

National College of Art & Design

Painting, Fine Art.

**The Fetishised Feminine: Do the works of artists Balthus and Hans Bellmer remain worthy of veneration within a visual culture not dictated by a heteronormative male gaze?**

Sarah Leddy

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National College of Art and Design

## **School of Visual Culture**

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

**Signed:** Sarah Leddy

**Programme / department:** Fine Art - Painting

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## Introduction

The artists Balthus and Hans Bellmer are known separately for their provocative use of the pubescent girl body in their extensive and celebrated oeuvres. Their young subjects are endlessly portrayed in myriad vulnerable positions across various mediums; they are bent over, splayed, dismembered and subjugated. While Bellmer's works lurk under the shields of Surrealist inquisitiveness and Oedipal rebellion, the disturbing frequencies of Balthus' creations are somewhat muted by the lonely classicism of his compositions. Upon reviewing the biographies and works of these men, one notices a glaringly cohesive rhetoric of covetous discourse regarding ideal images of youth and innocence, performed through an onslaught of nubile girl models; the resulting imagery steeped in eroticism and fetishism. Despite their works' misogynistic and paedophilic overtones, these adult men are given free reign to manipulate their girl-child Muses as they see fit under the guise of a 'culture' which permits and perpetuates a fragmented and degraded canon of the feminine.

Hans Bellmer began to make his first girl-doll at the age of thirty-one in Berlin, set to the backdrop of the first soundings of the Nazi regime. He went on to produce multiple dolls, often limbless, blind or dishevelled, and countless drawings of flayed and distorted girl bodies, erotically posed, adorned in frills and bows. Despite this, many choose to view his output purely as a veritable rebellion against an oppressive political and social landscape, venerated by the Surrealists "as a liberating struggle against the father, the police, and ultimately, fascism and the state" (Taylor, 2000, p.21).

Balthus - a child-prodigy - would go on to be considered one of the most willfully mysterious artists of twentieth century painting. Unlike Bellmer's extensive erotic musings on his own work, Balthus throughout his life remained staunchly reluctant to provide a direct sensical context for his provocative compositions. The man's continual denial of the sexual subtext - of paintings that portray female children almost exclusively unconscious or bent

over, legs akimbo or from a perspective that leers up the skirt of the child - are overstated, performatively uncomprehending, and regurgitated endlessly by the art world that supports him: ““They’re always trying to see something erotic in my painting, which I never understood.”” (Weber, 1999, p. 26)

This inquiry asks the reader to consider whether works like that of Balthus and Bellmer retain value within a culture where value is not dictated by a suppressive, limited male perspective. It seeks to highlight the blatant misogynistic and paedophilic ideation intrinsic to the work and question a ‘culture’ so desensitised to the hypersexualised display of women and female children that it bestowed value on this imagery in the first place. It wonders: Does this work remain worthy of the space it occupies, splayed across the gallery walls of our most influential cultural institutions? It will demonstrate how ‘culture’ itself has devalued women while bestowing undue praise upon their suppressors, making space for the insipid yet persistent reduction of woman to nought more than a transmutable vessel for the projections of her male counterpart.

## **‘Femme Enfant’: Woman in Culture and the Canonically Acceptable Proclivities of**

**Hans Bellmer**

Works by Bellmer were first published by the French Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1934; a two page spread of images of his first girl-doll in various stages of dismemberment around the studio, titled *Doll: Variations on the Assemblage of an Articulated Minor*. (fig.1) The works were enthusiastically embraced by the journal’s readership. Surrealists of the time were enthralled by the exploration of automatons, intrigued by their near-human affect, their “animate/inanimate status”, and the unease this state roused in those observing it (Taylor, 1996, p.151). More poignantly, Bellmer’s preoccupation with nubile girls was of great intrigue due to the Surrealist movement’s love affair with the concept of the ‘femme-enfant’; a girlish vessel onto which the men of Surrealism projected their desire for a rejection of an authoritarian, patriarchal political and social scene, a symbol of innocence, dream-worlds and a simplified and fetishised femininity; not so complex and restrictive as the

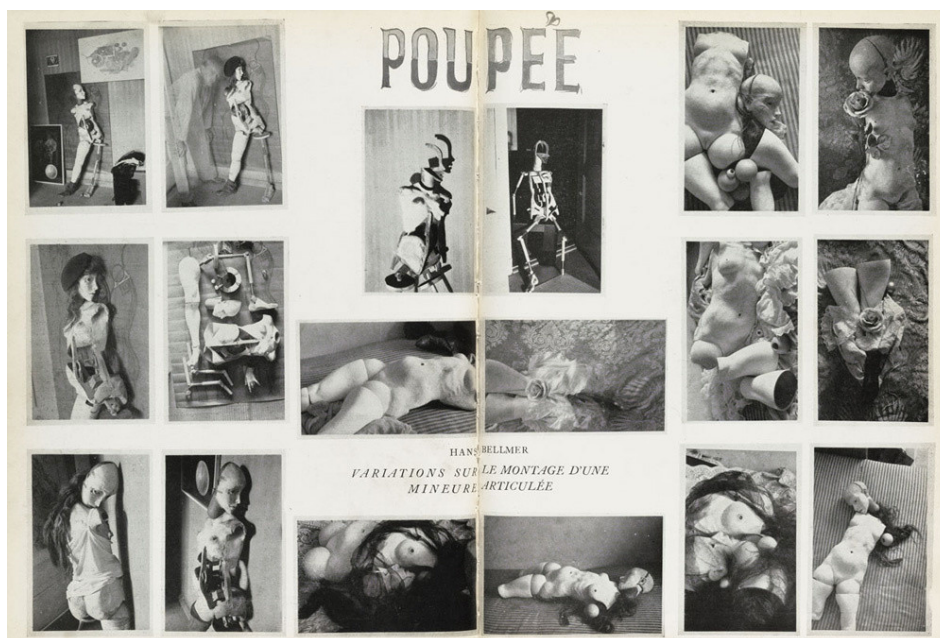


fig. 1. Bellmer’s child-doll is variously constructed and prostrated, propped against walls and laid on a bed, in a two-page spread in *Minotaure*.

adult world of men: “The Surrealists conceived of woman as man’s mediator with nature and unconscious, femme-enfant, muse, source and object of man’s

desire, embodiment of amour fou, and emblem of revolution.” (Raaberg, 1990, p. 2)

Being simply an ‘emblem’ of revolution, woman is understood not as an active or autonomous force in the phallogentric order of our ‘culture’, but as a suitably malleable and aesthetically satisfying prop used to spur those more whole, three dimensional revolutionaries. Bellmer, within this system, is free to manipulate aspects of the female image he finds most compelling - in this case, her sexualised pubescent form - to his own ends, without question (see fig. 2):

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (Mulvey, 1973, p.15)

One aspect of the archetype of the ‘femme-enfant’ mentioned by Raaberg that is especially intriguing, is the recognition of woman as “man’s mediator with nature”. This conception indicates most starkly what it is that has given credence to the cultivation of an almost exclusively male-driven canon in ‘cultural’ history, making the visual productions of men like Hans Bellmer and Balthus so easily digestible within it. Why is it that we do not see the bodies of men and male children broken down, exploited and subjugated in such a way in our museums and galleries? What is it about a woman's perceived place in ‘culture’ that renders her body as public property, for public consumption? Sherry B. Ortner discusses extensively what she calls the “pan-cultural devaluation of woman” through her apparent indelible connection with nature, and resulting alienation from ‘culture’:

