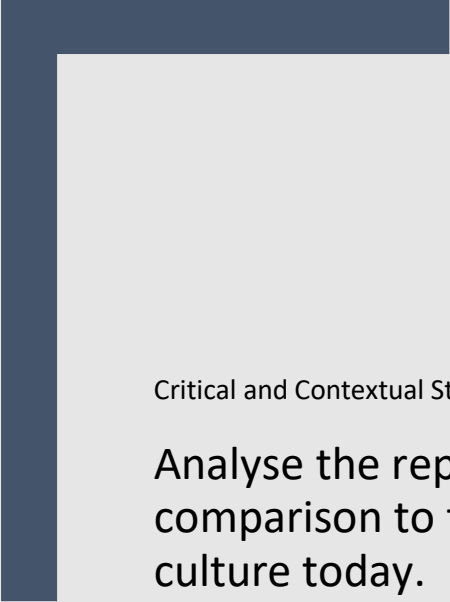


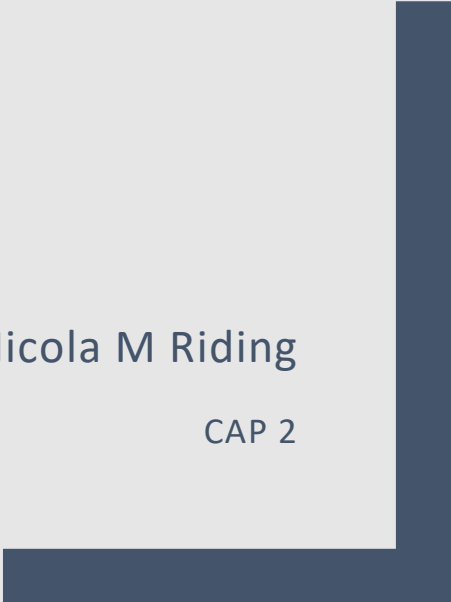


Critical and Contextual Studies Assessment Semester 1 CAP 2

Analyse the representation of the historical Venus, in comparison to the Venus in contemporary art and/or culture today.

Nicola M Riding

CAP 2



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Why do I shave my legs with a razor called Venus? Let me introduce you to one of the reasons why. The influence, of the Goddess Venus. She herself has had many guises as Bettany Hughes states, she is:

‘a potent idea....this deity is the incarnation of fear as well as love, of pain as well as pleasure, of the agony and ecstasy of desire’ (Hughes, 2020).

In Western Society, representations of Venus along with the Virgin Mary, act as a barometer for the way beauty, desire, lust pleasures and womanhood are viewed and then projected on to flesh and blood human beings (Hughes, 2020). They have been used for political gain and social commentary. You cannot consider Venus without considering the prejudice of misogyny and particularly the rise of Christianity through the creation of the Doctrine of Original Sin (Holland, 2018). In addition, Western cultures were drawn to the allure of ‘classical pedigree’ and put their faith in the ancients, Rome and Greece for an understanding of civilisation (McCormack, 2021).

Art itself is not the only determinant of attitudes. It is a reflection of the society in which it is created and it is this that we shall consider by looking at the comparison of the historical Venus and compare that to contemporary representations.

In ‘Venus at her Mirror,’ (Prater, 2002) the breadth and scale of how Venus has been represented historically in painting and sculpture by Velazquez, Titian, Rubens, Goya, Carracci, etc. A veritable who’s who of classic art. And with each century the motif is passed down to influence the next generation of artists. As seen below:



Left: Venus of Urbino, Titan 1534. Uffizi Gallery. Oil on Canvas (Prater, 2002).



Right: Olympia, Manet 1863. Musee d'Orsay. Oil on Canvas. (Kim, 2014)

Each have their nuance. There are several things that all historical paintings and sculptures of Venus have in common. She is a naked white woman, her skin is pale and there are no blemishes, she often has a mirror to convey both sides; the sitter and the viewer acknowledging each other, (Kozanoglu, 2019). She was painted by a man for another wealthy man for his personal pleasure (McCormack, 2021). The women are transported from a person to a 'display' (Kozanoglu, 2019). As Berger summarises, "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." (Berger, 1972).



Johan Zoffany, The Tribuna of the Uffizi, 1770 (McCormack, 2021).

Venus in historic art represents the idealised version of what a white woman should look like at that point in time and it was created for the male gaze (Berger, 1972) & (Barrett, 2003) or the education of women. We are in no doubt of this when we look at the painting above by Zoffany.



Plate by Thomas Stothard from the third edition of Bryan Edwards', 'The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies', (1801).

Black women and other diverse groups were not represented in historic art's representation of beauty, that is unless you were a servant in the case of Olympia by Manet. The boundaries of beauty were set on the Eastern Mediterranean even though there were many other different definitions of beauty in other cultures (McCormack, 2021). The only time a black woman was represented as Venus was the etching above. There's nothing 'civil' about this piece as it represents the worst of Racist Misogyny, a true horror. As McCormack says it,

"promotes a fantasy of the transatlantic crossing as a willing and emancipatory voyage for African women and obscures the reality of confinement and abused [those] enslaved women faced." (McCormack, 2021).

