Feminine Persuasion

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Artistic Behavior in the Human Female

JEAN ROBERTSON, PH.D.

Alfred C. Kinsey and his team of researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with six thousand women to collect the data reported in the volume *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, published early in the repressed 1950s when no one was openly discussing sex. Kinsey was ahead of his time in bringing sex into public discourse and academic debate; moreover, he was radical in asking women to voice our own observations about our sexuality. The six thousand Kinsey interviews were revolutionary not only for the explicit information they uncovered but because the interview process itself was anchored in the tacit assumption that women possess knowledge that matters; analysis and publication of the interviews helped to establish that women are sexual subjects, not just objects. There have been dramatic, ongoing changes over the ensuing fifty years in how women have understood and expressed sexuality and sexual issues, but chief among the changes was surmounting that initial barrier of repression—cultural repression that hindered women from gaining a public voice in the arena of human sexual behavior. Thanks in part to the pioneering efforts of Kinsey and The Kinsey Institute, women claimed the right (and the power) to sexual subjectivity, to say aloud that we too are sexual beings and intend to express our sexuality from our point of view.

Artistic explorations of sexuality are closely connected to the sexual politics of the wider culture. “Your body is a battleground,” proclaims a
text in a 1989 artwork by Barbara Kruger. Kruger was referring specifically to the pro-choice movement and the struggle by women for reproductive rights, but the slogan more generally encapsulates the notion that the body, including its expression in sexuality, “is one of the great political arenas of our times,” as Thomas Laqueur puts it. The rise of the feminist and civil rights movements, widespread awareness of sexual violence, including rape, incest, and domestic abuse, the sexual revolution, and the enormous expansion of pornography and the sex industry have all influenced debates about the nature of sexuality and its representation in art and other areas of visual culture, including movies, television, magazines, and the Internet. The charged issue of women claiming control over our (own) bodies, including how and by whom we are depicted, has fueled an explosion of powerful—one might even say mind-altering—art by contemporary women. With any gain in power, of course, there are inevitable disagreements: Even as women artists have taken control of the representation of female sexuality within the art world, they have disagreed and varied in their concepts and artistic strategies.

Body images and sexual identities are culturally and psychologically constructed and encoded. In 1953, the same year as the publication of Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, Simone de Beauvoir’s ground-breaking book, The Second Sex, was published in English. De Beauvoir famously wrote, “One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one,” claiming that sexual identity depends primarily on cultural conditioning, not biology. How women (and men) see ourselves and others as sexual beings, how we define our sexual identities, and even our erotic responses to stimuli are formed, according to de Beauvoir (and the many others who have worked from related hypotheses), by social experiences and political events. Sexual behaviors, preferences, and attributes encode social values. Your body is not your own. It belongs, in a very real sense, to society, for it is within the context of society that meaning is encoded and communicated. At the same time, as researchers in a wide swath of fields (from genetics to physical anthropology) have proposed, facets of sexuality are biological and instinctual. Working in parallel fashion, women artists have debated, through both verbal and visual means, how much of sexuality is based on corporeal impulses rather than intellectual concepts that are negotiable.

A GLANCE BACK  Sexuality is a preeminent theme in art by women today, yet fifty years ago it was strangely absent in women’s art, at least in the mainstream. Of course it could be argued that the most critically acclaimed
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The art of the postwar era was abstract rather than representational and that male artists were not representing sexuality explicitly either. But famous male figurative artists, including Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali, remained highly visible and active in the 1950s, and were creating erotic fantasy images of females. Even some of the male Abstract Expressionists occasionally ventured into concoctions of a sexualized nature, most famously Willem de Kooning with his ferocious Woman paintings. Beginning in the late 1950s in Paris, Yves Klein performed his Living Brush paintings, applying Klein blue paint to the torsos of nude female models and directing them to imprint their bodies against a canvas on the floor. With the rise of Pop Art in the 1960s, renditions of eroticized females by male artists became a staple, from Andy Warhol’s many paintings of the Hollywood sex goddess Marilyn Monroe to Tom Wesselmann’s Great American Nude series to Mel Ramos’s kitsch paintings of voluptuous pinup girls.