...woman is being identified with, or symbolically associated with, nature, as opposed to man, who is identified with culture. Since it is always culture’s project to subsume and transcend nature, if woman is part of nature, then culture would find it ‘natural’ to subordinate, not to say oppress, her. (Ortner, 1972, p. 21)

It being ‘culture’'s assigned function to overcome the animal condition, to produce artefact and anthropological history - that which makes us human - it follows that woman - through being conveniently bound in nature by the functions of her body - would be

dehumanised, overcome, and subordinated in that same process. Ortner discusses De Beauvoir's writings regarding "woman's 'enslavement to the species'", referencing the burdensome ability to manifest new life, or sustain "pure repetition", by which she becomes defined. In contrast, man, by design, is systematically at liberty to pursue a higher



fig. 2. Bellmer is seen to violently transmute the female body and hang it, corpse-like, in a forest. The dismembered legs wear school-girl shoes.

purpose, orchestrate 'culture': "But man assures the repetition of Life while transcending Life through Existence [i.e. goal - oriented, meaningful action]; by this transcendence he creates values that deprive pure repetition of all value." (1949, cited in Ortner, 1972, pp. 22-23) Woman, while making up half of all humanity and thus being somewhat acknowledged historically as a participant in the functions of 'culture', has merely been permitted a less active role in the generation of 'culture'. Having not been freely granted the autonomy to represent herself within the cultural canon, woman's form became reimagined as a malleable medium through which 'cultured' men like Bellmer felt entitled to represent themselves. Meanwhile, woman's perceived purpose is reframed as a base and presymbolic (pre-cultural, abject) function:

...woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, on the other hand, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert

his creativity externally, 'artificially', through the medium of technology and symbols. In doing so, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables - human beings. (Ortner, 1972, p.23).

This theory highlights the truly base, ingrained bias behind the casual subjugation of women and girls in the work of Balthus and Bellmer. Furthermore, representations of these and other men's fantasies inform a diminished representation of woman as a whole within our visual 'culture'; she is reduced to an infantile sexual object.



fig. 3. A girl-body in stockings is distended by an exaggerated phallus in Bellmer's drawing.

Bellmer indulges freely in fantasies of automated reproductive girl bodies, while Balthus dominates his child-subjects through calculated gesture and pose.

Within this 'culture' Bellmer proudly twists, distorts and penetrates pubescent girl bodies with his destructive vision, depicts the distension of their torsos by huge phalluses (fig. 3) and produces child-puppets as sexual conduits while writing openly about his paedophilic impulses. Sue Taylor, who wrote extensively about Bellmer, describes how the writings of Freud influenced the artist - as well as many Surrealists - deeply; adding yet another layer of 'cultured' legitimacy to the work. The psychologist believed that children possessed a liberated form of sexuality, having yet to learn of the moral restraints that would be placed on their impulses as they age; they retained a lack of "mental dams" against "sexual



excesses". Taylor goes on to describe how "Freud ascribed a natural disposition toward polymorphous perversity to children and to the 'average uncultivated woman'." (2000, p. 30) Moreover, the typical bourgeois attitude toward sexuality, one of repression and prudishness, was one which the Surrealists went to great measures to offend and repudiate. The 'femme-enfant' - and, indeed, the supposed 'uncultivated woman' - is fetishised as a natural antithesis to the moralising of sexuality; being innocent, she is "unself-conscious, totally without a sense of the implications of her acts, and beyond proscriptive morality" (Gilman, 1982, cited in Taylor, 2000, p.30). Bellmer is intrigued by these concepts in an unseemly fashion and appears to take great satisfaction in projecting his own knowing, sexual vision onto his child-effigy. Through his imagery and writings he dangerously fetishises and venerates her innocence, willfully seeking to corrupt it to the end of his own pleasure.

While the sight of Bellmer's work alone makes his paedophilic ideation abundantly clear, if more evidence was needed, one might only need to skim his unambiguous writings about the doll in his essay *Memories of the Doll Theme* - explored in depth in Taylor's biography of the man - to be certain: "It was worth all my obsessive efforts, when, amid the smell of glue and wet plaster, the essence of all that is impressive would take shape and become a real object to be possessed." (2000, p.32) Bellmer speaks lasciviously of the anatomy and adornment of little girls, coveting "the casual quiver of their pink pleats" as well as their "bowed and especially knock-kneed legs" (Taylor, 2000, pp.28, 45). The resulting works produced by Bellmer are endlessly reported to explore Freudian theories of sexual difference, the primal scene, castration anxiety, and Oedipal rebellion. There is no doubting the validity and intrigue of such psychosexual analysis, especially in reference to a man such as Bellmer. However, the artist's interest in these subjects coupled with his overtly sexual pursuit of children casts his work in a much murkier light, and raises questions as to the

nature of a 'culture' which would seek to promote his output purely as an honourable rebellion against the Fascist regime.

For, Taylor establishes, Bellmer was a man with a documented habit of "coaxing little girls from the orphanage near his parents' home... to model for paintings and drawings", as well as a penchant for erotic photography of minors: "Perhaps there was a more authentic danger,' he wrote, 'in the photography that was banned...it suffices to say, if I remember correctly, that it was in this way that my thoughts turned to the young maidens.'" (2000,

p. 56) Bellmer references extensive incestuous fantasies of his young cousin (see fig. 4), Ursula, a child

whom he felt reciprocated these feelings, and for whom he made a bodily replacement in his first doll: "It was in 1932,' he later remembered..., 'that J.B....[Jean Bellmer] bore an intense love for a young girl who felt that same love for him.'" (1990, cited in Taylor, 2000, p. 56)

Though disturbing to many today - and probably to many of those seen to be prudish at the time - the imagery, and even the crude writings of Bellmer, blended smoothly into the rebellious Surrealist scene, and continue to be validated by 'culture' in the present; seen clearly by the fact that they are published, exhibited, written into the canon. Surely - once



fig. 4. Bellmer's incestual ideation is displayed in this drawing that sees child-like girls performing sex acts on a man resembling himself, entitled *The Hardworking Family*.

again - this fact can only bring one to pause, and reconsider the 'culture' as a whole. And yet, many important institutions still proudly exhibit these works, with very little context as to the true and obvious nature of the images (fig. 5). Bellmer's works remain on display, and without the benefit of complete context, in both the Tate in London and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Neither of these displays include mention of Bellmer's true fixations on their gallery labels, effectively normalising their content. And, upon examining the content of a lot of our 'culture's' discourse around women and girls, one might suppose it is normal.

