

Who's Afraid of Female Pleasure?

By

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**Abstract**

My work is an exploration of female sexuality and the use of the body in conceptual photography. I use photography as a sensual medium that acts similarly to paint conveying visceral and ambiguous qualities in abstract forms. The medium of film becomes eroticized, intertwining the image of body with other bodies on film. The film is treated sensually in its tactility of smooth, slick, luminous qualities; folding; manipulating with heat that gets flushed; bubbling; overflowing on the surface. Femininity and the body are adorned through film; layers that present themselves to the world. We reveal and conceal ourselves in parts. An optical tactile experience; of pushing and pulling; exposing and layering; flirting between visibility in the sensual physical body as the body medium of film. My work expresses the human experience; the body carries a language and performs; acceding to desire and pleasure. My intent is to create an erotic intervention in the content of my images. My research draws from sources that advocate a sexually confident attitude without passivity.

### **Revealing Herself**

By engaging in an act of pleasure a woman becomes fluid, - morphing, transforming, dissolving, and folding into something else beyond words. Her body encompasses a tactile experience. She is brute force, a force of nature. Her transformations are powerful. As the transformer she is both creator and destroyer. She is a force of nature, impossible to resist, in the act of sex and pleasure. At once powerful and dangerous she flirts and reveals herself in parts that re-appear in erotic forms through the body.



*Gwendolyn Freeman*

*Untitled 2016 '30x40' Photograph*

In a like fashion, Helene Cixous' and Laura Alexander have written on female sexuality and desire; stating:

As a giver, woman has a "cosmic" sexual energy that assumes many shapes, all of them discursive elements that grant her wholeness without fixity, without a phallogocentric universe. Her mutability works through interior unconscious creating vastness along with unity: she is a whole composed...of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble. (8)



*Gwendolyn Freeman*

*Untitled 2016 19 x19 Photograph*



*Gwendolyn Freeman*

*Untitled 2016 '30x40' Photograph*

### **Schneemann**

Carolee Schneemann is a touchstone for my work. She paved the way for many women who pursue the topics of sexuality and the body; giving women empowerment to use their bodies in art, her iconic body of work challenged what it meant to be a female artist in a time when art was a male dominated field. She confronted issues of gender and sexuality breaking many taboos associated with the female body in art especially her creation of ideas about the Vulvic Space. In so doing she challenged the way we thought about sex

and pleasure. Her concept and research about the Vulvic Space was an exploratory source of knowledge. Carolee Schneeman researched ancient artifacts especially the Minoan *Snake Goddess*. Her concept of the sexual experience was a form of researching art making. I knew from the first time I saw her film *Fuses*; I wanted to continue my art practice and pursue my interest in the body and female sexuality. I was fascinated that she wanted to show the world what it was like to make love to her partner. *Fuses* depicted sexual pleasure in a time where gratification for women and their experience was not often portrayed in art. Schneemann's utilization of technology and video to make an erotic film during a time of male dominated art, made her face extreme controversy, today the film is still being watched and celebrated today.

Her honest approach is what I admire the most. Her personal and political experience transformed the worldview making a forbidden topic of the female body and its right to pleasure into a work of art worthy of study. Her work remains relevant to this day, an important part of history on the subject of the female body in contemporary art.

I am inspired through the manifesto of Helene Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa*, She urged women to write their experience, rebelling against dominant orthodox power structures that repress women and their rights to expression without guilt, to reclaim their desires, and to find a creativity of their own that is unique and free, one that no longer serves false misconceptions. For Laura Alexander and Helene Cixous', writing is referred to as the maternal body, which is a source of creativity and creation, which encompasses artistic creativity. To write *l'écriture féminine*, is about liberates the censored body, Writing is located through the use of body and manifested

in a form of expression that re-invents new forms of expression reclaiming sexuality and desire. Feminine writing and creating is the Medusa in Cixous' essay. The head of the medusa moves fluidly and freely against from suppressing parameters for women like misogyny.

Medusa's symbolism contains multiple desires, multiple selves, and multiple forms of language of creativity and expression. The activity of writing is identical to a form of expression and desire in Cixous' essay. Desire and symbolism takes place in the slippery wetness of the serpent's fluidity of movement that cannot be contained within the oppressive power structures for women. The serpent's ability to shift in many forms cannot be contained within a structure; the fluidity becomes the symbol for female expression and sexuality.



