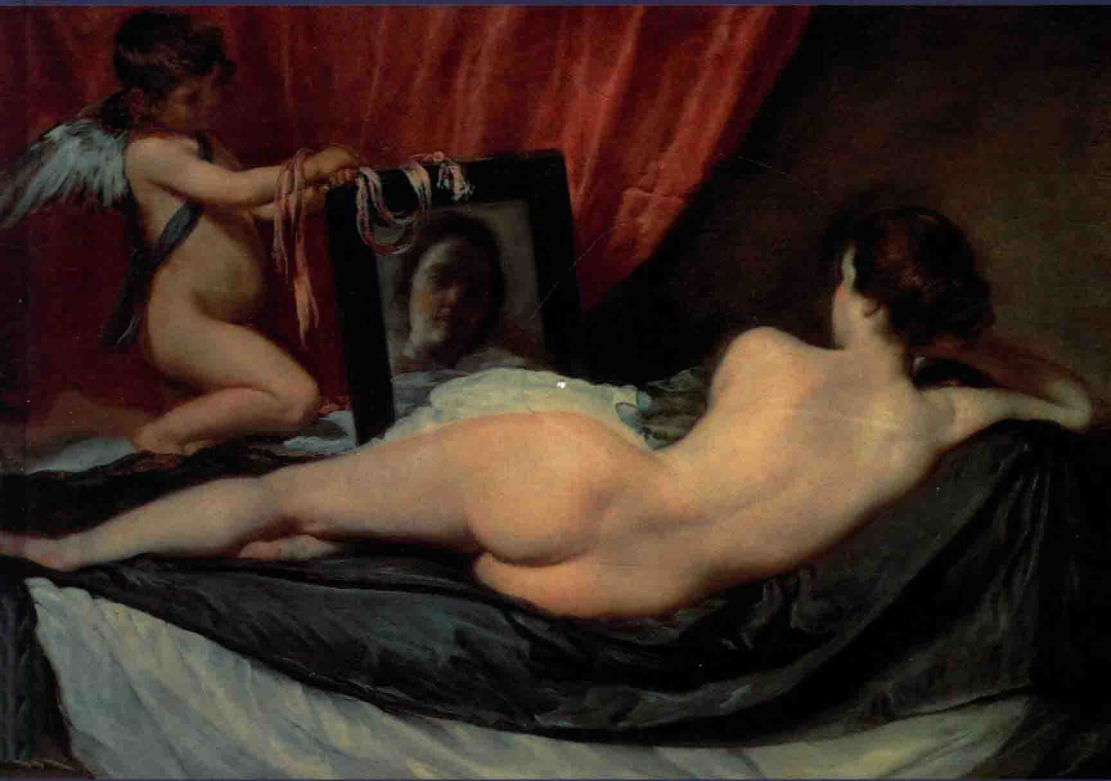


The **f** e m a l e
NUDE



**ART, OBSCENITY
and SEXUALITY**



Lynda Nead

THE FEMALE NUDE

Art, Obscenity and Sexuality

Lynda Nead



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THE FEMALE NUDE

For Sam Connor

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INTRODUCTION

This is not an historical survey of the female nude. Although such a history might place particular artists and images within a range of social and artistic contexts, ultimately it would still leave the category of the female nude intact, perpetuating its existence as a discrete area of art historical study, its boundaries defined by its subject matter and medium. The reader who comes to this book expecting a survey of art will therefore be surprised by certain exclusions and inclusions. A number of artists who are conventionally associated with the female nude are passed over in silence, whereas other work is considered which is undoubtedly less familiar within the canon of art history. The book is rather an attempt to examine the female nude as a means of gaining access to a much wider (and, I would argue, far more significant) range of issues concerning the female body and cultural value, representation, feminism and cultural politics, and the definition and regulation of the obscene.

Anyone who examines the history of western art must be struck by the prevalence of images of the female body. More than any other subject, the female nude connotes 'Art'. The framed image of a female body, hung on the wall of an art gallery, is shorthand for art more generally; it is an icon of western culture, a symbol of civilization and accomplishment. But how and why did the female nude acquire this status? And how does the image of the female body displayed in the gallery relate to other images of the female body produced within mass culture? These are the types of questions that are addressed in the following pages.

