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Feminism/Painting

WITH REFERENCE TO THE WORK OF
Alexis Hunter

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ALEXIS HUNTER

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PRECIS

Do we truly need a 'true' sex? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a 'true sex' in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures.

Michel Foucault

INTRODUCTION

The main impulse in choosing the theme for this thesis is to try to come to terms with my desire to be a painter and yet not compromise my feminist politics. This is a dilemma which I have been grappling with over the past three years and which I find difficult to define verbally without sounding like a rabid propagandist.

On the one hand there is the knowledge of the loaded history of painting with its largely condescending treatment of women, and on the other, a love of the actual material of paint and a resentment that because of past associations, there might be barriers to my using it as a medium of expression. It could be argued that the broadening of the scope regarding subject matter to include women's experience should be a liberating force for the feminist artist, but in my own practice to date I have found it very difficult to express in terms of paint. The narrative nature of this experience seems to be more effective through such a media as photography, film or performance, both in consideration of aesthetics and content.

The problem which surfaced again and again during the course of my research is that of the need for a theory from which to proceed. The historical role of women as muse rather than art maker, the 'object' of the 'gaze' rather than active 'subject' and how to come to terms with these issues without taking an essentialist stance.

I have chosen Alexis Hunter as the artist whose work has embraced the themes and issues in which I am particularly interested. Her arrival in England from New Zealand in 1972 was at a time when the effects of the social and political upheavals of the late 1960's were becoming

evident. The challenge to modernism, by radical art practice and feminism was gathering momentum and in the wider social sphere, the womens movement was becoming increasingly important.

When she joined the Artists Union in London and attended their women's workshops Hunter found, as did many other artists such as Mary Kelly and Susan Hiller who were exposed to feminist issues, that traditional media could not hold all that she wanted to say. Modernist art practice did not allow issues of politics or psychoanalysis to intrude into the pure form of work which dealt with the idea of the paint on the flat surface of the support. From being a photorealist painter, Hunter turned to photography. Her work at this time was largely involved in collaborative projects with other feminist artists. They were using various means including the imagery used in popular culture in an attempt to challenge existing notions of the uniqueness of the work of art. They saw the museums and galleries as being full of art that is geared towards the fantasies of men and were trying to redress the balance.

The feminist involvement in art began in the late 1960's in America. From the beginning the East and West Coast artists had emphasised different priorities. New York artists sought economic parity and equality in exhibitions and art writing space, while the Californian artists were more concerned with exploring the idea of a 'female consciousness'. Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) was the first women's art organisation. It began in New York in 1969 as an offshoot of the 'Art Workers Coalition' which was a politically radical grouping but indifferent to womens issues. Lucy Lippard organised an ad hoc committee of women artists to protest at the small number of women

artists in gallery and museum exhibitions. This consciousness raising operation resulted in the Whitney Museum increasing women's representation from under ten to over twenty percent. Womens co-operative galleries began to emerge together with other organisations to meet the needs of the interest created in women's art.

On the West Coast, Judy Chicago organised the first feminist art programme at Fresno State College in 1970. This led to a collaboration with Miriam Schapiro for a similar project for 'The Californian Institute of the Arts' which produced the 'Womenhouse' exhibition in which a group of women artists took over a house and in each room created work which expressed their particular view of women's lives as shaped by their new feminist consciousness.

Feminist art activity began in Europe in the early seventies and though they were initially informed by the writings of Americans such as Lucy Lippard and Linda Nochlin, the British feminists went on to develop their own theories based chiefly on a Marxist ideology. Lucy Lippard refers to the English tradition of left-wing politics which artists could join and work with and which provided a base for an advanced level of theoretical discussion. Marxism, it could be argued, privileges the predominately male activity of production as the primary human activity when Marx said that 'men begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce the means of their subsistence'. (Owens, 1984, p. 57.) As Craig Owen notes, since women are traditionally consigned to the areas of non-productive or reproductive labour 'they are thereby situated outside the society of male producers in a state of nature'. (Owens, 1984, p. 58.) When psychoanalysis surfaced as an avenue of enquiry, British Marxism was sceptical of its possibilities; taking the concept of political

practice and social change as its prerogative, Marxism posits psychoanalysis as being inherently conservative, perpetuating the subordination of women under capitalism. The important point must be that 'both Marxism and psychoanalysis were identified as forms of radical enquiry which were unassumable to bourgeois norms'. (Rose, 1986, p. 87.)

Women artists have traditionally been patronised rather than having been given patronage. Alice Neel on being complimented on painting like a man declared 'I always paint like a woman but I don't paint like a woman is supposed to paint' (Observer, 20 August, 1978.) Alexis Hunter recalled how she used to feel that being called a woman artist, was somehow derogatory (feminine meant silly or dotty). In the light of these observations, preconceptions about what female art is supposed to look like must be challenged.

Defenders of Modernism argue that Post-Modernism leans too far towards popular culture, while Post-Modernists see the issue as a continuation of the debate between Benjamin and Adorno. There is a strict demarcation line between Modernism on the one hand and mass culture on the other, according to Theodor Adorno. He posits the avant-garde as the last bastion of intellectual and artistic challenge to a technological society which seeks to maintain psychological control of the population by creating an entertainment 'culture'. This mass media offers an escape from the reality of everyday life, while at the same time reinforcing those same values.

Walter Benjamin, however, would see technology and the means of mass reproduction of art as a way of making it accessible to the entire

society. He rejects Adorno's stance on the mass media as being a placebo which merely distracts in favour of an art stripped of its elitist cloak.

In the space between these two polarities, one is left to constantly reassess their own ideological stance. This lack of fixity contributes to the feelings of insecurity and fragmentary nature of our present day culture.

Conflict, parody and debunking humour are used by Alexis Hunter in works such as 'The Marxist Wife (Still does the Housework)' (1978) and 'Domestic Warfare' (1979) (See Fig. 1). Both title and images communicate an ironic political message. Taking her cue from the advertising media where women are constantly portrayed as society's cleaners, the Marxist wife is engaged in polishing a portrait of Karl Marx which has a caption of revolutionary, man, thinker, but, despite all her efforts to clean it, the word 'man' gets dirtier the more she rubs. The 'Domestic Warfare' piece consisted of 160 slides of a man and women heaving consumer goods at one another. Each item represented some kind of male and female role play, and, at one point, the man hides behind a portrait of Marx.

