

THE DEATH OF THE MUSE

A Report of a Senior Study

by

Laura Pierpont

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Date Approved _____, by _____

Faculty Supervisor

Date Approved _____, by _____

Division Chair

ABSTRACT

Women, of many different eras and historical periods, must have the truth told of what it is to be woman, of the female experience. One place our modern world looks to for ideas of women is art history for it reflects ideas first born in societies. But often we do not find much truth there, or at least not complete truth. Women are viewed in archetypal or incomplete ways in many classical works of art. These views, often manufactured by men, create images and situations of women as “objects” instead of “subjects”. The central aim within this thesis work is not only to describe the history of this occurrence in art but to change this, fundamentally rewriting history in modern way. New photo interpretations of selected classical works of art history will translate these women from “object” to “subject”. Within the novel works, although these narratives are manipulated by yet another artist, more accurate, more complete, and more real views of women are created by a fellow female. Their past stories are abandoned for new narratives, ones in which these female characters live again with inventive tales to tell about what it is to be female and, more importantly, what it is to be translated into something new.

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CHAPTER I

PROPOSAL

The history of art has throughout the ages fundamentally been shaped and dominated by men. In this realm, women in art of different periods have served as “objects” rather than “subjects” in many works of art. As said “objects”, most apparent in times of antiquity, women have been made images, archetypes, and models for many differing ideas and beliefs largely held by male counterparts; thus, rarely embodying accurate female perspectives or personages, only inflated or even fictional dichotomies. As such, art history is one avenue in which we as modern people can look back to observe and interpret these views of women in societies as visual artifact.

By this history, we are able to view clearly the changes of roles and rights of women from past days to now, and it is known that this history for women has been both beautiful and bleak. Those bleak moments in art for the whole of what is “woman” were times of the representation of women as singularly sexual, as possessions, as bodies of mystery to be reviled, and even as symbols of evil. These ideas, and many more, about women are present in much historical works of art as they were first ideas of societies. The narratives and fates of these women are forever immortalized in art, able to be visually remembered and experienced by the masses. But what if this truth of permanence were to change?

It is in this thesis research that the lives and stories of some of these women will be rewritten in the form of new works of art. Chosen works of art from male artists of art history depicting women as previously stated “objects” will be reworked and, moreover, retold in both attitude and purpose. These classical works will take on new visual narratives and the converted female “subjects” will in contemporary works of art live new lives and stories that in their corresponding historical periods would never have been possible.

The women of classic Greek art, female archetypes of Edvard Munch’s *Three Stages of Women*, feminine characters of Eugène Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus*, the skirt lifting heroine of Jean Honore Fragonard’s *The Swing*, and the lady of Van der Weyden’s *Portrait of a Lady* will all live new lives in modern transformations of the original pieces.

These new lives will be shown in photographic form. In a gallery in the spring of 2014, photos will be shown housed in a camera apparatus and projected on the gallery wall. They will also be shown on loop by digital projection at close to life size at a 5’X3’ minimum. There will be a total of 7 images, one for each reworked piece of art and 3 in total for the representation of the translated Greek pieces. The gallery space will be kept dark with spotlights on reproduced images of the original works, a self-portrait, the artist statement, and promotional materials.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do the chosen original works classify, use, and represent women? What were the personal and historical motives behind such representation?
2. How does changing these historical works of art give new meaning to the stories of their female subjects, and in the greater context, what does it speak to about women in art today?

CHAPTER III

TIMELINE

September-November

- Research art history works using the female form as “object” for possible translation.
- Finalize intended photographs with full completion of personal rendering and change of female to “subject”
- Storyboard/sketch these final ideas with preparation on execution.
- Research needed steps/possibilities to create large photographs.

December-January

- Begin to search for appropriate locations to stage the shoot.
- Acquire permission to use chosen locations.
- Begin to search for and cast model to embody characters.
- Edit model release form.
- Have the chosen models sign the edited model release form.
- Search for, borrow, or purchase any needed costume materials.

February

- Shoot *Portrait of a Lady* image after casting model, setting up location and props, and acquiring release signature.
- Shoot *Three Stages of Women* image after casting models, setting up location and props, and acquiring release signatures.
- Begin to edit and choose final images for gallery showing.

March/April

- Search for and cast model for Greek contrapposto shoot.
- Have model sign edited release form.
- Buy need body paint materials.
- Shoot Greek contrapposto images and begin editing.

- Shoot The Swing image after casting models, setting up location and props, and acquiring release signatures.
- Shoot Munch image after casting and prop selections.
- Shoot The Death of Sardanapalus image after casting models, setting up location and props (from Maryville College theatre department), and acquiring release signatures.

