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"The return of painting and it's implications for
The Feminist Movement"

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INTRODUCTION

When I first became interested in feminist art five years ago I saw it as a fascinating and vital 'branch' of post-modern art. I equated it with important groups of women in New York who were breaking new historic ground - creating 'alternative' art, using their huge studios and expensive equipment.

Now, looking back after the 'wealth' of information accumulated, I feel that this is a problem which faces many women, unfamiliar with feminist art practices or conceptual media. While becoming so intent on developing a separatist art movement and running counter to the mainstream, feminist artists have often managed to mystify the audience it aims to relate to.

I've tried to develop my own feminist consciousness while working with an established media (paint) and have become increasingly aware of certain conflicts about making feminist statements, while working within a mainstream trend. Since my painting is loosely expressionistic I had to question my choice of media and methodology, was it possible to explore and relate particularly feminist experience while employing gestural use of paint.

Since feminist critic Gisela Ecker refers to Jackson Pollock's drip-paintings as ejaculatory splatterings, and Carol Duncan considers all members of "Die Brucke" and the Fauves to have painted with their heart and loins, expressionist painting is not deemed particularly sensitive to the needs of women artists.

This thesis is an investigation into the women's movement's early move from main-stream practices and the supposed conflicts between feminism and expressionism.

In "Chapter I" I discuss the equation of large expressionistic works with the male and the apparent reluctance of most women artists to get involved, while also listing the points that make figurative expressionism an apparently unyielding area for women. I outline, particularly, male expressionists use of the female form in the past as a main problem area for women artists.

"Chapter II" then deals with women artists and the self image. Images of the female nude are not impossible but problematic for women. The feminist movement of the last two decades were so involved in finding new ways of depicting femininity that any traditional, figurative image seemed to just add to the wealth of negative, misinformed images of femininity portrayed by male artists since the time of the Renaissance. I have to argue, however, that women's refusal to depict their own bodies in full only can result in self-censorship. There are some feminist artists who have decided to take on the task working with the self-image to create a new positive meaning for the female nude.

"Chapter III" deals with women artists who returned to painting, and the advantages found in this most traditional media after years of the freedom of conceptual 'alternative' art.

My aim is to investigate certain misinformed notions of masculine and feminine forms of expression throughout this essay, discussing problems women artists have with certain imagery and methodology. By mentioning women artists who have overcome such difficulties (the female nude, gestural

use of paint). I hope to state that it is possible for feminist artists to embrace all forms of media successfully, even traditionally male dominated ones.

CHAPTER 1

In the late 70's painting was allegedly rediscovered in Italy by a young painter, Sandro Chia, (Fig.1) and a phenomenon called 'new painting' emerged firstly in Germany and Italy and subsequently in the United States, Great Britain and France. In 1985 a renewed interest in the expressive power of paint had re-emerged in places as far apart as Spain, Japan and Australia.

The 'New Painting', as it became known, reflected much of the zeitgeist of "Die Brücke" in Germany at the turn of the century, particularly Kirchner. One of the fundamental tenets of early German expressionism was that of a true creative impulse, a timeless urge from deep within the individual which could manifest itself anytime, in any culture, in any part of the world.

"New painting fulfilled a deep need for an expressive art that gave full rein to subjectivity and by its use of representational language demonstrated its involvement with real experience".

There was also a renewed interest in all artists who had used the figure in an expressionistic manner. Francis Bacon, later paintings of Picasso, de Coubertin's work. Paintings could all be seen as precedents.

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CHAPTER I

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"In the new German painting there is a vivifying unresolved contract between the allegorical figural abstractions embodying old German expectations and a new energy embedded in hyperactive paint. But the situation may be reversible, an old energy may be renewed by the paint and a new expectation may be announced by the allegorical figural abstractions". 2.

The figuration as in the work of Baselitz, for example, becomes more symbolic than in the works of early expressionists and there is a new more active raw , gestural use of paint.

New painting was forcefully opposed to from the start. The defenders of abstraction both conceptual and perceptual, accused the new painting of "Reactionary Authoritarianism". It regressed, they argued, "not 3. only to expressionism (a decadent style) but to painting (an obsolete convention)!"

This essay, however, only wants to examine one branch of criticism of the return of expressionistic "on the wall" painting, and that's a feminist criticism. One of the remarkable aspects of the main neo-expressionist movement and the exhibitions held is the small minority of women partakers. In Britain, for example, exhibitions of "New Trends" in art, ie "New Spirit in Painting" Royal Academy 1981, "New Art", Tate Gallery 1984, and "The British Art Show", Arts Council, 1984-5; did little to instil confidence in the woman artist. In these exhibitions very little if any of the work exhibited was by women.

I disagree with any sweeping terms defining masculinity

and feminity within culture - as Gisela Ecker points out in "Feminist Aesthetics" we're not given a certain methodology because of our sex. It gets thrust upon us by a certain political, cultural climate. I don't think anyone agrees that throwing paint around in an energetic, expressionistic manner is a particularly masculine mode of expression anymore than making pink porcelain pieces is a feminine one.

"It is essential to realise that concepts of masculine and feminine, whose meanings seem so unambiguous to ordinary people are among the most confused that occur in science.....in human beings neither pure masculinity or feminity is found either in the psychological or the biological sense"...FREUD 4.

In politics and business and to some extent culture the male is expected to act as a more forceful agent. The equating of the aggressive, frenzied use of paint with the male is understandable and predictable but in a social rather than inherently biological context.

It's also important to note that since the avant-garde expressionism at the turn of the century definitions of masculinity have changed. Feminism, it is hoped, gave birth to new women and to new men.

"Masculine and feminine identities are no longer seen as fixed or monolithic" - Lynne Segal, "Is the Future Female?" 5.

I've looked for definitions of expressionism and found it to be an all embracing term, as universal as art itself, the following are quotes on feminist artists'

and traditional male expressionists' definitions.

Feminist Suzanne Santoro

"Expressionism begins with a self-assertion and the awareness of difference between ourselves and others". 6.

Karl-Schmidt Rottluff

"I know for my own part that I have no programme just an inexplicable longing to grasp what I feel and find for it is the purest expression." 7.

Emile Nolde

"The absolute originality, the intense often grotesque expression of force and life in the simplest form.

The authentic and original expression of fundamental emotions." 8.

Both Kirchner and Kandinsky, while members of "The Bridge" and "The Blue Rider" groups respectively longed for the end of the "ruinous separation" of the arts from each other - Kirchner, with his passion for expressionist poetry, particularly the work of Helm - Kandinsky wrote articles on music, theatre and the visual arts and worked with the composer Schonberg for the first almanach of "The Blue Rider". All of the expressionists helped bring the woodcut, a traditionally secondary craft medium into a high art category.

The pluralism of the beginnings of expressionism has many similarities with the multi-facetness of the feminist movement, and their 're-discovery' of craft mediums, use of text and interest in art forms yet now

the return of expressionism has been heralded as an art form unconjunctive to the feminist movement.

Nancy Spero for example used to paint dark expressionist canvasses during the minimalist years and now when expressionist painting has 'returned' and male artists making what she refers to as "big splats" she is assembling fragile prints on paper "little things that bite".

9.

This example suggests that it is not painting in a gestural manner on large canvasses that troubles the woman artist, but doing it within a mainstream movement "along with the boys" as it were. This leads to the whole question of separatism, which the early feminists advocated as necessary for the nurturing and growth of feminist art. This I feel is only one of the reasons for the dichotomy between "feminist art" and mainstream movements in painting, neo-expressionism in particular. I want to outline the main areas I feel are most crucial to womens self-inflicted alienation from this form of expression.

(i) The idea of separatism

In Lucy Lippards 1976 book of essays on feminist writing "From the Center" she describes early tentative gatherings of the Movement in New York where some thirty-five women artists sat in a large circle and described their work, with no visual aids. Time after time objects of an acceptable ambitious art world nature and scale would be discussed and hesitantly add afterwards how in their private time they painted on pebbles, took photographs of friends, worked with dolls or made little collages. These things turned out to be more poignant and relevant to the womens' experience but on an 'ambitious' art world scale seemed

menial and tentative.

"Most of us at the time were afraid to send those tender sprouts into the world of high art. Only the subsequent establishment of women's galleries, women's shows, women's course, paved the way for eventual exposure".

10.

It was generally agreed, however, that once the feminist movement had established itself as a reckonable force women artists should then feel free to take their findings and experiences to embrace any branch or form of art that they wised, if they wished. In 1976 after advocating a "Separate art world for the time being" Lippard continued that the danger of separatism was that it could become "not a training ground but a protective womb."

11.

Until however artists and critics alike could develop a sense of individual aesthetic directions it was necessary to work on the outside of the mainly male dominated hierarchal art system. Since the objectives were the creation of a specially feminist art for a feminist audience there was little point in holding it up to a branch of criticism that simply didn't understand it.