Hunter is trying to build a bridge between 'light and low' culture, she had made her images intentionally slick and commercial looking in an attempt to reach out to the wider public. If she could engage the attention of viewers who would not normally look at contemporary art she could reveal some truths about the lies photography tells. Lucy Lippard believes that she did not always succeed in making her point in these parodies because the 'dominant view is indeed dominant'. (Lippard, 1981, p. 2.) Viewers are so conditioned to seductive colour



Marxist's Wife (still does the housework) 1978

Fig. 1

photography in advertising that art may be unable to parody it. I would disagree with this opinion as I believe that even 'commercial-looking' work similar to that which is so dominant in our daily lives, takes on a surreal quality when viewed in a gallery context.

Alexis Hunter has worked from a feminist perspective using both mainstream art practice and, at the same time, challenging its preconceptions. In an interview with Caroline Osborne she discussed her reasons for changing from the medium of paint to the more conceptual media of film and photography, because at that time she felt that painting had been overloaded with the same meaning for hundreds of years. In conversation with Sarah Kent in May 1984 she stated 'We have new ideas, new subject matter, new art forms, a new audience and we are working from a position of integrity'. (Kent, 1984, p. 61.)

CHAPTER 1

'Towards a theory from which to proceed'

If we were to believe that women have an inherent creativity which is simply not recognised by mainstream culture, we would be taking an essentialist stance. The danger with this approach would be that it is an ineffectual political practice as it places the emphasis on the personal, at the expense of the social, and thus does not challenge the underlying structures.

By seeking to examine the deep seated causes of womens oppression rather than just its effects, a radical feminist art practice needs to be informed about how women are constituted through social practice in culture. This theoretically informed art could be effective in causing real change, through looking at the way women are consumed in this society. Then, it should be possible to create a counter strategy based on real knowledge.

Maira Roth, on the important distinction between feminist art and feminist artists, defines the feminine artist as 'a woman who believes and practices feminism outside of her studio and thus comes to the work with a developed feminist sensibility'. (Roth, 1987, p. 344.) There is an important difference between a 'feminist sensibility' and the historical 'feminine sensibility' which I will return to, but first, I want to look at some of the influences which inform the 'feminist sensibility'.

A central question to the debate about feminism must concern the possibility of a 'female sensibility'. When women use as subject matter the content of their own life experience in a form dictated by this new content, as in the 'Womenhouse' project, then it would seem that there must be such a 'sensibility'. On the historical cultural record of our experience, Vivian Gornick pointed out 'It is the male sensibility that has apprehended and described our life. It is the maleness of experience that has been a metaphor for human existence'. (Gornick, 1987, p. 334.)

Is the notion of a female sensibility biologically given, or is it a social construct? Terms such as 'vaginal iconography' or 'central core imagery' applied to art would suggest biological determination and perhaps this is inevitable, if women are using their experience of life as subject matter. But since experience is shaped by the culture in which one lives, then it must also be a political construction. Lisa Tickner views this art as 'an attempt to challenge the notion of female inferiority and penis envy'. (Tickner, 1978, p. 241 - 242.) Elaine Showalter comments on the importance of the study of biological imagery and noted 'there can be no expression of the body which is unmediated by linguistic, social and literary structures'. (Showalter, 1985, p. 125.)

Today, the feminine sensibility is seen as a totally constructed one and studies are more likely to be directed towards 'gender difference' and questions of representation as opposed to 'female sensibility', although French writers, such as Kristeva, would still argue that it is not possible to disregard the biological factor and that gender difference is sexual difference

Which is at once biological, physiological, and relative to production - is translated by and translates a difference in the relationship of subjects to the symbolic contract which is the social contract: a difference, then, in the relationship to power, language, and meaning. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 39.)

Artists like Alexis Hunter and Mary Kelly recognise that representation is at the very root of the difference between male and female in our society. This representation is a way of reflecting the cultures vision of itself and not a mimesis of some absolute reality and so is inevitably politically motivated. Representation, therefore, gives a legitimacy to cultures dominant ideology by re-presenting the preconceived ideas about gender which are at the very foundations of our system of beliefs.

French feminist writers such as Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva have been a major force in developing theories on femininity. Using Derridian deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, they investigate 'language' as the means through which men have claimed to have a 'complete' identity and relegate woman to be the 'other' of man in binary opposition.

These writers seek to challenge the primacy of the phallus 'phallocentrism', as the symbol of social and cultural authority.

Derrida argued that the 'discourse of western metaphysics has been based on a sovereign subject, an idealised version of man' (Jones, 1985, p. 87). The phallus as the symbol of socio-cultural authority, and the structuring of man as the central reference point of thought, forms the core of a hierarchal structure where women occupy the negative role. For example, men/women; subject/object;

culture/nature; and so on. It is the basis of the logic on which these claims are based that deconstruction seeks to dismantle.

It would have been impossible for Lacan to theorize psychoanalysis along scientific lines without the emergence of the new science of structural linguistics. This finding of Sassure, allowed Lacan to explain Freuds discovery, that the unconscious is structured 'like language'. Lacan acknowledges his debt to linguistics and writes of the temporary shadow cast on Freudian theory by the model of Helmholtz and Maxwells thermodynamic physics. Freud studied the interpretation of dreams reducing the variants to two elements, Lacan recognised these elements of 'displacement' and 'condensation' as two essential figures of speech called in linguistics, 'metonymy' and 'metaphor'; hence slips, failures, jokes and symptoms, like the elements of dreams themselves, become signifiers. (Althusser, 1969, p. 159).

Lacan sought to give psychoanalysis a theory and thus prevent it serving as a mere shaministic technique. Althusser defends the artifice and hermeticism of Lacan's style as a strategy for presentation of the theory of the unconscious 'It was to give Freuds discovery its measure in theoretical concepts by defining as rigorously as possible today the unconscious and its laws'. (Althusser, 1969, p. 156).