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*Gwendolyn Freeman*

*Untitled 2016 '30x40' Photograph*

### **The Idea of Erotic Forms**

Through this research I am influenced to create new forms of expression utilizing the body and photographic medium without words that evoke meaning. The layering of photographic film creates multiple forms of expression and ambiguity. The use of digital noise creates a type of writing

and expression about the body and sexuality. The imperfections such as fingerprints in my images form tactile signatures. I am working with a photographic medium that carries a history of male dominance and pornography and I am reclaiming this part of photographic history through personal gesture. The medium is eroticized through my search to re-imagine new female forms of expression and language, my body creates new erotic forms or visual language.

Robertson and McDaniel state:

“Representations of female sexuality have occurred throughout the history of Western Art, but until very recently they were almost invariably produced by male artists. The female nude was a long-standing artistic subject but not one permitted to women artists. Typical depictions by male artists of sexualized females were objectified, the women rendered in a state of total passivity as objects to be exploited for male sexual gratification (and as sources of energy to be absorbed by the turned on male). Female desire when it is shown at all by male artists, tended to debase, as in the figure of the fallen woman, a temptress associated with carnal sin who led men astray, such as Eve or Salome. (147)

In the movement of pro-sex feminism that began in the 1980s, artists like as Annie Sprinkle, Silvia Sleigh, and Marilyn Minter with her porn grid series in 1989, have used erotic source material as a major part of their work. They have written their experience and re-defined the conception of pleasure and desire.



*Gwendolyn Freeman*

*Untitled 2016 '40x30' Photograph*

Artist's work concerns women owning and enjoying their bodies, unashamed and without their desires being diminished. Marilyn Minter's work uses enamel paint that drips on large sheets of metal of erotically charged images which is a form of feminine writing, the fluidity of Minter's use of paint and her luscious models with open mouths challenge the theoretical fear of castration and the myth of vagina dentata. Ghada Amer stitches and paints with thread using a contrast of abstraction and the figure, another example of feminine writing in her paintings with thread that is fluid on the canvas utilizing the thread with a charged quality and her conscious decision to incorporate pornographic images embodies the history of male dominance challenging the idea of art and pornography. From a distance Amer's paintings look like

drawings, allowing the thread to form loosely, unlike the way in which thread is used in traditional stitching. The thread symbolically breaks the structure of stitching implying the confines of a past history for women. Her writing with thread harkens back to Cixous' manifesto *The Laugh of The Medusa*.

To discuss sexuality in my photographs I use myself as the subject and object referencing pornography and erotic source material. Viewers have labeled a narcissist and in my early years of art practice I was told I could not use my own body in my work to investigate the nude body. I made a lot of pieces in secret to rebel because I couldn't stop my own fascination with the body. To understand sexuality and identity I always have to start with myself as the subject, to be able to examine the *self*, which continues to be complex. Had it not been for the power of work without a lot of the female artists that I have discussed in this statement, I would never have continued to have this conversation.

Patty Chang, Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann have addressed the sexual roles of women, the role of female beauty, and the problem of being labeled narcissistic by critics. I perceive this as a challenge to embrace my gender, culture, and pleasure. What is there to be enjoyed with the social roles of women within so many marginalized beliefs? Why must one behave within the parameters of another's ideals and conventions?

Meskimmon responds to this question by stating that:

By engaging in this work, she has acknowledged her own investment in the images of female beauty enshrined by the western fine art

tradition and has established a form of control over her own self-image (127).

Cixous' essay encourages women to reclaim female sexuality and to re-write the body. My subject matter challenges the proceeding debate because of its erotic content. I refuse to form within someone else's margins and I continue to address my own form of expressions through my own image-making creativity.

Pleasure, pornography, sexuality and the female body have been a very popular discussion in contemporary art.

An article from The Tate Modern explained:

The distinction between erotic art and pornography is widely debated but rarely agreed upon. Likewise academics have struggled to find a clear theory to segregate these terms. As Western society becomes increasingly liberal, critic's arguments are becoming more progressive and art more experimental, whilst the distribution of porn and products of the sex industry are becoming commonplace. As a result art and pornography continue to merge. (Bonesso 1)

My projects have faced the same debate in former educational institutions involving its similar subject matter. The work of every artist I have referenced, inspires me and many other women to continue to rebel in this conversation.