Representations of female sexuality have occurred throughout the history of Western art, but until very recently they were almost invariably authored by male artists (so much so that we might argue that depictions of bare naked ladies function as tropes of male sexual potency—reflected glory, as it were). The female nude was a long-standing artistic subject but not one permitted to women artists. Prototypical male depictions of the female form and female sexuality were objectified, with women rendered in a state of total passivity as objects to be exploited for male sexual gratification (and as sources of energy to power the turned-on male id). Female sexual desire, when it was shown at all by male artists, tended to be debased in the figure of a fallen woman, a temptress associated with carnal sin who led men astray—Eve, Salome.

Only a few brave women dared to introduce issues of female sexuality into artistic practice, to engage directly with female sexual identity and desire, male voyeurism, or feelings of sexual vulnerability and anxiety. These women tended to work outside the mainstream, known only within small circles in their heyday. For example, working in Paris between the two World Wars, Romaine Brooks painted portraits of lesbians and Claude Cahun staged photographs exploring gender ambiguity; both artists only achieved widespread fame late in the twentieth century, well after their deaths. Louise Bourgeois (born 1911) is acclaimed today for her tortured expressionistic sculptures embodying sexual themes, but she worked at the fringes of the art world for the first three decades of her career.

From the late 1960s, artistic expressions of sexuality by women surfaced overtly and dramatically. The importance of the burgeoning
women’s liberation movement in encouraging women artists to explore sexual themes cannot be overstated. In tandem with the consciousness-raising and activism of the political movement for women’s rights, pioneering feminist artists claimed women’s experiences, emotions, dreams, and goals as legitimate subject matter for art. Female sexuality was a major category they addressed from the outset, along with many other topics, including women’s history, women’s spirituality, and issues of equal access to education, jobs, and income. Pioneering feminist artists explored a liberated sexuality through a range of media and techniques, from painting and sculpture to newer media including photography, video, installation, and performance.

Because women’s voices as sexual beings had been so repressed and unacknowledged, at the outset shock therapy was employed to claim female sexuality as a legitimate theme. Women artists breached the boundaries between the hitherto private realm of female sexuality and public display in sensational fashion. In some cases women artists of the 1960s and 1970s, including Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke, flaunted their own hyper-sexualized bodies in erotic performances that celebrated their newfound sexual agency. These works have been characterized as narcissistic and exhibitionistic by critics who are disturbed by overt displays of female sexuality, but the approach was effective in asserting an active libido and a subjective, embodied presence for women’s voices. At the same time, there was a great deal of activist work that used autobiographical experiences of sexual oppression as a lens to examine larger political issues of being a woman in contemporary society. Faith Ringgold, Judy Baca, Michele Wallace, and other artists of color struggled to make visible issues of racial difference that affected sexual politics.

A famous, widely publicized achievement of this era was the 1972 exhibition Womanhouse, organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, and created by them and their students in the pioneering Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts. Working in a house in Los Angeles, the women created installations within the domestic spaces, exuberantly displaying tampons, underwear, and other items that referred directly to biological functions particular to women’s bodies, including menstruation and childbirth; various sections of the exhibition and accompanying performances raised issues of sexual violence, the psychic confinement of traditional women’s roles, and restrictive social standards of feminine beauty. Judy Chicago’s collaborative installation The Dinner Party (1974–1979) was another landmark. Besides recovering women of distinction from the dustbins

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of history, the iconography of *The Dinner Party*—famously, the use of vulva designs on the plates—was a clarion call to rescue the female body from Western male stereotypes. Indeed, the use of “cunt imagery” (to use Chicago’s terminology) from the 1970s on has been a recurring strategy for resisting male voyeurism and asserting a female sexuality that is positioned (and must be expressed from) within a female center. A recent extension of this approach is Mona Hatoum’s video installation *Corps étranger* (Foreign body, 1994), which features projections of images of the interior of the artist’s body recorded by endoscopic and coloscopic cameras. As Amelia Jones writes, “Here the naked female body is all vagina dentata, all hole, with nothing phallic/fetishistic left to palliate the male gaze.”

