“The Nude” as “The Naked”
Considering the photography of Natacha Merritt

Throughout visual culture, from the traditional avenue of art history to the bombardment of media and advertising that tell us how we want to live our lives, there is the unobtainable and very much alluring (arousing) depiction of the female nude. This subject and the use of it in art have been contested by female artists who look to claim a female identity in the art world. One such artist is Natacha Merritt, whose digital photography visually documents the artist’s sex life, including explicit self-portraits as well as interactions with various partners. The debate within feminist art questions the use of the woman’s body as “the nude”, where artists have historically created work that both celebrate the female body as well as omits it in an attempt to diversify from a masculine society. Merritt’s photography claims to depict the independence of female sexuality; however the images are framed with language created by and for male culture, which does not create a feminine identity, rather a passive acceptance of the woman as the object.

Before delving into Merritt’s Digital Diaries, it is important to understand the language of “the nude” and “the naked”, which is defined by Kenneth Clark in his text The Nude: A Study in Ideal Art. Clark states that there “is a distinction between bodies deprived of clothes ‘huddled and defenceless’, and the body ‘clothed’ in art: the nude is the body re-formed rather than deformed, ‘balanced, prosperous and confident’.”¹ (Nead, The Female Nude: Art, Obscurity and Sexuality 1992) Lynda Nead also notes that Clark’s general comments regarding “the nude” become gendered and represent only the female figure, instead of both sexes being referenced as

¹ Clark, The Nude: 1.
objects. This is not to say that all nudes in art are strictly female, rather that the art world has been, and is, a male dominated field in which the nude has been created for the desires of men. The instances where the male nude was popular, such as with artists like Michelangelo and periods such as classical Greece, the men were homosexual and therefore still acting upon stimulation. (Firestone 1970) It is from this distinction that a binary argument is created for what constitutes ideal and actual. Within this logic, the classification of genders has been assigned so that the male is signified by the mind, creating artistic form from matter. In this equation, the matter or physicality is represented by the female, which is signified by nature, and is only brought to any merit when it is formed into art by the culture of man. “The nude”, therefore, remains the most complete example of transforming matter into art. (Clark 1956) It is from this idea of a needed transformation which objectifies women in art. By molding the actual into an idealized female form, the male culture disregards the essence of femininity and instead degrades the body into a base material that needs to be altered. Within this Platonic concept of mind over matter, women are reduced to the functions of the body, or nature, while men are propped up with being creators in the world.

Women, then, stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of women still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.² (Chadwick 1989)

This notion that women are formed by culture instead of equally creating it is also present in Clark’s distinction of the ideal nude and “the naked”:

To my mind art exists in the realm of contemplation, and is bound by some sort of imaginative transposition. The moment art becomes an incentive to

² Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual pleasure and narrative cinema’, Screen, 16 (3) (autumn, 1975): 6-18
There is a clear divide, by Clark’s standards, of what is beauty and what is obscene; the ideal is formed into art by phallogocentrism, while “the naked” – as raw and untouched matter of nature, is degenerate. By considering the female body as unfit until a masculine culture shapes it into something else creates a hierarchy that labels woman as inadequate by default. Therefore “the nude” as the ideal from a female perspective holds no merit due to the shameful “defenseless” transformation the female must undergo in this framework; “the nude” becomes “the naked”.

In 1964, artists Carolee Schneemann and Robert Morris performed Site in New York. During the performance, walls of the studio were broken down and removed to reveal a nude Schneemann, reclining on a make-shift chaise and represented to look like Manet’s Olympia. Patrons of the gallery space were confronted by a live depiction of a female nude who in turn stared back at them – redirecting the gaze. This deconstructed nude demonstrated the male language mirrored back onto it; Manet’s Olympia is considered a work of high art, while a naked woman in public – in the flesh, so to speak, or even a photo of the performance, might be considered obscene. Michel Foucault notes that the obscenity occurs when we gain access to the representation and are no longer removed from the voyeuristic qualities of gazing at an exposed body that are usually kept sealed, private and temple-like. Yet the problem in the formed language of “the nude” is just that: the female is not kept sacred, but exposed and put on display for the masculine gaze. According to French writer and theorist, Simone de Beauvoir, “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their

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4 Derrida’s term explaining male dominance of language; essay “Plato’s Pharmacy”
5 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality
own point of view, which they confused with absolute truth.” (Firestone 1970) How are women supposed to not identify with the language of the world? What then is the female identity?