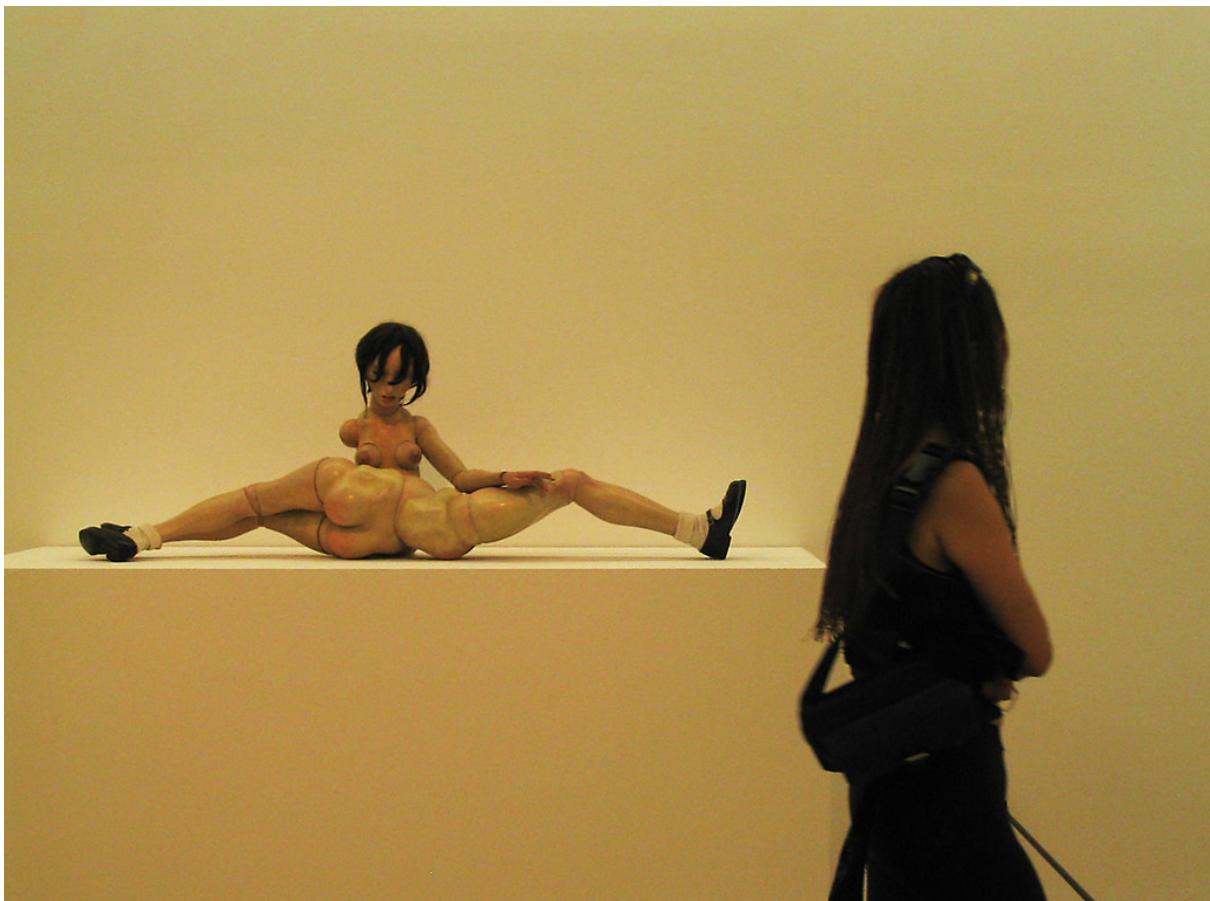


fig. 5. A young woman views Bellmer's blind and distorted girl-doll at the Pompidou in Paris.

## Cultural Constants: Misplaced Value and the Child Muse

Perhaps the ‘normal’ and enduring nature of such themes is what gives a painter like Balthus the authority to declare his painted displays of exposed and degraded female children unworthy of further interrogation. They are, simply, “just what they are” (Balthus, 1983, cited in Weber, 1999, p.26):

Ananda Coomaraswamy writes, ‘If a poet cannot imitate the eternal realities, but only the vagaries of human character, there can be no place for him in ideal society, however true or intriguing his representations may be.’ These “eternal realities”, Balthus suggested, are what he has tried to capture - far more than any specifics of his own life... (Weber, 1999, pp. 88-89)

It seems that Balthus’ “eternal reality” - as well as the canon of art history itself - included exponentially more little girls prostrated on various chaise longues than the average lived reality; one much less steeped in ‘culture’. Due to the intensive veiling of Balthus’ motivations, frank contextualisation becomes all the more difficult; taboo, even. Comparison with the loquacious Bellmer, however, reveals disturbing consistencies. A veritable morse code of high ‘cultural’ jargon accompanies their visual output that endeavours and has so far succeeded in providing honourable validation for their lifelong obsessions with the bodies of little girls. Additionally, reminiscent of Bellmer’s acquisition

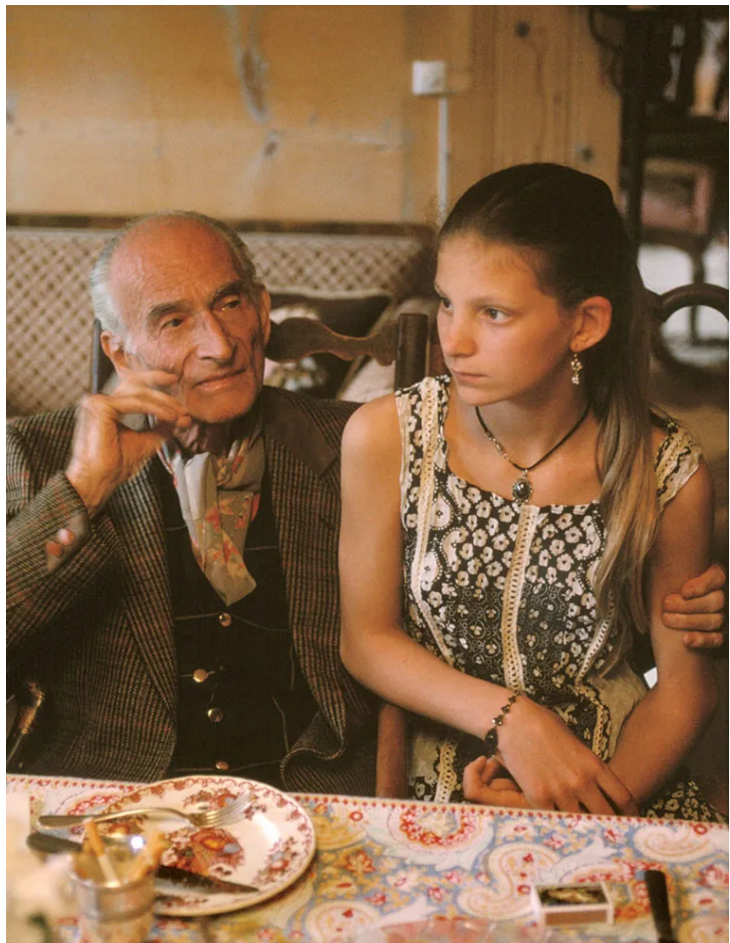


fig. 6. Balthus with his young Muse, Anna Wahli.

of young girls from the local orphanage, Balthus, in his final years, befriended his doctor's eight year old daughter Anna Wahli and made her his final Muse (fig. 6).

The Muse, an “embodiment of an individual artist's obsession”, is mythologised to inspire, whilst suspending an artist “between longing and dread” (Hand, 2004, pp. 194, 199). In a sense, she is understood to be projecting a vision onto her captive artist - historically assumed to be male. The Muse takes on a sort of faux-autonomy within this discourse - she is a seductress, known to “freeze the artist, Medusa-like so that s/he returns, again and again, willingly or not” (Hand, 2004, p. 202). At the sight of Anna Wahli, this narrative implies, Balthus became blamelessly possessed by an artistic flurry so powerful that it provided an artful legitimacy to his thousands-strong archive of nude images of the child. In reality, the cultural relegation of woman - or child, in this case - to Muse positions her not as creator, manipulator, or active force in the grand narrative of ‘culture’ at all, but sees her diminished to object, image and victim: “The Muse is female. Men of culture...converted life into art, thus could not live it. But women, and those men who were excluded from culture, remained in direct contact with their experience - fit subject matter.” (Firestone, 1970, p. 13).