During the time that I have worked on this project, I have frequently been overwhelmed by the vastness of the subject and have longed for a topic with clear and limited historical parameters. The material covered in this book ranges from Plato to postmodernism, but in spite of the difficulties implicit in dealing with such a broad historical scope, I have always felt committed to addressing the more general philosophical issues raised by the female nude, as well as to introducing, at various points in the text, specific historical case-studies. Part of this commitment to more general and theoretical argument lies in the fact that, up to this time, feminist art

history has not yet produced a wide-ranging examination of the meanings, values and assumptions that have been and continue to be propagated by the female nude within patriarchal culture. Although there has recently been a number of fascinating feminist studies of particular artists or works,¹ these studies are relatively atomized and it is still possible to work within a period in the absence of any critical framework for discussing visual representations of the female body. As a result, a book such as Kenneth Clark's *The Nude* has managed to attain an astonishingly extended life, without meeting any serious or sustained challenge to its critical premises. To formulate a feminist history of the female nude has thus been to rely on isolated historical studies, or texts that are produced from within the same patriarchal culture from which the images themselves may emanate. The aims of this book are thus twofold: to set up a general theoretical framework for further historical study of the female nude and to elaborate and specify this argument through the discussion of specific historical cases.

There is a theme that runs throughout this book; at various points it becomes more explicit, but it is always present as an underlying structure. The theme is frames and framing. The text is divided into three main parts which offer different frameworks for examining the visual representation of the female body. Part I is called 'Theorizing the Female Nude' and is an attempt to establish a general theoretical framework. The claim of this book is that the female nude is not simply one subject among a whole range of subjects that artists have chosen to depict within the history of art; rather, it should be recognized as a particularly significant motif within western art and aesthetics. The representation of the female body within the forms and frames of high art is a metaphor for the value and significance of art generally. It symbolizes the transformation of the base matter of nature into the elevated forms of culture and the spirit. The female nude can thus be understood as a means of containing femininity and female sexuality. If, as will be argued in Part I, the female body has been regarded as unformed, undifferentiated matter, then the procedures and conventions of high art are one way of controlling this unruly body and placing it within the securing boundaries of aesthetic discourse.

The female nude not only proposes particular definitions of the female body, but also sets in place specific norms of viewing and viewers. The Enlightenment ideal of the contemplative viewing of an art object works to reinforce the unity and integrity of the viewing subject and sets up an opposition between the perfection of art and the disruption and incompleteness of non-art, or obscenity. The obscene body is the body without borders or containment and obscenity is representation that moves and arouses the viewer rather than bringing about stillness and wholeness. The representation of the female body can therefore be seen as a discourse on the subject and is at the core of the history of western aesthetics.

Part II, 'Redrawing the Lines', examines in more detail the discursive formation of the female nude, through art education and the significance of the life class, and in relation to art criticism and the role of sexual metaphor in the critical appraisal of the female nude. Part II also addresses the relationship of feminism and the representation of the female body. By looking at a selection of work produced by women from the 1970s to the 1990s, it shows how developments within the women's movement have been articulated in terms of a politics of identity and the body and through the formulation of new cultural strategies and interventions.

Part III is titled 'Cultural Distinctions' and looks at the ways in which lines are drawn around different types of representation of the female body, moving through high art, glamour photography, newspaper 'pin-ups' and various forms of soft- and hard-core pornography. These categories present a series of cultural distinctions that not only differentiate types of images, but also classify the consumers of those images. The high-art female nude cannot be studied in isolation, but needs to be looked at in the broader context of its relationship with various forms of mass culture. Part III examines the legal framing of representations of the female body by focusing on the definition of pornography and the regulation of the obscene. The category of the obscene is therefore raised in a theoretical and philosophical context in Part I, and then in the context of specific legislative history in Part III. In 'Cultural Distinctions', it is argued that the policing of the boundaries of pornography is not simply a question of controlling the sexual content of images, but amounts to a regulation of audiences of images. Historically, the sexual has been seen to constitute dangerous knowledge which, in the wrong hands, can lead to a dangerous society; the regulation of obscenity is thus shown to be a procedure for the regulation of populations.

From the beginning of this project, it has always seemed to me that the discussion of the female nude inevitably raises the issue of pornography and I have approached this subject with some trepidation. Current debates on pornography, within the women's movement alone, are both extensive and entrenched. Arguments have polarized into pro- and anti-censorship platforms and, partly as a result of this, have failed to yield fruitful new directions in recent years. The attempt to recast these debates has been one of the most challenging aspects of the production of this book. I have attempted a selective engagement with aspects of these debates, in order to show the complex interrelationships between the domains of art and pornography through the representation of the female body. That said, however, the book is no more exclusively a study of pornography than it is a survey of art; rather it exists in the interstices of these discourses and seeks to uncover how the lines are drawn around these categories and by whom.