Art practice has always remained a commentary on culture and politics. An article from The Tate Modern explains further:

Art acts as a mirror to the culture of its time, as our attitude towards sex becomes more inclusive. Art continues to include sex in its canon with increasing although tentative, acceptance. Where James Joyce saw his novel *Ulysses* 1922 banned for 10 years due to explicit passages, and Egon Schiele served jail time for producing erotic drawings; we now see sex becoming a relevant and provocative conversation within contemporary art. (1)

Sexuality in contemporary art remains an engaging discussion for women who are working with erotic source material. Women have the ability to change our perspective on the body. Women can look at the body and rebel against the limits that society has placed on issues of sexuality redefining what we fear about this discussion through the work they create. Women can re-write history and insert their personal and political experience into the world. *The Laugh of The Medusa* places emphasis on the monstrous feminine because “she” is active in her sexuality. The multiples in my photograph intertwine the body and flesh making it difficult for the body to be restricted by boundaries. The female body in my work explores the abject and monstrous feminine to challenge a controlled or contained body, I do this by

creating multiples that are actively intimidating to the viewer to defy marginalized beliefs placed on women in Western society. To defy control or repression, women must rebel with their own form of expression. Not to behaving a stereotypical ways, they engage in a form of rebellion doing the opposite and act out even more deliberately.

I am inspired by Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel's claim:

The 1990s and today have seen a renewed emphasis on physical displays of female potency in art. Younger women artists are highly transgressive, giving visual form to multiple complex aspects to sexual pleasure and lust in works that may refer to voyeurism and fetishism, and erotomania. (148)

One of my own questions in making this work: Can placing women in feminist art empower them?

Cixous confirms in her essay *The Laugh of The Medusa*:

Women must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their own bodies. Women must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history. (3)



*Gwendolyn Freeman*

*Untitled 2016 '30x40' Photograph*

### **Internal Operates as Personal**

My photographs are created in my home—an interior, which operates as personal place to navigate a celebration of femininity, desire and sexuality. From this personal space I can re-imagine new forms of visual language. Within this domestic space I rebel against domination of domesticity in the space. Instead of domestic roles, I create a commentary on erotica. We are no longer looking at just a body but an erotic body that has more capabilities and pleasures. The abstractions I have created allow me to re-write the image or the content of the image to redefine what the viewer is looking at. With an expressive gesture like paint dripping onto an image as in Marilyn Minters' work the subject matter becomes a loaded expression. In its quality

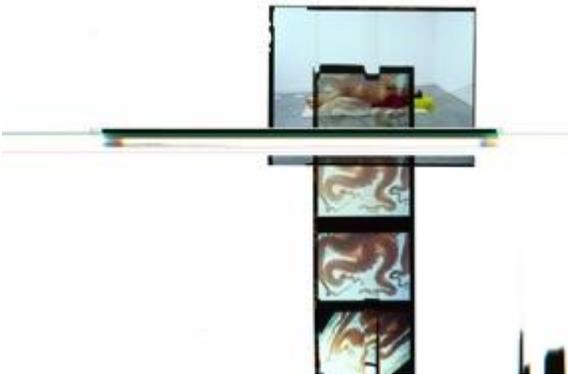
as an erotic image, more than what we presume is already present.

Through the body of work that I have created in my practice, I wish to empower women. This exploration is about changing the content of the image to create an intervention that contains visceral qualities.



*Gwendolyn Freeman*

*Untitled 2016 12 x16 Photograph*



*Gwendolyn Freeman*

*Untitled 2016 12 x16 Photograph*

### **Process Explores Underlying**

My process uses analogue film and digital software to re-shape and change the content within my photographs. There is an underlying commentary in my process starting with a rigorous history and technical background in photography that searches for ways to rebel and challenge the correctness of a very structured technical process. I draw from Cixous manifesto that rebels against the linear structures and I am inspired to challenge technical correctness to create new possibilities. My personal experience working as a professional photographer, within the male-dominated field informs my work. The work environment is a hostile one. Based on gender; your technical and creative abilities are continuously undermined.

Some clients refuse to consider women as professional photographers. Sexism in the work place is real.

### **Body In Multitudes of Meaning**

As a result of an underlying process; I am representing bodies and their complexities and how to situate myself and the body in contemporary art practice. Within the context of both art history and contemporary society the female body has been portrayed and boxed in a desirable object I see myself as a woman trying to rebel against traditional modes of thinking and traditional modes of representation of the female form.