The historical limitations placed on women in ‘culture’, of course, have not prevented them from producing art or artefacts themselves, especially now. It has only guaranteed that, until recently, those contributions most appreciated, highly regarded, and embraced by ‘culture’ have been largely that of men, having been bestowed value by a systematically male canon. ‘Cultured’ heteronormative white men have long had the floor, free to define others within their ‘culture’ at will, through an understanding that the male experience equals the human experience. In the words of De Beauvoir, “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse



with absolute truth.” (1949, cited in Firestone, 1970, p. 13) Balthus and his various child-muses fit snugly into this window of acceptability.

In his old age, Balthus was rendered unable to draw adequate studies for his paintings, so he instead turned to more modern methods of documentation. The images he produced displayed Anna throughout her early adolescence, sprawled around the artist’s home, often appearing asleep or unconscious - a state Balthus was fond of depicting. As Anna ages, she becomes progressively more nude; from being half-covered with a blanket,



fig. 7. Balthus polaroid of a semi-nude, seemingly unconscious Anna, with head bandage.

to fully nude, bent over a bathtub in her underwear (fig. 9), or posed in a style reminiscent of earlier paintings such as *The Room* (fig. 7). Here, a female figure is unveiled, appearing ravaged, as if she had just been clobbered in the head, or suffered some sort of attack (fig. 8). Of course, the ever-confounded Balthus denied the blatancy of the imagery he himself produced, even as his limp subject stared, glassy-eyed, into the ether under the cruel gaze of a strangely Balthusian child-gnome: “This woman whom others have deemed either dead or unconscious, victimized or sexually satiated, was, according to the man who painted her ‘just a nude.’” (Weber, 1999, p. 29)



fig. 8. Balthus' *The Room*.

Many of the photographs of Anna are blurry and underexposed in a way that quite blatantly seems less to do with Balthus's aesthetic preferences, and more with the old man's unfamiliarity with the modern medium (fig. 9). The images are repetitive, with Anna herself even expressing a retrospective lack of full understanding of the artist's process, "...from my point of view, all the photographs looked alike. I wondered why I had to return, week after week." (Micchelli, 2013). Balthus's wife Setsuko spoke to the press about the work:



fig. 9. An example of an overexposed polaroid of Anna. Balthus was fond of depicting his girls bent over, occupied.

“I had the feeling that he sought less to finish a painting than to explore the possibilities of a variety of poses. He wanted to see, to try this or that, as if in quest of an ideal image that he had dreamed of all his life...” (Peverelli, 2018). A statement from the late Balthus in a press release for the Gagosian showcase bears another unsettling resemblance to the open paedophilic musings of Bellmer, who, upon completing his first doll, found his ideal vision amidst “wet glue and plaster”:

From time to time, amidst all the trials and errors, it happens: I recognize what I was looking for. All of a sudden the vision that pre-existed incarnates itself, more or less intuitively and more or less precisely. The dream and the reality are superimposed and made one. (*Balthus: The Last Studies*, 2013)

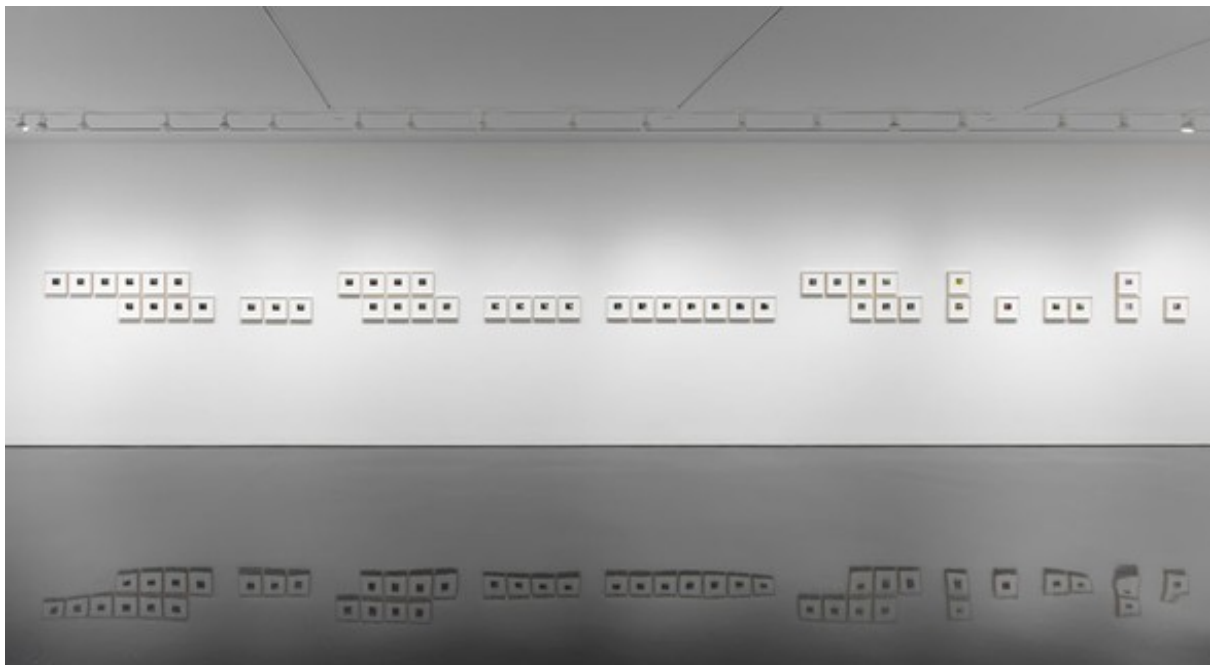


fig. 10. *Balthus: The Last Studies* at the Gagosian, New York.

It should be clear to any rational observer, that the production of a near two-thousand strong catalogue of images of a nude or semi-nude child over an eight year time span, with no clearly stated painterly intention other than the corporealisation of a long-held fantasy, could be labelled as none other than an obtuse expression of paedophilia. And yet, these images - which were released after the death of the artist - were proudly exhibited in the Gagosian gallery, on Madison Avenue in New York in 2013, and sold for tens of thousands of dollars



(Micchelli, 2013, npa) (fig. 10): “Right on the line of inappropriateness, they could be called ‘ultra soft’ core...But that wasn’t stopping a line of wealthy older men forming behind me to see the book.” (Sigler, 2015, npa) In many spheres, the sale of intimate images of children alone in rooms, taken by unrelated adult men is considered a crime. Here, the images are wrapped up in a delicately worded press release for an extremely profitable showcase that walks us merrily through the scene as “Anna presents herself to Balthus’s lens for the first time, a guileless child already possessed of La Gioconda’s mysterious smile.” (*Balthus: The Last Studies*, 2013, npa) (fig. 11)

In the context of the art world, for all intents and purposes, these images become something else entirely: a respectable contribution to the ‘culture’. The images are not of a nude child, but of the final Muse of the great Balthus. The only qualifying factor was the adult Anna’s retrospective consent, which she gave. The notion that we are viewing a child, factually incapable of consenting to the realities of such a setup becomes irrelevant; she has entered a mythical ‘cultural’ realm, fulfilling a classical role. Much like how Bellmer’s motivations morphed to suit the narratives of those promoting it - a seemingly liberated Surrealist scene - the work of Balthus is framed to suit the narratives of those who would seek to sell it.



fig. 11. An eight year-old Anna smiles into the camera.

