

The Exploration of Voyeurism and Privacy through the Removal of the Female
Form in Early Modern Art Paintings.

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Around the turn of the 20th century, women started to gain autonomy, asking for it for themselves, through activism, fashion, and the vote. Women in the arts were no different. Men were still the leading voice in artistic movements, regardless of female involvement, but women were still there. Male artists often made women the object in their work; using the model or the domestic scenes he shows you his perspective through the “Male Gaze,” the second wave feminist idea of the male viewer gaining pleasure from turning a woman into an object¹. In John Berger’s essay “Ways of Seeing” he remarks “... You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman who’s nakedness you have depicted for your own pleasure.”² The idea that the artist puts their responsibility to the model can also be viewed through the lens of human interaction. The “Bystander Effect” is a phenomenon when a person does not offer help when others are present³. They push the responsibility off onto the people around them. This can be applied to the arts when the viewers do not take responsibility for what they are seeing, not taking into account that they have become participants in the scenes.

Spaces and the actions of the women inside them have been a topic for many painters. From Vermeer to Degas, the domestic life is something that has been explored extensively. But when women become an object rather than a person, there for the pleasure of the viewer, we must begin to recognize our place in the perusal of art.

Through the female subjects of these paintings and the gaze of the male painter, we are put in the position of a male observer, a traditionally authoritative role, in which the male

¹ Marita Sturken, and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: an introduction to visual culture*, (Oxford University Press, Inc., 2001), 76.

² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (Penguin Books: Penguin Books, reprint 1990).

³ David G. Meyers, *Social Psychology* (10th ed.)

is dominant and thus the standard for what is expected and catered to. These scenes often show women doing housework, small handicrafts such as sewing and lace making, tending to children, and in many cases, reading. While women who can read often show the class and social standing of the family, in many cases it is another example of delicateness and her refinery, two traits of femininity.

Domestic scenes in art let the viewer peek inside a world that they are normally not privy to. This lends itself to the growth of the voyeuristic nature of our culture that had begun to cultivate itself in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. With this type of art, we are asked to look into the lives of others, and often we are allowed to create commentary on it. This is something we would be outraged at if it happened to us, but we expect to happen to others. Through many scenes in art and history we get glimpses of what life is and was like, and we often forget to take responsibility for what we are seeing.

Art is often handed to the viewer, in the sense that they do not have to work for meaning or pleasure, and while it is what an artist hopes for in an ideal viewer, they do not always search for a deeper meaning. Traditional art that was commissioned by the church served as didactic aids for the faithful, while stately poses commissioned by the king show grandeur. In domestic scene paintings, rather than posed figures or fruit bowls, the piece asks the viewer to take from it, not fear or faithfulness, but to sympathize with the figures, to relate to them, to glean something from it.

While some think of domestic scenes as nothing more than just that, and the situations and life that happen in the home as opposed to bar or street scenes, women are the primary the focus of these paintings. Women fulfilling traditional gender roles, such

as tending to the house and children, bedrooms, kitchens, reading rooms, all show up again and again, telling stories of the place these women held in society and their own households.

But where do I fit into all of this? And more importantly why does this even matter? Aren't we living in an age of enlightenment where men and women are equal and gender roles and norms don't really matter? While many advancements for woman have come during the last 100+ years, there are many ways still women become commodities in modern culture, art just being one area. It is more important to take away from these works an understanding of the time period, and a commentary on the culture, then it is to discredit them based solely on the "casual sexism" of the time.

Casual sexism differs from institutionalized sexism for many reasons. Casual sexism often refers to expectations of roles in the household, manners of dress, and thinking, for example, that women are weaker for no other reason but her gender⁴. While institutionalized sexism is more dealing with the "glass ceiling", rape, objectification, the wage gap, and other more extreme things that are fostered by a larger group. Casual sexism change often with time, and the way women live today was paved for us by the women who came before. A woman reading a book, like in Samuel S. Carr's "Reading by the Fire", now would not turn many heads, but many would think such a thing was scandalous only a few decades before this piece was painted. Art shows a snapshot of its time, a glimpse into the spaces of somewhere we may never see. They are tools to learn

⁴ Marina Lewycka, "Casual sexism was the air we breathed. Let today's women never forget that," *The Independent* (2012), <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/marina-lewycka-casual-sexism-was-the-air-we-breathed--let-todays-women-never-forget-that-7547325.html> (accessed March 20, 2013).

our history and change our perception of our lives and of those who lived before us.

Some have said that men are drawn to larger-than-life sculptures and art, while women tend to focus on miniature scale⁵. This is often not true, but we can see how this would be presumed from traditional dollhouses, lace work, and other handicrafts that women often made. We could see this as another form of casual sexism in the sense that women are constantly told to not take up so much space, only use what you need, be seen and not heard. But this can also show itself as a form of dedication and skill levels, showing itself in an almost jewel-like state, in manners of details and craft.

I often find myself drawn to small and precious works, and have always had a fondness for dollhouses, stemming from a childhood experience. My paternal grandmother had a dollhouse in her basement, very large and beautiful. The house was empty of dolls, but filled with photos of my uncles who had died and I had never met. I was never allowed to touch and this made the object like a tomb for her sons. This desolate space that their spirits inhabited has influenced most of my works, including this one. By not having the figure in the spaces then, it made their presence, or rather their glaring absence, more prominent. In this work, the fact that the women are gone and only alluded to as just being there brings up the feelings of their misplacement.