The segregation of women artists from the main movements of the time existed in the hope that this would help form a new gender specificness in art. Woman will always exist as the "other" as long as man accepts that he is the "norm" so by playing on their differences and "otherness" male artists and critics would have to question their point of view, and not consider it the 'absolute truth' as Simone de Beauvoir accused them of long ago.

As Gisela Ecker points out in "Feminist Aesthetics" only when the critics who are assessing the work become aware of their sexuality and question their point of view and until all becomes gender specific will the feminist movement have been worthwhile.

"Once the fact that there are women working well in all media and in all styles get through to those in the art establishment and once those in charge of that establishment begin to implement their new newfound knowledge by selecting women the same way men have been selected all along, the process of segregation may be obsolete" - Lucy Lippard, 1976. 12.

I don't feel in 1990 that the descrimination that women artists at the time of "From the Center" experienced still applies - why then with the feminist movement claiming to be big enough to embrace any area or tenet of art, is it so difficult to regard women who are working outside collective womens' groups as feminists. To run counter the mainstream is one way of developing a specific female consciousness but therein lies the danger of being controlled by what one opposes. Perhaps expressionist painting doesn't hold any interest for some feminist artists, but there shouldn't be any "taboo areas for women today". By avoiding certain methods of expression women run the risk of further ghettoizing themselves.

(ii) Pluralism

The whole pluralism of the seventies, with artists of both genders and all races, tired of processing abstract modern art experimented in all directions and

in all media. This was particularly sensitive to the needs of the feminist movement with their tentative (at first) explorations into new less established areas. The neo-painting resurrection suggested to feminists as with all the avant-garde movement a return to traditional on the wall art within a capitalist hierarchical structure which limited creative potential. The advantage of a 'de-centralised' art world was that women could enjoy doing something derivative without feeling like outsiders.

(iii) Gestural use of paint

The equation of expressionistic upright brush marks with the male are about as general and flimsily founded as Chicago's and Schapiro's centrally focused swirling motions are with female. French feminist Kristeva states that men make phallic symbols to quell their fears and donate themselves as positive and existing - therefore positioning the woman who is without phallus as lacking and absent. However, now both Lacan and Kristeva suggest that this "feminine terrain of lack" and of marginality is open to men as well as women. 13.

Since it's now widely accepted that there are no longer fixed ideas of masculinity or femininity (yet obviously men and women enter the world of creativity from different positions) the question of masculine and feminine gestures shouldn't exist.

Man's asserting of his sexuality (as long as it's not carried out in a method that is ruinous or harmful to women) is as positive as Chicago's vaginal sexual imagery, her pink fleshy holes around a central sphere. The equating of gestural paint strokes with the phallus is flimsy to say the least. There is no evidence to

suggest that paint can't be applied in a central swirling manner, as well as in upright phallogocentric strokes.

I do sympathise with problems some women have with the whole 'gut reaction' of expressionism and the immediateness of the image. Women have tended to prefer images that have a narrative background and speak of personal conflicts rather than base emotions. Maria Chevska, who I'll talk about in Chapter 111, claims that there will never be a female Schnabel (although she is a feminist who paints.)

"It would not be worth their while to produce bombastic objects empty of all but peacock display."¹⁴.

(iv) The use (or misuse) of the female form in early expressionist and vanguard art of the turn of the century such as Picasso, Kirchner, Heckyl, has been the core of much feminist discussion over the past few years. "Painting with his heart and loins" is a phrase used by Carol Duncan in her essay "Virility and Domination in Early Vanguard Painting" to describe the attitude of young male expressionists at the time.

It's not the question of virility and the need to assert it in one's work that caused the criticism but the position of the female nude in much of the vanguard expressionist work. In the majority of paintings we see the female as a passive recipient or cause of the male sexual aggression.

"These paintings often portray women as powerless, sexually subjugated beings. By portraying them thus the artist makes visible his own claim as a sexually dominating presence even if he himself does not appear within the picture."

A vast majority of paintings from this period are based around the female figure. I can't say the female nude is the 'subject' because the subject seems to be the artist's presence (often reflected in a mirror behind the model). The woman is either portrayed as a faceless, nameless lump of flesh as in the numerous works by Kees van Dongen, Heckyl (see fig ii), or they are portrayed as natural beings in the landscape.

"The expressionists especially Fauves and the Brucke, were youth and health cultists who liked noisy colour and wanted to paint their direct experience of mountains, sunshine and naked girls" 15.

Kirchner: 'Girl under a Japanese Umbrella' (fig iii) asserts the artistic and sexual needs of this generation with characteristic boldness. Leaning directly over his model, the artist fastens his attention to her head, breasts and buttocks, the latter violently twisted towards him. Her features are painted in a garish tribal manner which is re-echoed by the pattern of the umbrella and the general composition.

"His painterly gestures are large spontaneous sometimes vehement and his colours intense, raw and strident. These features proclaim his unhesitant and uninhibited response to his sexual and sensual experience". 16.

Heckyls: 'Crystal Day' (fig iv)

The nude in the landscape, the idea of the natural female occurred frequently in the art of Die Brucke. Heckyl's nude is in one sense (colour and form) almost indistinguishable from the rocky formation of the landscape. He is literally without features although her

nipples are meticulously detailed. She stands in the traditional arms up exhibitionist/surrender pose, covering her head.

"The artist in asserting his own sexual will has annihilated all that is human in his opponent. The assertion of the artists sexual domination is in large part what these paintings are about." - Carol Duncan.

17.

Even a less passionate approach does affirm that the artists do go to great lengths to deny the models subjectivity. She is usually either sprawled on a sofa covering her face, painted up with mouth, breasts and buttocks detailed to blend in with the overall pattern or as a section of the landscape.

Unfortunately, the regard for the female nude has been one of the "traditions" that the neo-expressionists seem to have taken as their own, as for example in the many works of Baselitz where the female form hangs upside down again as part of the pattern of turgid, clotted paint. (fig v)

Robert Combas (fig vi) "Thousands of beasties....." Ketty relaxes in the grass, nipple and genitals on display as a part of the pattern of confusion. and "angst" which besotts the artist.

Dieter Hacker: Reinstates the woman as nature, man as culture dichotomy in "Red-Earth" (fig vii) where the female form actually acts as the landscape. Even titles like Rainer Fettings "It's a man's world" and Siegfried Anzinger's "Sugar Penis" do little to instil confidence in feminist who suspect that the neo-

expressionist movement could be seen as a step backwards for artists.

Because I feel that the traditional and current attitude towards the female nude in expressionist painting is one of the main reasons for many women's discomfort with the area I've dedicated my next chapter to how women themselves have tackled the self image.

Chapter III discussed two woman artists, Maria Chevaska and Alexis Hunter who are using paint as a means of feminist expression and the conflicts involved.

Chapter IV is about Suzanne Valadon who managed to express her femininity within a traditional masculine area of working.



Fig.1 Sandro Chia - "Under the Tree"