“La Gioconda’s mysterious smile” advertised on a child in the Gagosian reads as a mutated, and notably more artful narration of the same “sexual charms” Bellmer’s Ursula was pruriently described - by Peter Webb, the man’s biographer - to be “fully aware of” as she “took great delight in flirting” with her elder uncle (1985, p. 26). Both tales appear twisted, their resulting narratives lacking basis other than the perceptions of the men present; they contribute to an age-old story that conveniently supports an excuse for their lascivious desires, placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of flirtatious girls. Of course, this ‘culture’ of displacing autonomy - often referred to as ‘victim-blaming’ in modern discourse - is disguised beautifully by vague talk of ideal images, Muses and classical compositions, or sexual freedom and revolution. Valerie Solanas’ *Scum Manifesto* - while problematic in many respects - is not without value, and springs to mind when confronted with this infuriatingly cultivated mysticism, as well as the art world’s continued guarded veneration of these and other artists’ questionable works. Despite the fact that ‘culture’ is no longer entirely or even mostly populated by a heteronormative male gaze, it proves viciously pervasive:

The male ‘artistic’ aim being, not to communicate..., but to disguise his animalism, he resorts to symbolism and obscurity (‘deep’ stuff). The vast majority of people, particularly the ‘educated’ ones, lacking faith in their own judgement, humble, respectful of authority (‘Daddy knows best’ is translated into adult language as ‘Critic knows best’, ‘Writer knows best’, ‘PhD knows best’), are easily conned into believing that obscurity, evasiveness, incomprehensibility, indirectness, ambiguity and boredom are marks of depth and brilliance. (Solanas, 1968, p. 12)

Of course, our art ‘culture’ is known to extend great leniencies to the behaviours of its most valued contributors. And perhaps art should be given space to exist independently of its creator. However, when the output is so intrinsically linked with and visually representative of the active subjugation, objectification and victimisation of its subjects - here, women and girls - from the sole perspective and to the benefit of their perpetrators - in this case, exclusively adult men - should the value of that contribution be reconsidered?

An example of this acutely misplaced value is no more harmfully and embarrassingly observed than in the case of Graham Ovenden. In his 1984 book, Webb extols the “honesty with which Bellmer embarked upon his task, and the painful self-revelation which it involved” (1985, p. 12). He goes on to proffer the successful artist, convicted and jailed in 2013 for multiple sexual offences against children perpetrated throughout his career, as a contributor of parallel virtuosity to Bellmer. Ovenden, too, was an artist who received understanding and acclaim for his depictions of young girls. He boasted his pursuit of “Edenic simplicity – a state of grace, as it were, where there is neither sin nor corruption. The apple has yet to be eaten. The subject, of course, symbolizes this state in the photograph.” (*Artist on Trial*, 2013, npa) The subject, of course, being a nude child, and Ovenden’s reason for seeking out this content being, of course, his desire to “capture” the girl while she still possesses that indelible quality of purity so delicately alluded to by the man, and symbolised across ‘culture’ by various fruits. The consecration of the girl body in this veiled pedophilic discourse is not uncommon and can be seen parroted across the works of Bellmer and Balthus. A disturbing cohesion is seen in an attempt by Balthus’ son - and biographer - Stanislas to contextualise the artist’s work as a high cultural contribution:

These girls are in fact emblematic archetypes belonging to another, higher realm. Their very youth is the symbol of an ageless body of glory, as adolescence... aptly symbolizes that heavenward state of growth which Plato refers to in the *Timaeus*. (1983, cited in Paulson, 1990, p.161)

These men’s sermonising seeks to validate and uphold culture’s vile coveting of girls’ bodies, their autonomy and their virginity; a practice which denigrates and shames wholly embodied, sexual women and cultivates a dangerous fetishisation of innocent children. The continued extolment of men whose work is only understood through the diminution and ongoing abuse of women and girls across ‘culture’ is a shameful and backward effort. It is an effort that only serves to bolster an art world in which galleries like the Tate, the Gagosian

and MoMA proudly hang nude images of little girls created by men like Ovenden under the guise of ‘culture’ (fig. 12).

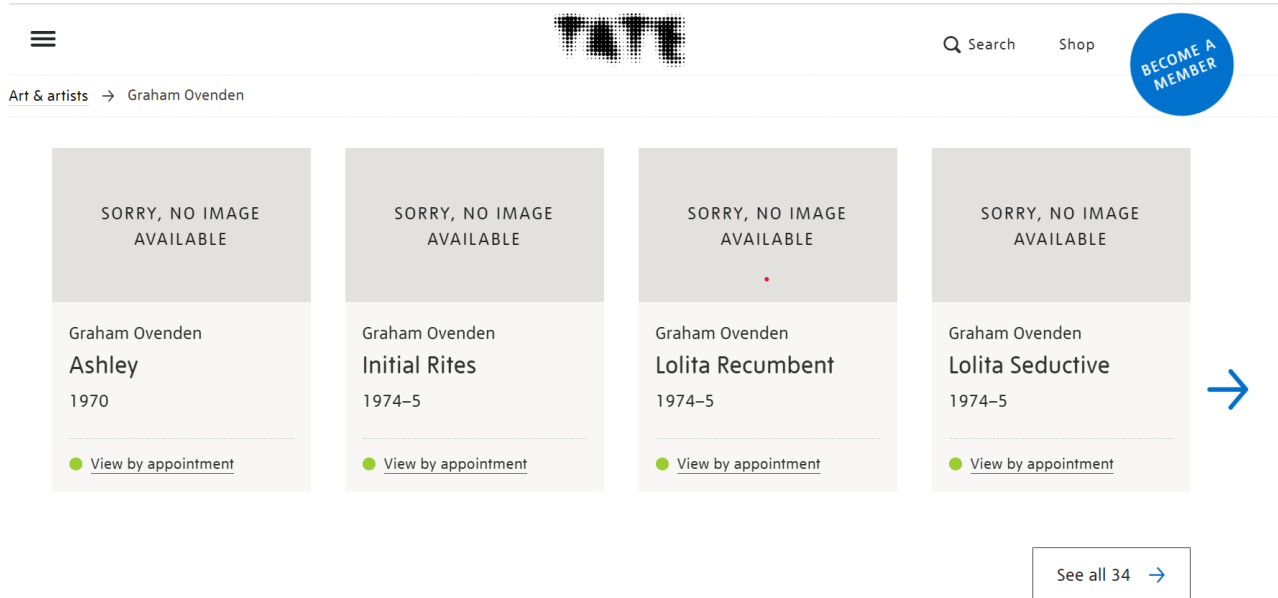


fig. 12. Images of Ovenden’s work have been removed from Tate’s website, but his artist profile remains intact, while the work is available to be viewed by appointment.