Women have no means of coming to an understanding of what their experience is, or even that it is different from male experience. The tool for representing, for objectifying one’s experience in order to deal with it, culture, is so saturated with male bias that women almost never have a chance to see themselves culturally through their own eyes. 6 (Firestone 1970)

Feminist art has and continues to have the discussion of how to define a female identity, and whether this should include the presence or absence of the nude figure.

Feminist art should contemplate women’s lives and experiences, should raise consciousness to issues of female identity and reflect their political, social, sexual and female perspectives separate from their male counterparts. 7 (Moore 2014)

The paradox therefore is in trying to claim a female identity within the male language of the world. There have been strong viewpoints from both sides; art that removes the body and focuses on the experience of being a woman, and the complete acceptance of the body as art. The craft movement elevated low-art to a fine art by using non-traditional materials, such as fiber and ceramic, along with embracing the domestic life of women that referred to the home, child-raising, and the female body in flux – which referenced the abject 8 nature of the uncontained body. Artists like Eva Hesse and Mary Kelly both used this method as a way to claim female identity in the world.

In Kelly’s installation *Post-Partum Document*, the viewer sifts through a catalogue of information regarding the artist’s experience of motherhood. Instead of documenting the physicality of the figure as a traditional art form, Kelly represents the body with clothing, fluids

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6 Shulamith Firestone
7 Jeanne Moore, Adjunct Professor, Madonna University
8 Julia Kristeva’s theory of Abjection
and data entries that show the functions of the body instead of rendering it as an object. Kelly states that “to use the body of the woman, her image or person, is not impossible but problematic for feminism.” (Nead, The Female Nude: Art, Obscurity and Sexuality 1992) However, the concept of ignoring the male culture of the world also poses problems since we cannot escape the language in which we reside. It would take a complete denial of culture as we know it to produce real “female” art.9 (Bovenschen 1976)

Claiming a feminine identity or sexuality apart from the male point of view is the ongoing struggle for women and is the topic amongst postmodern theorists. In her essay Sexuality in the Field of Vision, Jacqueline Rose discusses sexuality and visual representation, as well as the problem of sexual identity. Referring to Freud and Lacan, she stresses their shared viewpoint that sexual identity is merely a fantasy, stemming from that moment as a child when we discover our anatomical difference. The physical difference notwithstanding, to create a truly female identity that is not wound up in role playing seems difficult: The language that defines us as female is the same that established the varied roles that make us ‘feminine’ and ‘sexual’.10 (Moore 2014)

Other female artists choose to work within the confines of the language by producing art that uses the body as the focal point. Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party, for example, uses vaginal iconography as a celebration of women’s contributions though out history, which has been ignored by male culture. Glorifying vaginal images attack the basis of male supremacy – that the penis, because it is visible, is superior. (Rose 1974) Clearly referencing Freud’s assumption that women have been castrated and therefore been left lacking or wanting of a phallus, art work such as Carolee Schneemann’s Interior Scroll and Hannah Wilke’s So Help Me Hannah recognize phallogocentrism, but also reject it in search of their own female perspective.

When women use their own bodies in their artwork, they are using their selves; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject.11 (Frueh 1989)

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10 Jeanne Moore, Adjunct Professor, Madonna University
11 Lucy Lippard, American writer/critic
For that reason, within the quest of seeking a female identity, it is critical to understand the existing language that creates the paradigm of inequality among the sexes, which is the main concern I have with the work of Natacha Merritt.

In 2000, Merritt published *Digital Diaries*, the first ever book of digital photography published (Sciortino 2012). Given a digital camera a few years earlier, Merritt started to document her sex life by photographing masturbation, intercourse with her boyfriend, as well as showing her friends in sexually explicit and very real scenes that skirt the boundaries of erotic art and pornography. According to Merritt, her art explores her sexuality as a female, finding it personally empowering, but is not conceptual. (Healy 2000)

*Digital Diaries* happened because I just had a great sex life, and wanted to document it. I was taking photos of strippers and dancers in the San Francisco S&M, slut-sex scenes, and having a great time, but there was nothing intellectual behind it. (Sciortino 2012)

The photographs in the collection depict naked women – some of which are self-portraits, who are dressed in stereotypical forms of sexy fetish, and performing sex acts for the camera. However, unlike the body art referred to earlier by Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilkie, Merritt’s nudes do not gaze back in recognition of the voyeuristic viewer. These images

> [c]all into question where that line is drawn between erotic and pornographic…. The fact that her portfolios are called *Digital Diaries* and *Sexual Selection* suggests to me a connotation of private viewing on the one hand and a more voyeuristic aspect on the other.  

