

Examination of the gendered approach to the notion of 'Gaze'?

John Berger, in 'Ways of Seeing' suggests that '*Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.....Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight*' (1).

At the end of the 1960's when Berger wrote this text it was not long after the start of the 'second wave' of feminism. Berger, amongst other discussions, posits that the depiction of the female, and especially the naked female, hadn't really changed since the Renaissance. This essay questions whether since Berger's essay any change has occurred in the representation of the female in Art.

In a recent BBC Radio Four programme (2) regarding the Velasquez's 'Rokeby Venus' and its mutilation by the suffragette Mary Richardson, the photographer Tom Hunter was interviewed about his 're-presentation' of that painting. Hunter's alternate vision 'Ye Old Axe' from his series 'Living in Hell and other stories' was to re-situate the Venus as a striptease artiste in a pub along the Hackney Road in London's East End, he suggested that it was a comment on how men (one presumes working class men, in this context) could view a 'nude' woman. Hunter's use of a classic art reference is one that has been used by many artists, not just photographic artists to either re-contextualize or subvert the original intent. Hunter's work in this series was in part to provide an access for 'ordinary' people to acquaint themselves with classical art by re-situating the context to the issues facing 'ordinary' people – his John Kobal award for the photography image 'Woman reading a possession order' after Vermeer's 'A girl reading a letter by an open window' being perhaps his most famous work to date. Velazquez's 'The Rokeby Venus' couldn't have a more iconic British classical art setting, the National Gallery, and in Colin Wiggins accompanying essay on Hunter's series at the National Gallery he suggests that "... *Velazquez's masterpiece.... Is a picture of a young, beautiful, naked woman, displaying herself for the male viewer*" (3); note 'naked' and not 'nude' as Berger comments on Kenneth Clark's notion that '*to be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself.... an object... Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display.*' (4) I would contend that Velazquez's painting isn't about a woman disporting herself naked for us, the viewers, rather Velazquez has *displayed* her 'nude' for our 'gaze'.

Hunter's use of the striptease bar in the Hackney Road complicates things in two ways I think. Firstly it is a place for men to gaze at women, clearly in a capitalist society the contractual construct between user and provider is characterized by the 'pint pot passed around to fund the next strip' and not in the 'free to view' National Gallery. Secondly it seeks to remove any sense of class difference between the iconic status of the National Gallery's status of high art as a legitimizing entity and the Hackney Road emporium of earthly delights. Hunter's vision of a stripper – it should be noted that the subject in his image is a striptease dancer known to the artist and not a professional model (2) - with associated paraphernalia of thong and stiletto heels, places his woman for the viewer's gaze contextualized as a commodity in the sex industry, bringing the stripper to the same place as the punter/viewer and not deifying her as an object of art.

Karolin Klüppel also uses classical references for some of her work, most notably her series '*I never promised you a Rose Garden*'. (5) Klüppel's strategy certainly re-situates the classical references, but not necessarily in a contemporary setting. Klüppel's tactics appears to challenge the notion of the male gaze by re-presenting these icons of classical art with gender reversed depiction. This exchange of sexual identity, though not in every image of the series – the image of a narcissus conflated with Leda is an exception – confronts the viewer, and perhaps more especially so, the male viewer. Much of feminist art through the 'Second Wave' and beyond specifically dealt with body representation, principally about the re-appropriation of the female form and even function. Notable exceptions to this were perhaps artists such as Sylvia Sleigh and Joan Semmel – both working with paint as opposed to photography – with their representation of the male form for the 'female gaze'. Chicago, Wilkes, Harrison, Schneeman and others tackled the Male gaze head-on. Eve Ensler with the *Vagina Monologues* (6) is another who has wrestled with the notion of re-owning the female form from continued exploitation, or even demonization of the 'other'. Laura Mulvey who had defined the concept of 'Male gaze' in her seminal essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative Cinema' written in 1975 suggested "*Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease, from Zeigfeld to Busby Berkely, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.*" (7) and so whilst Hunter re-replaces the 'Venus' from that iconic gallery space, it is to a much more contemporary sexualized role as striptease artist whose '*look*' she holds with us, the viewer, from the image reflected to us, via the mirror. Hunter appears to want us to gaze upon the woman as a stripper, as a sexual entity, though his replacement of the cupid figure with a 'bouncer' is said by Hunter to be a kind of conscience figure, questioning our presence looking into the frame (2) whereas Velazquez's cupid is complicit in the contract between viewer and painter.

Klüppel's image '*Ontario*' (8) is another rendering of Millais' 'Ophelia'. A very quick trawl on the web via Google will reveal a great many representations of this tragic character from Shakespeare's Hamlet, and it has to be said that many of these images have a scent of prurience about them, represented as they are by women in various states of undress. Klüppel though does something very different; she has re-presented Ophelia as a male, a young post pubescent male in pose similar to that of Millais' so the connection maybe conjured between the two images. Whilst the Millais original is that of the dead Ophelia, Klüppel's vision is very much alive and in the moment. The subject is posed to reveal his genitalia at the centre of the image where the tip of his penis breaks the surface of the water whilst he floats '*naked*' in. I think this is the great difference between the two images discussed. Hunter's vision has the subject paraded both literally and metaphorically for the 'Male' gaze, whereas Klüppel's vision appears more existential. The subject looks to be in a state of grace, the viewer is seemingly invited to share in the subject's state, suggesting, in my view, that the 'Female' gaze is more nuanced in this respect, and whilst the central subject in Klüppel's photograph is the genitalia the subject is set in an Arcadian vision, fruits of the land accompany the subject which are perhaps an allusion to the reproductive elements of the central partial tumescence which speaks about fertility as being an underlying theme.