For Althusser, both Freud and Lacan represented 'Births of Sciences and Criticisms' (Althusser, 1969, p. 148) which threatens western society and so had been revised in order to neutralise their effect. Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud he sees as as a revitalising of the theory. He argues that psychoanalysis like Marxism has a right to specificity

of concepts in line with its own specific object - the unconscious and its effects. Lacan has, in Althusser's view, provided Marxists with new insights into the workings of ideology; he invokes Lacan's structural model of the linguistic consciousness when he states that 'Ideology is eternal exactly like the consciousness'. (Althusser, 1969, p. 164.)

The problem for women is that Freud wrote from a masculine perspective with the boy child more in mind than the girl. Lacan has not changed that viewpoint, and so the French Feminist writers have an ongoing challenge. By seeking to examine the deep seated causes of women's oppression, rather than just its effects, a radical feminist art practice needs to be informed about how women are constituted through social practices in culture. Such theoretically informed art could be effective in causing real change.

Helene Cixous was among the first practitioners of 'écriture féminine'. She has criticised feminism as a movement too much like men's search for power, rather than trying to transcend the phallogocentric order. She also rejects the Freudian/Lacanian theories of women as 'lack' and calls for the re-evaluation of the female body as plenitude and a positive force where women's sexual capacities, including motherhood, are celebrated. The problem for anyone working in this field is to take these issues on board and still avoid an essentialist stance where the situation is merely reversed from the male supremacy of a Patriarchal culture to a female matriarchal society, reinforcing the notions of binary opposition instead of allowing for a multiplicity of difference.

Luce Irigaray puts the emphasis on the 'difference' of feminine

characteristics and sees them in a positive context, when defined against masculine norms. She was originally a member of Lacan's Ecole Freudienne but has since become one of the most outspoken critics of his conclusions about women. She cites the lack of position from which to challenge male dominated notions of both sexes, not on the usual ties of motherhood and domesticity, but on a 'long history of cultural subordination of womens bodies and their sexuality to the needs and fantasies of men'. (Jones, 1985, p. 84).

Ann Rosalind Jones points to the woman's exclusion from the symbolic - that is 'their absence from powerful public discourses - including philosophy and psychoanalysis' (Jones, 1985) as being an underlying concern of the French theorising of the feminine. She would urge, as Cixous does, that writing is one of the ways in which women can make their presence felt. In her manifesto of 1975, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous urges women to write. 'Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement.' (Cixous, 1975, p. 259).

Initially the importance of giving voice to personal experience and to recording both women's oppression as well as aspirations, was a liberating force in women's art. Today, we see the need for a more analytical approach which would examine the wider social implications. As Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman Lewis point out in their essay on textual strategies, 'The experiential must be taken beyond the consciously felt and articulated needs of women if a real transformation of the structures of womens oppression is to occur'. (Barry and Flitterman Lewis, 1987, p. 106.) The aim is to develop an alternative pleasure to replace the old one of passive consumption and

at the same time avoid creating a definitive 'feminist' text, as any movement towards cultural closure would be at odds with deconstructive strategy.

Angela Partington would argue that there is nothing new about deconstruction. She would see the deconstructive approach firmly placed in the history of the successive avant garde movements of the 20th century whose constant imperative was to 'break with the conventions of "readability" in favour of strategies which are intended to demonstrate the "opacity" or productivity of the text'. (Partington, 1987, p. 231.)

Today, female artists have a developed sense of their femininity which is the result of the work of the feminist writers and artists who have been involved in research in this area. Our current understanding of a feminine sensibility is vastly different from what this sensibility meant in the historical sense. Where it was once synonymous with delicacy and stoicism in the face of paternalism now, at least, women have resources available to aid an understanding of the cultural background of their history.

Charlotte Bronte was a writer who had a particular insight into the feminine. Michelle Barret argues that to 'credit' Bronte with 'irony' in her treatment of women's inferior status is mistaken, as she prescribes resignation and stoicism as the feminine solution to ill treatment. Barret states

When Charlotte Bronte refers to "nature" we credit her with an ironic exposure of the irrationality of socially constructed ideologies, but if a man had written the same passage we would be accusing him of biologism. (Barret, 1986, p. 42.)

She also claims that the knowledge of the sex of the author cannot be a reliable guide to the meaning of the text

That the "sexism" or "feminism" of particular works of art or images is not self-evident or in any unambiguous way intrinsic to that work, but depends on how we read it. (Barret, 1986, p. 42.)

I believe that the notion of an essential femininity has often led to a substitution of 'nature' for 'history'; for example, the insistence of a 'natural' order of things where women are made solely responsible for domestic and child care as befits their 'nature'. Conversely, this implies that mens 'nature' befits the public cultural arena, ignoring the fact that history is constantly changing.

Alexis Hunter commenting on the importance of a specific audience for work, discovered that when a group of women artists showed slides of their work to a female audience, that audience could empathise with the content of the work in a way which encouraged the artists who had until then felt a reticence about their personal experience being a suitable subject matter for art.

They realised they were out of sympathy with established contemporary art, which eschewed content that related to social reality. 'Mystified the content it did have and enlarged the actual art object to immense proportions to make it more obscure and important'. (Hunter, 1983, p. 25.)

The avant garde needs new 'heresies' to succeed and overturn current orthodoxies and also the power and status to legitimate and enshrine

aesthetic experience. Since women have had little power in these areas traditionally, their involvement with the movement has been minimal. For me, a practising feminist artist must be informed of current critical opinion, to be aware of the power of imagery and allow for the difference between being a producer of visual meaning and, the task of the feminist critic/writer. The interdisciplinary approach should allow for the difference in the material nature of the art producer and the analytical writings of the art theorist. I would cite Nancy Spero as an artist who is unduly influenced by theory, particularly that of the French writers, whose work she appears almost to illustrate. The balance between form and content can be so difficult to achieve; one argument is that you cannot make a revolutionary statement using an establishment form, not because the form is unyielding to new ideas, but because the viewer is conditioned in advance to certain responses.

In her 1982 work 'Considering Theory', (see Fig. 2), Alexis Hunter tries to reveal the gap between theorising and individual action. The image of a woman firmly gripping a snake, and with its tail in her mouth and with the two heads facing one another in mortal combat, subverts the traditional image of Eve and the serpent, in which woman is in thrall to the representation of the forces of evil. In this case, she might even devour this metaphor for patriarchal theology and intellectual conceit, and should she fail to do so in this instance, one is left in no doubt as to her rage and determination to be no longer submissive and amenable.