A central area of analysis as feminist theory and practice that evolved was the concept of “the gaze,” which established the decisive role of the viewer as the person with the power to assign value and meaning to what is looked at. The concept of the gaze was given a feminist elaboration by Laura Mulvey, who argued that the gaze is gendered and that Western visual representations of females typically assume a male spectator gazing at the female as a passive object. Further, the gaze is voyeuristic when the female is seen as a pleasurable sexual object. In the 1970s, women artists resisted the male gaze by asserting the presence of a consciousness and answering with a gaze of their own. In the 1980s, a great deal of effort went into revealing masculinist values embedded in the process of looking—a process in which looking flows into scopophilia—by deconstructing how female objects of the gaze are stereotyped in art history and visual culture generally.

In the 1980s, artists and critics increasingly focused on the social and psychological manifestations of sexuality rather than on its biological, corporeal qualities. Ideas from the theoretical discourses of post-Freudian psychology, Marxism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, articulated by writers and theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigary, Griselda Pollock, Lisa Tickner, and Kate Linker exerted a strong influence on feminist artists. There was a move away from personal, vernacular work based on autobiography toward more conceptual simulations of female identity communicated through gender-coded attributes—stereotypes that could be deconstructed and their artificiality revealed. Some women artists rejected any display of the fleshy, needy, organic female body, preferring to examine the social, political, and psychic systems that constructed (and constricted) female sexuality. As Fiona Carson explains, “The physicality of the female body began to disappear under the weight of its own history in the early 1980s, becoming almost a taboo subject for image-makers because one would add to the overwhelming pile of objectified and stereotyped representations in the dominant culture. As its physical representation became increasingly problematic, the female body dissolved into a flux of shifting signifiers and tangential references. . . . What mattered was to deconstruct its ideological meanings, the interrogation of signs across its surface.” Some artists used metaphorical objects such as beds or articles of clothing as symbols that substituted for the absent female body. Numerous artists selected photographic media over traditional fine art media, considering the latter to be male-dominated and compromised. Performances for the camera, including the well-known work of Cindy Sherman, replaced the physicality of live performance.
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Works in which text often rivaled image for dominance ("scriptovisual" work) by Barbara Kruger, Mary Kelly, and others received widespread critical attention.

The increasingly sophisticated analysis of female sexuality and sexual issues brought attention to the diversity of sexuality. Artists addressed aspects of sexuality that had been particularly repressed and hidden, including lesbian and transgender sexualities, and racial, ethnic, class, and national differences. Artists in the 1990s continued to confront issues of marginality, adding to their critique the absence of aging and disabled women from mainstream representations of sexuality.

The 1990s saw a renewed emphasis on physical displays of female potency in art with a tactile presence, although young feminist artists tried to emphasize corporeal aspects without compromising new theoretical insights. In general, there was resistance to the coolly didactic feminist art prescribed as "correct" feminism by 1980s poststructuralist critics. In the wake of a set of exhibitions in 1993–1994 in New York, Los Angeles, and London, all entitled Bad Girls, a new group of women emerged who were making very visceral works with often explosive sexual content, including Janine Antoni, Rachel Lachowitz, and Nicole Eisenman (works by Eisenman are represented in pls. 40–42). The women named are politically savvy and have tried to assert the visceral presence of female sexuality while sustaining opposition to a patriarchal ideology. On the other hand, a group of so-called postfeminist bad girl artists also emerged in the 1990s, women who have benefited from the political freedoms gained by their predecessors, but who reject the label "feminist" for themselves, including Cecily Brown, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, and Vanessa Beecroft. The political positions of postfeminists are not clear-cut, and some present sexually titillating, provocative work without conceptual grounding.

