Challenging the Feminine: Gender Tropes in Classical Painting

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Abstract

In much of art history, women are depicted as innately helpless, weak and even unwittingly malevolent. Conversely, many paintings affirm the virility, dominance, and general wisdom of men. *Challenging The Feminine: Gender Tropes in Classical Painting* identifies three archetypal depictions of females: the reclining female, the female aspect, and the grouped female. Several iconic works of art history are referenced, such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino,* Edgar Degas' *Bath Paintings,* and Raphael's *Three Graces.* Accompanying the research, the artist has produced a series of large-scale oil paintings exploring depictions of gender. The use of classical figurative poses creates parallels between gender within contemporary art and the antiquated preconceptions of female agency. The artist also uses facial expressions and body language to communicate each painted figure's personality and experience. Much like the duality of male and female, the Vanitas genre effectively communicates binary ideas. Relevant contemporary artists such as Jenny Saville, Beverly McIver, and Lizz Andronaco inform this discussion about the portrayal of women in contemporary painting. This body of work contextualizes and questions the conventions of feminine tropes in art history by utilizing the same classical canons that propagated them.

1. Introduction

Challenging The Feminine: Gender Tropes in Classical Painting is a series of large-scale, figurative oil paintings. This series investigates modern society's rigid adherence to outdated gender roles while producing new and contemporary depictions of women in art. In art history, women are rarely portrayed as individuals; rather they are used as representational objects. Paintings depicting powerful elder women are scarce; young women are generally depicted as vulnerable sexual objects; and women in general are reduced to singular traits. Tropes and visual elements are mechanisms which characterize gender in art. The appropriation and juxtaposition of classical male and female poses counteracts the canonical tropes used to paint women.

Other than biological sex, body language, symbols, and environment can also imply gender. In order to protest the classification of gender from a 21st century point of view, classical works depicting the standardization of male and female are used as informative precedents. Male figures are featured in the traditional postures of women, while female figures are placed in poses of undeniable power. Archetypal tropes such as the Three Graces, along with conventions such as direct gaze, and standing poses are used to communicate the idea of contemporary femininity in non-classical representation.

The relationship of the Vanitas genre to gender informs the research of symbolism within figurative painting. Much like gender, Vanitas is used to express dualities. Objects are used to inform the viewer of archetypal dualities such as life versus death, man versus nature, and growth versus decay.

My technique and approach to creating artwork has evolved throughout the course of this research project. A mixed media approach including the use of traditional oil painting, water color, and drawing within my art work further contributed to challenging the preconceptions of duality. Through the consolidation of the composition,

dynamic poses, and symbolism the viewer may begin to form their own conclusions about the images in *Challenging the Feminine*.

Accompanying my study of definitive figure paintings from art history, I have also researched the work of Beverly McIver, Jenny Saville, and Lizz Andronaco. Information and research by Naomi Wolf fuels my discussion of the the feminine.

2. Vanitas Genre as a Signifier of Gender

Vanitas painting is a 16th and 17th century Dutch, allegorical still life genre which often features succulent and/or rotting food, flowers in bloom or decay, along with other objects such as extinguished candles, cracked mirrors, and human skulls. These objects are used symbolically to juxtapose dualities. Vanitas imagery highlights these binary relationships as to prompt reflection on the fragility of life.

An example of Vanitas as a vehicle for demonstrating duality can be seen in *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life* by the Dutch Golden Age painter Harmen Steenwyck.[1] A beautiful and unsettling image of death and the passage of time, Steenwyck's painting is rendered in muted tones. Although the space behind the still life is empty the painting holds a wealth of information.

In the center of the painting, illuminated by a ray of sunlight coming from above, perhaps through a window, rests a human skull whose front teeth and mandible are missing. If the eyes were still intact, perhaps they would be directed towards the viewer as if to convey the inevitable shared fate of mortal beings. The partial skull lay surrounded by objects of human knowledge, pleasure, and ingenuity – books, musical instruments, a lamp, a chronometer, and a weapon.

A sword cuts through the horizontal plane of Steenwyck's composition, appearing to enter and exit the top right quadrant of the skull and alluding to the inherent violence of life, but perhaps also to the self-destructiveness of humanity. The creation of tools and weapons used to protect are turned against us. Smoke from the lamp behind the skull and sword, feathers up and into the darkness on the top right side of the composition. It dissipates and is short lived, serving as a reminder of the ephemeral quality of time and life. Lastly, in Steenwyck's painting, the shell is the only object not directly related to man as it rests detached from humanity (the skull) and its creations. The shell serves as a symbol for the unspoiled natural world: nature without man. The texture of the shell relates back to the skull and connects man and nature within this Vanitas work.