## **Imagined Tempresses: Sexual violence and the Obstructed Female Gaze**

The pervasively ‘masculine’ gaze which has so wholly guided the historical focus of art ‘culture’ is seen vividly across the works of both Bellmer and Balthus. The artists speak endlessly of ideal images and visions, appearing to wield a certain kind of voyeuristic gaze that we see time and again across culture, romanticised, fetishised and mass produced. That is, a gaze that fancies itself seduced by the allures of a performatively coy feminine image. The fantasy becomes the unattainable nature of a reluctant woman, an innocent or vulnerable or unconscious woman, or, in this case a child - the most innocent, most vulnerable and most incapable of consenting. Bellmer “dreams of a ‘miraculous garden whose distant odor had so promptly devalued [his] magic act,’ and supposes ‘that this fabulous distance, just as with the dolls, could be a necessary component of any super-sweet thing, and deteriorates when it is no longer unattainable.’” (Taylor, 2000, p. 56) This type of fetishist, in tandem, prefers the object of his desires to be unattainable, respectably reluctant, and yet secretly desirous of his affections in return, as seen in Bellmer’s perception of his child-cousin’s reciprocated longing.

What better object for such an individual to impose his particular penchant for non-consent upon than a helpless doll? Bellmer lives out his violent fantasies through the manipulation of his life-size pubescent prop, seen in his published photography. One image in particular seemed in its critical reception to capture the Surrealist male imagination. The child-like figure is seen propped against a wall, gazing timidly over its shoulder. The doll has not been afforded the luxury of arms. It has, however, been granted gratuitously shaped buttocks, which are purposefully exposed in this frame, below a ruffled-up nightie (fig. 13). The averted gaze of the child-effigy is intrinsic to the eroticism for Bellmer:

Didn’t it amount to the final triumph over those young girls—with their wide eyes and averted looks—when a conscious gaze plundered its charms, when aggressive fingers searching for something malleable allowed the distillates of mind and senses slowly to take form, limb by limb? (Bellmer, 1990, cited in Wetzel, 2021, npa)

Peter Webb's writings about the first doll - and regarding Bellmer's fixations in general - make evident the fact that the appeal of this strange effigy was not understood only or fetishised uniquely by the artist, but spoke to an idealised vision of seduction that permeates our 'culture', and captured desire widely:

...(male) commentators on this work have often readily embraced the fiction of the doll as temptress... simultaneously the object of sexual and sadistic thoughts and the guilty instigator of the imagined activity. Webb...blames the doll's very inertness for his own libidinous daydreams: 'Her passivity invites our attentions, whether kind or cruel, to rumple her beribboned hair, to make up her lips, to mark her with love-bites, to paint bruises on her knees, and to splash with mud her long, pink, schoolgirl's legs.' (Taylor, 2000, p. 31)

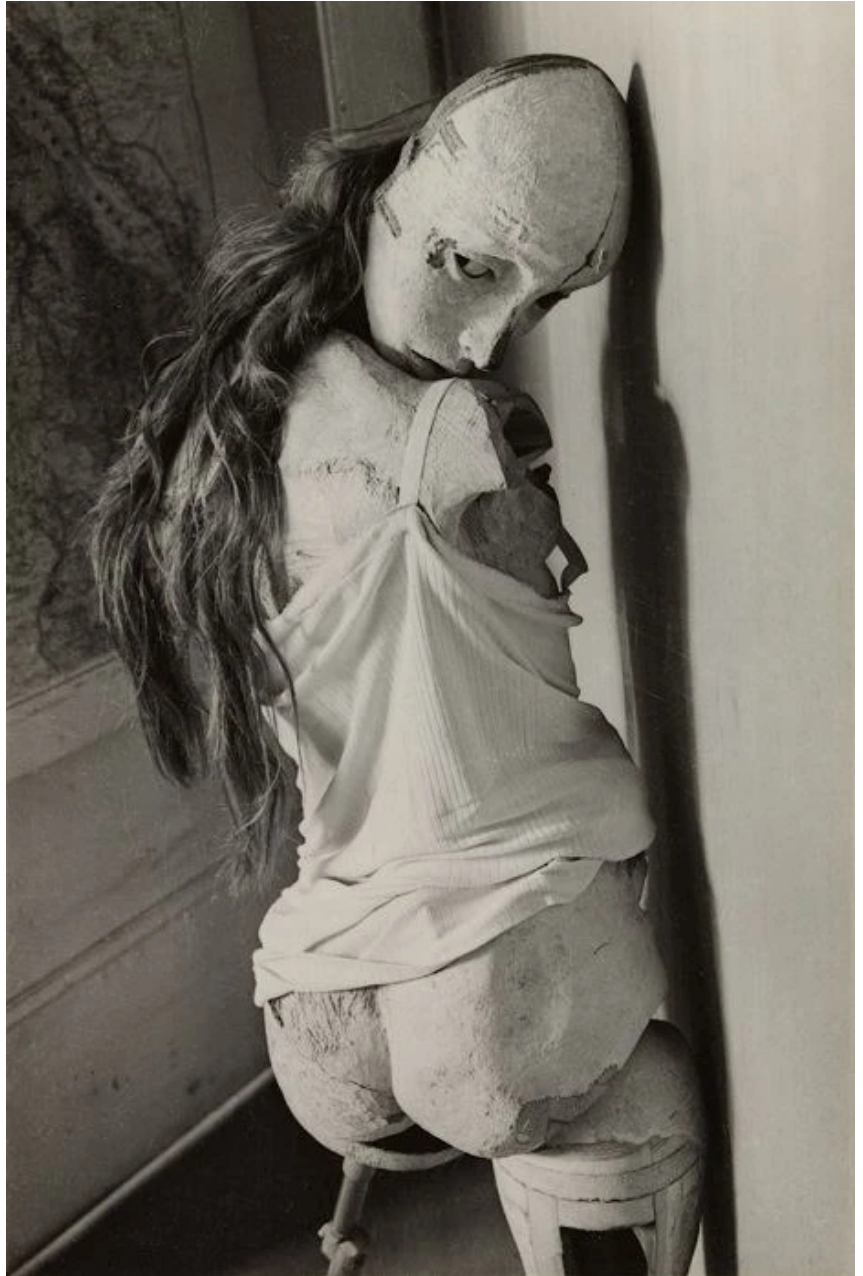


fig. 13. A photo of Bellmer's first doll that proves especially disturbing.

Bellmer's girl-effigies, as objects, lack all autonomy and are innocent of sexuality. Being inanimate, they are intrinsically pure and vulnerable. Recognising this, Bellmer moulds them as vessels for paedophilic impulses; they act as a mirror, only serving to reflect the consuming desires of those who enjoy them. As we've seen, Webb found the inanimate



object's avoidant eyes to be autonomously tempting, describing "...the Doll with her hair down her back wearing a schoolgirl's vest which is slipping off her body as she looks teasingly over her shoulder." (1985, p.32). Of course, a lifeless object's averted 'gaze' - a gaze only in the viewer's imagination, as the doll's eyes, being not real eyes, see nothing - is no more capable of intentionally tempting the man than, say, the children Bellmer secretly watched were, despite his delusion that the sight of them "...playing doctors up there in the loft... could be easily taken for seduction, even stimulate desire.'" (1934, cited in Webb, 1985, p. 34) This desire is expressed in his paedophilic drawings (fig. 14); drawings which inform the construction of malformed child-dolls, exhibited widely as an expression of liberation.

