



## Subjects of the Visual Arts: Nude Females

by Tee A. Corinne

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As goddesses, seductresses, saints, sinners, and muses, the female has been a recurring subject in art for millennia. Nude depictions of women appear in most cultures, on both sides of the equator, and in rich variety.

The early Woman (Venus) of Willendorf is rendered replete with voluptuous curves, while ancient Cycladic goddesses are depicted as skinny-figured, with arms crossed at their waists. African female nude figures often grace utilitarian objects, while Indian nudes dance alone ecstatically and sometimes embrace in same-sex groups. Central American art includes fierce nude Aztec goddesses, and Peruvian ceramic pots show women giving birth or making love. Medieval Irish "Sheela na gig" nude sculptures spread their legs and hold their vulvas open.

An artist's passion usually influences the way he or she portrays a nude figure of whatever gender. Michelangelo (1475-1564), for instance, whose passion was for men, masculinized his female nudes, as did gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) in his studies of body builder Lisa Lyon. In contrast, bisexual architect-designer Eileen Gray (1878-1976) created the reverse effect by portraying feminized male nudes on a 1913 lacquered screen.

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), whose studies of nude men are sensual and sensitive, produced only one female nude, a rigidly stiff image. Dancer-choreographer Arnie Zane (1948-1988) produced desexualized--but often tender--nude photographs of women dancers.

### Women Artists

Prior to the late nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, it was considered improper for women to use nudes as the subject of their art. They were excluded from studying the nude with their male counterparts in art schools. Some, such as Gwen John (1868-1939), made nude self-portraits in order to bypass social restrictions.

It has been difficult for researchers to locate complete studies of women artists' work, especially nudes, both because their work was not valued as highly as men's when it was made and because less has been researched and published about it. Some work has been lost, such as the nude photographs of a female friend made by lesbian Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952) early in her career and circulated within her circle of women friends.

Unlike many gay male artists, most lesbian and many bisexual women artists working before the 1970s--sculptor Louise Nevelson (1900-1988), painter Nell Blaine (1922-1996), and photographer Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), for example--avoided the nude. Yet for a few, the unclothed female was a rich vehicle with which to communicate their ideas.



The Venus of Willendorf, one of the earliest known artistic depictions of the nude female, is believed to have been created before 20,000 BCE. Photograph by Matthias Kabel. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 license.

## **Nineteenth-Century Lesbian Sculptors**

In the second half of the nineteenth century, numerous American and British women artists traveled to Rome to study marble sculpture. These included lesbians Emma Stebbins (1815-1882), Anne Whitney (1821-1915), and Harriet Hosmer (1830-1908). Stebbins' friendship circle included African-American/Native American sculptor Mary Edmonia Lewis (1843-1909), who may have been lesbian.

These women chiseled nude and semi-nude (primarily female) figures and also produced figures draped as if with wet cloth that clung revealingly to the body underneath. At least once Hosmer occasioned scandal by depicting a (respectable) woman friend instead of a professional model.

American sculptors Florence Wyle (1881?-1968) and Frances Loring (*ca* 1887-1968) met in art school in Chicago and lived briefly in New York City before moving permanently to Toronto. They crafted nude and draped female figures in marble, a practice they continued long after the public's taste had moved on.

## **Early Twentieth-Century Lesbian and Bisexual Artists**

Women artists of the early twentieth century took diverse approaches to nude imagery. In the 1910s and 1920s, American lesbian photographers Laura Gilpin (1891-1979) and Clara Sipprell (1885-1975) created dreamy, soft-focus, desexualized images of nude females.

Working in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, Jeanne Mammen (1890-1976) produced graphics, including nude and semi-nude female figures, for gay and lesbian periodicals. With the coming to power of the anti-gay Nazis, the queer side of Mammen's illustrating career ended. Her contemporary, bisexual collage artist Hannah Höch (1889-1978), pasted disparate body parts together, creating images that comment on gender and politics.