Fig. 1: Harmen Steenwyck, *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanitas of Human Life,* 1640, Oil on oak, 39.2"x 50.7"

The objects used by Steenwyck act as artifacts of the abstract concepts expressed by Vanitas. In my own paintings, I use objects such as the apple and the pomegranate, along with other contemporary items, to discuss the standards and stereotypes of gender. Like the smoke, the physical manifestations of gender preconceptions dissipate as society changes. "Gender-acceptable" clothing, adornment, and hair styles change from period to period. Trousers, long hair, jewelry, and make-up are only a few examples. To reference the nature-element, I paint nudes or I allow a figure to dissolve into the environment of the composition.

Similar to the use of symbolic objects in Vanitas painting, I use historical and contemporary objects as conceptual artifacts. In canonical works, symbols such as apples and pomegranates have branded woman-kind with metaphorical meaning. Both objects and people may act as metaphors for philosophical or mythological themes, concepts, or ideas. Apples, as a symbol, play a foundational role in Western society and other societies based on

Judeo-Christian beliefs. The apple is the catalyst of temptation for Eve, or woman, the downfall of Adam, or man. In this context, the apple represents the idea of women as morally lax seducers of unassuming and otherwise innocent men. It is also a transient symbol as the apple is often related to pomegranates, connecting across religions and culture to the Ancient Greek myth of the goddess Persephone. For Persephone, the pomegranate was a device used to ensnare her in the realm of her future husband. But, by eating only a few of the seeds, the years of her life are divided between the land of the dead, and the land of the living. In Persephone's case, she is at the hands of either her husband or her mother but never the architect of her own future. Similarly, Eve is controlled by curiosity. Merely a pawn of the goading snake figure in the garden, she is then at the mercy of her husband and god who blame her for tricking him. Both stories have been featured so frequently throughout the history of art that each woman becomes synonymous with her fruit.

Many of the historical references I use also convey a sense of femaleness to the viewer through compositional context clues. Interior settings imply domesticity, flowers allude to certain goddesses, and animals can allude to specific female deities or virtues. Within my own work, I juxtapose classical female poses and contexts with male figures. I render men without imposing feminine qualities onto them because I wanted to stay true to the expression of physical maleness. Thusly, the poses and objects become the catalysts for meaning.

Focusing on the face, as well as the body is useful in communicating individuality and experience. Without the presence of a face, voyeurism and archetypal themes would dilute the presence of a monumental female form. Shearer West, an art historian, further examines themes and importance of identity and the individual within late twentieth century Portraiture:

> Postmodern visual culture has explored the relationships between individuality, social role, and cultural, sexual, and gender stereotypes, but artists deal with these concepts as unstable, fluctuating, and indeterminate. In terms of portraiture, there has been a greater self-consciousness on the part of the artists about the implications of the age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and other signs of their sitters' identity."[2]

I use the presence of a face to directly confront the viewer with a naked feminine body. In challenging the male gaze, it's important to keep the face of the female figures present. It creates a confrontational tension between painted figure and viewer. The female figures are not vulnerable in their nakedness. Rather, they boldly present and own their bodies in complete acceptance. *Phenomenal Woman* uses body language and scale to convey the powerful presence of the feminine figure. She stands, centered in the composition, legs spread and eyes on the viewer below her. The form of her body is created from a marrying of expressionistic brushwork, preliminary line work, along with exaggerated shapes and shadows.

Fig. 2 Louise Bahia, *Phenomenal Woman,* 2015,
Oil on canvas, 80"x30"

The space around her is broken down, the relatively flat application of paint receding against the thicker application of the paint expressing her flesh. Her hands raised and resting on her head, she gazes down at the viewer. The fleshiness of the figure is provided by a rich application of oil paint. Parts of paint stick and pastel drawing show through and overlap the oil paint, intertwining the figure with the background. While this standing pose may evoke feminine ideals of posture and demeanor, it is her gaze, scale, and confident stance that set her apart from the female figures of art history. I do little to idealize the figures I paint; rather, I try to stay true to each indentation, protrusion,

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and fold of skin. She is confronting the viewer with her body instead of being presented as an offering. In parts of the composition her form disintegrates into blueish line work in order to let the gridded layout show through. She melds with her environment while entering ours. *Phenomenal Woman* departs from traditional representation as a portrayal of a female figure instead of a trope.