SEXUAL THEMES

It would strain the classification-making abilities of Dr. Kinsey himself to categorize the rich diversity of ideas about female sexuality that are expressed in contemporary art by women. Following are four thematic topics among the numerous possibilities: sex and violence, body image and appearance, sexual identity and diversity, and sexual pleasure and desire. There is much crossover and volatility among the topics. Of course, that the motifs of art created by women are heterogeneous and resistant to clearly articulated boundaries is more proof that women’s knowledge about sexuality contains content that is altogether too slippery for any single, or even a few, grand narratives.
Sex and Violence

From the beginnings of the feminist movement, women artists represented painful sexual experiences as well as pleasurable ones. Women have created works revealing and examining the relationship between sexuality and violence, depicting the physical and psychological traumas women experience from rape, battery, murder, and sexual harassment, and in some instances critiquing the social milieu that enables and tolerates sexual abuse. There are many examples from the past forty years. In the early 1960s Yoko Ono performed her Cut Piece, inviting audience members to come up on stage and cut off pieces of her clothing; the performance revealed viewers’ willingness to watch and even participate in a ritualistic violation of a woman’s body. Ablutions (1972), performed through the CalArts Feminist Art Program by Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani, dramatized the trauma of rape, and included a tape of women’s voices recounting individual real-life experiences of assault. Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz collaborated on In Mourning and in Rage (1977), a public performance in Los Angeles critiquing the political structure that permitted sexual violence against women. Sue Coe’s painting New Bedford Rape (1983), based on an actual rape in Massachusetts, shows a woman pinned on a pool table while men line up to take a turn. Barbara Kruger has made many works since the early 1980s spotlighting ways in which language is used as an instrument of power by reinforcing stereotypes that facilitate violence against women as well as against gays, blacks, and other minorities. Sue Williams’s painting A Funny Thing Happened (1992) couches rage about sexual violence inside a cartoonish technique. In a startling reversal of the power dynamics of most sex crimes, Nicole Eisenman made several paintings in the 1990s depicting women castrating men.

For feminists, violence against women and girls has everything to do with social and political power structures that normalize, even naturalize, male assumptions of power. In a patriarchal society, females are viewed as lesser—as helpers, followers, and servants of men; an unequal balance of power that opens the door to exploitation, mistreatment, and abuse. Women’s art about sexual violence often functions as visual consciousness-raising, demonstrating the prevalence of abuse and suggesting causes and solutions. Still, women artists have an uphill climb in their efforts to represent sexual violence because of the weird (and wildly profitable) conflation of violence and glamour in our mass media. Western popular culture is obsessed with violence, often pairing
violence with glamorous young women and sensuality. In contrast, the victims of violence represented in art by the women mentioned above are neither glamorous nor erotic; they are diverse, vulnerable, in pain, and angry, as in real life.

Body Image and Appearance

Every culture constructs images of sexual attractiveness: Certain body types are favored as the ideal objects of sexual desire and they dominate advertising, movies, and other areas of visual culture, while other body types are denigrated and characterized as sexually undesirable. In Western culture today, the sexual ideal for women is defined within incredibly narrow parameters: young, thin, fit; and there is enormous pressure on women to strive for the prescriptive appearance, however unrealistic the goal. As Ynestra King writes (discussing disabled women in particular), “It is no longer enough to be thin; one must have ubiquitous muscle definition, nothing loose, flabby, or ill defined, no fuzzy boundaries. And of course, there’s the importance of control. Control over aging, bodily processes, weight, fertility, muscle tone, skin quality, and movement.”

Over and over we find women artists making works that critique the restrictive ideals of beauty and sexual attractiveness that stunt women’s perceptions of their own sexual potential. Some artists, among them Hannah Wilke, Joanna Frueh, Laura Aguilar, Jenny Saville, and Jo Spence, challenge the assumption that the “perfect” body of commercial capitalism is normative by representing women who are aging, large, disabled, or scarred, and who are also erotic. Other artists, including Martha Wilson, Janine Antoni, and Maureen Connor, explore the psychic stresses that accompany eating disorders, excessive plastic surgeries, restrictive clothing, and other self-punishing attempts at bodily upkeep and control. Some, including Lorna Simpson and Barbara Kruger, break apart the conventions of various visual media in order to show that media-promoted body images are artificial ideals rather than inherent ones and also to “lay bare the ideological underpinnings (including sexism, ageism, and racism) of ideals of beauty.”