May

- Complete written thesis documents in the correct format with a final edit.
- Complete bibliography and all references with a final edit.
- Review all materials with advisor.
- Send thank you notes and personal invitations to Senior Show.
- Finalize Senior Show gallery space.
- Build camera apparatus viewing system for gallery.
- Have original works printed (secured to backing).
- Borrow projector and computer for image projection.
- Test gallery set up at home and in gallery.
- Complete labels.
- Hang work and bring viewing system to the gallery.
- Present final work.

CHAPTER IV

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pablo Picasso, the famous Cubist whom was equally famous for his tumultuous relationships with women, once said, “There are only two types of women: goddesses and doormats”. Picasso was not the only male artist of his time (nor the first or last) to have notoriously complicated views of women, especially his muses. More complicated than this is that very word itself: muse. Webster’s dictionary defines “muse” as it is used as a noun as “a source of inspiration; especially: a guiding genius”. Women in the history of art have served as muses to male artists for centuries. Botticelli, Titian, Rodin, Warhol, Picasso, Munch. These male artists and so many more used the female model as muse or had personal female muses in their lives who were subjects and sources of some the greatest works of art in the history of the world (Priscilla, “Top 10 Muses...”). There seems to be power in this; these women were involved intimately in the creation of these classical works. Although this is evident, Webster’s dictionary also defines “muse” as a said, “state of deep thought or dreamy abstraction”. Here is where the romanticism of the artistic muse dies. The muse in art is not always authentic and is at times truthfully more the latter: a “dreamy abstraction”. These views of women are dreams within themselves; and are further defined as, “a general idea or quality rather than an actual person”. The muse is conjured, historically mythical, and contradicting in nature. These views of women in art are projections of inaccurate characteristics and symbols and are more often than not, simply not real. Women in art are more than muses and goddesses and doormats.

Particularly highlighting this idea of muse, or simply woman as object, are the following: the women of Hellenistic Greek sculpture, female archetypes of Edvard Munch's *Three Stages of Women*, feminine characters of Eugène Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*, the skirt lifting heroine of Jean Honore Fragonard's *The Swing*, and the lady of Van der Weyden's *Portrait of a Lady*. These women are set to transcend their original roles as "objects" and become instead fully formed and recognized as the "subjects" they have the potential to be. But first, one must see the history of these women and the works their images aid to create.

Sex sells. This was as true for the ancient Greeks as it is today in our modern world. Early use of the female nude in Greek art can be seen in the vase painting of the Archaic and Classical periods when that art form was at its height in ancient Greece (Kleiner 121). Fred Kleiner and his fellow authors explain that vase art was an appropriate place for the nude female form as vases were for private use and were kept in the home. Female nudity before the late classical period would not have been accepted on public works (Kleiner 124). But this norm shifted in the Hellenistic period as female nudity was shown with sexual themes and undertones, largely in sculpture. This period, traditionally noted to have begun from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, ushered in a new cultural and artistic age in ancient Greece (Kleiner 153). Moreover, this is the first time in which the female nude was sculpted and reproduced with sexual form and aim. The artist Praxiteles had first caused a stir with his original work *Aphrodite of Knidos* in the late Classical period by depicting the goddess of love completely nude; but even this figure is modest with a hand covering her pelvic area (Kleiner 145). Hellenistic eroticism would go beyond Praxiteles and more openly depict the sexuality of the female form. The famous *Venus de Milo* is a prime example of such sexual representation in sculpture. The statue's garment is hanging loosely around her hips having the look as if it were

about to fall to the ground. The work is meant to inspire sexual feelings and to, as Kleiner describes, “tease the spectator” (Kleiner 159). Sexuality in another work is made playful with *Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan* from Delos, Greece (Kleiner 160). Here, Aphrodite defends her nude self with her sandal from the half human/half goat god of the woods, Pan. Men too were not excluded from this time of eroticism. In *Barberini Faun* a nude male form is shown in a lounging position with the focus of the work being the satyr’s genitals (Kleiner 160). Kleiner recounts, “It is not surprising that when Hellenistic sculptors began to explore the sexuality of the human body, they turned their attention to both men and women” (Kleiner 160). Although this is true, it is the male artistic use of the female form--and its first sexualizing theme-- in ancient Greece that would be one of the earliest examples of woman as an object of lustfully sexual representation in art.

