagery that would respond to female feelings. My paintings deal with communication, how a hand touches a body, rather than male or female domination. Women are conditioned to play a masochistic role. But I want to show sensuality with the power factor eliminated. The images are handled in an objective, cool way, with non-realistic space, with a sense of being removed from the world. But there is feeling in the gestures, passion in the color. Ultimately, the play and relationship of color is what my painting is about. I'm using sex to hang my art on."