

WOMEN PAINTERS AND THE NUDE

or

WHO IS VARGA? – by Kathleen Jardine

In 1991 I received a letter from a museum curator which read in part: “You are a true heiress to a tradition which somehow melds Ingres, Lautrec, Cassatt and shades of Egon Schiele and Varga with a brash late 20th century uniqueness. There is also some forthright factor I can’t define in your paintings that overpowers the moronic objections which might be raised against their sensuality... Have you thought about getting a publisher for a book on your paintings?”

Initially I felt heady with this praise. This was a person of power and authority. Wow! Cassatt! I was honored by the comparison. Gradually other thoughts clouded my euphoria. I was disquieted by my description as sensual rather than sensuous.



Sacred and Profane Love
by Kathleen Jardine, Watercolor, 51” x 48”

Ingres and Lautrec’s work seemed part of a sensualist tradition - and Schiele’s gynecological portraits of women constituted my only acquaintance. “The female nudes of Schiele often combine erotic attraction with revulsion,” read Arneson’s History of Modern Art. Oh great, I thought. And who is Varga? I looked Varga up in Arneson. No Varga. I tried Hamilton’s 19th and 20th Century Art, and finally Gardner’s Art Through the Ages. No Varga.

Several possibilities occurred to me. There are few women in any of these texts, even if one of these authors, Helen Gardner, was a woman. Maybe Varga was a woman. I then owned no women’s art history texts to consult. Then again, maybe Varga was some trendy Whitney Biennial-bound artist, a darling of the tastemaking cognoscenti. I had curiously neglected women’s art history but much of the current scene was an area of studied ignorance on my part.

The phone interrupted. “Did you receive my letter?” breathed the curator. “Are your nudes portraits of yourself? I’d love to see a photo of you. What do you look like? Your work is so erotic,” he purred. I confess I was dumbfounded and hung up without coming to any understanding. And without asking, “Who the heck is Varga?”

By now some of you are wondering how many areas of studied ignorance I may possess. My husband did - when he came home that evening and quit laughing. “Kathleen,” he said, “Varga illustrated for Playboy magazine. Maybe you have to have been a teenage boy. You know, he did that airbrushed, pornographic kitsch.”

By then I was laughing. “I thought Varga might be a woman because he wasn’t in the art history texts. Well, my other guess was partly right:

that is the kind of stuff turning up in the Whitney. Some curators....”

Perhaps I should note here my many pleasantly unremarkable exchanges with professionally unimpeachable curators.

Would this curator have written this letter to a man? Maybe. But I doubt he would have followed it up with that phone call. Do nudes provoke some viewers to a profane reading regardless of the painter’s gender or intentions? Certainly many artists have intended this reaction. Renoir, for example, declared, “I paint with my penis.” He described his models as “ripe fruit.”

I believe my work to be sensuous (“enjoying the pleasure of the senses”) and only ironically sensual (“pertaining to the bodily senses rather than the mind or soul; lustful; lewd”), if

“Clothing dates a painting, an inconvenient problem when one is trying to invoke timelessness.”

at all. But the curator’s was not the only wooden-headed reading I had received. One viewer promised to have N.C. Senator Jesse Helms close an exhibition of my work. A reviewer once likened my work to the pornographic Eric Fischl’s. And to my greatest surprise, I was several times presumed to be a lesbian by members of audiences. Why?

John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, persuasively explains these viewers’ reactions. Berger understands Western easel painting to be a grand documentation of the world as a commodity or possession. Still life, landscape and the female nude constitute the main genres of property, with the female nude the most perniciously encoded in 500 years of painting. Berger sees most nudes as pornographic antiques. Among his many, many examples he cites the painting commissioned by King Charles II of his mistress, the very naked Nell Gwynne. Charles enjoyed inviting men to his chambers to look at this painting to view his acquisition, as it were. Helen Gardner matter-of-

factly contributes to this “way-of-seeing” with many casual descriptions of such commissions as the Duke of Mantua’s. He paid Correggio to paint a series romanticizing the adulteries and rapes of Jupiter.

The Duke and King lived centuries too soon for Varga and *Playboy* magazine, it seems.

While history abounds with these stories, a non-pornographic strain does persist within the larger tradition. Berger gives much credit to such artists as the iconoclastic Rembrandt whose nudes radiate a recondite love and respect between artist and subject. While Berger (and I) can tell the difference, some viewers can’t because they are so conventionally schooled in profane assumptions.

Thus it is assumed by these viewers that a woman artist sexualizes, objectifies and commodifies her subject, too. Perhaps she is imagined a lesbian who would treat the nude as have so many men. Or perhaps, as the above-quoted curator seemed to hope, the paintings are self-portraits and may be taken as sexual advertisements from a woman objectifying herself. Plenty of women collude in this construct just walking down the street. Why not on paper or canvas?

Incidentally, I mention here that my main subject has been my son who hasn’t modeled nude since babyhood. And that I would have happily painted more nude men if they had been available. The relative availability of male and female nude models is a sociological study in itself.

I notice that I paint fewer female nudes these last five years but it’s not to avoid attracting the attention of idiots. My friends who have so generously modeled for me during the last two decades are older; in a culture that values only youth and beauty in women, they feel a new vulnerability in nudity. I feel sad about this. And I’m also vexed to have to more often paint clothing. Fads, styles and novelties bore me, and they’re hard references to avoid in painting clothed figures. Clothing dates a painting, an inconvenient problem when one is trying to invoke timelessness. Plus, I have a long-standing Luddite aversion to the signs of soulless contemporary life embodied in

mass-produced objects. Sometimes I include these things as intentional dystopic emblems; sometimes they seem just as hopelessly unavoidable in a painting as I find them in life. Nudes free me of these concerns and so I choose them by default. The politics of sentience are embodied for me in the nude; so paradoxically, are the profane preoccupations of some viewers.