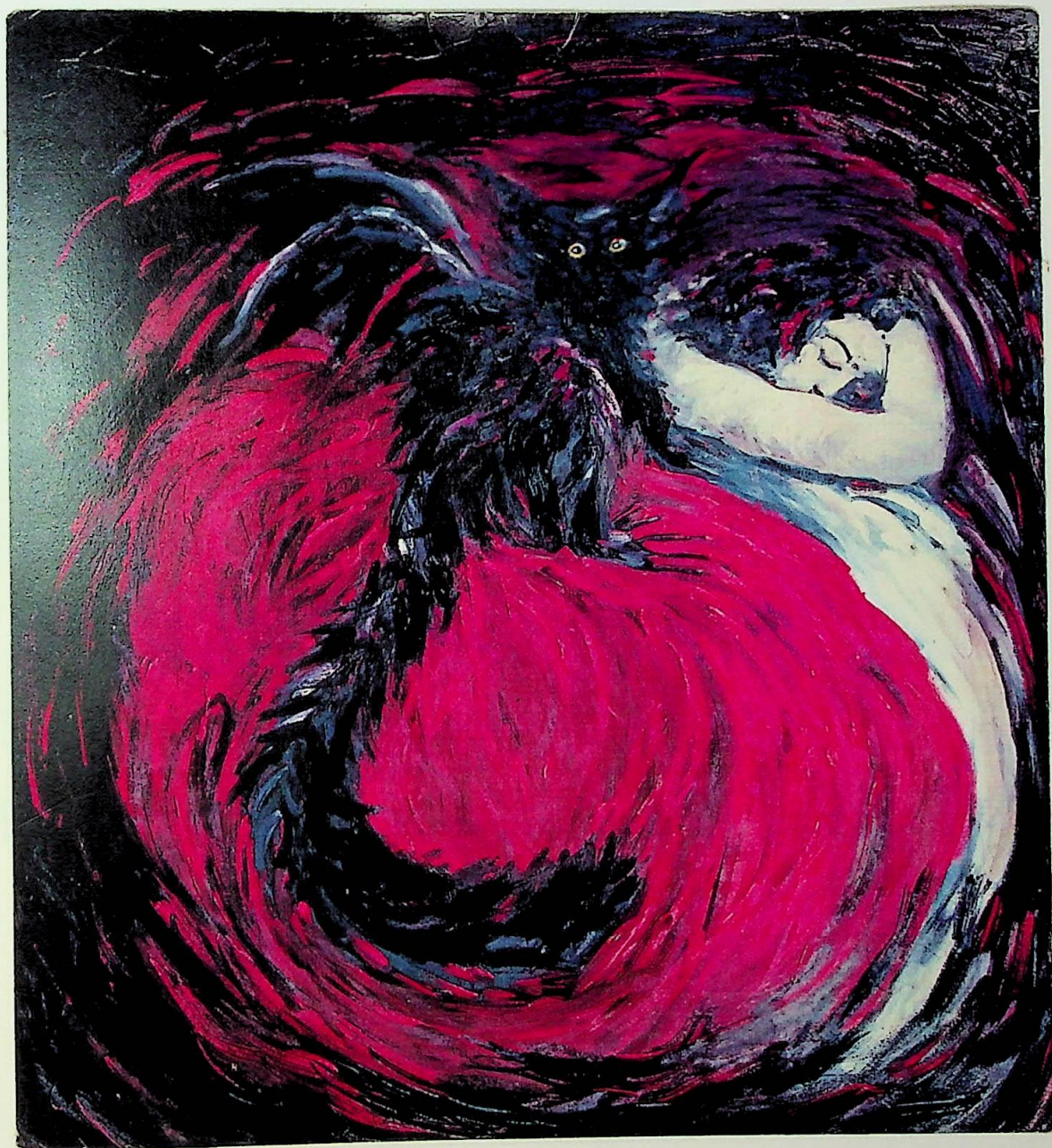


Considering Theory 1982
acrylic on paper
660 x 762mm
Private collection, Dallas, Texas

Fig. 2

A 1984/85 work 'Conflicts of the Psyche - The struggle between ambition and desire' (see Fig. 3) is a reworking of Henry Fuseli's 'The Nightmare', which depicts a winged incubus with the head of a dog sitting on a sleeping woman's stomach. In Hunter's interpretation, the woman has turned away from the incubus refusing to be possessed by it.

Beasts and mythical monsters play a major role in other works in the conflicts of the psyche series. In 'Siamese Separation' (see Fig. 4), again, the serpent like chimeras are locked in a struggle. Animal imagery has been popular in the 1980's and features in many neo-Expressionist works. This could be seen as a highly reactionary move on the part of Alexis Hunter, as this form of painting is seen to align artists with a romantic tradition which has historically excluded women. This gestural mode of painting is particularly suited to market demand and is associated with the male artist as genius notion. Post Modern painting and in particular New Expressionism is a masculine art form as witnessed in the major 'New Spirit in Painting' and 'Zeitgeist' exhibitions, where no women were included. This form of painting tends to be retro-visionary; it replaces lost confidence and belief with overblown self-importance in place of significance. I would see Alexis Hunter's appropriation of this style as a subversive move and used from a position of confidence, in the issues she deals with. For her, these paintings are not simply dramatic images of animals in conflict but, are symbolic images of self. They provide a strategy, through the use of metaphor, for dealing with the political problems surrounding the representation of women.



Conflicts of the Psyche—The Struggle
between Ambition and Desire II 1984–85
oil on canvas
1705 x 1940mm
Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 3



Alexis Hunter, *Siamese Separation*, 1985.

Fig. 4

CHAPTER 2

'On the Object of the Gaze'

'Representation of the world like the world itself, is the work of men, they describe it from their point of view which they confuse with absolute truth.' (Simone de Beauvoir)

In this Chapter I want to examine the possibilities of making art work which recognises the problems inherent in the representation of women in the forms of dominant culture and to explore ways in which a feminist artist might subsequently re-use familiar styles in order to go forward and create new meanings. To this end, it is first necessary to look at women's subordination within traditional forms of representation which posit men as the creators and woman as his muse to be recreated in an often idealised image for the desiring male gaze. As Jean Fisher notes

In Western culture representation is circumscribed by a gaze that defines the desire of the male; in placing the woman as the desirable "other" it donates to her the role of muse (I). (Fisher, 1983, p. 87.)

