

## John Berger: Ways of Seeing/3

Since time began, a woman has conventionally had a different social status to a man, a status which only now is beginning to change. A woman has an all together different presence to a man. A man's presence is dependant on the power he appears to have. It suggests what he is capable of doing to or for you. He is the giver, and it is this presence that defines men as men. A woman however gives off a sense of what can be done to or for her. She can consciously or subconsciously create an aura; the way she speaks, her expression, voice and her exterior appearance. The way she receives is a direct result of the way she has presented herself. Perhaps men are not aware of the details, but more of the

overall aura a woman gives off; he then uses this in order he know how to treat her. However, at the beginning of time, a woman cannot have been aware of herself in this way, and hence must have been conditioned to do so. This is not a natural reaction, but throughout western society woman has been habituated to care how they appear to men. Even now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have entirely independent women resorting to plastic surgery, or wearing make-up. Do they do this for themselves? I suggest that they don't: could we imagine women spending time applying make-up, or dieting if men did not exist? This tells us that there is some undeniable instinct within women to present herself for men, and perhaps also that now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a women's aura is predominantly created through physical appearance, in comparison to the 1800's when a women would create an aura through being 'accomplished' (Learning languages, being gifted at sewing, and a talented musician.)



Susannah and the Elders. Tintoretto, 1518-1594

A woman is constantly aware of the image she exudes, particularly to men, and this is perhaps a result of the way in which woman have been born into 'men's keeping.' By this I mean the way that throughout history, woman has relied on man for income, status, social class, and in a sense, almost life itself, hence she will always be conditioned to present herself to men in the most attractive way she can, or in a way that she feels best defines what can or cannot be done to her. When she looks at

herself, not only does she see herself, she will try to see herself as others, particularly men, would see her. She considers this appearance to others, and may judge her success as a woman on it, and may even feel no self worth if she does not consider herself to be giving men the right impression. In particular, she surveys herself as if she were a man, perhaps in order that she can create an aura in accordance with what she wants a man to see when he looks at her. In this sense, a woman is always aware that she has a spectator.

This continues in art, where there is an implication that the woman is aware of her spectator. She is naked as the spectator sees her, and naked for the spectator. In classical paintings, we often see woman with mirrors; the woman here is viewing herself as the spectator would view her when viewing the painting. In fact, this is embedded in tradition: since art began, women have been painted to be looked at by men, and have more often than not appeared naked, or nude.

There is a distinct difference between being naked, and being nude. To be naked is to be without clothing, but to be nude is to be naked but seen as a body. A nude is an object, not a person. Where nakedness reveals oneself, nudity is nakedness placed on display, and is the result of being looked at naked. In art we find that it is the woman that is naked; we would actually find it strange to see a naked posing man, because in traditional art the

convention is that the man is the painter and the woman is the object to be viewed. Hence (traditional) paintings assume the viewer is a man, they are always painted from a male perspective, but perhaps this is because it is only relatively recently that woman have been accepted, and respected for their art. These attitudes in art mirror the traditional attitudes: that woman are there to feed an appetite, not to have one. These paintings of woman are created to appeal to male sexuality, but have nothing to do with her own sexuality, since she could be anyone. The man has the monopoly over any passion or sexual power. She looks at the painter, knowing that she has an audience, and she responds with 'calculated charm' knowing that she is being watched. In effect, woman objectifies herself.



Vanity, Memling, 1435-1494



Venus, Cupid Time and Love, Bronzino, 1503 - 1572

In art though, we can also see strong connections between woman and artist. We often see a painting which we know has been painted by an artist who was connected or perhaps in love with his subject. These paintings are painted personally. The woman is not just on show for men, but is an object of his desire rather than fantasy. We can feel that the painter is painting her for who she is, not what she is. Nakedness here is a positive visual value in its own right. It isn't just practical on a mechanical level of sex. He wants to see his lover naked because there is a sense of relief or reassurance to be had in knowing that they are as we expect. But with nakedness comes a visual loss of mystery. Until nakedness, we focus on the most expressive parts of the body, the eyes, hands mouth etc. When we are naked we focus on the torso or genitals, and the only thing that these can express is sex. Without clothes, we are just male or female, and we find comfort in this simple fact.

In art now, the nude has become less significant. If we compare the later *Olympia* by Manet with *The Venus of Urbino*, Titan, we can see the prostitute defiantly challenging her role as the surveyed. Rather than assessing her own femininity, she seems to, almost rebelliously, be just being, uncaring of how others are viewing her. However, even in modern society, it would appear that even the most self disregarding woman will be this way because she wants to give off a certain aura to a man. For



The Venus of Urbino, Titan, 1487-1576



Olympia, Manet, 1823-1883



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example, an extreme feminist will most likely be behaving the way she is in order for man to see her behaving that way: if man did not exist, then she would feel no need to portray herself as such. It seems likely to me that women will always, no matter how subconsciously, survey themselves as a man would see them. We only have to look at the media and advertising nowadays to realize that the role of women and men has not particularly changed. Perhaps this is because women will always be feminine, and men will always be masculine, it is human nature. We do not have to feel that it is sexism. However, the ideal spectator is still assumed to be a male. The image that woman has flatters him, that she cares so much how she appears to him, and that she is willing to receive. We only have to consider how many female beauty products we can find in a cosmetics store in comparison to male – a direct result of women surveying themselves.

Angelina Jolie, 2005