The subject matter in my images works simultaneously with my technical process. The female figure in my work rebels against the constructs within western society addressing issues of desire, and sexuality within these interior spaces. My work re-composes the image by combining and layering other sources of film Ideally this changes the content

within the image and implies a transformation of the sexual body analogous to the transformations that occurs with an analog and digital medium.

My research investigates Hans Bellmer; who composes disjointed dolls that retain no agency In opposition to Bellmer's disjointed figures. My photographs retain agency and re-emerge with an active feminine gaze that confronts the viewer. Within these images beauty and adornment are explored. Lingerie with luscious surroundings within a domestic space. Flowers, fishnet stockings adorn her legs and face as well as other parts of her body that perform for the camera. The camera becomes the collaborator in active participation in my work.

The layering of images use film as a mirror to create possibilities of multiple selves, multiple desires and other orifices in the image. If a sexually liberated woman is something to be feared by Western society, then my images play with creating something monstrous and intimidating in a multitude of erogenous zones. In my work, the interiors overlay to create openings that are shaped like vulvas within the photograph.

The figure is sexually unashamed, empowered and acknowledging in Gustave Courbet's painting *Origin of the world*. Her legs are open and assertive as the open mouth of the medusa from Cixous' essay. By using myself as the subject I reclaim my position of agency: both by using my own body as the subject and the artist. The sitter, who has determined and controlled the image, confronts the viewer with the more powerful gaze. While the sitter looks back, women as viewed and viewer look back unashamed.

My continued exploration of this subject matter faces the risk of not being supported. Women who make art face scrutiny just based on gender; they

face the scrutiny of their practice not being taken seriously. Ideally I want my work to contribute to the transformation of the visual language surrounding the sexually charged female figure. The power is within women by refusing to conform to social constructs and by speaking and acting freely. Through the act of claiming the body and re-claiming the image of my sexual being, I have the ability to transform the definition of female identity. I hope this work invites other women to explore their own power and identity. The strength of the work enabling the body to cover a large terrain of issues remains important for me especially incorporating the history of women engaged in this topic. Claiming and transforming my own body to implicate more ambiguity, I take advantage of the truism: what we don't see becomes the infatuation. Conveying a human experience has the power to transform. Some critics oppose the metaphor and myth of the Medusa because she is a mythical creature, However Carolee Schneemann drew inspiration from the *Minoan Snake Goddess* for her performance piece "*Interior Scroll*". She incorporated the power from the Mythical creature and goddess. Exploring a myth is an exploration of identity and a fluid freedom of self-expression. There remains a discovery to be made in this exploration of the *self* that is rule breaking, providing all women freedom from regulations that will challenge the conventions and contradictions of our own Western society.

#### Bibliography:

Alexander, Laura. *Helen Cixous and The Rhetoric of Feminine Desire: Re-Writing The Medusa*. Mode Journal. Web 1 Feb. 2015.

Laura Alexander writes on Helen Cixous: a professor, a French feminist writer and a philosopher. In Cixous' poetic manifesto, *The Laugh of The Medusa* published in 1976, Cixous presents a feminist text that defined sexuality, desire and the roles of gender through writing and expression of the body, a clear attempt to defy and resist Freudian and Marxist beliefs, especially the fear of women and the fear of castration. The manifesto supports feminine expression as experienced, through the body and freeing it from the conventions of censorship. Both the body and language of women must be transformed through writing that is resistant to the masculine point of view on women and their bodies. This essay describes women as many selves, exerting feminine identity as fluid and constantly evolving from a lived experience. Laura Alexander writes the perspective of the body's force and regeneration as exemplified in pregnancy and motherhood, to signify one of the many powers of women.

Bonesso, Lily. *Art and Pornography*. Tate Museum. Article. Web. 2 April 2015

Lily Bonesso explores the debate between erotic art and pornography used in contemporary art. This most current article on this topic from the Tate Modern Museum in the United Kingdom. Remains relevant in the on going discussion about contemporary issues of pornography and censorship laws occurring recently in the UK.

Dolan, Jill. *The Feminist Spectator As Critic*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University Michigan Press, 1988. Print.

Dolan is a professor of women's studies at University of Wisconsin. She examines feminist artists in theatre focusing on issues of representation, sexuality, race, and gender.

