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From a woman's perspective

By Ariella Budick

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A generation ago, when feminist critics took a close, outraged look at art history's catalogue of scrumptious nudes, they herded Titian, Goya, Klimt, Schiele and scores of other lubricious painters into a single category and accused them of a new misdeed: scopophilia, the pathological love of looking. When men behold women, so the theory goes, they see passive objects, targets of repulsion or desire. Museums brim with women opening their every crevice to the male gaze. Galleries are garnished with dimpled limbs, flushed cheeks and heaving cleavage, all proffered for the delectation of male painters and viewers.

The Cheim and Reid Gallery updates that profoundly influential idea with a sprawling summer show, *The Female Gaze: Women Look at Women*, which implies that switching the sex of the artist yields triumphantly different results. The exhibition argues that women will elevate other women from decorative cameos to stars in their own drama. Only females can rescue femininity from its degrading clichés.

Alas, a premise is not proof, and the works here suggest that most women, too, are afflicted with male-pattern scopophilia. A masturbating woman is a masturbating woman, regardless of her painter's gender, and she titillates just the same. Take Lisa Yuskavage's kneeling blonde poppet, her chest perkily thrust forwards in the throes of self-love. You might, if you were magnanimously inclined, see this nude as an ironic critique, a kind of anti-pornography. Yuskavage winkingly refers to an assortment of kitsch genres: the pin-up, the dirty postcard, the glossy magazine sweated over by generations of adolescent boys. She's playing a double game, exciting some viewers while gratifying others into a sense of intellectual superiority.

But it's hard to see this image as empowering. Like many of the artists assembled here, Yuskavage celebrates women's freedom to exploit women the way men do. Call it Madonna feminism. "Okay, I have chained myself," the star said, when asked if she felt degraded by appearing in masochistic videos. "I crawled under my own table, y'know." Apparently the power of women now ranges all

the way from self-stimulation to self-oppression.

Yuskavage has plenty of like-minded company in the gallery. Ghada Amer's elegant canvases hide lewdly posed ladies beneath dainty drizzlings of thread. Amer modifies the macho language of Abstract Expressionism, turning sprinklings into stitches that evoke domestic craft. But in adapting images from pornography, Amer has merely found a new way to re-exploit female sexuality.

There's also Katy Grannan's "Nicole", seemingly soaked in sexual ecstasy; Louise Bourgeois and Joan Semmel's intimate takes on humping couples, and Vanessa Beecroft's life-sized, wax-coated sleeping beauty, which might have been clipped from the pages of *Necrophiliac Monthly*.

Giving a woman a camera or brush is no guarantee that she will do things differently from a man - especially when it comes to reducing members of her sex to the sum of their body parts. Nothing here achieves the psychological subtlety we see in Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa", David's "Madame Recamier" or even Sargent's "Madame X".

Perhaps it's not fair to expect women to perceive possibilities outside the limits of convention. Take the photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron, who turned her lens on the women of her household, sheared them of their identities and freed their voluminous hair from constraint. Cameron had her Madonnas, Sapphos and Guineveres cast their sorrowful eyes downwards in longing and resignation. Stripping them of their specificity, she outfitted them in the cloak of self-sacrifice, spreading an ideal of femininity that fit comfortably within the parameters of Victorian womanhood.

Only a few artists break the mould, approaching their subjects as people first and women second. Diane Arbus pierced her subjects' defences and then snapped the shutter just when they let their social masks fall away. Men and women alike were laid bare as compendia of imperfections. Arbus was kind compared with Alice Neel, who forced her sitters to conform to her bleak view of humanity. Almost everyone she painted looks corroded and corpse-like - the girl here is a sulky and shrewd future depressive. The opposite of a fairy godmother, Neel could wave a brush and turn a stunning model into a hag.

There's something deeply dispiriting about seeing such a lavish collection of talents undermine themselves. With off-putting dogmas and jargon-filled zeal, but also with perceptive acuity, feminist critics pointed out how regularly male artists stripped women, not only of their clothes but also of their individuality. So why do so many of their female counterparts do the same, reducing personality to sexuality and offering up that faded, familiar display of old-time erotica.

'The Female Gaze: Women Look at Women' continues until September 19 www.heimread.com



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