Bisexual Polish-born artist Tamara de Lempicka (1898-1980), working in Paris, painted full-bodied and sensuously languid Art Deco nudes.

Bisexual Mexican-Jewish painter Frida Kahlo (1910-1954), on the other hand, imbued her nudes with autobiographical content, often referencing her numerous bodily injuries (including polio, a broken backbone, an injured pelvis, and numerous surgeries) and physical and psychological pain. She also portrayed sensual female nudes together and nudes as nurturers.

Working in France, Buenos Aires-born bisexual painter Léonor Fini (1908-1996) created surrealistic dream worlds peopled by ethereal women and androgynous men who seem to drift in and out of their clothing.

## **Muse**

It can be argued that there is an intimate link between the gender of one's muse and that of one's sexual partners. In the 1910s, American artist Romaine Brooks (1874-1970) became obsessed with the body of one of her lovers, Ida Rubinstein (1894-1996). She produced paintings of Rubinstein nude and a series of nude photographs that may have been used as studies for paintings.

She also painted a semi-nude portrait of bisexual American artist-designer Eyre de Lanux (1894-1996). Lanux, in turn, made a drawing of the lover she shared with Brooks, Natalie Clifford Barney (1876-1972). In Lanux's drawing, Barney reclines, her eyes half-closed, her breasts bared. A recent erotic encounter between artist and subject is clearly implied.

For some, such as photographer Ruth Bernhard (b. 1905), who had relationships with both men and women, inspiration seems to have been particularly linked to her female nudes. Bernhard, in fact, would appear to have had a lesbian muse from the large number of images of nude females she made between 1935 and

1970. In her single nude male image, the figure appears crucified.

Neon artist Lili Lakich (b. 1944), whose career began in the decade prior to the Stonewall Riots of 1969, memorialized one of her lovers, nude, in *Donna Impaled as a Constellation*, a 1983 construction of aluminum and argon, helium, and neon lights.

### **The Influence of Feminism**

Beginning in the 1960s, Swedish-born bisexual painter Monica Sjoo (b. 1938) utilized goddess imagery in her paintings. Her large nude *God Giving Birth* created controversy in the 1970s.

In the early 1970s, lesbian feminist activity surfaced in many countries around the world, bringing with it the opportunity for lesbian and bisexual artists to raise openly issues of the body and the muse that had previously been silenced.

Since that time, books and magazines have been the primary way that lesbian-produced, lesbian-themed art has circulated. Throughout the 1970s, American-born documentary photographer JEB (Joan E. Biren, b. 1944) established a feminist approach to nude imagery by showing ordinary-looking women in desexualized contexts, often in open-air settings.

In the 1980s, drawings by American lesbian artist Sudie Rakusin (b. 1948) of nude and semi-nude women as warriors and priestesses dominated United States women's counter-culture periodicals.

Whereas Rakusin's nudes are curvaceous and spiritually inclined, those of painter-printmaker Max White (b. 1954) are sharp-edged and spiky. Like Rakusin's, White's early work circulated in lesbian and feminist publications.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, lesbian photographer Roberta Almeraz (b. 1953)--whose parents were Puerto Rican and Filipino--was one of the few American lesbians of color to publish nudes both in more general lesbian-produced sex magazines and in lesbians-of-color magazines such as *Esto No Tiene Nombre*.

Picturing disability has been a recurring theme in lesbian-feminist art. Dutch photographer Gon Buurman (b. 1939) has published nude images of differently-abled women embracing. American sculptor Nancy Fried (b. 1945), United States photographer Deborah Bright (b. 1950), and New Zealand photographer Rebecca Swan (b. 1968) have used as subject their experiences with breast cancer and its effect on their bodies.

Fried and Bright have each produced self-portraits after mastectomies. United States photographer Cathy Cade (b. 1942) integrated a nude disabled woman, with cane, into her sociologically-inflected *Lesbian Photo Album* (1987).