Her criticism provides insight into video work and can be referenced to the early history of performance art, which has early origins in theatre in Berlin. Her writings, and critical research about how women are portrayed in cinema and film which is a helpful topic underpinning Dolan's history of women's studies that connect the subject matter of gender and feminist theory.

Jones, Amelia. *Body Art Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. Print.

Jones presents a deep critical analysis of body art, giving examples of both male and female works of art from the 1970s to the present. Her writing focuses on feminist art that is grounded in issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender, and reflects historically in major political events from the 1950s to 1990s.

Jones uses references to theory about the use of the body as material to any other art medium that can set new rules for how the body is viewed. Artists such as Shigeko Kubota's performance at Fluxus, *Vagina Painting* can be referenced as a form of feminine writing in Cixous' essay *Laugh of the Medusa*.

Meskimmon, Marsha. *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-portraiture in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Meskimmon writes about women artists and the self-portrait in art as a way of reclaiming the image from the viewer's preconceived notions or stereotypes. The self-portrait can be a masculine and feminine identity in representation, exemplified in the work of Jenny Saville. The self-portrait can be both subject and object in art. "The artist has actually confronted in a very direct way the concept of woman as object in representation; by using her own body as the canvas, she removes the sense of distance between artist and object implied in any artwork and undermines many of the senses of self-portraiture which they rely on critical distance."(p.126)

She has referenced Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle, and Valerie Export in her discussion about object and subject in art especially self-portraiture. Her writings present several examples of art, imagery, and performance, examining feminist practice by women who address specific issues of the body and sexuality. The terms such as "slut" were to be interpreted as positive by the artist Annie Sprinkle, despite its derogatory association. However I wish to question the double standard of art practice in relation to western society that condemns certain behaviors in women; who use themselves as the subject in art making and the association of a false construct with language.

Robertson, Jean and McDaniel, Craig. *Themes of Contemporary Art Visual Art After 1980*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2005

Robertson and McDaniel explore a concise theme concerning the body, sexuality, the gaze, as well as sex and violence. Topics covered in the book reference happenings between 1980 to 2011. The book provides examples of artists who have devoted their practice and body of work to the exploration of several topics that have occurred throughout this time. The writings also provide key examples of theory on the topics that are covered on the body especially pleasure and desire. This chapter gives specific language and explanations of the history of contemporary art that challenges the topic of women in the arts who use erotic subject matter to confront the male gaze and assert female sexuality. The works of Ghada Amer and Marlene Dumas are among the examples published in this text.

Schneider, Rebecca. *The Explicit Body In Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Schneider examines topics on the explicit body, sex as performance and erotic art from artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Annie Sprinkle, and Carolee Schneemann. Her topics concerning the explicit body in performance question how one determines explicitness in body art and who determines its value or what becomes appropriate. Schneider states, “ The performers in this study use their bodies as the stages across which they re-enact social dramas and traumas that arbitrated cultural differentiations between truth and illusion, reality, dream, fact and fantasy, natural and unnatural, essential and constructed.” (p.7)

“...Secrecy is wrapped up in the cultural construction of femininity.”(p.88) The use of the body in performance and art can be defined in such terms as “live art”

Roselee Goldberg has also written on the topic of live art and performance. Without this subject society remains unaffected and blind to the very issues examined by the artists that Schneider uses throughout her text. The interaction explicit in the experience becomes crucial for our awareness. This text becomes important in my own exploration of my work on the body and feminine identity.

Tickner, Lisa. *The Body Politic: Female Sexuality & Women Artists since 1970. Art History Volume 1* (1978): 238-251 pp. Web. 6 Oct. 2014.

Tickner's article covers topics about pleasure and female sexuality. Her criticism and writing emphasize liberation in art practice for women, embracing freedom of expression in the art-making process. The Author refers to the subject of sexuality throughout art history in its representation of gender and gender roles, which emphasize desire and fear with the opposite sex.

Tickner examines the topic of narcissism and its connection to face and aesthetics. Considering that face has a narcissistic power to confront the viewer, "The face is taboo, it's the core of human aesthetics, the only place which retains a narcissistic power" (p.245). Her writings refer to the feminine identity especially regarding the use of cosmetics as transformations that reconnect ones' identity and the body. Despite it being published in the 1970s, I find this writing helpful to my research because it makes connections between common issues and questions that occur my practice whenever used with other contemporary writings.