This manipulated or fantasised female gaze is a key element to the romantic liberation of the Surrealists. Obsessed as they were with Oedipal

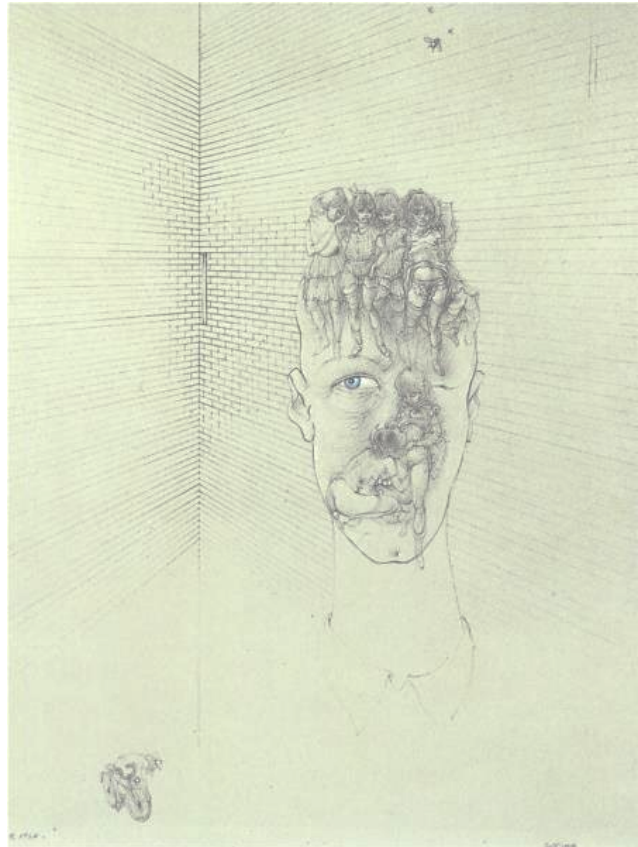


fig. 14. Bellmer's *The Blue Eye* depicts his voyeuristic fantasies of little girls, performing sex acts.



fig. 15. Bellmer's schoolgirl *Half-Doll* is blind and disfigured, with genital-like head.

rebellions, the fear they were determined to relieve - of castration, a loss of power and control - was symbolically linked to “the fear of being blinded” (Webb, 1985, p. 43). Of course, the disfigurement of a woman or girl in fact grants the malefactor additional



fig. 16. This doll's face and eyes are obscured while its arms are absent. Yet, its bulbous torso protrudes vulnerably. It wears a girlish bow in its bedraggled hair.

anxiety-soothing power and control over his

environment, seen in Bellmer's blind dolls (fig 15, 16): “The gaze itself is male; the woman is denied the power of a returning gaze of her own, just as she is denied a completeness of body.” (Lassalle, 1987, npa) These objects certainly represent liberation for a select few, while only serving to reduce women and girls to symbolic idols; once again, representation of man is mistaken for sufficient representation of humanity. The lack of an autonomous and potentially repudiating gaze perceived in the wide shiny eyes of an uninhabited vessel only allows the lustful gaze of the viewer to be reflected, creating a comforting illusion of reciprocity:

This fear or sense of discomfort likely arises from the uncanny perception that a feminine, therefore sensual and Dionysian, force is so closely connected to powerful, yet unfeeling objects. Through that understanding of the feminine and the mechanical... Bellmer, sensing danger in the power of the mechanical-female, reacts by removing the eyes, the tools that allow the doll to permute the viewer as the viewer permutes the female body. (Wetzel, 2021, npa)



While Balthus wasn't known to remove the eyes of his painted girls in a literal sense, when one fixes their gaze on a Balthus creation, that gaze is very rarely met. Instead, the eyes of the viewer observe the serene profiles of oblivious little girls, or sleeping women. The girls, if they are awake, are often occupied by some pursuit resulting in a suggestive arrangement that bares flesh or provides a convenient vantage point up the skirt of the child (fig 17, 18). The onlooker here is squarely in control of the narrative; he may look as long as he likes, unaccounted for by his vulnerable subjects. One can only imagine the discomfort of Balthus' young models as they posed with limp necks, bent on their knees or with legs spread open toward the painter, exposing their underwear for hours on end. The essence of a Balthus work lies in his careful control of the scene, a curated space that nurtures the unencumbered gaze; a feast of scopophilic pleasures for those so inclined.

Scopophilia, associated by Freud with "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze", constitutes one of the "component instincts of sexuality"

(Mulvey, 1973, p.16). Balthus exercises control over his vicious fantasies through his paintings. His subjects are perpetually captive, preserved in their nubile state under his



fig. 17. Balthus' *The Living Room*. Two young girls are sprawled in a room; one is unconscious, the other bent over, reading.

probing gaze, while they are rendered powerless by the obstruction of their own: “Balthus has used his art to anesthetize, distort, and even victimize these characters not only to immortalize their beauty but also to control them utterly.” (Weber, 1999, p. 74)

Balthus’ girls are, in every way that it counts, blinded. Despite posturing himself as both socially and artistically above surrealism and being steadfastly against the concept of psychoanalysis, feeling it was in fact “the curse of modern thought” (Weber, 1999, p. 87), the lens through which Balthus chooses to view his female subjects - from his impeding of their autonomy to his penchant for reducing his subjects to unconscious, dreamlike states - echoes typical misogynistic Surrealist practice:

In effect, the woman remains trapped by the look... Created and constructed by that look, and fragmented into the components used to illustrate the...experience, the woman in surrealism is deprived of any psychology or wholeness of her own. She is literally and metaphorically a blind figure, repeatedly represented within an image system that distorts or removes her look, leaving her without perception or subjecthood. (Lassalle, 1987, p.4)



fig. 18. The girl model appears more strained than dream-like; her face is tense, brow furrowed as we observe her from a vantage point that looks up her skirt. Balthus’ *Thérèse Dreaming* is on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), New York .



Despite a highly cultivated stillness, Balthus' work portrays a parallel expression of romanticised sexual violence to the work of Bellmer. The artist's violent ideation is willfully censored by a level of restraint that is palpable to the viewer, fostering a disturbing atmosphere of anticipation that Kay Larson describes as "the most forceful expression in twentieth century art of states of desire". (1984, cited in Benston, 1988, p.343) The critic finds this voracious longing to be a "calculated affront" to women; a bona fide threat of attack. Meanwhile, male critics time and again show themselves to be aware of, and yet unconcerned with the allusions of violence toward women and girls. Critics such as Robert Paulson gush and seem to, more than anything, take pleasure in the tension:

...the elaborate formal pattern of the composition...The withholding or restraining of desire, the sense of representing the moment before or at violence ('jusque dans la mort') - this Balthus embodies in these tensions of classical form, autonomous paint, and provocative image. (1984, cited in Benston, 1988, p.345)