### **Women of Size**

Late twentieth-century feminism also included a reaction against the "beauty" industry and the oppressiveness of compulsory thinness.

Since the late 1970s, American photographer Katie Niles (b. 1951) has explored her own sturdy body, both nude and clothed. In each self-portrait she is smoking a pipe. In 1996, her color photograph of nude and semi-nude, fat, pierced, and tattooed lesbians participating in a safer-sex orgy gained international attention when it was published in the anthology edited by Susie Bright and Jill Posener, *Nothing But the Girl: The Blatant Lesbian Image* (1996).

Cookie (Annjohnna) Andrews-Hunt (1952-1995)--active with The Fat Avengers, a lesbian fat activist group based in Seattle, Washington--photographed and participated in the Northwest United States feminist, fat,

and leather communities and helped produce *Images of Our Flesh*, a 1983 calendar of photographs of fat women.

Bisexual photographer Laurie Toby Edison (b. 1942), skinny herself, visually defined the fat nude female in the book and traveling show *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes* (1994). California-based photographer Laura Aguilar (b. 1959) uses her own ample body in a myriad of large self-portraits. She has also created a series of paired portraits in which the same individual or couple appears clothed and unclothed.

### **Lovemaking Imagery**

By the end of the nineteenth century, sapphic love was being written about by women. As the twentieth century began, Natalie Clifford Barney, working with her lovers Eva Palmer (b. ca 1876) and poet Renée Vivien (born Pauline Mary Tarn, 1877-1909), produced bucolic and amazonian nude photographs and at least one overtly erotic image. Two decades later, bisexual Germaine Krull (1897-1985) photographed sensual and sexual encounters between women.

Publishing in Paris during the first half of the twentieth century, women illustrators such as Gerda Wegener (1885-1940), Clara Tice (1888-1973), Mariette Lydis (1887-1970), Margit Gaal (active in the 1920s), and Suzanne Ballivet (active 1930s-1955) produced sexual graphics of women making love. In the 1970s, bisexual Betty Dodson (b. 1929) drew lovemaking images of same- and mixed-gender couples, details of female genitalia, and an all-woman group sex party.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Uruguay-born Diana Blok (b. 1952) and Netherlands-born Marlo Broekmans (b. 1953)--photographers and lovers--created romantic, erotically-inflected double self-portraits.

Late in the twentieth century, lesbian painters Lorraine Inzalaco (b.1946) and Patricia Cronin (b. 1963) made lyrical visual explorations of nudes and lovemaking. In the 1990s, Nicole Eisenman (b. 1963) painted confrontational, rowdy, and irreverent images of multfigured sexual activity.

Photography, however, has been the favorite medium for lesbians to depict sex. Photographers who have utilized the female nude in sexual situations include Jill Posener (b. 1953) from England; Cyndra MacDowall (b. 1953) from Canada; Laurence Jangey-Paget (b. 1965) from France; Parminder Sekhon (b. 1968) from England; C. Moore Hardy (b. 1955) from Australia; and Marcelina Martin (b. 1950), Judy Francesconi (b. 1959), Honey Lee Cottrell (b. 1945), Phyllis Christopher (b. 1963), and Tee A. Corinne (b. 1943) from the United States.

### **Transsexual and Intersexual Imagery**

Imaging hermaphroditism has been a part of art since ancient times. In the early twentieth century, sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935) gathered photographs of hermaphrodites and images that seemed to support the concept of a "third sex."

Two photographers who started their lives with female bodies, Del LaGrace Volcano (formerly known as Della Grace, b. 1957) and female-to-male transsexual Loren Cameron (b. 1959), have used their own and others' nude bodies-in-transition as the subject of photographic inquiry.