Changes to the classic Venus idiom started to manifest with the emergence of the twentieth century and the rise of Modernism. That's not to say that male artists of this period did not continue to interpret Venus and the nude in the same old way e.g., Picasso (McCormack, 2021) but other artistic voices began to emerge as progression in society was made and as contemporary experts began challenging the definition of beauty and 'the psychic havoc it wrought' (Steiner, 2001).

Women artists are now able to reclaim their right to represent themselves in a more realistic and human way. I will consider

the contemporary work of three women, Tracey Emin, Rupī Kaur and Mary Duffy in this regard.



Tracy Emin, *My Bed*, 1998. On loan to the Tate, London from Count Christian Duerckheim (ARTLAND Editors, Unknown)

Tracey Emin in *My Bed*, 1998, is considered as 1 of 10 works that has changed Art History (ARTLAND Editors, Unknown). There is no naked body here just the bed, it challenges the viewer to consider a real woman who leaves a sense of herself in her bed with the items she leaves behind. This story is told from a woman's point of view. It is confessional, it addresses taboos about women's depression, imperfections, failures and bodily fluids. You couldn't get further from the classical Venus if you tried! (ARTLAND Editors, Unknown).

The motif of the bed with bodily fluids was taken further by Rupī Kaur, an Indian Canadian, when she posted a picture of herself on Instagram in 2015 in her bed (Holden, 2015), in what can be described as a Venus pose. She is clothed showing menstrual leakage on her pyjamas and bed. It is the antithesis of the historic Venus. It is an image that is relatable to women but was not without its controversy with Instagram taking down the image several times (McCormack, 2021).



Instagram/Rupi Kaur, 2015

Mary Duffy in her work pays homage to ancient sculptures such as Venus De Milo. The photograph below was taken from a live performance, Duffy was born without arms and she laid herself bare (Millett-Gallant, 2010) As Millett ably puts it,

“Duffy’s performative act transgressed the boundaries between representation and everyday life, as it simultaneously refigured histories of art and performance.”



Cutting the Ties that Bind (Heroes) Duffy, Mary 1987 Photograph (Council, 1986)

Duffy uses drapes, as used in classical interpretations of Venus, to reveal her own body in what can be seen as a powerful challenge to the perceived views about the visual appearance of

disability (Preetjohn, 2005). Duffy's right as a woman and artist to cut the ties that bind her to the patriarch and ancient perceptions of beauty are challenged, she is a disabled woman objectifying herself in a society that already objectifies her and thereby Duffy creates true social dialogue (Millett-Gallant, 2010).

What these three artists demonstrate is as Catherine McCormack (McCormack, 2021) has stated that,

“there's a steadily growing momentum to correct gender and racial inequality in the art world. As the forgotten and overlooked contributions of women and artists of colour are brought out of archives and into the light through numerous exhibitions and publishing projects.”

However, there is a conundrum, on one hand you have women telling their stories unobjectified for an inclusive audience and on the other, the beauty industry continually spurts out the idealised version of how women should be. We need to balance progress with the distribution of art, in all its forms, through the internet in the context of growing participatory culture. This means, 'anyone magically transforms from just sitting in a couch (a consumer of media) to putting a comment on an Instagram post (a contributor) and even editing their vacation photos (a producer)' so says Laurinda Shaver a Creative Digital Producer (Shaver, 2021).

This means that on digital platforms anyone can be an artist! Of concern has to be how the Venus myth continues to thrive. As can be seen by the number of times that Sandro Botticelli's the Birth of Venus image has been replicated. It is everywhere from pop songs to adverts for sports-wear to images in glossy



magazines (Cain, 2018). Take the 2009 image by David LaChapelle, photographer and music video director. Venus is a, 'heavily made-up, deeply tanned, bottle-blond model. Recreating the Venus pose makes explicit reference to the idea of Botticelli as setting an aspirational standard for female beauty' (Cain, 2018). Is this progressive contemporary art? What is this photographic image actually telling us

other than here is another representation of Venus, more heavily sexualised, by a man that perpetuates the age-old beauty myth? 'Ever since Rome we keep replacing the statues but continue to play the same blinding game' Robin Cost Lewis in the New Yorker 2016 (McCormack, 2021).

This is contrary to the building of equalities in the art world. This can particularly be seen in the deluge of folk that access pornography, a media that objectifies women in an abhorrent way. Better Marketing (Jurberg, 2020) via a report in Forbes estimates that in 2019 there were 42 billion visits to Pornhub (Silver, 2019). In a world where there are more young boys and men accessing porn sites than walking through galleries and museums the world over, it is the role of artists today to challenge the objectification of women. It is a tough one and there is an uphill struggle ahead of us. This doesn't mean that we don't continue to drive change. It's how we use the tools available to us through social media and apply pressure to influence regulation, control and government policy as well as through our art. We should all strive to be Guerrilla Girls. (A group of feminist

activist artists who use facts, humour, and outrageous visuals to expose gender and ethnic bias and corruption in politics, art, film, and pop culture in their artworks.) (ARTLAND Editors, Unknown).



Guerrilla Girls, Do Women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? 1989

END

1493 words excluding title and descriptions of inserted images (113 words).

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