In another work by Hunter "*Girls' Sex Act in Club:....*" (9) which is also a re-presentation of a classical work of art, in this case Lucas Cranach the Elder's, '*Cupid complaining to Venus*' genitals are again at the focal point of the image. In Hunter's image we aren't privy to the sight of the naked female's pudenda, there is a surrogate though who views it for us by proxy. A man leans uncomfortably forward to gain a privileged perspective of the subject's genitalia, thereby emphasizing the object of the 'Male' gaze by forcefully reminding the viewer that the object of 'Male' gaze is that 'otherness' of sexual difference. As Mulvey suggests the 'stripper' in this Hunter picture "*.... holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire....*" and whilst the dancer is situated above the stand-in voyeur and seemingly in control, the sense is one of complicitness to requirements of the 'Male' gaze as she steadies herself by holding onto the curtain so that the gaze isn't troubled by movement, life not getting in the way. The inspiration for this re-staging was perhaps as much about 'Male' gaze as Hunter's, but the original purpose was probably as much to do with being produced for the singular pleasure of a singular "male' gaze and perhaps the onanistic outcome it was probably used for. The key to both these images is the acknowledgement of the 'Male' gaze confirming Mulvey's proposition - in Cranach's vision the Venus is uncaring as to the wants, desires, wishes or predicament (there is a small swarm of bees around him) of the cupid figure thereby suggesting that viewer's gaze is more important than the nurturing nature of the female. In Hunter's version, the same; both these central subjects are acknowledging the vital contract between them and the Male viewer's intent, gazing into the frame, usurping any notion that she (the subject/object) had any other role other than that of being there for the viewer's privilege.

Another of Klüppel's works '*Pirus*' (10) appears to be the conflation of the twin classical themes of Leda and Narcissus. Curiously it is only the swans that have reflections whilst the languid male has none. The tale of the swan's predatory sexual advance on Leda and her eventual rape has again been challenged by Klüppel's re-staging; the Leda character being transformed to Narcissus who is perhaps luring the swan to an engagement and clearly at odds with the classical narrative. What this says about the original tale I am unsure, but what I think Klüppel is providing here is another perspective of the 'naked' male - beautifully and sensually told - an existential study of this male subject (the subject both physical and metaphorical) within his environment. Virile and sexually charged this subject isn't compliant to the viewer's gaze, but lost to us the viewer; again maybe in a state of grace. The swan that approaches isn't sexually aggressive but has an apparent desire to connect, form a dialogue perhaps, and the absence of a reflection suggesting an absence of the duplicitous 'other's' side to the male. Hunter's images confirm the notion of the 'Male' gaze, it reminds the viewer, perhaps even accuses the viewer, that for the subjects he presents they are still, as Berger puts it: "*But the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in a quite different way from men - not because the feminine is different from the masculine - but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.*" (11). It might be argued that we have no further need to be reminded of the power struggle associated with the 'Male' gaze and that Hunter's revisiting of that trope is a mere amplifier of that discussion started so many centuries ago; however it is a conscious and quite

visceral work that provides a very powerful stab at the state of female representation in a very singular way, and perhaps reversing the 'gaze' to the male viewer asking questions of him. Whereas Klüppel suggests a more nuanced set of questions of the viewer: We, the viewers are invited to join with the subject as we aren't challenged by the subject's observation of us which enables us to reflect on state of the subject's place in the frame, we aren't being requested to approve but to enquire about the subject's place in the world. Klüppel's subject is naked and not nude, stripped bare of disguise and artifice we engage with him as well as his form; in Hunter's confirmation of the destructive force of the 'Male' gaze only her form is of importance – which is of course his point.

- (1) Ways of Seeing – Berger, p47, Penguin 1977 edition
- (2) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03xgl3y>
- (3) Tom Hunter Living in Hell and other Stories, p47, The National Gallery
- (4) Ways of Seeing – Berger, p53/54, Penguin 1977 edition
- (5) <http://www.karolinklueppel.de/index.php?/work/work/>
- (6) <http://www.eveensler.org/plays/the-vagina-monologues/>
- (7) Film Theory & Criticism (seventh edition) p715, Oxford University Press 2009.
- (8) <http://www.karolinklueppel.de/index.php?/work/work/>
- (9) <http://www.theguardian.com/flash/tomHunter.swf> (slide show with audio description by the artist of the 'Ye Old Axe' followed by several images from the series including 'Girls' act...')
- (10) <http://www.karolinklueppel.de/index.php?/work/work/>
- (11) Ways of Seeing – Berger, p64, Penguin 1977 edition