I hope that it will be clear from the following pages that in spite of the

INTRODUCTION

dominance of patriarchal culture, more spaces are being made by feminism, both in high and popular culture, for representations of the female body that express women's identities, desires and needs. This project of self-definition is a critical aspect of the politics of the women's movement, and the slogan of the 1970s, 'our bodies our selves', needs to be continuously re-examined and pursued.

Having reached the end of this particular piece of work, I am still impressed by the immensity of the subject and the diverse areas of contemporary and historical culture that are opened out by study of the female nude. So, although it is a conventional qualification, I feel compelled to say that I view this book as a contribution to a much larger and ongoing debate, rather than as a final or conclusive statement about the subjects raised here.

As with most academics in the current political climate, I have found the most difficult aspect of work on this book to be finding the time to spend on it. I am therefore extremely grateful to the Leverhulme Trust who awarded me a grant in order to work on the book for six months in 1990. My thanks also go to all my colleagues in the Department of History of Art at Birkbeck College who continue to create a supportive environment for research which respects the diversity of approaches now represented within the discipline. Laura Marcus and Tag Gronberg have offered really helpful criticism and comments, and I am grateful to them for reading various parts of this text. But above all, my thanks go to Steve Connor, without whom . . . without whom this book could not possibly have been finished; thank you for endless patience, intellectual and emotional support and childcare!

Part I

THEORIZING THE FEMALE NUDE

1 FRAMING THE FEMALE BODY

At no point is there a plane or an outline where the eye may wander undirected. The arms surround the body like a sheath, and by their movement help to emphasise its basic rhythm. The head, left arm and weight-bearing leg form a line as firm as the shaft of a temple.

(Kenneth Clark, *The Nude*, 1956)¹

Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body . . . The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins. There is no reason to assume any primacy for the individual's attitude to his own bodily and emotional experience, any more than for his cultural and social experience.

(Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966)²

This permanent requirement – to distinguish between the internal or proper sense and the circumstance of the object being talked about – organizes all philosophical discourses on art, the meaning of art and meaning as such . . . This requirement presupposes a discourse on the limit between the inside and outside of the art object, here a *discourse on the frame*.

(Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 1987)³

These three statements have been taken from works published over a period of three decades and from three distinct academic disciplines (art history, anthropology and philosophy), but here they are placed side by side because, in their diverse ways, they seem to unravel an aesthetic that has structured the representation of the female body in western art since

antiquity. They speak of outlines, margins and frames – procedures and forms that regulate both the ways in which the female body is shown and the proper conduct of the prospective viewer. Kenneth Clark describes the achievement of the Capitoline Venus in terms of containment. The arms ‘surround’ and enfold the body, and the planes and surfaces of the marble itself seem to emphasize this act of enclosure. Clark’s range of images is significant. The pose is likened to a ‘sheath’; it has become a covering for the body and is as regular and structured as the column of a temple. It is almost unnecessary to point out the phallic connotations of this language. For Clark, the female body has been shorn of its formal excesses and, as Venus, has been turned into an image of the phallus. The transformation of the female body into the female nude is thus an act of regulation: of the female body and of the potentially wayward viewer whose wandering eye is disciplined by the conventions and protocols of art.

With the quotation from Mary Douglas, the move is from the particularities of the female nude, that is, a cultural commodity, highly formalized and conventionalized, to the more general issue of the body and its boundaries. Douglas examines the cultural links between dirt and disorder or formlessness and analyses the rituals of cleansing and purification that control this threat. Hygiene and dirt imply two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a transgression of that order. All transitional states therefore pose a threat; anything that resists classification or refuses to belong to one category or another emanates danger. And once again it is the margins, the very edges of categories, that are most critical in the construction of symbolic meaning.

From this position, it is not so far to Jacques Derrida’s ‘discourse on the frame’. In a radical dismantling of Kantian aesthetics, Derrida problematizes the philosophical concept of the disinterested aesthetic experience by focusing our attention not on the object of contemplation but on its boundary. The frame is the site of meaning, where vital distinctions between inside and outside, between proper and improper concerns, are made. If the aesthetic experience is one that transcends individual inclination and takes on a universal relevance, then without the frame there can be no unified art object and no coherent viewing subject.