3. Appropriation of Canonical Female Tropes: The Grouped, Reclining, and Aspect

In much of art history women are depicted as innately helpless, weak, and at worst, unwittingly malevolent. However, men can find affirmations of their virility, strength, dominance, and even practical and spiritual wisdom. Women, however, are depicted as tropes or recurring metaphorical themes. Shearer West expands on gender in art history, stating that the differences expressed by males and females throughout art history are constructions of their perceived biological differences in those eras:

> "In different historical periods there have been variations in what was considered appropriate for male and female behavior, although some believe differences between men and women are universal because they are biologically determined rather than socially constructed."[3]

This implication of socially constructed roles for women and men appears in art work. Three themes kept surfacing in the research of femininity within art history: the reclining female, the grouped female, and the female aspect. The female aspect trope presents females as a singular trait. By characterizing women as one-dimensional, they are stripped of their personhood. Goddesses, graces, and divines are all incarnations of the female aspect trope. The female aspect trope is a common and easily recognizable across multiple mediums of creative expression, including mythology, music, theatre, and painting. The female aspect trope is used in conjunction with the reclining and group trope, but it is notable because it is one of the main conventions used throughout art history when creating socially acceptable paintings of nude females.

Fig. 3 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538, Oil on Canvas,
46"x 65"

The Venus of Urbino by Titian[4] is an appropriate example of how art can define the expectations and value of women. Titian paints a timid and soft reference to the Roman Goddess of love, sexuality, and fecundity. Scholars speculate the identity of the sitter as being the Duke of Urbino's young wife-to-be. She stares coyly at the viewer, clad in the guise of Venus, covering her vulva with an almost limp hand. Holding a bouquet of flowers, a representation of the goddess, she reclines on a red seat covered with a white sheet and white pillows. A pink flower, representational of friendly love, has fallen onto the exposed redness of the cushion. Red acts as a symbolic reference to the eroticism of this painting and its concept. Even while Titian has unveiled her passionate core, however, the goddess of female sexuality is reined in by the symbol of marital fidelity, a small dog at her feet. Finally, she has been placed within an intimate interior, effectively domesticizing Venus.

My painting titled *The Duke* is inspired by Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. Rather than a female figure, *The Duke* portrays a reclining male figure within a demure interior, and is painted onto three canvases. Lounging among pillows, the figure is enclosed in a private corner with the viewer as a curtain divides the composition in two. Unlike the female figures I paint, the male figure does not fill the space of the canvas. He appears timid and soft, gazing worriedly at the viewer, neither inviting nor dissuading. The nude male succumbs to the female-gaze; he is in turn as

helpless as his female counterpart, Venus, is to the male-gaze. The brushwork is reined in, stylistically separating itself from my painted images of female nudes. A pair of apples lay at his feet, referencing the object-symbol relationship of Vanitas, simultaneously suggesting the role to which he belongs and stripping him of person-hood. This suggests him as an aspect, not an individual; as a virtue, not a person.

Venus is only one example of this phenomenon. As a whole, female aspects largely inspire classical painting. Greek mythology presents Persephone, a beautiful maiden stolen away from her life to become queen of the underworld. The Bible illustrates Eve, or woman, as a seducer of man. Finally, the archetypal hag is associated with the dead and the decay of beauty.

Classical painting is heavily inspired by the female aspects of mythology and Venus is only one example. Others include the story of Persephone, a beautiful maiden stolen away from her life to become queen of the underworld. The Bible's Eve, characterizes woman as the seducer of man. Furthermore, the archetypal hag or crone is associated with the dead, and the decay of beauty.

Although there are few Western paintings of the crone aspect, it is an important one to note. As women age, they become more powerful. Older women have progressed through the periods of maiden and mother and have gained experience and wisdom that rival that of their male counterparts. Because of this, the hag has been illustrated as fearsome.

A national bestseller about the socially constructed ideals for women and femininity, *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf discusses the societal tension created between older women and younger women. She posits that the relationship has only become more tenuous as the beauty standard began to replace the ideal of the virgin and domestic feminine.