The problem is finding a means which avoids presenting the woman's image as the fetishised object of the male look, without denying her the right to represent her own sexuality.

Psychoanalysis is one of the important tools which is used by feminists as a means to understanding the deeply rooted oppression of women in a patriarchal society. The struggle to challenge patriarchy while still caught within its language presents the same problem for writing as it does for visual representation. This has been a special interest of

the French feminist writers who recognised the need for a new mode of expression in language. Jo-Anna Issak quotes Kristeva

This erotic body (language) is the territory of the mother, what she terms the "semiotic" verb play not controlled by symbolic convention by the "law" of the father. (Issak, 1987, p. 27.)

Lacan, as suggested, is central to these theories as he had reformulated the work of Sigmund Freud, using as a framework the development of Linguistic Science. He found that the fixing of language and the fixing of sexual identity go hand in hand. 'Lacan read Freud through language, but he also brought out, by implication, the sexuality at work in all practices of the sign. Rose, 1986, p. 229.)

The moment when a child recognises its own image in the mirror Lacan sees as crucial for the construction of the ego. Since this phase predates language, the image appears to be more perfect and complete than is actually experienced by the body. This has the effect of dividing the child's identity in two and so Lacan reveals that the image in which we first recognise ourselves is in essence a misrecognition. The mirror has played a significant role in the history of visual representation and sexual positioning, from the 'Vanitas' paintings to the legend of the snake encrusted head of Medusa which has the power to turn to stone everyone who gazes on it directly, but can be safely viewed reflected in a mirror.

Desire is created when a wish for pleasure continues after a biological need is satisfied, as in the case of the breast and the lactating infant. This substitution of one object of arousal for another

constitutes the basis of fetishism, a subject I will discuss later in relation to Alexis Hunter's 'Approach to fear series and Soho Square 1978/87'.

Kristeva who trained as a psychoanalyst can be seen as the French writer who pushed to its limits the relationship between psychoanalysis and semiotics. She is best known for the concept of the 'semiotic' which she described as 'the traces of the subjects difficult passage into the proper order of language' (Rose, 1986, p. 144). Referring to this language Jo Anna Issak sees it as one that experimental writing 'liberates, absorbs, and employs, a presentence making disposition to rhythm, intonation, nonsense, makes nonsense abound with sense: makes one laugh' (Issak, 1987, p. 27). The human being is born into language and it is within the terms of that language that the human subject is constructed as Juliet Mitchell quotes: 'Language does not arise from within the individual, it is always out there in the world laying in wait for the neonate'. (Mitchell, 1984, p. 253.)

Many feminist critiques on the representation of woman are based on the idea of objectification through representation, which turns them into chattels, objects of possession and therefore exchangeable and disposable commodities. Of course representation can also be a positive statement; an art which seeks to expose the fixed nature of sexual identity as a fantasy and to challenge what it is we are looking at. Theories which may bring women closer to understanding the nature of their oppression also present the ultimate challenge of how to restructure those systems which organise our consciousness. Sexual identity is not a 'given' but is produced through diverse social practices, which are the fabric of daily life. As Kathy Meyers notes, there is 'a complex web of regulation channelling and development which

is not fixed but directly linked to the social and historical attitudes of the social formation. (Meyers, 1987, p. 281.)

The pleasure in looking 'scopophilia' was identified by Freud as an instinct of sexuality which exists as drives, independently of the etrogenic zones. By subjecting other people to a voyeuristic gaze they are turned into objects for the satisfaction of the viewer. On the other hand there is the pleasure of being looked at which is traditionally seen as an exhibitionist role for women, to reinforce the notion of the split in the pleasure in looking between active/male and passive female. Laura Mulvey discusses the paradox of phallogentrism; that it should depend on the image of the castrated woman, to give order and meaning to its world. The castration complex remains a continuous point of reference despite the fact that 'desire, born with language allows the possibility of transcending the instinctual and the imaginary.

If woman, as object, served the primary function of arousal of male sexual desire, then any other object might do just as well. High stiletto heeled shoes are a common fetish. As well as being an inhibitor to freedom of movement, the shoe fits that part of the body furthest from the head, and, therefore, the personality of the woman. Alexis Hunter uses shoes in an early series entitled 'Approach to Fear' (1977), to symbolise freedom from bondage. The serial photographic images deal with various causes of fear, from violence through to positive action. In the shoe fetish imagery, which she titled 'Pain - Solace', a hand is shown removing the cause of the pain - a silver high heeled shoe. In the second series, 'Pain - Destruction of Cause', (see Fig. 5) the shoe is ritualistically burned and rendered



Approach to Fear XIII: Pain-Destruction of Cause 1977

Fig. 5

ineffectual. She returns to this concept in a later work, 'Soho Square 1978/87', in which two feet gradually liberate themselves from a pair of ankle strapped high heeled shoes. Hunter uses paint over the photographs in this series and when the feet are finally free she obliterates the shoes, with a bold brush stroke.

Hands, shadows, blood, fire, jewellery and fashion shoes are recurring images in Hunter's work, suggesting beauty or violence, nature or conditioned culture. The 'Approach to Fear' series is a variation on this theme; the images are less about fighting human battles than about fighting convention to win freedom of self. By using hands and feet only, instead of the full figure, the series works to make one look afresh at what we take for granted in everyday life. Lucy Lippard judges these works as risk taking 'that time honoured modernist mechanism - thrust into a new framework'. (Lippard, 1981, p. 3.) This she finds gives the work its backbone and makes it more interesting than most 'narcissistic' womans art.

Alexis Hunter was looking for a means to express the reality of change in women's lives in the 1970's, and to confront the fear of independence. She was not in the financial position to make film, although she saw it as the most politically effective medium. So, she made instead the narrative photographic sequences which could be read as storyboards for the films she could not afford to make. Many women artists work in this multi-layered way; the juxtapositioning and superimposition of several different realities, to form a new one. The notion of cyclical time has obvious links with menstruation and women feel the need to express their life as a sequence of instances rather than as moments caught in a single image.