In this section I will draw on the work of writers such as Douglas and Derrida in order to make sense of the female nude and its symbolic importance within the western tradition of high art. I will argue that one of the principal goals of the female nude has been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body. The forms, conventions and poses of art have worked metaphorically to shore up the female body – to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from transgressing the boundary dividing the inside of the body and the outside, the self from the space of the other. Clearly, the relevance of this analytical model goes far beyond the examination of art. For if, as Douglas suggests, the body’s boundaries

cannot be separated from the operation of other social and cultural boundaries, then bodily transgression is also an image of social deviation. The general movement, then, is from the specifics of representing the female body to more general structures of values and beliefs. To take up Derrida's point: the definition of limits and frames determines not simply the meaning of art, but meaning as such.

'The chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness.'⁴ In statements such as this, Aristotle set out the classical ideal of unity and integrity of form which has had a lasting and powerful influence on western culture. It can be traced in the language of aesthetics and art criticism; it lies at the heart of much art education and it structures legal and ethical discourses on art and obscenity. What seems to be at stake in all these discourses, and what all these areas have in common, is the production of a rational, coherent subject. In other words, the notion of unified form is integrally bound up with the perception of self, and the construction of individual identity. Psychoanalysis proposes a number of relations between psychical structures and the perception and representation of the body. Here too, subjectivity is articulated in terms of spaces and boundaries, of a fixing of the limits of corporeality. Freud relates the structure of the child's ego to the psychical projection of the erotogenic surface of the body. In a footnote to the 1927 English translation of 'The Ego and the Id', Freud states that:

The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides . . . representing the superficies of the mental apparatus.⁵

The female nude can almost be seen as a metaphor for these processes of separation and ordering, for the formation of self and the spaces of the other. If the female body is defined as lacking containment and issuing filth and pollution from its faltering outlines and broken surface, then the classical forms of art perform a kind of magical regulation of the female body, containing it and momentarily repairing the orifices and tears. This can, however, only be a fleeting success; the margins are dangerous and will need to be subjected to the discipline of art again . . . and again. The western tradition of the female nude is thus a kind of discourse on the subject, echoing structures of thinking across many areas of the human sciences.

The general points that are being made here can be specified and pinned down through a more detailed discussion of individual texts and images. Three further examples illustrate how the relationship between boundaries and the female body is given representation. In a painting of the virtue *Chastity* by the sixteenth-century Italian painter, Giovanni Battista Moroni, the allegorical figure holds a sieve on her lap, the symbol of her

purity and inviolability (Plate 1).⁶ The sieve is filled with water and yet no liquid runs out, for chastity is watertight; it is impenetrable and allows no leakage. The miraculous water-filled sieve is a metaphor for the ideal, hermetically sealed female body. The boundary of the body has been made absolutely inviolate; it has become a kind of layer of armour between the inside of the body and the outside. Of course, there is something worrying and incomplete about the impermeable sieve as a figure for the virtuous woman. If nothing is allowed in or out, then the female body remains a disturbing container for both the ideal and the polluted. Although the impermeable boundary may go some way towards answering fears concerning the female body, the problem does not go away, but is simply contained, stanching, for a while.

Woman is able to stand as an allegory of Chastity by displacing the worrying connotations of yielding and porous skin or oozing gaps and orifices on to the clear outline and metallic surface of the sieve. There are other ways in which this desire for clear boundaries and definitions can be satisfied. The female body can be re-formed, its surfaces reinforced and hardened, by bodybuilding. Lisa Lyon won the first World Women's Bodybuilding Championship in 1979. About a year later she met the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and posed for a series of pictures which were published as a book called *Lady: Lisa Lyon* in 1983.⁷ Now, bodybuilding is a mixed blessing for feminism. On the one hand, it seems to offer a certain kind of liberation, a way for women to develop their muscularity and physical strength. It produces a different kind of female body-image which could be seen to blur the conventional definitions of gendered identity. But on the other hand, this revised femininity seems simply to exchange one stereotype for another – one body beautiful for another, possibly racier, image of woman which can easily be absorbed within the patriarchal repertoire of feminine stereotypes. What is interesting in the present context, however, is the way in which both Lyon's bodybuilding and Mapplethorpe's photographic techniques are articulated in terms of bringing the female body under control. In a foreword to the book Samuel Wagstaff describes the compatibility between the photographer and the model:

Of course, Mapplethorpe always makes it more difficult for himself by deliberately framing everything and everybody in the same strait-jacket style – the world reinvented as logic, precision, sculpture in obvious light and shadow.

I don't suppose he would ever have taken a second exposure of Lisa if her classicism and ideals of order had not been a match for his.⁸

The images of Lyon are presented in terms of 'logic', 'precision' and 'order', pointing, quite knowingly, to the act of regulation that has been