How have women painters historically contended with these issues of objectification and pornography? The curator's letter prompted me to do some reading but I found my question was lost in a much larger perplexity: how did they manage to make art at all? Women worked in an atmosphere of corrosive disrespect and discouragement. Whitney Chadwick, in *Women, Art and Society* quotes legions of scornful commentators. "The woman of genius does not exist. When she does, she is a man," wrote a 19th century critic. From another: "So long as a woman remains from unsexing herself, let her dabble in anything." A steady withering blast continued for centuries. Boccaccio wrote, "...for Art is very much alien to the minds of women, and these things cannot be accomplished without a great deal of talent, which in women is usually very scarce." Dear Vasari observed, "To the woman artist belongs diligence rather than invention, the locus of genius. Should women apply themselves too diligently they risk appearing to wrest from us the palm of supremacy."

Still, women did somehow make magnificent art. Much of their work is lost and we know it only from tantalizing written description. Maddeningly, their work was often assigned to that of men: Judith Leyster to Franz Hals, Marietta Robusti to Tintoretto, Constance Marie Champentier to Jaque-Louis David. This list goes on and on. Another difficulty, in addition to untangling what work actually made it to the present is that bodies of work by women tended to be small. Their careers were shortened by large families and often, early deaths in pregnancy and childbirth. Women's work has not long been collected and collections are still small - as you will

notice if you visit the National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. A docent told me that the museum receives no federal funding and relies on private donations. It will grow slowly but the collection's very smallness testifies to the difficulties women faced and overcame to make art.

Among their many impediments, women found it nearly impossible to get instruction. The genre of the female nude was 400 years old by the time women were no longer barred from live drawing classes. The earliest nude that I found by a woman is "Susanna and the Elders" by Artemesia Gentileschi, painted in 1610 (an interesting subject choice since it rebounds on the misfortune of finding oneself the object of voyeurism). I found very few other examples in the genre until Alice Barber Stephens painted "The Female Live Class"



Beautiful Carolina and Dear Vincent
by Kathleen Jardine, Watercolor, 40" x 32"

in 1879, a wonderful study of women working segregated with a female nude model. Men thought it too erotic to look on a nude model in mixed professional company.

With this, women slowly began to interpret a subject formerly “understood” only by male artists: the cultural meaning of the nude female. Earlier I asked, how did women artists of the past contend with these issues of objectification and pornography? – in the same way that male artists like Rembrandt did: by lavishing affection and respect on their subjects, by refusing to objectify.

One of these painters, Paula Modersohn-Becker (b. 1876) is thought to be the first woman to make nude self-portraits – before dying young from complications of childbirth). The painters Gwen John (b. 1876) and Suzanne Valadon (b. 1867) also worked extensively from the nude, and as did so many women artists, supported themselves as artists’ models. Johns’ life was reflective and private - as was her work. Valadon was outrageous and so, often, were her paintings. The illegitimate daughter of a laundress, she began adult life as a circus performer. Critics called her beautiful and spirited work “virile” (and thought it a compliment). Karen Peterson and J.J. Wilson in *Women Artists* cover much of the same biographical material as Whitey Chadwick; I was amused by Chadwick’s omission of the fact that Valadon’s son (and student) was Maurice Utrillo. For centuries women artists were noted chiefly by their connections to textbook-canonized male artists. It must be monotonous to remark for the woman art historian: Gwen John to Augustus John and Augustus Rodin; Camille Claudel to the same Rodin; Frieda Kahlo to Diego Rivera; Georgia O’Keefe to Alfred Stieglitz; Mary Cassatt to Edgar Degas. Ah me. It did go on and on.

I feel much indebted to these women. They were ground-breakers and it was hard going. We live in a different world today, one in which many of us can go long periods of our professional lives hardly noticing our gender as a distinction. For two reasons I was long in much noticing that I was a woman painter. Because of my acutely impoverished upbringing, class issues tended to

subsume gender issues: where there are no professional painters of either sex, being female doesn’t seem such a significant obstacle to painting. (I think Susan Valadon would have agreed.) And through the accidents of career course I entered a nearly gender-blind venue for showing and selling my work: competitions. Women are pretty fairly represented in competitions and get ample exposure, sales, prizes and general encouragement. Every time I competed successfully I felt grateful and lucky, and I felt for those who were not so lucky. I guess some were men.

Yes, we get the occasional insinuating comment or question, or letter and phone call; compared to the problems of our women antecedents I can only find those comical. And yes, we are largely omitted from the collections and exhibitions of prestigious museums. And women painting today may never make it into the survey textbooks, either. I would be more indignant at this possibility. except it appears we may be overtaken by a larger issue: the textbooks may be closing on painters, regardless of gender. Now that is a real equal opportunity development. Many prominent tastemakers predict it. Seminal exhibitions like the Whitney Biennials bear it out. “Painting is dead,” I heard Donald Judd, the minimalist sculptor pronounce in a 1985 lecture. “The party is over.”

Boy, I hope not. Lots of us just barely got here.

Additional Reading

Kathleen recommends the following titles for those interested in additional information:

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Viking Penguin, 1977.

Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art and Society*. Singapore: Thames & Hudson, 1990.

Peterson, Karen and Wilson, J.J. *Women Artists*. New York: Harper Colophon Books.