A strategy with particular currency today is to use humor, parody, and excessiveness to subvert stereotypes of an ideal body image. Drawing on the work and terminology of the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, feminist writers and artists use notions of carnival and the grotesque body to discuss works that borrow “tropes from the traditions of the carnivalesque, the tradition of licensed subversion in which hierarchical rank and prohibitions are suspended via vulgar humour, pro-
fanities, and costumes and masks." For example, with high humor, Nancy Davidson inflates giant weather balloons, which she "carves" with fetishistic props such as fishnets, corsets, and G-strings into camp versions of voluptuous female buttocks and breasts (pls. 37–39). Davidson says, "I am interested in humor, excess and the gigantic woman. It comes from being a longtime feminist and being aware as a woman, feeling powerful. When you feel in control, you can take a risk. You can play the part of the clown or the fool."10

"Grotesque" bodies break through boundaries and other attempts at control, providing a spectacular contrast to the sanitized, frozen bodies promoted by advertising. Grotesque bodies are embedded in physical processes and are allowed to change over time—they ooze, bleed, sag, and age. In some of her photographs, Margi Geerlinks plays with the visual oddness of attempts to freeze time in a quest for eternal youth by depicting elderly women whose wrinkles have been digitally erased (images that anticipate the confusions about age that may emerge as botox injections become increasingly commonplace).

**Sexual Identity and Diversity**

In mainstream Western culture, binary oppositions are the central way of structuring sexual difference: "Male" and "female" are understood as clear opposites, and heterosexuality is viewed as the normative sexual identity. But in actual lives as well as in the realms of art and theory, sexual identities are more complicated, more ambitiously open to change and debate. Although radical within their historical moment for making female voices active voices, women artists in the 1960s and 1970s who gained art world visibility were overwhelmingly heterosexual (there were significant exceptions, among them the lesbian-identified artists Harmony Hammond and Tee Corinne). Philosopher Judith Butler’s influential book *Gender Trouble*,11 along with the emergence of queer theory in the early 1990s, helped make people aware of the heterosexual bias of previous feminist theory and practice, and brought new visibility to the work of lesbian artists. Since then artists increasingly are representing the great diversity of sexual identities in our midst: heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered; registering desires that cross old boundaries of age, race, class, disability, nationality, and ethnicity. Among the many contemporary women artists representing diverse sexual orientations are Catherine Opie, Holly Hughes, Nan Goldin, and Nicole Eisenman.

Various artists interested in issues of sexual identity are working with gender instability as an area of particular interest. Sexual differ-
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ences are encoded visually: We learn to “read” a person’s gender and sexual orientation by noting stereotyped visual clues such as hairstyle, clothing, pose, and gesture. Artists who wish to subvert social stereotypes of masculinity and femininity employ props, masks, makeup, and costumes to represent bodies of uncertain gender that resist classification by viewers. Those who have created artwork depicting transvestism and other means that blur gender boundaries include Cindy Sherman, Collier Schorr, Nancy Burson, and Mariette Pathy Allen (the latter’s documentary photographic work with transgender communities is represented in the Kinsey Institute collection—see pl. 1). On a fundamental level, such transgressions do more than question gender stereotypes; they undermine the whole notion of a stable, consistent gender identity. Such renditions suggest that sexual identity and gender roles are cultural products that are multiple, fluid, and open to constant renegotiation and change.

In addition to sexual orientation and gender codes, artists have examined ways in which sexual identities are coded and stereotyped by race and national origin. The critique has evolved beyond revealing the voyeurism of the male gaze to countering the Eurocentric gaze in particular. According to this critique, the norms of Eurocentric aesthetics pervade Western representations of women, holding up white women as socially acceptable objects of desire while women of color are portrayed as racially and sexually “other,” outside the discourse of sexual normality. Although cast as sexually taboo (for the presumed white male viewer), women of color are frequently stereotyped as sexually promiscuous and eroticly exotic. Thus women of color are not only objectified as are white women, but endure the added pain and shame of finding themselves the targets of extreme fetishization and pornographic voyeurism.

