

Research: Does the female nude exploit women for male gratification?

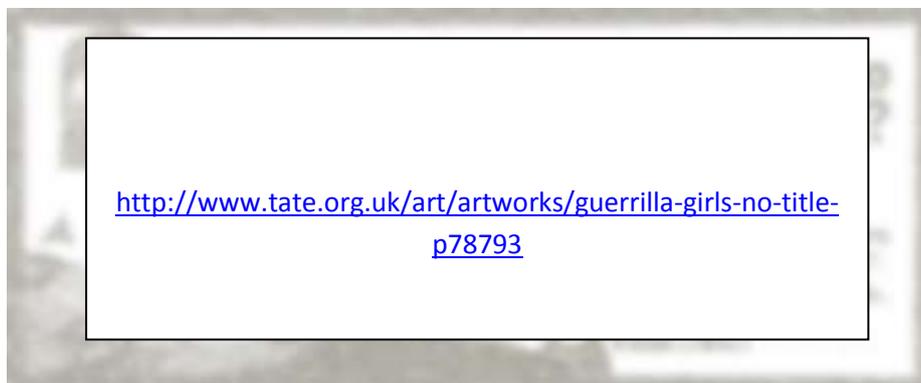
What does the term *nude* imply? Pooke and Newall (2008 p146) have a chapter on viewing the nude. They quote Berger as saying “Central to critical consideration of gender in the Western canon is the nude. The term implies a special status for the art form and signifies a difference between nakedness and nudity. Naked refers to the absence of clothing, literally the physical state of undress, whereas nude is a cultural category in which the body is an object of the gaze.”

Nudes in art have existed for many thousands of years, (Pooke and Newall 2008 p138) state that “Male nakedness was inherent to the values of the classical world and was closely linked with the heroic or divine ideal”. They also comment on the emergence of the first female nude statue of Aphrodite “representations of the goddess of love bathing present an alluring image and point to a developing fascination with female beauty”.

The idealised representation of the human form has continued to the present day.

Is the representation of the female nude exploitative of women? It’s certainly true that representations of the male nude also exist (Michelangelo’s David for example) but there are many more representations of the female nude. Are they all ‘idealised representations of the human form’ or, as they are nearly all painted by men, is this confirmation of stereotypical gender roles?

The ‘Guerrilla Girls’ certainly believe that the proportion of women nude subjects to women painters is unfair:



It could be argued that the portraits of nudes (men and women) are works celebrating the beauty of nature, but (Pooke and Newall 2008 p138) point out “A work is no longer independent of the viewer, but is understood in the context of the viewer’s visual experience”.

Any work produced prior to the mid-20th century will have been worked on at a time when gender roles between men and women were seen in a very different light to how they are now.

It is interesting to note how women artists have portrayed other women throughout the ages.

Artemisia Gentileschi in 1622 portrays Susannah and the Elders differently to some of the male interpretations, Susannah looking more afraid, the elders intruding on her nakedness.

<http://www.artemisiasia-gentileschi.com/susanna2.html>

Susannah and the elders portrayed by Artemisia Gentileschi on the left and by Alessandro Allori on the right.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:AlloriSusanna.jpg>

<http://www.okeeffemuseum.org/natural-and-still-life-forms.html>

Georgia O'Keefe uses flowers, their forms to represent the female pudenda.

Judy Chicago, in *The Dinner Party* uses the triangular shape of the dinner table (traditionally symbol of woman and goddess) instead of the traditional square arrangement. There are many other feminist references in this work.

<http://www.fischerarthistory.com/judy-chicago1.html>

References

Pooke, G. and Newall, D (2008) *Art History: The Basics*. Abingdon: Routledge