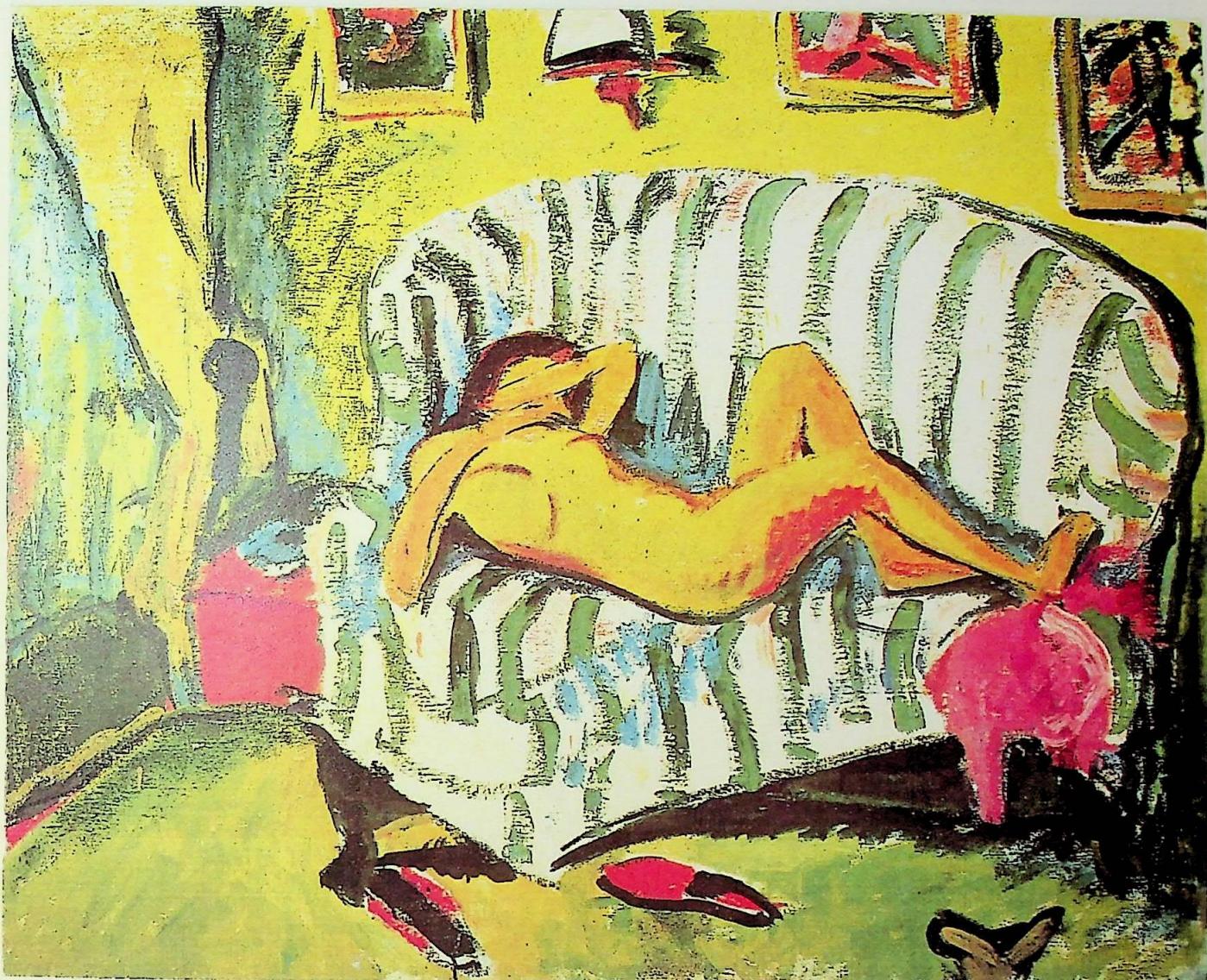


Fig.ii Erich Heckyl - "Nude on a Sofa"



Fig.iii Ernst Ludwig Kirchner
"Girl Under a Japanese Umbrella"



Fig.iv Erich Heckyl - "Crystal Day"



Fig.v Georg Baselitz - "Maria in Knokke"



Fig.vi Robert Combas - "Thousands of Beasties...."



Fig. vii

Dieter Hacker.

"Red Earth."

CHAPTER II

WOMEN ARTISTS AND THE SELF IMAGE

This chapter is based on women's problems and conflicts when dealing with the female nude.

Women painters in the last two decades have been reluctant to work with figurative female imagery, mainly because the nude was considered colonised territory, one of the great icons of art since the Renaissance.

"The nude in art has been enshrined as an icon of culture since the Renaissance and epitomises the objectification of female sexuality. For this reason it is particularly resistant to change by women artists."

1.

Not only are images of the nude tied up with hierarchal historical and mythological art associations they give us a misinformed one-sided male view of female sexuality. The female exists, sexually only, as an object of the male gaze never as a subject. Her sexuality is presented but at the same time firmly in the males possession. He has been the signifier of the pose, the master of the image, she as a passive participant. Any pleasure emanates from her position which has been organised by the artist for a male audience. This makes it extremely difficult for women to look at images of other women by male artists. John Berger outlined this on his essay "The Naked and the Nude".

"...men act, women appear, men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male; the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object and most particularly an object of vision: A sight." 2.

When women are being offered images of themselves from a male point (which they are being constantly bombarded with in art and the media) they can either be sympathetic or have the dubious privilege of sharing in male voyeuristic pleasure - neither of which are particularly positive for the female.

Pluralist feminist culture has been centred around counteracting the stereotyping and sexism of female imagery. They searched for new more positive images for women as the denounced images which were limiting and oppressive and gave a misguided view of female sexuality.

It was decided that rather than risk misinterpretation a new feminist language should be formed. Painting a figure of a naked woman, Even to celebrate womans sexual identity could easily be misinterpreted given the weight of its history and associations. Since the nude was embedded within a structure of 'looking' based on male power and female passivity, it seemed impossible to give it a new set of meanings or implications.

"Using a variety of strategies including celebration through a symbol and myth, deconstruction of dominant visual codes, parody and role reversal feminist artists

have literally taken apart traditional ways of viewing the female body and tried to find new images and language with which to explore feminine identities". 3.

Most notably, the female body has been celebrated in women's art practices through an exploration of bodily processes. Pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation were elevated into a fine art category by "essentialist" feminists who believed in using these aspects of fertility to celebrate woman as powerful giver of life. Vaginal imagery has often been used to challenge stereotypical representations of female sexuality and to insert a specifically female centred subject matter. Judy Chicaco and Miriam Schapiro wrote in 1973 -

"To be a woman is to be an object of contempt and the vagina, stamp of femaleness is despised. The woman artist seeing herself as loathed, takes the very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the beauty and truth of her identity". 4.

Suzanne Santoro in her book "Towards a New Expression" wanted to find a way to understanding the structure of the female genitals and sought to produce "An Invitation to Feminine Sexual Self Expression" which had been denied up to now.

I feel that Chicaco (The Dinner Party - fig i) and Santoro are treading dangerously. It's true that blatant "gyno-sensuous" imagery hadn't been used in art since the fertility goddesses, and it is essential that woman finds her own sexual identity rather than the sexual identity that had been given to her by man. Citing women in terms of their sexuality and

reproduction functions (Chicaco's 'Dinner Party' consists of important women from history, mythology and culture represented by vaginal and vulva-like plates) does recall the old woman as nature idea.

This ancient dichotomy equating woman as natural, man as culture and creative has been used for centuries, as artists continued to see woman as earth mother, or figure in the landscape, identified by her biological essences and passive eroticism - thus negating her powers of creativity. Chicaco and Santoro by attempting to salvage "the despised stamp of femaleness" have instead made very general and basic statements about female sexuality. "The Dinner Party" dates from 1975 and may have been shockingly revolutionary then, but now with the circulation of increasingly explicit pornographic representations of the vagina, the meanings of vaginal imagery has been radically changed. The bottom line is, do women really want to be represented by their body parts or biological functions, also the audience outside the immediate feminist group and unfamiliar with new art practices must be confused, alienated or simply bored by it.

I've already discussed the problems women artists have when approaching the female nude, the self-image, and their search for new ways of expressing themselves and their sexuality.

By avoiding the self-image women are resigning themselves to being model, never maker rather than possibly enjoying both. It is difficult to know how to go about redressing the balance without the great fear of being misinterpreted. No image-maker is ever sure how the viewer is going to react and of course there is the

question of voyeurism, which is always pertinent with any figurative image. Up to now it has been easier to ignore the whole muddled area and concentrate on new forms of imagery, yet why 'give in' to this 'take over' by centuries of male dominated art. Why not look for new ways of depiction which oppose its current role as seductive raw material. No image of the female nude can entirely escape the prospect of male voyeurism, but new forms of material must be found which offer women images of themselves which are not humiliating or oppressive.

A body of feminist discourse has been dedicated to the male as viewer, woman as viewed aspect. Barbra Kruger's (fig ii) "Your Gaze Hits the side of my Face" and "I Will Not Play Nature to your Culture" address these issues "staying the technique" but without really 5. challenging or contradicting.

Only by working with the self-image it it possible to aggravate and confuse the male as subject/woman as object, viewer/viewed pattern. When the female is both object and subject, artist and model the matter is completely redressed and we get a new twist to an ancient pattern.

As in the works of Heckyl (fig iii, Chapter I) the artist is not visable but his presence is felt by his approach and the manner in which the model is used. I feel it's essential for women artists to use the female nude in order to challenge the stereotypes of femininity within the fine art practice.

Some women artists have done this working with the existing iconography of the nude but challenging its historical, stereotypical restrictions, and using it as

a method of highly personalised subjective expression.

"The major premise (and promise) of the women's movement since the 60's has been to find a "voice" for woman, intelligible yet separate from the patriarchal voice and to reclaim the image of woman from the representation of others." 6.

Nancy Spero has launched a "full-scale attack of patriarchy" and her weapon - the female body. A differently coded female body becomes a "positive force" whose impulses and actions transgress against a patriarchal language. 7.

"Spero's carnivalesque figurations of women's bodies and spaces is posited against a masculine imaginary and towards another way of symbolising it's 'other' or 'female imaginary'." 8.

Spero uses a variety of materials, collaged over the image several times to give the impression that no fixed or stagnant statements are being made. Her sources reach across historic and mythological interests to connect the variety and changeability of experience.

The Birth of Venus 1984 (fig iii) 10.

In this work Spero reprints the venus figure over a series of handprints to disallow us an image which represents wholeness and unity. The outline of Venus is running through a maze of ancient neo-lithic markings determined not be seen as a fixed or passive entity. The very fact that the Venus is running and active exudes a fierce subjectivity challenging their usual representation.

Most of Spero's nudes are multiple images, drawn, superimposed and layered or collaged. The idea of patterns and repetition recurs on long freize or scroll-like pieces of paper, never making a fixed or finite statement.

"The works are about rythem and repetition, the narrative doesn's have a beginning, middle or end". 9.

