

Feminism

When you think of an artists – its likely your answer will be a man. Yet lots of women take art courses.

Art was mainly created by men for men, on an overwhelmingly large percentage. Books were also written by me for men with authors such as Hertz Gonwick.

There are two halves to the feminist lecture:

- 1 Feminist art history and how female historians talk about art
- 2 Women artists who use a female agenda in their work

1

From the 1960's onwards equality of women's right occurred as well as inventions such as contraception and abortion rights. Women's studies began to be published and noticed for the first time. Women who came apparent at that time were people such as Betty Freeman writing the 'Feminine Mystique'. People were beginning to think about women's needs and rights comparing this to the situation they were actually in. Socially constructed ideas such as homemakers and mothers were what was 'expected' of women. *'I want something more than my husband, my children and my home'*.

They wanted more of higher education, books, and work and wanted to be known as well established and serious artists. A voice was found for women and looking back into history men overwhelmingly controlled history and its interpretation. Feminist thinking about art history is known as very influential and can change interpretations form vary famous artworks.

In 1870 John Edward Millias painted a work which depicted a naked woman bound to a tree with a man in armour cutting her loose with a large sword. The male description of the painting looked into brushwork, subject matter, artist's style where as the female interpretation looked at the relationship between the characters. The knight was fully clothed and using a massive sword cutting the naked woman free. He was the active characters, rescuing the maiden in distress. The woman was the more passive of the two, completely bare, But she doesn't look to him to rescue her. She is depicted as reliant on the man to cut her loose with his sword but why should she be? The art ist was a man and for the male audience he has depicted the female body for the make gaze, as if all females wait naked for the day to be rescued by a man and taken away. Women had to intellectually study for this analysis which is now known as one of the greatest theories on the piece to this day.

Tischen also created work about the rape of Uropa, a mythological goddess. It is rape, a element of sex being committee without both parties consent – but is depicted as a romantic and love filled act. Cherubs fill the sky with bow and arrows and the woman herself does not look angry or struggling. She had her

legs open in a sexual position almost inviting the man to rape her. It is a very male view of what rape is. There is nothing loving about it, it is a sexual crime. Tischen has created the piece fully directed towards the male gaze.

Another work depicting the beheading of a man was always thought to have been created by a male artist, but was actually created by Gentileschi, a female artist. It was considered 'too skilful' for a woman to have created. Research by Mary Goward however, changed this.

Matisse often paints the nude female body, and illustrates the traditional unchallenged relationship between men and women. The artist is the action figure; he controls what's happening fully clothed. The woman is told to take any position for being a nude model. She is often full frontal and looking away from the viewer in a passive nature. What is this telling us about the society that allowed this relationship to develop and carry on happening?

When women wanted to break away from this with their own work, they found that art galleries and museums were run by men for men full of male orientated work. They concluded that solidarity must be sought together and as a group of collective women. They had to pull together and show their work in unlikely places such as libraries, community centres and colleges. They held group discussions and talked about their objectives and aims with their work. They ultimately wanted to claim back the female body from male artists so that it wasn't an object of desire anymore.

Hanna Wilke was a performance artist and took part in many pieces where she would appear naked on stage in front of an audience. She would then make members of the audience make a small plasticine shape and proceeded to stick them all over her body. She was not ashamed of her body, she was naked yes, but she was in control of the situation and she looked how she wanted herself to look. She was naked and topless but not a playboy model. It was a symbol of identity, not eroticism. How often have marks been made on the human body with a sinister purpose such as the Jews being marked to indicate they were to be sent into concentration camps.

Paralee Sehneemann was also a performance artist in 1975 and she wanted to express what it was like to be a woman, not a touched up image in a playboy magazine. She appeared on stage with red paint smeared around her legs and crotch, meant to look like menstruated blood. She then proceeded to pull a script about feminism from her vagina. There was no hiding or shame about what she was doing, a point of showing that women have a monthly cycle and bleed and hurt. This is what we are and men have to accept that we are not just sex objects for their gaze.

Also with this first generation of feminists Julie Chicago created work called 'Dinner party'. It was a co-operative effort involving 30 other female artists. Tables were laid in a triangular form with 39 place settings. In each setting were a goblet, knife and fork and a painted plate. Nearly all of the painted plates had a vaginal shape on them and each plate was set for a famous woman in history, wanting to celebrate them. In the centre of the tables was

an inscribed material with name such as Florence Nightingale and Emily Dickinson.

Barbara Kruger felt that feminists needed to pull away from the female bodies physical form as we are still in some way exposing our bodies. Her non - sexual works are still very distinctive with a combination of photography and text.

Cindy Sherman also pulled away from the female body and looked at stereotypes that women often fell into. Often in her works the female character looks directly at the viewer and isn't ashamed of who and what she is.

Carrie May Weins' work was based very much upon fairy tales and how they can be interpreted. One of her works shows a black woman looking into a mirror to an old white woman's reflection. Words underneath say: 'Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the finest of them all', 'Snow White is you black bitch and don't you forget it!'. This pulls ideas of what it is like to be a black female living in America together of having no respect in society and being excluded as to the colour of her skin.