> "Youth and (until recently) virginity have been "beautiful" in women since they stand for experiential and sexual ignorance. Aging in women is "unbeautiful" since women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken: Older women fear young ones, young women fear old, and the beauty myth truncates for all the female life span."[5]

In a society obsessed with the perfection of the female form and its presentation, older women are cast aside. Men are not held to the same standard, however. Most societies do not view elderly men as having lost value, in comparison to their younger counterparts. While they may no longer have the strength they once possessed in youth, but in the eyes of a patriarchal society, the elder male has proven himself. Contrastingly, older women, no longer pleasantly inexperienced or youthful, are viewed as worthless. Placing an older male in the pose of the canonical hag does not effectively communicate the same way as placing a man in the pose of a Venus. We are accustomed to seeing images of older men as individuals, powerful and experienced. While men can also represent an aspect or trait, it is not the main means of portrayal for the male subject. I paint the elder woman as a powerful individual who knows her own strengths. A successful contemporary depiction of the elder woman marries individualism, beauty, and age. Wrinkles appear true to the woman, neither accentuated nor diminished. She is painted larger than life, secure and content to intimidate.
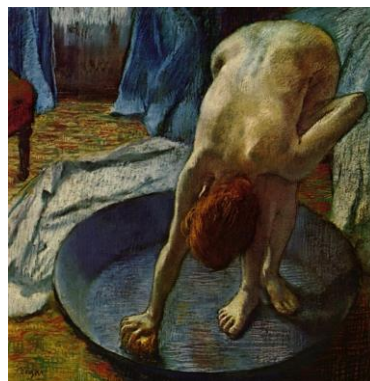

Fig. 4: Edgar Degas, The Tub, 1886, pastel
on paper, 27.5"x 27.5"

The reclining female is another trope used to represent women. It refers, not only to physically reclining figures, but also to female figures in domestic or intimate settings. These women are mainly painted within an interior although they can be displayed within a landscape as well. In *Challenging the Feminine*, many classical references

were chosen for their postures. In the same way Titian's *Venus of Urbino* displays aspects of sexual fidelity and virtuousness through the use of posture and symbolism, Degas' bathers similarly convey the coveted trait of vulnerability through the use of body language. Edgar Degas' bath paintings show women in dynamic positions as they bend, wash, and comb, unaware of the viewer and their own vulnerability. In his pastel drawing, *The Tub*, Degas depicts a female figure bent over, soaking up water with a sponge to clean herself.[6] The interior is simple, a chair and curtains can be discerned in the background. The cool tones of these surrounding elements make the relatively warm hues of the figure stand out. Her form can be studied at the leisure of the viewer; there is no confrontation from the figure as she stoops in an unflattering fashion. Her face is hidden and the women becomes subject to the male-gaze. She is an ornament, improving the otherwise simple interior of the painted space.

In classical works of male figures, the poses Degas uses in his Bath paintings are non-existent. Degas' entire series of bath paintings can be categorized seamlessly into the reclining female trope. The unaware and vulnerability of the figures can be translated into sexual inexperience and viability, granting them allure and appeal. The reclining female images in Western art history portray a spectrum of virtue for representational femmes from the 16th to 19th century.

Finally, the grouped female trope is used to convey multiple desirable traits in women or to contrast favorable aspects against less favorable. In much of art history, women can also be seen in a unit of multiples. Classical works such as Rubens' *The Judgement of Paris,* and Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii,* can be categorized into the grouped female trope. While the grouped female trope can refer to groups of females who are merely placed together, it is most commonly recognized when paired with the female aspect trope. In many of these paintings, a single female is reiterated in varying poses to reinforce the aspects. Graces, virtues, and vices are all signifiers of this trope. In Raphael's *Three Graces*, three women stand centered in the foreground of the painting, each holding a red fruit.[7] The figures gaze in turn draws the viewers' eye to each figures' hand. The three women symbolize the graces charm, beauty, and creativity; however, it is as a group, rather than individuals, that they hold meaning and represent the three aspects. As the figures rise above the horizon, it can be implied that the importance of these graces outweigh the importance of the natural world. *Challenging the Feminine* makes use of this repetition when depicting male figures to highlight the disproportionate number of classical images showing women as objects.

Fig. 5: Raphael, *Three Graces*, 1503, Oil on
Panel, 17" x 17"

4. Process

Challenging The Feminine is a series of mixed media figure paintings. The combination of figurative elements, abstraction, and texture variation create a composition that is charged and interesting. Similarly, traditional painting techniques such as the use of an underpainting, alla prima, and wet-on-wet blending, with drawing connect the contemporary conversation about gender with its antiquated preconceptions. The pieces within *Challenging the Feminine* are located on a spectrum of drawing and painting. For the female figures, quick strokes and fluid lines come together to form a coherent image exceeding the expectations and preconceptions of both mediums. For the male figures, a more traditional rendering of the form is used a reflection of art history's influence of passive female imagery.