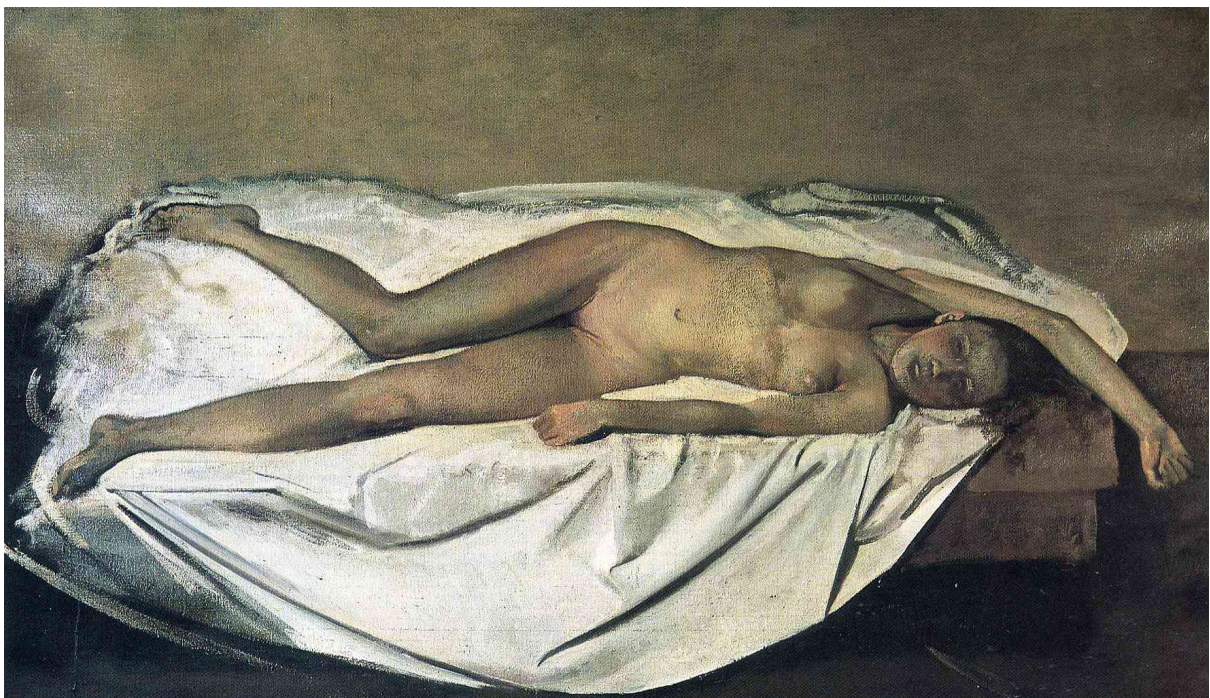


fig. 19. Balthus' *The Victim*.

Of course, it's easy to bask in the tension when one can almost guarantee they will never suffer the results of that tension once it breaks. It might be enjoyable to speak knowledgeably of the "autonomous paint" used to hold captive its female subject, knowing

one's own autonomy will never come into question. Larson, in her review, questions the male establishment's endorsement of the work, again observing that it "presents a particularly subtle case of the tendency to universalize the male experience" and wonders how men would feel if the tables were turned (1984, cited in Benston, 1988, p.343). In a world where "the 'default' position of images is feminine, 'constructing spectatorship', in Norman Bryson's words, 'around an opposition between woman as image and man as the bearer of the look.'" (Mitchell, 1996, p. 75), women have been systematically desensitised to the weight of that 'look' through lived experience. One can only imagine that, should the historical 'bearer' witness himself prostrated, subjugated and victimised across a culture constructed by a demonstrative, hyper-sexual female gaze, he might be markedly less enthusiastic in his reception of that culture's contributors.



fig. 20. Balthus' *The White Skirt*.

One can hardly look upon a work such as *The Victim* (fig. 19), and see a simple nude. The woman is prostrated, limp across a white sheet, one arm hanging strangely as if it had



been viciously dislocated, a knife lies conspicuously below the bed; the composition is reminiscent of a crime scene, a rape or murder. *The White Skirt* (fig. 20) is one of a multitude of pieces featuring seemingly limp, undressed young women and appears more contextually similar to the post-mortem photography of serial killer Harvey Glatman than any artful nude. With vacant eyes and girlish forms, they, too, appear to have been unconsciously and laboriously posed. Meanwhile, Balthus' *Andre Derain* (fig. 21) and *Guitar Lesson* (fig. 22) are none other than crude depictions of child molestation. Solanas spoke earlier of the disguised animalism of the male artist. In



fig. 21. Balthus' *Andre Derain*.

the case of Bellmer, Surrealist ideation, if anything, encouraged the wholesale butchering of the female body; little disguise was needed. And yet, under a modern lens, his works are unseemly, regressive. Meanwhile, any attempts Balthus made at disguise are at best superficial; blatant defilement veiled in talk of classicism and mystique. The only true mystery of Balthus' work, is how it has managed to skulk under the shelter of 'culture' for so long, the proud focus of exhibitions aplenty:

Balthus's imagery - even though he denies it - is often sexually violent, yet he handles the subject matter as if it were a formal occasion to which one should have received an engraved invitation protected by a tiny square of tissue paper. The underlying systemization asks us not to recoil. A breast hangs out, a lance pierces, a child flashes her inner thigh, but the tone in which the story is told suggests that the teller is unfazed and we should be, too. (Weber, 1999, p. 128)



fig. 22. *Guitar Lesson*, Balthus.

## Conclusion

As this analysis has exhibited, the works of these men sexualise female children, romanticise sexual violence and assault and only serve to contribute to an age-old, outdated fantasy of woman as little more than a desirous vessel. The argument most often rolled out as a last-ditch effort to defend the works of men like Bellmer and Balthus - despite everything - is that they are a part of 'cultural' history and therefore deserve respect, hold value. Culture's function is to represent the highest achievements, ideas and customs of the collective; unfortunately, our 'culture' consistently favours the perspective of - often questionable - heteronormative white men. It has been demonstrated that 'culture' as we know it refuses to acknowledge and respect the whole and embodied humanity of women and girls by continuing to not just display, but venerate contributions that suppress and dehumanise them - not to mention encourage discourse that actively endangers their safety - in its most highly regarded 'cultural' institutions. Those permitted to participate in 'culture' from its conception have shamefully misrepresented, overlooked and undervalued all but a select few; in effect, negating the very essence of 'culture'. Thus, the persistent adulation of the works of Bellmer, Balthus, and those like them deprive our so-called 'culture' of all value. And so these works, valued only as historical emblems of this failed 'culture', retain no value at all.

The only solution, it seems, is to cease all adulation and instead insist on full acknowledgement of relevant histories for honest contextualisation within our institutions. Perhaps, in context, works like this shouldn't be a part of the main collections of our most important galleries at all. As recently as 2019, a study found that of the collections of eighteen major US art institutions "85% of artists are white and 87% are men" (Topaz et al. 2019, npa). There is in fact an over-representation of this history on our gallery walls, leaving no room for other perspectives:

As much as 10% of galleries have no women on their books at all, while only 8% represent more women than men. Almost half (48%) represent 25% or fewer women.

Meanwhile, in a study of 820,000 exhibitions across the public and commercial sectors in 2018, only one third are by female artists. (Shaw, 2019, npa)

Not only are women still being ignored and excluded from cultural institutions, but of the works selected, Balthus and Bellmer make the cut time and again with imagery and thematics that actively denigrate women and advertise paedophilia. The Tate, The Gagosian, MoMA and The Met all house works from one or both of these artists. They are on display and featured in countless exhibitions. With limited space on our gallery walls, this is not a matter of censorship, but of deciding what we value most, of cultivating a culture that is representative of the collective; the best we have to offer.



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