Alexis Hunter made a lot of her art to be shown in public exhibition spaces, but found that the audience in 'alternative spaces' were even more middle class than in the museums. She felt that the class significance given to everything called art made it by definition, almost impossible to cross class boundaries. It could be argued that the difference between any contemporary work shown in a gallery is minimal, whether it be a photographic/montage image, or a painting. Once it is displayed as gallery art it becomes elitist, and is accessible to only the 'educated public'.

'Investment in the "look" is not as privileged in woman as in men'. (Iregary, 1989, p. 54.) Luce Iregary points to the supremacy of the eye with its ability to objectify and gain mastery over the other senses. She cites this as bringing about an impoverishment of bodily relations. 'The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality'. (Iregary, 1978, p. 50.) The position of woman as fantasy depends on a particular economy of vision. Perhaps this is why only a project which comes via feminism can, as Jacqueline Rose says, 'demand so unequivocally of the image that it renounce all pretensions to a narcissistic perfection of form'. (Rose, 1986, p. 232.) In this way women can be the signifier, not merely the signified. Woman no longer has to be content with the role of muse but can make a representation of herself. She is an active and 'whole' woman, not up for sale to the viewer.

In 1980 Alexis Hunter stopped showing exclusively in public galleries and began showing less overtly political work with a London dealer. She wished to return to painting and began by experimenting with pigment on discarded photographic work. She was, in effect, producing

more decorative and ambiguous imagery and feels that her audience in the dealer galleries are able to 'read through the layers of paint to the political content if they so wish'. (Hunter, 1982, Vol. 24.)

CHAPTER 3

'On a return to Painting'

While one may take an inventive approach to photography, the mechanics of the process dictate that what is photographed will be the resultant image. If the object or its context is to be altered the process must be consciously interfered with; for example, in Alexis Hunters 'Approach to Fear XIII: - Paint - Destruction of Cause' where the artist literally burns a high heeled shoe which then may take on another shape or interpretation. By subjecting the image to Xeroxing or montage the form can be altered, however, this again is a deliberate interference and is reliant on an 'outside' mechanical process. It is the possibility of unconscious 'change' inherent in the act of painting, where images can start appearing and the initial impulse for the work may be submerged in a totally new form, an 'unconscious' development in which the art maker's role becomes almost that of a facilitator.

The problem with this practice is that it is so close to the romantic notion of the artist as genius which I, as a feminist artist, reject. But, is the notion of the painter as a vehicle for the expression of the unconsciously felt, as well as the conscious exploration of ideas through a chosen medium - paint - not a valid method of working for a female artist, who is also a feminist and aware that the burden of history and grandiose titles can be an unfair barrier to feminine expression? Or, am I simply taking refuge in theory to forestall responsibility that freedom of expression brings?

Feminism can be seen either as an oppositional practice - against the institution of patriarchy, or that of a positive practice working to deploy power.

On the burden of art history, T. J. Clarke states that there can be no art history apart from other kinds of history, and goes on to say that even if we construct ourselves a rough and ready way to art history 'proper', there is a problem as the limits are so artificial and there is the further difficulty of choice of perspective.

So far 19th century art history has usually been studied under two headings: the history of an heroic avant garde and the movement away from literary and historical subject matter towards an art of pure sensation. (Clarke, 1973, p. 18.)

The trouble is, these two histories are not the full story. We need a study of the period from a multiplicity of perspective. Academism, an art based on literary painting and sculpture using antique form and subject matter, was the dominant mode in 19th century France. The radical movements of the period, such as Realism, would have been the antithesis of this art form and so they had to use extreme or controversial expression.

Individualism in French art was different from the movement towards an art of absolute sensation; for Courbet it was a rediscovery of self, the other side of matter. Gautier and the classicists disagreed with this approach as an unworthy aim; however, the notion that art was ultimately an expression of individuality persisted. The options for the intelligensia was to recognise the bourgeois, or dispute their rule. Clarke cites Baudelaire as having tried both methods: 'what does it matter whether the bourgeois keeps or loses an illusion'. (Clarke,

1973, p. 19.) A few years earlier Baudelaire had believed that art had to be inseparable from utility, if art was useless, so was life.

The problem for Courbet or Manet was whether to use popular form and imagery to re-animate the culture of the dominant classes or, to try to reconcile the two. There are parallels here for the feminist artist today. Whether to reclaim the imagery of a patriarchal culture or look for an entirely new 'language' with which to express feminist concerns.

In the absence of any convincing account of what is intrinsically 'aesthetic' Michelle Barret states that 'art can only be that which is defined as art in a particular society at a particular time'. (Barret, 1986, p. 38.) Feminist art criticism tends to look for feminist meanings, as opposed to artistic 'quality'. According to Angela Partington, she feels that these critics construct 'feminist readings' and in so doing radically relocate the source of pleasure in the works.

Hetty Einzig reviewed Alexis Hunter in a show in the Edward Tottah Gallery, January 1982, which also involved work by Paula Rego and Mikey Cuddity. She noted that Hunter's work was becoming increasingly expressionistic and preferred the earlier photographic sequences which she saw as being 'direct, succinct and often witty in their expression of major themes such as women and violence, sexuality, oppression and fear'. (Einzig, 1982, p. 17.) The new paintings were based on four male myths, Eve, Pandora, Circe and Medusa and were also conceived and executed in groups and sequences. While they followed a logical development Einzig found the work to be 'rather poorly executed and childish, ineffectual by comparison'. (Einzig, 1982, p. 17.) The images appeared banal compared with the previous photographic works.

The childish technique in these works was a deliberate ploy by the artist; she had achieved her initial recognition for her photographic narrative work which was a central concern until 1981, when she returned to painting. A key work of this period was a 1982 acrylic painting 'Left Handed Dream Cat', which she painted with her left hand in an attempt to investigate the physicality and sensuality of the paint, as well as its psychology. As mentioned earlier Hunter began her career as a photorealist painter and had no wish to return to this style which she now considered 'provincial'. She wished to explore the gender bias in mythology and to develop a freely expressive technique (see Fig. 6). Despite the formal differences between early and late work her concerns and content have always sought to defy the power and significations of the phallus and propose an active female sexuality. The theme has remained constant, although worked from different perspectives.