### **The Vulnerable Body**

Each generation tends to think that it has invented sex, or at least, its edgier practices. Sometime before the end of World War II, the French Jewish lesbian photographer Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob 1894-1954) made self-portraits showing herself involved in sadomasochistic lovemaking with her life companion. These images were confiscated and destroyed by the Nazis. Only a brief written trace of them remains.

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a different reaction from the earlier revolt against the body beautiful. This reaction took the form of images of bodies pierced and incised and images that appear to indicate violent sexual activity.

Examples include the work of Catherine Opie (b. 1961) and of Claire Garrotte (b. 1962). Opie's large, half-nude color self-portrait photographs feature designs or words scratched into her skin (and, in one, forty-six hypodermic needles inserted through her skin). Garrotte's multi-year photographic study of a lesbian threesome includes images of sadomasochistic activity.

Other artists, such as Vietnamese-born lesbian photographer and installation artist Hanh Thi Pham (b. 1954), have used images of their unclothed and semi-clothed bodies to effect political or social commentaries.

### **Exhibiting the Lesbian Body**

Issues surrounding control of "the gaze" surfaced frequently in the 1970s. As a consequence, many lesbian artists chose "women only" exhibition spaces, such as women's bars and women's centers, as a way to limit the viewing audience. Images of nudes and vulvas were especially protected.

By 1980, however, bisexual writer and artist Kate Millett (b. 1934) was exhibiting photographs of women's genitals in an office building corridor in New York City.

In 1992, Zoe Leonard (b. 1961)--as part of Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany--replaced each portrait painting of a man in one eighteenth-century gallery in the Kunsthalle Museum with a photographic close-up of female genitalia; paintings of women were left hanging. Millett's and Leonard's public displays of taboo imagery expanded the psychological space for the female nude.

Lola Flash (b. 1969), an African-American photographer who lives in London, uses color reversals in order to complicate issues of race. A number of her sensuous compositions have been published on covers of books.

During the early 1990s, working counter to the dominant lesbian feminist emphasis on honesty, three Canadian lesbians photographed staged sexual tableaux and then asked viewers to draw literal lines on the walls of the show to indicate where censorship should take place. The artists, calling themselves Kiss & Tell, were designer-writer Lizard Jones (b. 1961), photographer Susan Stewart (b. 1952), and sculptor Persimmon Blackbridge (b. 1951).

Beginning in 1998, Lesbian ConneXion/s--a photo exhibit by lesbian and bisexual women, most of whom live in northern Europe--was exhibited in the Netherlands, Belgium, Slovenia, Croatia, Russia, and the United States.

The show, which is still touring, includes female nudes by Sandra Vitaljic (b. 1972) of Zagreb, Olga Stefaniuk (b. 1954) of Warsaw, Kirsten Plathof (b. 1960) and Gundula Krause (b. 1967) of Berlin, Yvonne Anne Driehuis (b. 1957) of Utrecht, Marian Bakker (b. 1944) and Lorena Bernardi (b. 1960) of Amsterdam, Sophie Anquez (b. 1962) of Paris, and Tanya Sazansky (b. 1971) of Moscow, among others.

Lesbian ConneXion/s is noteworthy for the variety of its nudes. The images range from Bernardi's classic profiles in which one woman arches her back against another's pregnant belly to Anquez' crop-haired, skinny young women squeezing their breasts to create cleavage, and from Stefaniuk's nude-in-landscape to Vitaljic's hairless figure biting her own shoulder.

These images at once reference the past and reflect some of the multi-faceted ways that contemporary artists explore and update female nude imagery.

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## About the Author

**Tee A. Corinne** was a photographer and writer. Her articles about lesbian art and artists appeared in numerous journals and encyclopedias. Her books include *The Cunt Coloring Book*, *Yantras of Womanlove*, *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex*, *Courting Pleasure*, and *Intimacies*. She was the editor of *FABB: The Feminist Art Books Bulletin*, co-editor of the *Queer Caucus for Art Newsletter*, and member of the editorial advisory board of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com).

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