Postcolonial theorists such as Rasheed Araeen, bell hooks, Trin T. Minh-ha, M. A. Jaimes Guerrero, Ella Habiba Shohat, and Kobena Mercer trace these attitudes back to the power dynamics of colonialism, when European conquerors justified slavery, rape, and other forms of oppression and violence by stereotyping their captives as wild, overly physical beings, without any subjectivity of their own, who had to be controlled by extreme measures. Racist voyeurism toward colonized women also stems from the patriarchal attitudes of Western medicine, anthropology, and ethnography. In the nineteenth century, colonized people were deemed “specimens” to be studied, and were measured, photographed, and put on actual display in public spectacles to feed the curiosity and stoke the fantasies of Western audiences.
Visual artists who have made works about the legacy of colonialism and scientific voyeurism on women’s sexuality include Adrian Piper, Coco Fusco, Sonia Boyce, Mona Hatoum, Kara Walker, Adriana Varejão, and Renée Cox. Cox photographs the black female nude body (often her own) in poses that sometimes mimic historical Western renditions of women, shaking up assumptions of whiteness in Western ideals while also asserting the proud subjectivity of her model, who gazes back assertively at the camera (pl. 36). Nevertheless, the critic B. E. Myers has argued that despite the power of her images and political intentions, Cox, like other female artists of color, has a daunting task in trying to overcome viewers’ blind conditioning, which automatically assigns black women to a fixed category of sexual identity. Myers argues that “part of what makes Black women’s audiences unable to recognize them as fully human is the fact that their dark bodies are over-determined. The bodies themselves signify too greatly because they are heavy with history, and audiences come to understand these historical memories through at least two voices: through a scientifically-laden analytical lexicon; as well as through the wordless and very neurotic push of desire.”

Finally, even well-intentioned Western feminists can do direct a Eurocentric gaze at sexual practices and politics elsewhere in the world. Ella Shohat writes about “Western feminists’ imperial fantasies of rescuing clitoridectomized and veiled women,” suggesting that the tendency to see white Western values as universal is not limited to men. For instance, the films and photographs of Shirin Neshat, which show Iranian women garbed in the head-to-toe black chador, are typically assumed by Western viewers to be unambiguous critiques of the practice of veiling in a Muslim country. Neshat’s own view is more open to the negotiations of context; the artist recognizes, for instance, that veiling may even serve as a protest against Western hegemonic influence. In contemporary Western culture it is deemed important to have nothing “veiled,” including female sexuality, but is that necessarily an unequivocal social value?

**Sexual Pleasure and Desire**

A significant area in which women artists have claimed sexual subjectivity is the expression of sexual desire and pleasure. Instead of appearing as passive, eroticized objects, women represented in art by women register frank sexual needs and desires of their own. As with other sexual themes, the representation of eroticism has evolved over time. At first, emancipated women artists expressed conventional forms
of heterosexual eroticism; their breakthrough was in asserting a female libido and in reversing the gaze to show their desire for men. Gradually women gained the confidence to cross the forbidden territory of cross-gender or cross-racial desire. Today, younger women artists are even more transgressive, giving visual form to multiple, complex aspects of sexual pleasure and lust, leading in some cases to a no-holds-barred crossing of the public/private divide and representations of fetishism and erotomania. For example, Tracey Emin's installation *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (1995) features a tent embroidered inside with the 102 names of people the artist has slept with (but not necessarily had sex with). Annie Sprinkle, a former worker in the sex industry, achieved notoriety in the 1990s for performances in which she invited audience members to examine her cervix through a speculum. Lisa Yuskavage and Nancy Davidson play with our culture’s fixation with breasts by rendering excessively enlarged versions. In a series begun in the mid-1990s, Ghada Amer took images from sex magazines of women masturbating and remade them in embroidery thread adhered on painted canvases (her signature technique) (pls. 28–30). Marlene Dumas likewise has used pornographic images as source material. The now routine depictions of explicit sexual acts in films and other forms of popular visual culture may be forcing women artists to up the ante in the shock tactics they employ in order to get viewers to recognize the presence of female perspectives about sexual issues.