Michelle Barret says that 'The notion that some forms of art are intrinsically female (or male) is a dubious one'. (Barret, 1986, p. 46.) Until recently, it was unusual for a woman artist to work in a bold expressive technique. The libido as rationale for creativity was the realm of masculinity and even women such as Frida Kahlo, who worked with imagery connected with her sexuality, used a detailed and small scale mode of execution. Women just do not produce masculine equivalents of the erotic muse.

In her painting 'The Artist Looking for her Muse', (see Fig. 7), Hunter has the artist walking towards her ego, which is represented by a devil which she describes as the ego '... engaged in masturbatory activities - a private visual pun on Freudian psychology where power is



Alexis Hunter, *Passionate
Instincts VI*, 1983.

Fig. 6



An Artist looking for her Muse 1982
acrylic on paper
1016 x 1270mm
Courtesy of Edward Toteh, London

Fig. 7

represented by the phallus'. (Osborne, 1984, p. 48.) Despite the title, conditioning could cause one to perceive the female as the muse, or, even more worrying, can this female artist be really seeking inspiration from a male muse? Hunter explains that the potential source of inspiration is concerned only with pleasuring himself. 'He is selfishly insufficient for the women artists needs'. (Eastmond, 1989, p. 23.) The lack of fixity and the paradox in her work locates it in a post-Modern context. Ambiguity and sometimes almost irreconcilable contradiction occur as in her 1987 monoprint 'An Artist and her Muse (Dancing)' (see Fig. 8), which shows the artist dancing with a huge hairy muse. Is she saying that the woman now has the freedom to work emotionally and passionately, or is the woman dancing to the devils tune 'the tune of male ideology'. (Eastmond, 1989, p. 23.) Once more, the audience is presented with a paradox.

Alexis Hunter, in an interview with Caroline Osborne in 1984, was asked if her return to painting related to changes in her own life or to women in general. She referred to the work she had done on the burden of change on women who had been socialised into being dependent

But this work is about being totally independent and struggling with decisions about fear. Now I have the freedom to work emotionally and passionately. (Hunter, 1984, p. 64.)

This confidence is aided by having had a certain amount of success and the support of the Totah Gallery. She looked at schizophrenic and children's art as well as work by naive artists and cites a painting by James Dixon of Tory Island 'Grey Leg Geese Resting on the West End' as a big influence in her work. She was particularly interested in Dixon's brushwork as when she started painting again she found her



An Artist and her Muse 1987
monoprint
800 x 1160mm
Courtesy of Todd Gallery, London

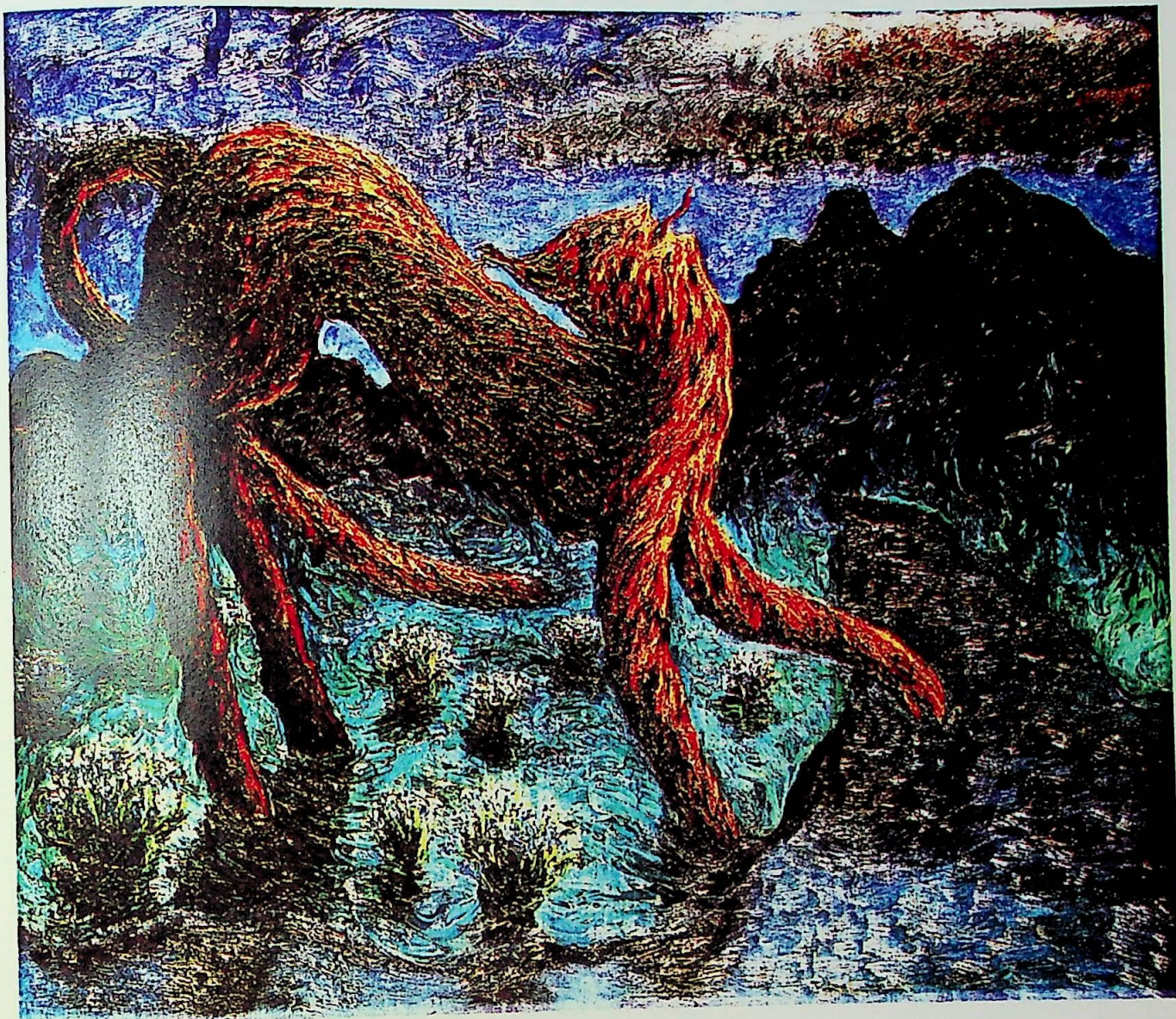
Fig. 8

own brush marks 'too slick'. (Osborne, 1984, p. 50.) She was trying to get a nervous mark and so began to paint with her left hand to get that slightly off centre tension.