“Diorama” is a relatively new word, coming from a French picture-viewing device in 1823, the word literally means “through that which is seen”⁶. This sums up very precisely what this series of work is about; the viewer and the way things are seen and interpreted by them. This leads itself to the inherent voyeurism involved in these scenes. Take for instance, Berthe Morisot’s painting “The Cheval Glass” (1876) a scene,

⁵ Anna Cremer, “Utopia in small scale- female escapism into miniature.” *Women's History Magazine*, (Issue 63)

⁶ Online Etymology Dictionary, “Diorama”.

which shows a young woman dressing, and though she is fully dressed, the viewer can still feel the intrusiveness of their gaze. This is a private moment that the painter has frozen for us.

Dioramas can come in many forms, from the large and life-sized scale in museums, to hobby sized military scenes, to the aforementioned dollhouses. These all attempt to make us understand the scene better than a painting or photograph might. Even on small scales the three-dimensional nature of the dioramas puts us in perspective of the space and the way things feel.

Through small dioramas I am telling the story of one woman's life. Many will not see these types of domestic scenes as perverse in nature, as we have come to expect them, and our privilege of seeing them has been lost through exposure. Imagine if this scene was in a film, a girl modeling in the mirror, unaware of the viewer. This exposes the true gravity of what we are being privy to. In my story we see a girl growing up, living her life that is obviously of a higher class. She eventually marries a sailor and has a child. Coming into the roles her gender and culture expects. Eventually in the story he dies, and she must raise her child by herself.

Take for instance the use of dollhouses in solving crimes, *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*, a series of 18 highly detailed rooms which recreated scenes of unexplained deaths (often prostitutes and victims of domestic violence), and helped investigators understand the crimes better. These pieces, created by Frances Glessner Lee, were made on a 1:12 scale and helped the investigators react to the space and try to solve the crime in 90 minutes. They helped foster the ideas of detail in forensic

investigations and are still used today as teaching tools ⁷.

The focus on women in my constructed domestic scenes bring with them symbolism and references to gender norms and social cues. The activities of sleep, reading, practicing in handicrafts like lace making, all have connotations of class and status in society. The rooms they are doing these things in scream about the place these women hold and artists' voices, and her glaring absence in these places. Like in *The Nutshell Studies*, clues and hints tell you about who this woman was. She reads and has a large bed, both signs of leisure and time for reflection and relaxation. As we move down the line of rooms we see she is well off through grand mirrors, wallpapers, decorations, and playing cards in a parlor. We see letters from her fiancé, and the place of their marriage, the birth of a child. Implied is his absence and death, and her solitary raising of their child. As her clothing goes from white to black we understand that he is dead. We can explore these things from the clues left in her absence.

The idea of minimal art started around the turn of the 20th century, taking away the Victorian clutter in interior design, architecture, and modern art, for a more linear and simple voice⁸. In this piece I am attempting to consolidate these two schools of thought into one. With each room being based on paintings from the 1850s until the 1920s, there is a distinct use of color, decoration, and accessory, that will be competing with what the viewer will approach: a white wall with gold rings. It is important for me that this work is perceived as subtle at first glance. The viewer should notice the light emanating from the rings and be invited to look inside, seeing the rooms, and taking away the story from

⁷ Erin Hooper Bush, "Death in Diorama".

⁸ Ivar Holm, *Ideas and Beliefs in Architecture and Industrial design: How attitudes, orientations, and underlying assumptions shape the built environment*

the clues I have left. The use of unappreciated detail is very important for what the piece is speaking to.

Originally based on Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, the peepholes will be at my eye level and below, rather than the gallery standard of 57 inches to call back to the eye holes being at his eye level⁹. Duchamp's work is often an influence for me, as was his collaboration with Joseph Cornell in the piece "The Duchamp Dossier". In this work Duchamp commissioned Cornell to make all of his works but in a miniature way that became like a portable museum that lived in a suitcase¹⁰. Any work that works in its own space is going to talk back to Cornell's shadow boxes and my work is no different in that respect. I am aiming to create spaces that make the rest of the world fall away.

The male gaze in art is an overreaching topic in art and history. Taking a female perspective and speaking to (and with) woman in art is what is most important to my practice and work. My work aims to speak to art historians, through painting references and novices, in the craftsmanship of the piece itself. Miniatures are used to pull in the viewer and take them into a space that they don't belong to. Like a storyboard in film, the placement of the rooms lead the viewer through the narrative I have created using many voices. In using peepholes and light I direct what the viewer is allowed to experience and take the reins in what is important in a very visual way. Through the use of small jewelry like scale and high craft I hope to take the viewer on a journey to a different time and to appreciate the larger ideas of women's place in society and art. Berger best summarizes the ideas presented here in "Ways of Seeing",

⁹ Philadelphia Museum of Art, "Marcel Duchamp: *Étant donnés*."

¹⁰ Other Voices, n.1., v.2, "Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp ... in Resonance -- The Duchamp Dossier."

“To be born a woman has to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women is developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself... One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object -- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”¹¹

¹¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (Penguin Books: Penguin Books, reprint 1990).

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