The scrolls roll on, images of the human female body that are never going to resolve themselves in the form of ancient goddesses juxtaposed with modern myths of the paradoxical twentieth century female. Goddesses, like the Celtic Sile-na-Gig along with the goddesses of the silver screen all dance together in the "continuous present.

Sile-na-gig (A Chorus Line" [fig iv]) is used as a powerful ancient image of female sexuality. Her use of the Sile-na-gig instead of the female image one would expect on a chorus line is an example of replacing expected pleasurable images with surprising, confrontational ones. The Sile is an ancient example of woman as an image of vigour and authority (she was also a symbol of death) and an independent and powerful force. I find this image of a primitive female form showing off her genitals much more positive and reassuring than Chicaco's slick, fragmented rendition of the female sex, probably because she stand for so much besides her sexuality, although her vulva is undoubtedly the most remarkable part of her make-up.

"These goddesses of strength and healing, of female jouissance, these survivors, these dancers on their way to revolution, are all part of the centuries of contemporary celebration of femininity". 10.

Carolee Schneeman and Hannah Wilke are performance artists who use their own bodies in their work and appear nude in performance.

"In some sense I made a gift of my own body to other women; giving our bodies back to ourselves. The haunting images of the cretan bull dancers; joyful, free, bare-breasted skilled women leaping precisely from danger to ascendancy guided my imagination" - Carolee Schneeman.

This reminds us that no matter how women reject images of themselves by men, they can't afford to lose the authority that they should have over the self-image and the freedom to do with it what they wish.

Hannah Wilkes - performance "starification" object series (fig v) consists of her handing out chewing gum to the audience, then taking it back flirtatiously and forming it into vaginal-like shapes and sticking them onto her naked torso. She is using her own body as is her right to assert her own sexuality. She takes pleasure from her own representation of herself as object and subject of the performance.

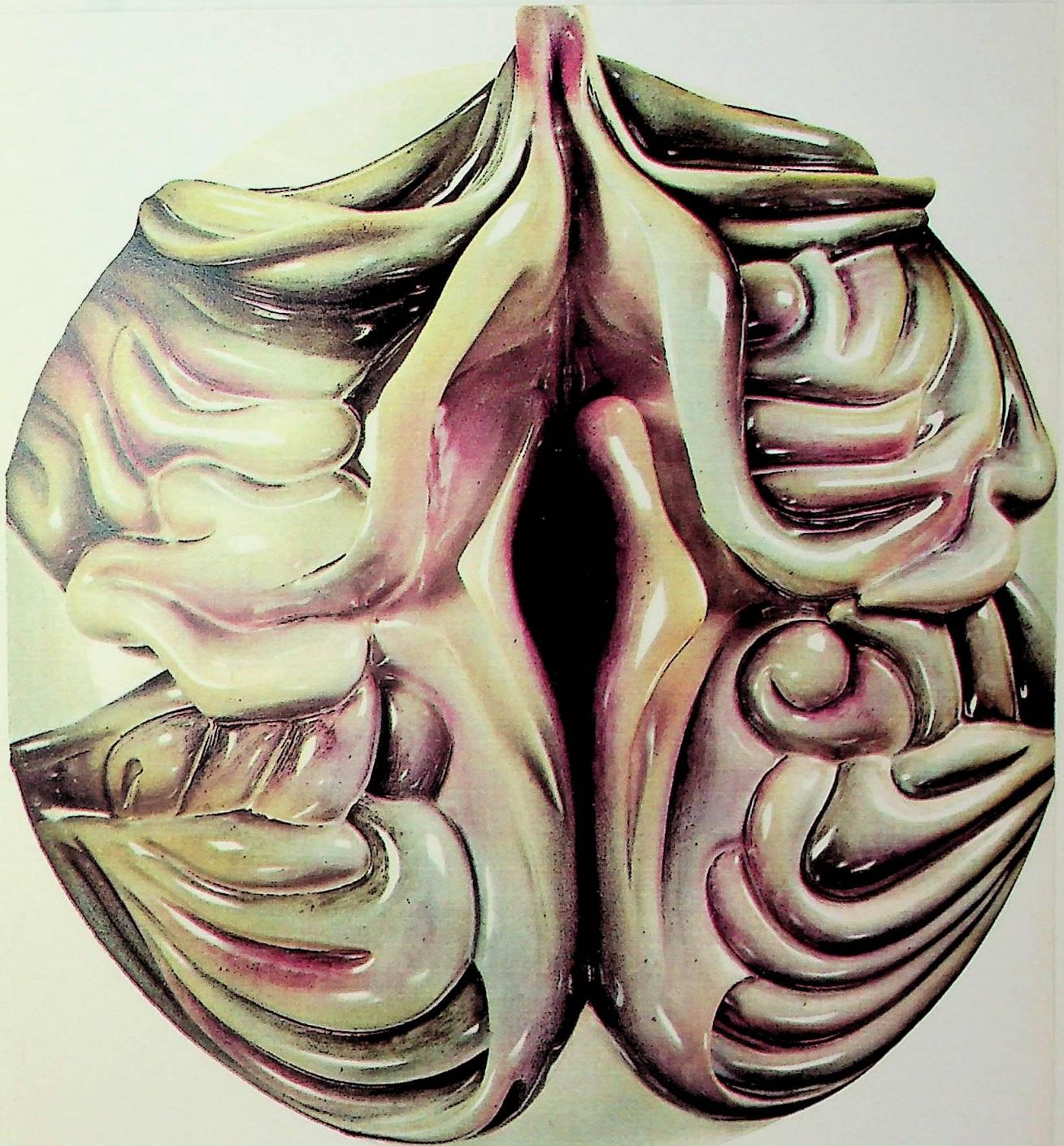


Fig.i Judy Chicago - "Georgia O'Keefe
from "The Dinner Party"

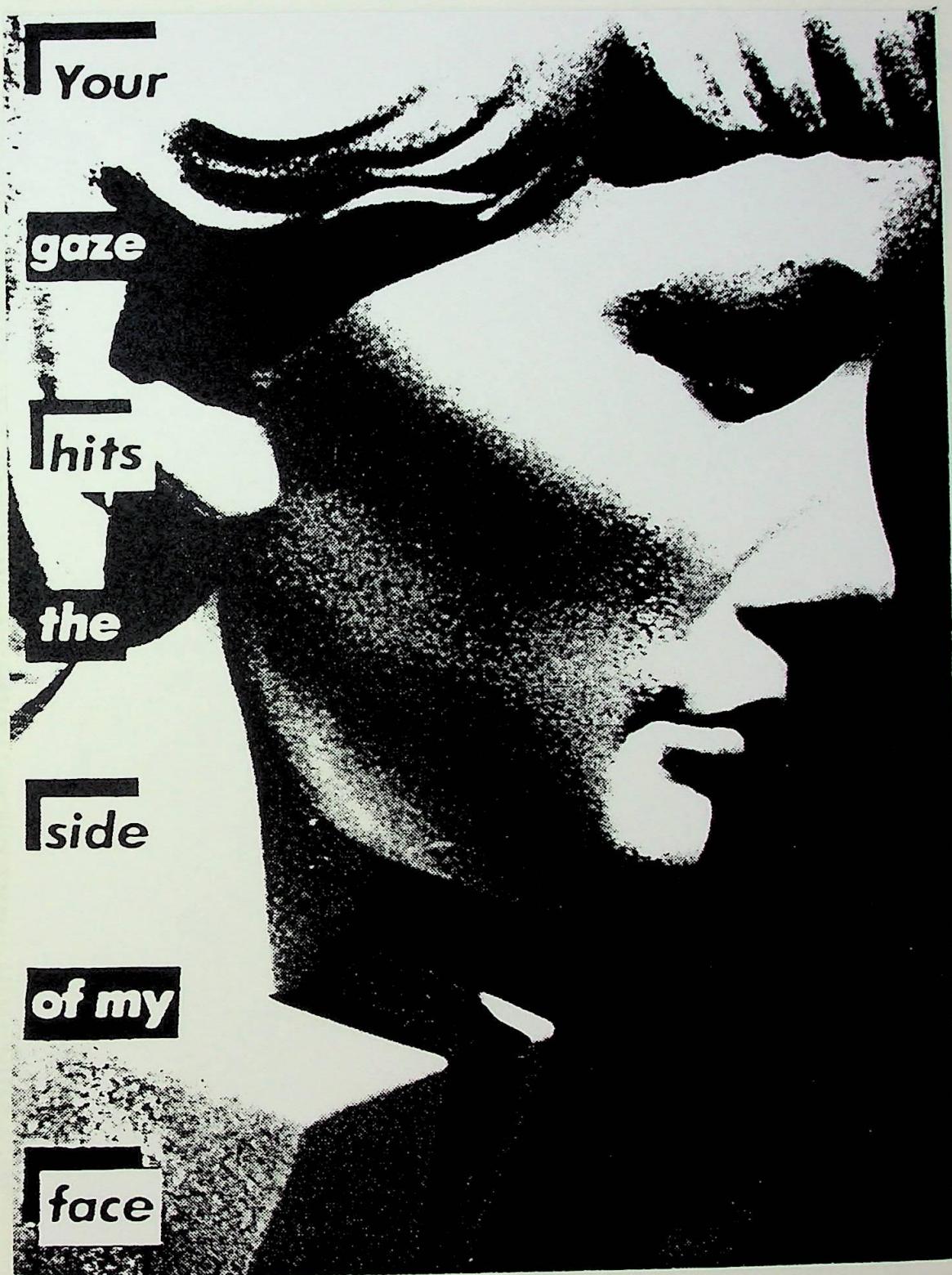


Fig.ii

Barbra Kruger -
"Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face"