The 'Passionate Instincts' series which followed in 1985, were informed by an impulse to delve beneath the surface of things. She was interested in the tension between ideology and the subconscious. These paintings are about the aggression of the creative urge: the images are of chimeras of different species mating. They represent 'the creative animus/anima of artists'. (Eastmond, 1989, p. 27.) The paint is applied in a swirling pattern which makes one think of a specifically female centralism or a whirlpool which has the power to pull one into its depths. Elizabeth Eastmond refers to Hunter's animals, monsters and hybrids which 'act as metaphors of an unconstrained, undomesticated female sexuality and are linked with her interest in psychoanalysis'. (Eastmond, 1989, p. 27.)

Hunter also uses animals as functions of self image and sees them as a strategy, through the use of metaphor, in dealing with the political question of the representation of women.

In 1986, Alexis Hunter lived for a time in Texas and also visited Mexico. She began to locate her animals in landscapes relating to regional mythology (see Fig. 9). Her revisioning of the landscape like Therese Oultons, owes a debt to romanticism. The fictional landscapes can become sites of mood or emotion. There is a traditional reading of landscape art as a male preserve, where the active male gaze conquers the passive female land in the culture/nature dichotomy. Given the artists knowledge of current philosophic debate, these



Le Cri de Mururoa 1987
oil on canvas
1200 x 1230mm
Private collection, London

Fig. 9

landscapes can be read as involving gender as an element in their making. Hunter re-contextualises the activity of painting the landscape by positioning woman as creator and so becomes the signifier rather than the signified.

Alexis Hunter maintains regular contact with her native New Zealand, visiting and exhibiting there every few years. Her latest exhibition took place at the Auckland City Art Gallery in July of 1989 when fifty eight works from 1976 - 1988 were shown. The latest work in that particular exhibition was 'The Waiting' (1988) (see figs. 10 and 11). This work had been previously shown in Britain in 1986 as 'A Man Waiting for the Harpies'. She has always had a practice of re-working paintings and, in this instance, she painted out the mans figure and so arrived at an evocative image much stronger than the previous more literal version.



Alexis Hunter
A Man Waiting for the Harpies 1986
oil on canvas
1727 x 2042mm *Fig. 11*

The Waiting 1987-88
oil on canvas
710 x 1510mm
Courtesy of RKS Art, Auckland
Fig. 10 (top of page)



'Passionate Instincts' 1987

Fig. 12

CONCLUSION

Feminist art practice has for the most part been a strategic rather than a stylistic practice. This art requires the audience to actively rather than passively view the work and so initially it was necessary for artists such as Alexis Hunter to produce images which were politically overt. The problem is that the viewer can come to expect explicit work and has difficulty when the artist reserves the right to make a more ambiguous expression of self.

The women's movement encouraged women to come together and collaborate in the dismantling of any enshrined ideology which emphasises a singularity of meaning for art. As previously stated, painting has been regarded as a predominately male domain and many feminist artists have a reticence towards using this medium as a means of expression; fearing that such activity would serve to reinforce the status quo.

Research for this thesis suggests to me several ways of looking at this problem apart from concentrating solely on alternative media, which in itself could become just as much an orthodoxy as painting and could even be categorised as radical chic. I feel that a feminist artist could return to painting and argue that she is in effect recontextualising the activity, citing woman as creator of cultural meanings.

There is always the reservation that once a feminist artist is taken up by a Dealer or gallery that tokenism can be suspected. This is a criticism which has been levelled at Alexis Hunter and one which is

fraught with contradiction. On the one hand we might applaud the perpetually protesting artist who will exhibit only in 'alternative' venues and refuse to become sullied by the taint of commercialism, while at the same time decrying the lack of representation of women's work in major contemporary art exhibitions. The belief that some forms of art are intrinsically gender exclusive is, as previously argued, a dubious claim as is the notion of gender dictating the limits of anyones creativity.

Griselda Pollock cites the mid 19th century as the time when discourses on masculinity and femininity were centred on the 'absoluteness of gender difference' (Pollock, 1988, p. 122) she distinguishes between the terms gender and sexual difference with the latter referring to the socio-psychic construction of sexuality and the former referring to the public discourse on what men and women are/ought to be. In 'Old Mistresses' Pollock and Rozika Parker found that up until this period, women artists were both documented and assessed. They point to the fact that at the very time when women had better access to art education such appraisal dwindled.

To discover the history of women and their art, means accounting for the way Art History is written. Although women have been treated negatively in modern art history, the work these artists produced has 'nonetheless played a structural role in the ideological project of art history'. (Pollock/Parker, 1987, p. 207.) By recording or discussing women artists in a negative way, the myth of masculine creative superiority and cultural dominance is perpetuated.

Feminist writers and artists have raised the issue of the politics of representation; they are aware that sexual inequality and domination

are not just the result of economic exploitation but that the effect of representation is a primary factor. Writers such as Foucault and Barthes have worked to reveal the problems inherent in the act of representation and have highlighted the subjugation in denying others the ability to represent themselves and so challenge, the very activity of representation.

In my assessment of Alexis Hunter's work I have had problems with some of the images used; for example, the series dealing with the artist and her muse. In these works Hunter is exploring the gender-biased nature of the traditional representation of the muse and is proposing a role reversed muse for the female artist. However, I have to ask would not a strategy aimed at undercutting these oppositions altogether not be a better approach? Angela Partington would see this as prioritising the role of the producer to an unnecessary degree; she feels if one emphasises the viewer function, it could be argued that role reversals 'engender a proliferation of meanings beyond (but including) the discursive oppositions structuring the original'. (Partington, 1987, p. 237.)

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