Although the rendering of the female and male figures differ from each other, the planning phase of my studio practice remain consistent in the portrayal of both men and women. Historical paintings and my own photographs

are used as posture references. Each work starts with a small scale paper drawing to plan composition—this usually happens in a sketchbook. While creating the layout of a painting, I pay close attention to how the figure is placed. Whether or not a figure is above or below eye-level, centered in the visual-plane or how it's cropped are visual elements considered during the first stages of a painting. During the drawing process, I make marks and draw lines across the paper to take anatomical notes of the visual information I receive from the figure. After a few initial drawings, I crop my image.

Next, to achieve energetic, tonal backgrounds, I start with either acrylic or oil paint applied lightly to the canvas. To create an activated painting space to which I can respond, I manipulate the surface by dripping paint and medium onto the canvas, by wiping away paint. This diffuses the rigidity I sometimes face when interpreting the likeness of a figure.
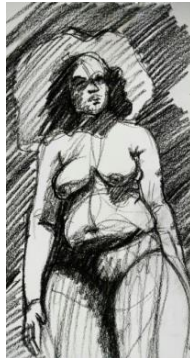

Fig. 6: Louise Bahia, Figure Sketch, 2015

After planning, the process between rendering female and male begin to differ. The female figures in *Confronting The Feminine* materialize from their environments, not completely rendered, but powerful while the male figures have begun to disintegrate into their own environments, giving up their substance to be represented by the tropes of women. I use sighting, a technique of using ratios and arbitrary comparisons, to accurately render the female figure on the larger canvas. The general impression of a pose begins the drawing and helps to keep the drawing consistent to the reference image.

I use charcoal like watercolor-pencil to create more finished looking charcoal renderings of female figures. This technique evolved from the problem of how to use charcoal within a painting. This way, the charcoal paintings have the same presence as the oil paintings. I draw the figure onto the canvas using charcoal, water, and a paint brush. The water causes the charcoal to melt and dry, creating rich, black line work. The fluidity of the water on canvas doesn't last long as the moisture begins to soak into the canvas. The continued application of charcoal, water, and paint builds layers and adds depth and intricacy to the painted drawing.

Contrastingly, painting the male figure starts with gridding the larger canvas to translate my drawing to the canvas surface. Next, I use a combination of flesh tones and various hues of color. Sections of the background and foreground are worked simultaneously so that the figure fits into the space. Working the figure separate from the background creates a sticker-effect where the figure looks as if it could be easily cut from the composition. Application of the paint is varied so that some areas will have a thicker buildup of paint and others a much thinner layer. This emphasizes the importance, closeness, and fleshiness of a figure. Along with the preserved layers of graphite, the varied paint applications serves as an artifact of the painting process. Furthermore, by varying the application of paint, both brushstrokes and drawing are preserved so that the viewer can receive a glimpse of the work's history.

Fig. 7: Louise Bahia, *In Progress of "The Duke",* 2015

Knowing when to stop is difficult; in *Challenging the Feminine*, the balance between drawing and painting is determined by the composition and subject matter. The female figures in my work are more fluid as they evolve from drawing to painting. In an interview with David Sylvester, twentieth century Contemporary painter Francis Bacon divulged a similar experience in refraining from over-working a piece. Many times, he ruined work when trying to push a painting further. He expresses that there is something beautiful in a work where not everything is resolved.[8] Visible charcoal, receding paint, and hints of the under-drawing of the piece is critical to allowing viewers to view the history and depth of the paintings process.

5. Contemporary Artists Who Challenge Gender Roles

While much has changed regarding gender roles, today women are still fighting for the expression of equality in professional, religious, and personal spheres. Associations of helplessness and weakness with femininity have taken root in societal subconscious and have affected most portrayals of the female gender. Contemporary artists such as Beverly McIver and Jenny Saville inform the discussion about women in painting.

Contemporary painter, Beverly McIver, uses portraiture in her work to channel the experiences, mental states, and emotions of herself and her sitters. Her representation of women reaches past stereotypical renderings to deliver honest and straightforward commentary on her subjects. She and her sister are very often the subjects of McIver's work. Her work, *Reminiscing,* is a split-format painting comprised of three sections.[9] She positions the head, the closed eyes, and the longing and wistful looks so that the viewer can begin to engage with the subject. McIver begins by challenging the viewer with the leftmost portrait. The subject looks directly at the viewer, chin raised in pride but hands close to the face showing self-consciousness. The next two sections allow the viewer to participate in the "moment of silence" the person in the middle seems to be having, and then in the longing of the far right portrait. The subdued blue behind the figure grants anonymity of space and time and create a focal point on the saturated reds of the portraits. McIver does a great job of showing the vulnerability of her female figures, not as a strictly feminine virtue but as a human predicament that people, regardless of gender feel at some point.

