

Representations: The Female Form and Self-portraiture in Art

Key Idea

The female form has been a popular subject throughout art history. Significantly, however, the majority of these artworks have been created by male artists. In 1989 American activist art group Guerrilla Girls found that Less than 5% of the artists in the modern art section of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art were women, but 85% of the nudes were female. By 2012 these statistics had shifted, but only slightly, to 4% women artists and 76% female nudes.¹ Art museums in Australia reflect similar situations.

This shows that women, then and now, are primarily present in galleries and museums as subjects for the (usually male) artist, and objects for viewing rather than artists in their own right, with their own ideas. This can be understood as directly analogous to the objectification of women in society – represented as objects without agency. However, all people, female and male, are complex individuals with unique personalities.

A power dynamic refers to the balance of power in a given situation, and the above facts are important because they relate to how power dynamics can operate through art. The way a subject is portrayed by an artist shapes the viewer's perception of that subject, giving the artist power over the subject. If a woman is characterised in a painting, photograph or sculpture as a passive object of beauty, whose primary role is to look desirable, this becomes the strongest idea associated with her, leading to what is known as 'unconscious bias'. It's like a writer guiding the reader by providing certain information, and emphasising specific detail, about a character.

Many feminist artists strategically tackle this imbalance by creating artworks that portray women subjects as strong, creative, rebellious, complex and unique individuals. Often the subject is the artist themselves, and they exercise their own power to portray themselves in whatever manner they choose. In this way self-portraiture functions as a reclamation of power.

Key Definitions

Portrayal: A description of someone or something in a particular way; a representation.²

Objectification: The action of degrading someone to the status of a mere object.³

Exhibition Case Studies

Elizabeth Gower, *Portrait of the artist as a young woman* 1974-2017

In this ongoing series of photographic portraits artist Elizabeth Gower portrays herself in relation to her studio and her exhibitions since 1974. Viewing from left-to-right, the series progressively charts developments in both Gower's art practice and her personal style and appearance across a forty-two year period. The series shows the diverse range of contexts within which Gower has produced and exhibited her artwork. The extra detail scribbled underneath each image of the photographer credited also gives insight into Gower's interactions with artists, curators and gallerists across the years, illustrating the social and professional networks that have formed around her art practice. The style of the photographs is very 'matter-of-fact' – Gower simply stands testament with her work. This can be read as a response to the pressure on women in Western society to go to great efforts to pose seductively for the benefit of a male audience. Instead, Gower simply poses as herself with her art, there is no overt effort to entice the viewer – they can take it or leave it.

Maria Kozic, *Bitch!* 1990

This work was originally displayed as a public billboard in Sydney, and later in Melbourne in the early 1990s. The image followed the earlier series *Bitch Prints* 1989 in which Kozic took 'girly pictures'. In this series the scantily clad women found on promotional calendars and advertising for power tools, cars and machinery and other traditionally masculine products were a reference point. Kozic noted the passive quality of the near nude, highly sexualised women, and through reworking the genre tried to 'boost them a bit... (to) give them more power'.⁴ *Bitch!* exaggerates this original idea through both scale and a direct statement to the viewer. With tiny plastic toy men in hand and chained around the her waist, the artist makes a self-portrait that is comically monstrous – complete with a drill to put holes through her opponents. The design also references vintage B-Movie advertising – low-budget, low-concept films which aimed to draw audiences through titillating imagery and provocative, often absurd storylines. This relates to Kozic's known engagement in her art with areas of popular culture regarded as 'being in bad taste'.⁵ Another reference for this artwork is the advertising for the 1958 *Attack of the 50 foot Woman*.

Historical Touchpoints

- Deborah Kelly, *Big butch billboard* 2009
- Guerrilla Girls, *Naked through the ages* 1989-2012
- Cindy Sherman, *Untitled film stills* (series) 1977-1980
- Tracy Emin, *Everyone i have ever ever slept with* 1963 - 1995 1995

Questions

- If you drew a self-portrait, what would you want it to 'say' to the viewer about you, and how could you make it communicate those things? Where would you draw yourself? What activity would you be doing? Would anyone else be in the picture?
- A portrait is a constructed image that communicates ideas about the subject's identity. If you had to create a self-portrait that was meant to communicate an idea of your identity exactly opposite to what it really is, how would you do that? Where would you be posed? What might you be saying? What would you be wearing?
- Australian women, across Australian media and popular culture broadly, are still frequently encouraged to present themselves in ways that conform to conventional ideals of 'woman' (beautiful, domestic, maternal, caregiver, etc.). If you had to create an artwork that engaged with the tradition of the female form, how would you create an artwork which challenged these conventional ideals? When in history would your image be set? Which traditional character or archetype could you appropriate and rework to make your point?

- 1 'Do women still need to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?', Guerrilla Girls. <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages>
- 2 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/portrayal>
- 3 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/objectification>
- 4 MacNeill, Kate. 2016. "In the streets where we live". In *A Companion to Public Art*, Cher Krause Knight and Harriet F. Senie, eds., p.168. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- 5 'Maria Kozic: Pulse Mk2', Art Gallery of NSW. <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/504.1995.a-d/>

Images

- a. Maria Kozic, *Bitch* 1990. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Andrew Curtis
- b. Elizabeth Gower, *Portrait of the artist as a young woman* 1974-2017 (detail). Courtesy the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Photograph: Andrew Curtis
- c. Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* 1963-95 1995. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London. Photograph: Stephen White.
- d. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled (Film Still #57)* 1980. © Cindy Sherman





a.



b.



c.



d.