Fig.iii Nancy Spero - "The Birth of Venus"

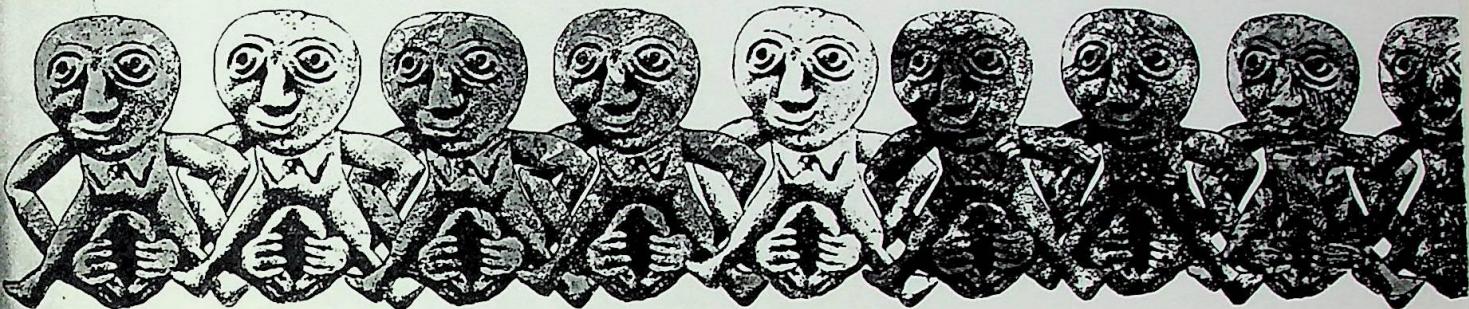


Fig.iv Nancy Spero - "The Chorus Line"



Fig.v

Hannah Wilke - from
"Starification Object Series"

CHAPTER III

PAINT AS A METHOD OF FEMINIST EXPRESSION

At the beginnings of the feminist movement women sought new media that they felt reflected a particularly feminine experience. It was generally felt that painting and established media sculpture was too loaded with a history of masculine meanings, uses and association. The use of different more pluralist media such as wool, fabric, porcelain, household objects, helped women create a separatist feminist language. Before the seventies anything "feminine" was considered inferior within the fine art hierarchy. Women decided to play upon these prejudices and use specifically "feminine" media drawn from their personal experiences until women were no longer afraid to be women in the art world.

Photography, video and installations appeared to serve as more immediate and sympathetic forms of expression. Following recent trends, however, towards figuration in mainstream painting a new interest and awareness towards this most traditional media evolved among women artists. With the original separatist idea among feminists, women who painted had to question their choice of media. Were they picking a safe, reputable media or one that was particularly sensitive to their own sensibilities.

ALEXIS HUNTER re-engaged the language of painting after nine years of involvement with the woman's movement and use of "alternative" media mainly photography. She

described why she spent that time away from traditional media in the first place.

"Painting has been overloaded with the same meaning for years and I wanted to explore new meaning. I wanted to deal with the reality of the change in women's lives which was happening in that decade, to confront the fear of independence.

Sometimes I think that paintings just paint themselves and you're just a cipher standing over them with a paintbrush. With photography you have a good idea what you're going to do, even though I try to take photography intuitively the narrative is clear." 1.

She accepts that what she and the women's movement were doing in the seventies was historically more important because they "broke" so much new ground. The alternative media and collectiveness was all a necessary part of the initiation of women as different, independent and playing upon that difference.

Now, however, it's now up to the individual woman to state her case and express herself however she sees fit.

When Hunter re-engaged the language of painting she did so because it necessitated her getting more involved in the actual process of forming the images. Like many women she stopped painting in the 70's questioning the difficulty of painting to carry an unambiguous message and using an establishment to carry a revolutionary message. She admits that even though there were struggles and conflicts within the seventies women's movement it was necessary to act as a united collective force.

Now she employs the ambiguity of paint as an individual whose coming to terms with personal conflicts.

In 1982 she started a series of large acrylic paintings about menstrual cycles and the premenstrual syndrome. As time went on her work became less direct and more complex.

The Struggle Between Ambition and Desire (fig 1) is based on her struggle between her emotional needs and the ambition to express herself as a woman and to other women.

"The contradiction in the title is to do with having to cut yourself off from people if you have to achieve something. Ambition to express yourself is a desire and desire can be something separate, a desire to be protected or sexual desire." 2.

She sees sexual desire as a sometime contradiction to other desire. The woman in the painting is asleep and the animal, the chimaera sitting on top of her represents her 'jungian animus' - the projection of her creativity. The woman is turned away from the animus refusing to be possessed by it.

"whether the chimera represents ambition or sexual desire I don't know - the elements are all part of the same thing. In the end you can't separate them and that is why they haunt you, that is the struggle." 3.

Now Hunter is influenced by John Berger's (1980) essay on animals looking at us.

"The more we make animals like us - castrate them or make them into breeding machines the more we want to be

natural and savage like them. It has parallels with Valerie Solanas's S.C.U.M. Manifesto (1971) where she says that men want to oppress women because they want to be like woman".

4.

In her "Passionate Instinct" series she portrays sexuality through beasts and savage animals, or mythological strange mutants. They also portray fear and anxiety, directly expressing the conflicts that exist around notions of femininity or masculinity around personal desire and passion. "Siamese Separation" (fig ii).

"The mutants mating, were about people, things whatever they are trying to mate, being frightened of death, being unable to. And it's just about that - the border between love, sex and violence which was actually running through all the other works as well."

5.

"In Passionate Instincts" VI (fig iii)

A tigerish beast stares out from beneath a stormy sky with a rocky landscape and volcano behind. Hunter admits to deliberately trying to break down "phallic perspective" in her paintings. She incorporates the Chicago notion of "female forms" such as circular organic forms and a central aperture. However, her paintings do not exist around centralism alone. She incorporates this to try and pull the viewer into the content so that they'll become involved in the narrative. She feels that the feminist movement or particular feminist artists have changed the face of painting because now content plays as much a part as the commodity.

She doesn't however expect all feminists to share the same kind of ideology.

"I think that all the different kinds of feminism make a broad base from which to operate. Theory had taken it's place alongside radical action - they both need each other. Each member of the movement should work according to her temperament and ability". 6.

This is not always the case. Here's a quote made by feminist critic Anna Bonshek about women who use paint as a means of expression:-

"Painting is an isolating activity and the myth of the artist as a gifted individual set apart from the rest of society conflicts how many women see their own creative process let alone their daily lives. Women have need to collaborate and feel they can come together and dismantle any enshrined idealism which supports the ego-centric individual genius." 7.

I find statements like these ruinous and often insulting to women. If painting is regarded as a male enclave and women steer clear of it fearing it may only serve to enforce the status quo they can be held responsible for their own self-censorship.

I think the debate should shift (it already has to some extent) towards examining the use and implications of certain media, rather than making vague narrow distinctions between them. There is need for a re-examination of the effect a chosen media has in relation to the artists wishes and the audience it relates to.

MARIA CHEVSKA - (fig iv "In the Sad Backyard hope Flies")

Much of Maria's work represents a crossing between one type of survival to another.

In "Crossing the Water" (fig v) we see swirling figures floating, limbs like water weeds. Like Nancy Spero she emphasised the constant changeability of the female state, the female figure is always present, sometimes hinted at, sometimes half swallowed up. She acknowledges the difficulty of painting the female figure, her floating figures can never be recognized as just flesh or an allegorical type.

"The time is ripe at present for women to become creators. As artists having to reconstruct the world position women have a chance to redefine their own experience through painting." 8.

Although the women painters discussed above seem to link their work with a past age they use it to bring to bear their own position with this society, (from their own perspective in terms of race, class, gender) and re-invest in that material which has remained unacceptable to feminists up to now.