Fig. 8: Beverly McIver, *Reminiscing*, 2005, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 30", left and right; 24" x 24", center

Lizz Andronaco is another contemporary painter who interprets the female figure as both a sexual being and an individual. Her portraits are larger than life and, like mine, use scale to confront the viewer. In *Bearded Lady*, Andronaco uses mixed-media on panel to create a larger than life portrait of a woman who exists outside the confine of the American gender binary.[10] In spite of the beard being centered in the composition, the portrait still reads as female. Perhaps it's the elongated eyelashes or large eyes, both of which are tropes used in modern representations of the feminine such as cartoons. The space around the figure of mimics the blocks of color used to render the figure. It's as if the figure and environment become products of one another, both being influenced by the hasty delineation of lines and scribble of color.

Similarly, Andronaco's *but you used to be such a Pretty Girl* shows a figure that is an amalgamation of male and female.[11] The subtle difference between the left side of the face and the right is consistent with her exploration of queerness. He fills the space and confronts the viewer with his two-fold identity; the expressionistic marks lead the viewer and create movement. While Andronaco's work doesn't explicitly focus on the challenging the portrayal of women, her paintings are of figures who disregard and often poke fun at the stereotypical male and female. Andronaco has influenced me to reconsider my own preconceptions of what it means to be a man or woman and to challenge my representation of the feminine and masculine in my work.

Fig. 10: Lizz Andronaco, *Bearded Lady,* Mixed Media on board, 2013, 24"x48"

Fig. 9: Lizz Andronaco, *but you used to be such a Pretty Girl*, mixed media on board 24x48" 2013

Painter Jenny Saville is another artist to challenges gender representation in painting with her monumental paintings of heavy women. Her paintings, *Fulcrum*[12] and *Propped,*[13] feature larger than life fleshy female figures. Saville paints them as individuals, each in their own space, unforgivingly confronting the viewer with their nakedness. Because of the incredible scale viewers must physically move to see the entirety of the figures, in an interview she describes the effect of *Fulcrum* "To read it, your eye has to move across it, like a landscape."[14] However, I think the landscape quality can be attributed to the majority of her works. Her female figures dominate the compositions in a way that disregards the classical zeitgeist of painting female nudes. Likewise, I consider my process of painting female figures similar to that of landscape painting as well. I take into account how my mediums, oil and charcoal, relate to each other on the canvas. I pay close attention to how the eye moves across each painting, rotating the canvas several times during the creation of a painting. This helps me to create a multi-layered narration of the painting process. Jenny Saville largely influenced my love of drawing and painting fleshy figures as well as using the paint as a way to record and not copy.

Fig. 12: Jenny Saville, *Fulcrum*, 1999, Oil on canvas, 103" x 192"

Fig. 11: Jenny Saville, *Propped*, 1992, Oil on canvas, 84" x 72"

6. Conclusion

Society's art is a deep reflection of its health. How a society uplifts or hinders its own people can be implied through the work of creative minds revolting or rejoicing at the state-of-affairs and policies of the culture they inhabit. During the creation of *Challenging the Feminine,* I've become acutely aware of the gender roles characterized in classical and modern art and of how they influence my work. Patriarchal society has yet to overcome the modern expression of the female gender and sexuality. The objectification of women in classical art places men in the role of the true human while women become something lesser. The art history examples of the female aspect, the reclining female, and the grouped female, portray a detrimental and false one-dimensionality of women to Western societies.

The intention of this work is to create conversation about the social configuration of gender throughout art history by appropriating poses and compositions from canonical works in art history. While creating *Challenging the Feminine*, I tried to respond sincerely and genuinely to this question of gender and to creatively review a system

that, until very recently, has been accepted as natural law, was the greatest challenge for this research. Departing from a binary system such as gender means challenging aspects of that system to study its history, purpose, and influence. The allegorical implications of the feminine gender within art history and contemporary art are connected with Vanitas recognizing and revoke the gender binary.

　　Although figure painting has had a long history, I believe the continuation of the genre is necessary to erase the role of women within art away from that of a vehicle for societal gender norms. Painting new portrayals of women, not as tropes but as individuals, can repair the detrimental effect these images have had on our society.

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