(Moore 2014)

The figures in *Digital Diaries* are there for the viewer to look at, to consider and objectify. Merritt’s photographs fail to claim a female identity because they do not acknowledge the existence of the language already in the world.

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12 Jeanne Moore, Adjunct Professor, Madonna University
Furthermore, Merritt’s photography shows an overwhelming narcissistic approach to her sexuality. One such photo depicts a self-portrait; Merritt performing oral sex to an unidentified male partner. Mouth open and eyes wide, Merritt poses for the camera, staring up at the screen of the digital camera as she takes the photo of herself in the middle of the sexual act; virtually making love to herself. Another such instance is noted with Merritt’s verbal admission that she chooses friends to photograph that look like her. (Bowman 2000) This self-described vanity is important because it shows Merritt not only ignoring the male culture that frames her sexuality, but also identifying with it:

“For some reason, I have no problem with the fact I’m giving head in these pictures, sucking dick, whatever you want to call it,” she explained matter-of-factly. “I feel completely in control, so I’m comfortable with that.” (Kettman 2000)

A variety of the photos in *Digital Diaries* are cropped images of the female nude, focusing on the vagina and breasts, as well as the inclusion of sex toys and pinup aesthetics such as high heels and lingerie. These props signify the male driven language over women and sexuality that in turn create objects out of female bodies. “Merritt’s photographs seem to present what the male viewer might consider the ideals of female sexuality: posing erotically, performing sexual acts, etc.”13 (Moore 2014) When questioned about her photographs expressing the male idea of sexuality, Merritt responded with a complete lack of knowledge of the culture that defines her sex:

“I was born into the rights that women like that created for me, and I respect that — but they’re full of shit. That same woman, if she grew her hair longer and wore some makeup, would have a lot more power. I’d say to all these feminists, ‘You fought the war, and you won. Enjoy the freedom.’ But they keep fighting. All girls of my generation love my work. I haven’t had a single girl under 35 or 40 criticize my book.” (Kettman 2000)

13 Ibid
Merritt’s viewpoint seems to portray an incorrect notion of power; she sees herself as being in control of her sexuality because she is saying yes, she is taking the photographs, and she is earning the money and recognition for the photography. However, the failure to see the objectification of the framework itself defines a lack of control. Lynda Nead notes that the act of representation is itself an act of regulation. The power is contained by convention and form; therefore there is no threat to patriarchal systems of order. (Nead, Framing the Female body 1992)

Women’s identification with the aesthetic objectification of femininity has traditionally been misplaced. Only when the artistic figures embodying the principles of femininity broke away from the traditional patterns of representation and managed to avoid the usual clichés, could there be any real identification. Barring this, identification on the part of women could take place only via a complicated process of transference. The woman could either betray her sex and identify with the masculine point of view, or, in a state of accepted passivity, she could be masochistic and narcissistic and identify with the object of the masculine representation.14 (Bovenschen 1976)

While comparing various methods of creating feminist art, there are sure to be disagreement regarding how best to portray a female identity that really has no feminine essence that has not been defined by male culture. However, the acknowledgement of such language is critical to the process of creating artwork that can be viewed as female. Merritt’s works, as well as her personal statements, fail to do this and in turn reflect the nude back at the female audience to be admired and objectified. In these representations, I do not see an independent woman claiming sexual identity. Rather, Merritt’s photography is an example of yet another set of images that use the female body and frame it as an object by and for the masculine gaze.

14 Silvia Bovenschen, Literary Critic
Natacha Merritt
Images from *Digital Diaries*
2000

Natacha Merritt
Image from *Sexual Selection*
2012
Bibliography


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Considering the photography of Natacha Merritt
Nature
(chaos)
(body)
(matter)

Culture
(order)
(mind)
(form)
I sit at one such little desk because of the Brighton shore. How I've noticed her satirical clattering. On, again, etc., it's due to 'mother's' tenacity of father's discipline. My work has been undersigned. It has appeared in various publications because it depends on belief in what I'm doing as a mother. I feel I can't carry on with it.

T3 27.1.76 AGE 2.6

If I make just too much noise with it, oh, do, then why can't I feel the duty about the time to come away? It is something I feel ultimately responsible for. What . . . for disciplining or father's appointments or even the shopping, not for providing. I'm not attention. I'm with attention. It's the only one who can meet this demand and I remember when I realized it... the first time a child. I love you, dummy.

T5 20.3.76 AGE 2.6

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