Fig.i

Alexis Hunter -
"The Struggle Between Ambition and Desire"



Fig.ii Alexis Hunter - "Siamese Separation"



Fig.iii Alexis Hunter - "Passionate Instinct VI"

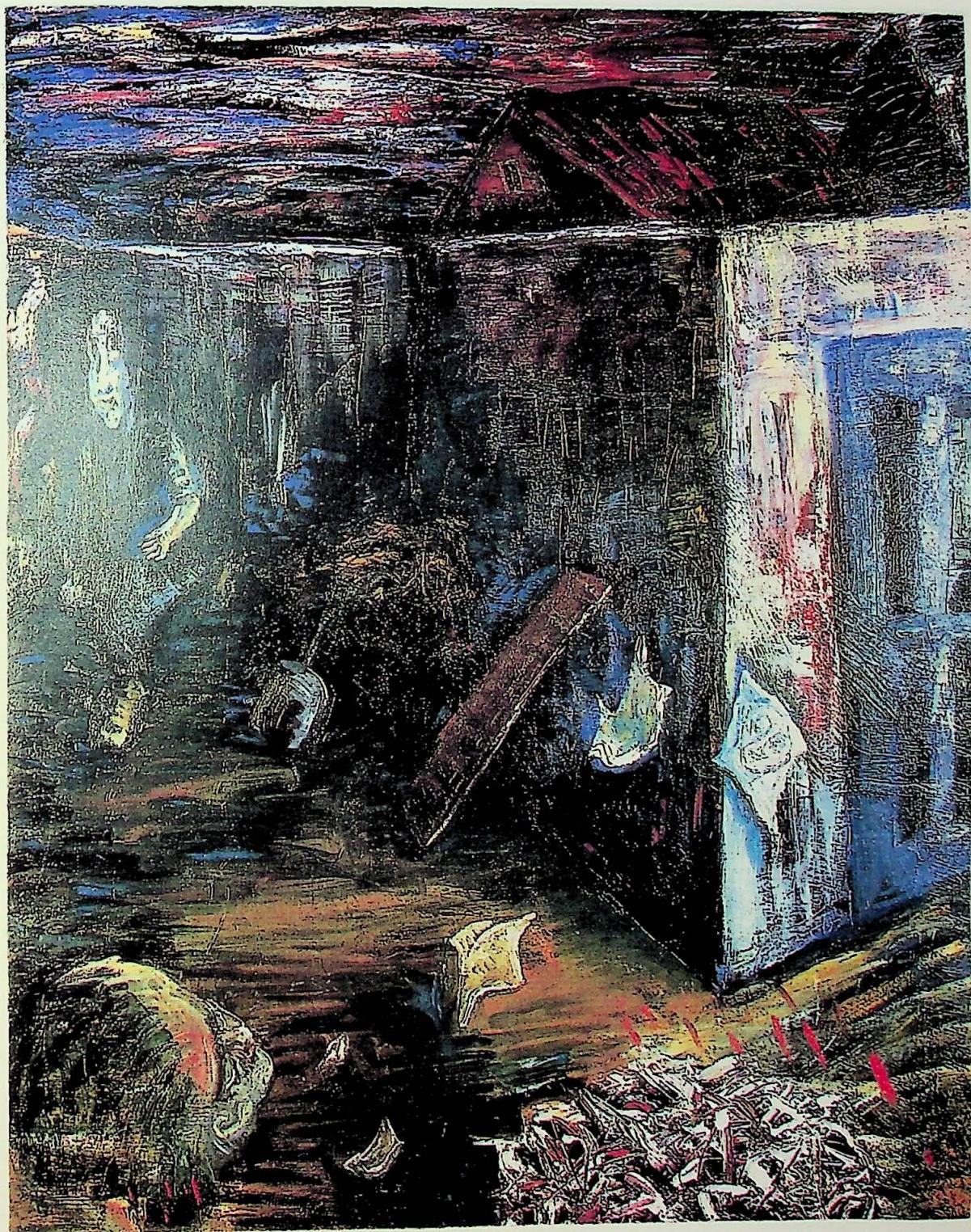


Fig.iv

Maria Chevska -
"In the Sad Backyard Hope Flies"



Fig.v

Maria Chevska - "Crossing the Water"

CHAPTER IV

SUZANNE VALADON

The importance of Suzanne Valadon's work lies in her reworking of the traditional artist/model relationship within such a hierachal practice as expressionist painting. Although she was a contemporary of the post-impressionist artists and influenced greatly by Toulouse Lautrec and Degas her work contains definite expressionistic tendencies.

I'm choosing Valadon because I feel she best illustrates points discussed earlier in this essay;

- [i] woman artists working with the female nude
- [ii] women asserting their own position while using an established media and working within an established movement.

I would be wrong to suggest that Valadon was a feminist or even aware of the differences between her ways of seeing and those of her contemporaries yet even though she worked within a masculine tradition of representation she did product images which disrupted the conventions of the time.

Obviously her ways of seeing had been affected by her unusual and advantageous position being both model and artist. Because of her own experience being as used to being observed as she was to observe she never wholly objectified the nude. She painted as many self-portraits as she did portraits continuing to see herself as object

and subject, viewer and viewed. All of this helps disrupt and reconstruct the position of the female image. Her work shows us that it is possible for women to work within such a powerful tradition of male voyeurism as the nude in painting.

The popularity of Valadon's work with her male counterparts and later on the artistic world in Paris at the beginning of the century suggest that there was nothing obviously daring or innovative about it. She admired and was influenced much by Degas and Lautrec and received every encouragement from them.

It's not the type of work which she produced which makes her interesting from a feminist view point but the manner in which she executes conventions. The formal characteristics of her drawing and painting and the different ways in which she positioned the nude on the picture plane render it more difficult for the image to be perceived in a voyeuristic manner.

She was doubtlessly unaware of the difference between her approach to the nude and that of her contemporaries as she often shared in their portrayal of groups of bathers, reducing the nude to its essentialist ideology. The theme of woman in nature was repopularised at this time where the female is portrayed as natural in terms of her biological functions and unchallenging passive eroticism Man's physiology by contrast leaving him alone free to deal with culture - creating artificially while women create naturally. However, in Valadon's work we see a consciousness of women's experience which challenges the convention of the nude. The female nude can appear so natural that John Berger, in "The Naked and the Nude" writing about Picasso's nudes could comment

"One scarcely feels she is posing...she is there...
her function is to be...she is nature...she is sex...
she is life." 1.

Valadon, though probably subconsciously and quite subtly turns this idea on it's head. She works within the conventions of the time and uses all the popular means of portraying the nude, ie - on a sofa, bathing, in the landscape, but she continued to see them in a subjective manner, as individuals engrossed in some act or in relation to each other.

In a series of paintings from the 1920's to the 1930's she draws in common with her contemporaries a series of reclining nudes (fig i) but her version differs from those in the attention given to the individuality of the sitter. The difference between hers and Heckyl's for example (see fig iii, chap.I) is that in Valadon's the woman's face is as strongly delineated as her body and she confronts the viewer coolly and unabashed. In Heckyl's the woman totally hides her face and offers up her body to a voyeuristic gaze.

B. Dorival noticed the difference in Valadon's portrayal of nudes and suggested that she brings together to separate genres of nude and portraiture.

"Everything is portraiture as far as she's concerned and a breast, tight, wrinkle are interrogated with no less attention that a facial expression. The models often chosen for their ugliness, their commonplace nature, heavy breasts, sagging stomachs, wide hips, prominent buttocks, thick wrists and ankles - are depicted with a gift for individual characterisation which we find in both individual and collective portraits." 2.

Some of her early works "The Tub" 1903 (fig ii) or "Nude Getting into Bath Beside Grandmother" reflect Degas' influence on her work by showing women caught in moments of action yet hers differ in two ways. Firstly, by placing the nude along with an older maternal woman she denies any suggestion of narcissistic sexuality or any voyeuristic pleasure. The bathing act is seen as a natural or unremarkable. Event from early biblical and mythological themes "Suzannah and the Elders" through to Post-Impressionist and Expressionist times the bathing act was seen as a privileged 'peeping Tom' access to the private female world. Women were seen as narcissistic objects on display.

Secondly, Valadon's drawing compared to Degas's appear curiously awkward. She places her figures artificially high on the picture plane denying the privileged key-hole vantage point that Degas offers the viewer. (fig iii "Nude Getting Out of Bath Beside Grandmother") Her lines are abrupt, harsh and edgy, offering no erotic sensation compared to Degas's diffused suggestion of the softness of flesh.

In the "Abandoned Doll" 1921 (fig iv), she deals with the onset of puberty and a young girls awareness of her own sexuality. Her mother dries her back (another example of the nude being accompanied by a maternal figure) but the girl turns away from her, suggesting some sort of conflict. The abandoned doll lies at her feet. This is typical of the kind of narrative content that we see in Valadon's work and is also reflected in works of todays women painters such as Alexis Hunter and Maria Chevaska. Not content with representations of female flesh she preferred to create images which reflected womens experiences, such as puberty, relationships between mother and daughter and aging.

Her many self portraits showed us that her experience as a model allowed her to see herself in a frank and uncompromising manner. Again she disrupts the expected pleasures of the iconography of the nude by painting herself late into her 50's and 60's bare breasted, aging, cropped hair, make-up and jewellery (fig v). What Valadon did was open up different possibilities of the nude, to allow for the expression of women's experience of their own bodies.