Artists and writers have also examined the ways in which erotic response, like other forms of sexuality, is culturally constructed. For example, the work of Laura Letinsky provokes an analysis of the visual codes of eroticism. Letinsky photographs staged intimate encounters between real heterosexual couples: The gap between the ordinary details and awkward poses of an actual encounter and our romantic expectations based on Hollywood fictions creates a rupture that reveals the artificiality of the conventional ideal (pls. 43–45).

Not surprisingly, the expression of female eroticism in visual art is highly controversial. Some feminists, including the artist and writer Mary Kelly, are wary of pleasurable representations of female sexuality, particularly displays of an erogenous female body. According to this argument, because mass-media renditions, which continue to situate the female body as the target of the (objectifying, libidinous) gaze, are so pervasive, they compromise (even pre-determine) how viewers see images of female eroticism in a fine-art context. Renée Cox has made erotic photographs of herself in, for instance, fishnet stockings or a leather corset, posed in a sexually alluring way. Do viewers see these
photos as Cox’s liberated expression of erotic fantasies or do they gaze pornographically? At issue is whether viewers perceive such images in a voyeuristic way that maintains and reinforces old patriarchal power structures, no matter how empowered the artists may believe their viewpoints to be.

Many contemporary feminists are ambivalent about the issue of expressing pleasure, recognizing that if an artist wants to articulate truthfully what it means to inhabit a female body she should not repress her own sexual desires. As Amer says about her attraction to pornography, “At first I lied to myself because I was worried about my family’s reaction. I thought I was using sewing because it is a submissive act, and the women showing their bodies in the magazine is a submissive act, so the work was about double submission. Instead, in my work there is an indication of women’s pleasure. I think women like to show their bodies and men like to look at them. There is an allusion to masturbation for women, to pleasure.”

Women artists striving to reclaim subjectivity in sexual expression and representation seek two, often competing, goals: how to advance freedom of sexual expression and how to repel the voyeuristic, controlling scrutiny of patriarchy. One strategy is to embrace ambiguity. For instance, Patty Chang makes videos that convey mixed messages about sexual pleasure and erotic response. In one video included in the exhibit *Feminine Persuasion*, Chang sits dressed in schoolgirl attire, contorting her face and body as something writhes under her white blouse, leaving wet spots; as Chang squirms, we glimpse her panties beneath a short black skirt. In fact, unseen by us, large live eels are inside the artist’s blouse. The scene is creepy and erotically charged; the expressions on Chang’s face do not tell us clearly if she is experiencing erotic arousal or disgust (see pl. 31 for still image).

The power that seeks to define female sexuality is pervasive, residing in laws, mass-produced images, and religious and social moral codes. These sources are often at war with one another—scenes of sexy teenage girls in tight clothes on television clash with religious prohibitions against premarital sex, for instance—but all of them turn females into the object of someone else’s scrutiny and control. Women artists who represent female eroticism in ways that are simultaneously attractive and alienating, arousing and anxiety-producing, may be deliberately reflecting the confusion about sexuality in contemporary culture. They are exploring the morally uncertain terrain between being a good feminist and a bad girl. They are wrestling against the dictates of a society in
which women’s sexuality is a Pandora’s box: We are damned if we open it, and damned if we don’t.

The twenty-first-century world has changed in ways that were unimagined even twenty years ago: The impact of AIDS has cast a pall over the freedoms of the sexual revolution; developments in reproductive medicine, genetics research, cosmetic surgery and procedures, and mood-altering drugs have raised new philosophical and ethical questions about the role of culture in mediating sexuality; and the growth of the Internet has posed new issues about the nature of sexual identity in a world of virtual sex and cyborg women. An entirely “post-biological” body is no longer the province of science fiction alone. Contemporary sexuality is complex and fluid rather than containable. Like Alfred Kinsey, the best contemporary women artists embrace sexual variety in all its complicatedness.

Notes