"Her work shows us that it is possible for women to intervene even within a genre which has such a powerful tradition as the nude in painting." 3.

On reflection on most of the points raised earlier suggests that Valadon shared expressionist objectives. The most immediate one is her refusal to idealise the figure. This often leads to critics of the time accusing her of hating women, the way she portrayed them differed so drastically to the conventions of the time.

"To be truthful" was Suzanne Valadon's main ambition. 4. She sought a form of honesty and realism that had little to do with servile imitation. Her point of view was that of a subjective interested party, drawing from her own experience from within.

Technically she often surprised and angered her contemporaries by refusing to idealise or compromise the form. Degas himself acknowledged the difference in letters to his "terrible Maria" (her real name) written around 1990 when he refers to her "wicked and supple drawings which are "drawn like a saw". 5.

Her interest in printmaking and her use of heavy tonalities and turgid overlaid use of paint have more

in common with avant-garde Expressionist than Post-Impressionists. Each of her pieces have to style of their own. She disliked being considered part of a group aiming for a consistent often startling originality.

I feel that the main point which I have deduced from looking at Valadon is that a feminine point of view, while employing an ancient genre such as the nude in painting is possible, and also possible within the rigid, expressionist approach she employed. In fact, Valadon used expressionist methods to achieve this view-point which disrupted the conventions; eg: refusing to idealise the form, disallowing any seductive quality, experimenting with the picture plane creating an unavoidable confrontation with image and viewer.

It is only by relocating such women artists historically in art that women today can begin to feel comfortable with movements such as expressionism, fauvism, post-impressionism, and feel that these exciting and innovative times are not only a male preserve.

Women artists have also a need to find links with their pasts and use that information to inform the present.

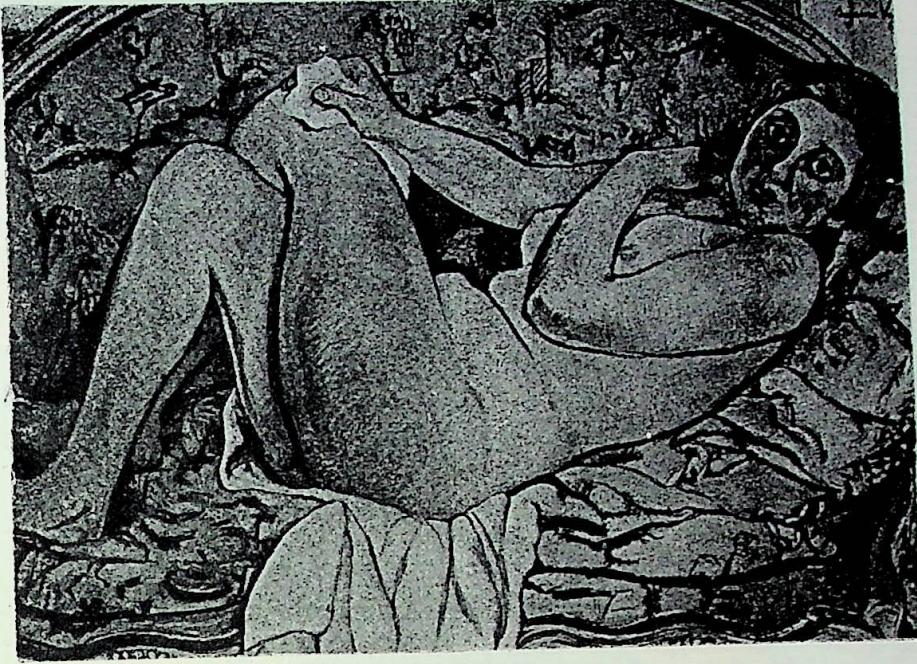


Fig.i Suzanne Valadon - "Reclining Nude"

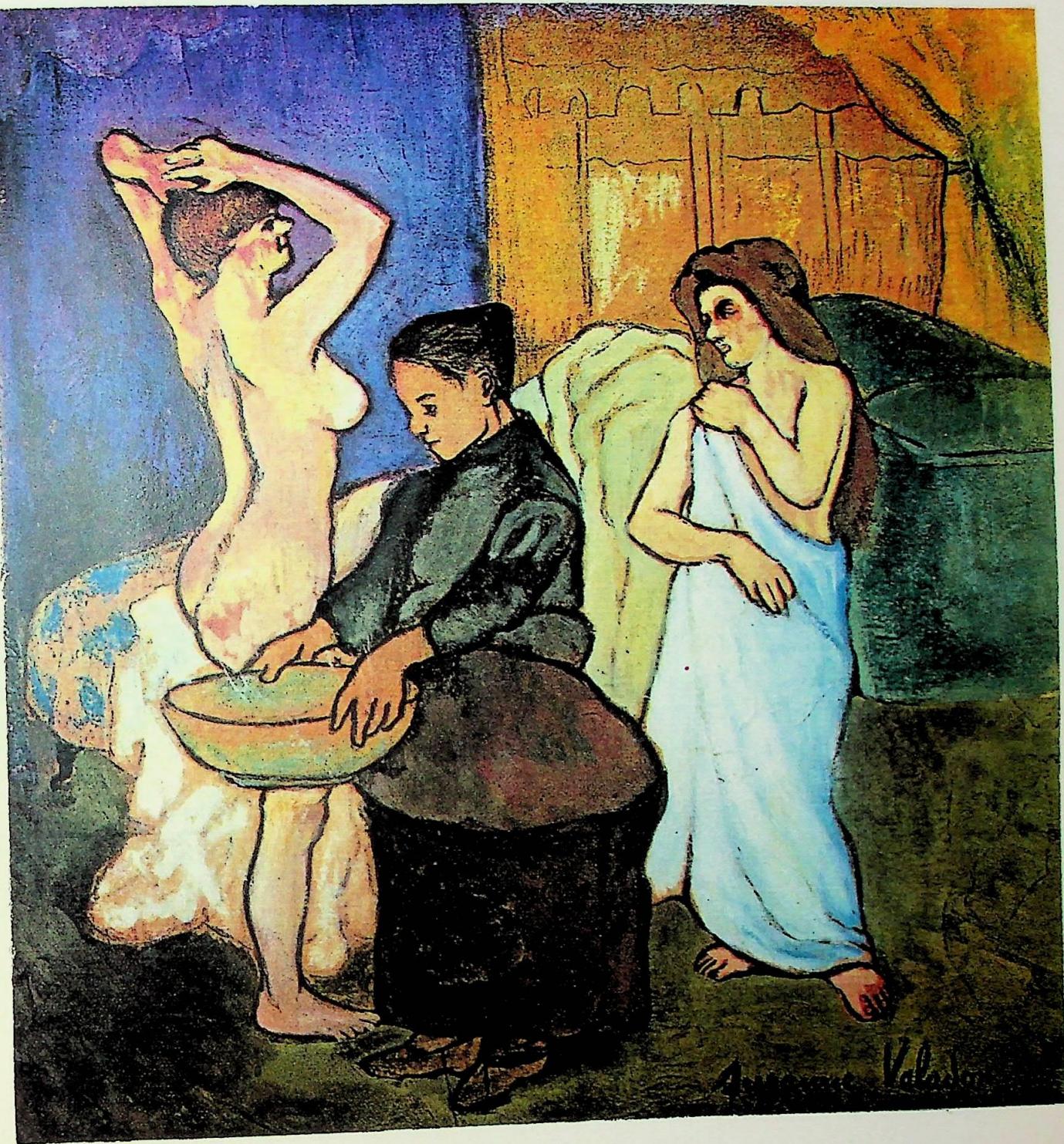


Fig.ii Suzanne Valadon - "The Tub"

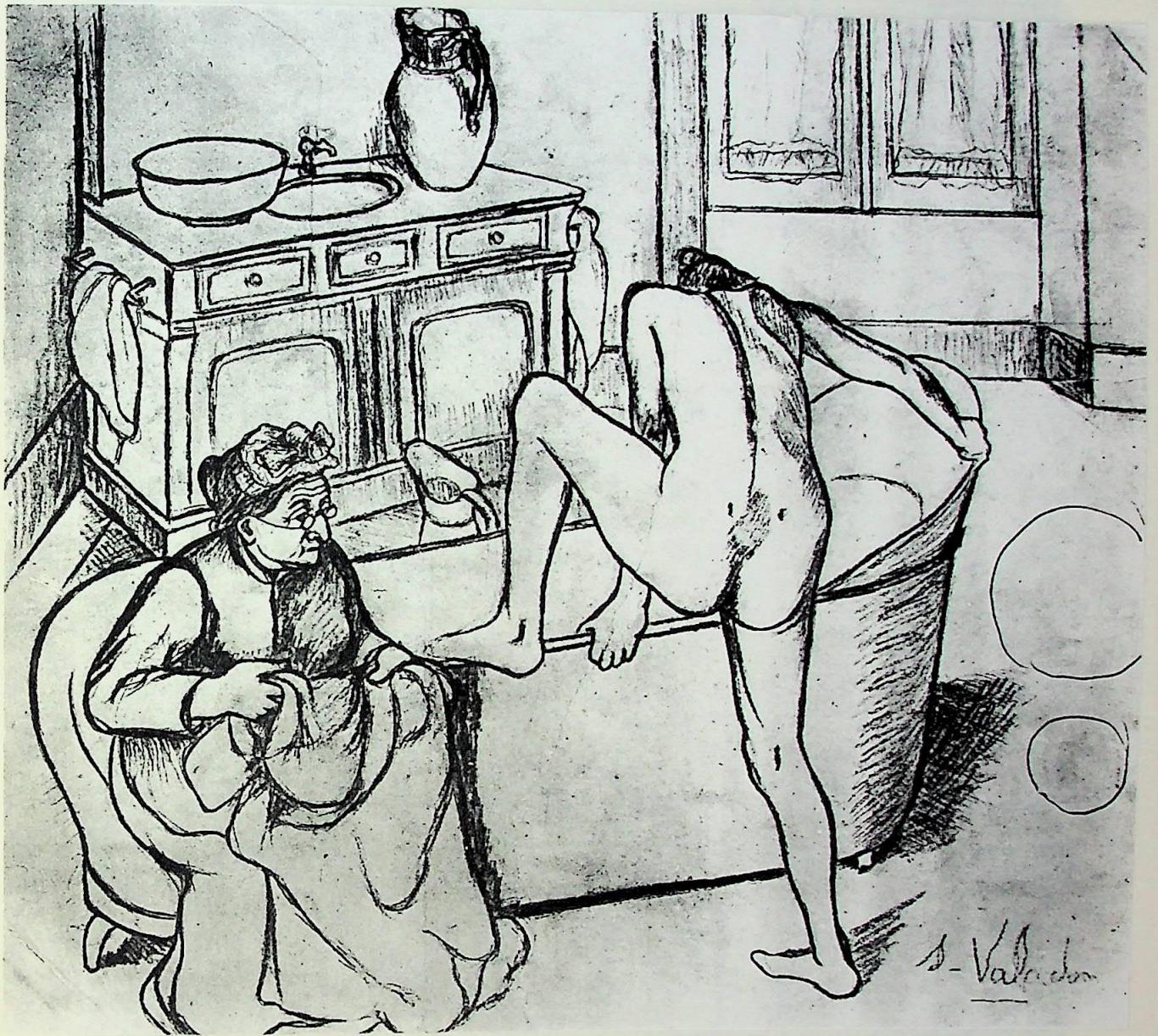


Fig.iii Suzanne Valadon -
"Nude Getting Out of Bath Beside Grandmother"

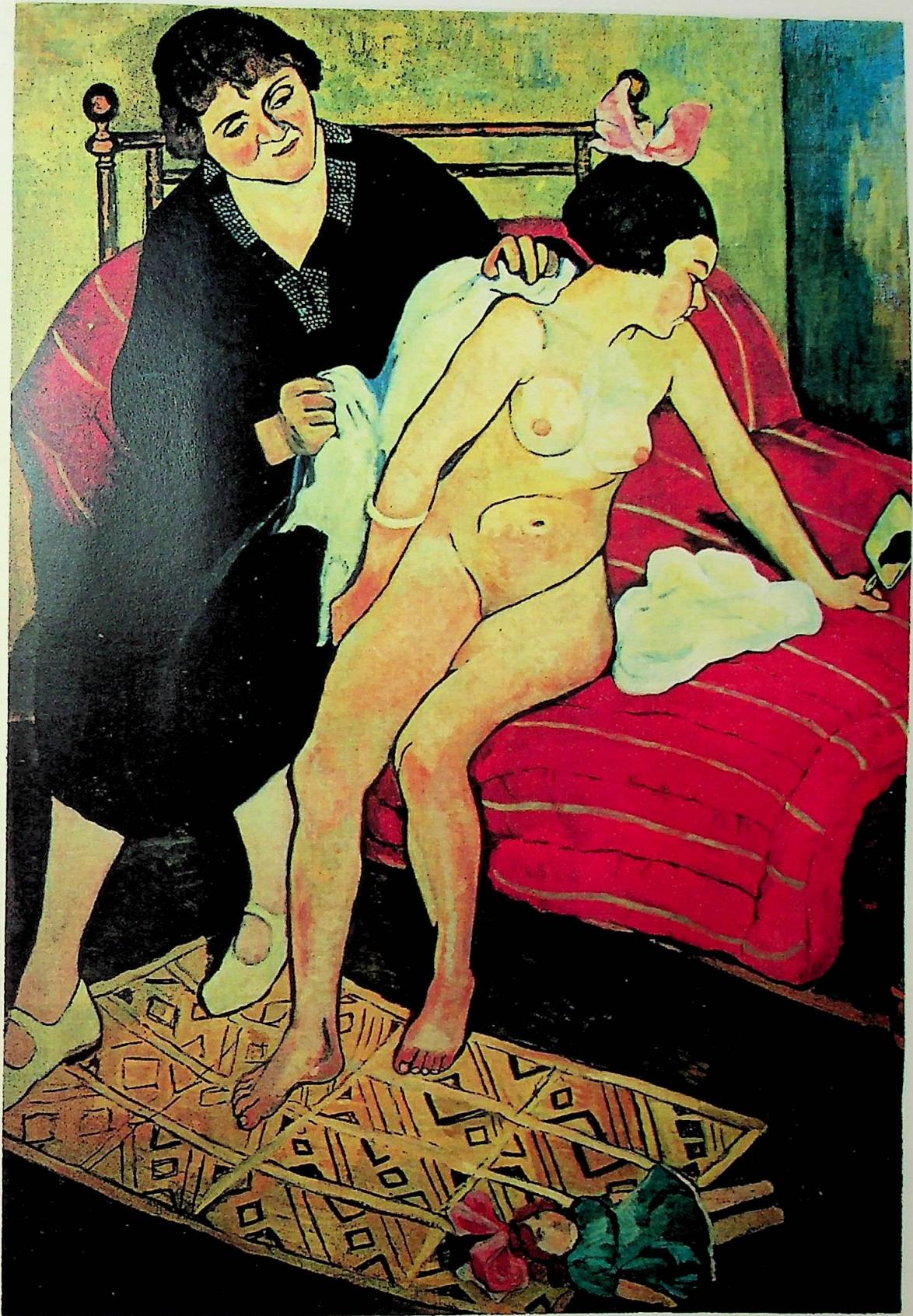


Fig.iv Suzanne Valadon - "The Abandoned Doll"



Fig.v

Suzanne Valadon - "Self Portrait"

CONCLUSION

This thesis was not meant to prove that all feminist artists can become expressionist painters.

Since expressionism is not a masculine trait there was never any doubt that they could, most of them didn't want to make "big splats" (Nancy Spero) or "bombastic objects, objects empty of all but peacock display" (Maria Chevaska) but at the same time the mistreatment of a certain trend by male artists should not result in female artists running in fear from it.

There is, undoubtedly a long way to go before women can leave "the protective womb", (Lucy Lippard) and feel that they can wholly embrace any tenet of any art practice. It's not only that women have a right to belong to the main stream art world, but rather that feminism has so much newly acquired knowledge to offer a traditional, often closed, area such as expressionism and new-painting.

For example; expressionist feminist Therese Oulton was privileged to be part of the "'New Image' in Painting" exhibition. Her work has been described by Anna Bonshek in "Visible Female" as deliberately creating a vortex, breaking down phallic perspective, pulling us into the drama, her own passion which cites her the woman as creator (fig.i). Much reference is made to her blood reds and feminist gesture.

Yet, in the "New Image" catalogue Tony Godfrey describes the same work as "similar to Volkar Tannerts - disrupting too simple banalities of romanticism" and that's it - no reference to her gender is given. The difference apparent

aren't even entertained. Is it impossible for work to be seen as feminist unless it has feminism 'pregnancy', 'vagina', stamped all over it? The importance of feminism is apparent with individual artists and womens' groups but barely within art generally. This is the cause of separatism.

Gizela Ecker stated that feminism would never be realised until all critics as well as artists became aware of their sexuality and questioned their point of view. However, with feminists active mainly only within feminist groups, with feminist critics male artists and critics don't have to react or to respond. When women artists such as Therese Oulton or Maria Chevaska are successful as they now are within a mainstream trend, no one seriously discusses the importance of feminism for them.

Running counter to the so-called mainstream is not really changing it or challenging it. It's only when women are working well with artists of all genders or classes or races that we can begin to reap the benefits and feel that hierarchies and presumptions are really being challenged.

There is no longer any need to protect "those tender sprouts" as Lucy Lippard called the Women's Art during the formative years of the women's movement.

The difference has been established and accumulated information of the last two decades has succeeded in throwing an entire new light on Art History. Now that we can see the problems in perspective it's time to start resolving.

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