The feminist group the Guerrilla Girls, who are self-proclaimed as a “bunch of anonymous females.... feminist counterparts to the mostly male tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hood, Batman, and the Lone Ranger” have much to say of the subject of the use of the female nude. They report, usually on their large and famous billboards, that as of 2012 76% of the nudes featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art were female. At times, this prevalence of the use of the female nude is rigorously noticed, “Anyone who examines the history of western art must be struck by the prevalence of images of the female body. More than any other subject, the female nude connotes ‘Art’. The framed image of the female body, hung on the wall of an art gallery, is shorthand for art more generally;”(Nead 1). Lynda Nead is a passionate author on the subject and is not afraid to put her ideas more starkly saying, “The female body—natural, unstructured—represents something that is outside the proper field of art and aesthetic judgment; but artistic style, pictorial form, contains and regulates the body and

renders it an object of beauty, suitable for art and aesthetic judgment” (Nead 25). Now while not everyone in the art world would fully agree with this statement--as many would say all in the natural world is the subject of art-- the idea of the differences between the body in nature and the body in art is interesting. The female nude in a work of art is a moment in time, a moment for that time in history. Encapsulated within this moment are all the biases, cultural significance, personal judgment, and speculation that can exist and be projected. These works represent some versions of truth about women but these would seem never to be universal truths. The real truth is that what is universal is the use of the female nude itself. And the implications of this use make realities, maybe not realities for women in life, but surely in history.

This use of women as symbols of sex continued in the history of art and arguably will never cease to be in cultures all around the world. Often the historical period or the artist himself (in this context) is the source of this occurrence. One of the founding artists of German Expressionism, Edvard Munch, depicted such themes in much of his work. Elizabeth Ingles, a biographer on Munch, describes the idea of women as sexual symbols as a reoccurring theme in his pieces most likely due to his personal experiences (Ingles 168). Other archetypes in his work reveal his sentiments about woman; Ingles illustrates such saying, “His ambiguous attitude is summed up in another version of womankind’s threefold nature, *The Three Stages of Woman* (1894): the virgin, the whore, and the crone are here present” (Ingles 168). These dichotomies are often repeated in many of Munch’s artistic works. His conflicted ideas about the nature of women come from his turbulent sexual relationships. The most notable liaison was with one Tulla Larson who followed him relentlessly and was recounted as, “sexually predatory” (Ingles 176). Much of Munch’s distrust of women and his resulting works may have been rooted in the era of the late 1800s as well. In that time the view of women was changing and many men were,

“experiencing the distrust of women that was triggered by the growth of female emancipation, the fear of powerful women that frequently turned to hatred” (Ingles 164). Munch was not the only artist of his time who was grappling with such conceptions. The dramatist Frank Wedekind, the poet Charles Baudelaire, the Belgian painter Félicien Rops, and the artist/playwright August Strindberg all produced work and opinion in accordance with such ideas. This was especially true for Rops with his “savage depictions of the feminine principle”; and for Strindberg also, who wrote that a female’s nature was “crooked and warped and inclined to evil” (Ingles 166). Furthermore, the Danish poet Emanuel Goldstein, who became a close friend of Munch’s shared his views of women as vampiric characters, “feasting on the lifeblood of the men who loved them” (Ingles 92). Thus, it is a logical progression that since many of the leading artists of that time personally and culturally held such views of women that their art would reflect these notions. These ideas of women are further dichotomies and are not, of course, the only roles woman can play. But the history of art is permanent, and there is no changing its great and epic past. It is in new works these limited archetypes can be turned on their head.

Yet another original work in the canon of the history of art that is begging for a new idea of women is that of Eugène Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus*. This work is a rendition of Byron’s drama from 1821 telling of the fall of the seventh century BC Assyrian King and was presented in a public salon in 1828 (Lambertson 67). In Bryon’s original version of the written tale, the death scene is recounted as a climatic occurrence in which Sardanapalus accepts his impending demise and “his favorite concubine chooses to perish with him in the name of true love” (Lambertson 67). Delacroix’s version is strikingly different from Byron’s original. In the painted version, Sardanapalus lounges as concubines, salves, and horses—all of his

possessions—are destroyed. John Lambertson describes some of the theories behind the variations saying, “Delacroix's unique treatment of the theme, coupled with the lack of convincing sources for these changes, has encouraged psychoanalytic, feminist, and post-colonialist scholars respectively to interpret the painting as an expression of the painter's sexual fantasy, of contemporary Frenchmen's domination of women, or most recently as a representation of Western power over the Near-East” (Lambertson 67). Lambertson goes on to argue that Delacroix was really constructing a critique of contemporary French absolutism. Whatever the case, it is interesting that Delacroix chose to rewrite the story visually which features several female concubines as focal points of the work; and so too is focal their violent and forthcoming death.

Violence as well as sex does have a history of captivating audiences. This was most likely true in the day of Delacroix. Edgar Allen Poe—who died less than thirty years after the public salon showing of *Sardanapalus*—once said, “the most poetical topic in the world is the death of a beautiful woman” (Tudor 94). This sentiment is directly in line with early Romanticism in art and literature, of which both Poe and Delacroix were products and producers themselves. Tudor goes on to claim further that *Sardanapalus* is more than truly an example of Romanticism and its ideals of beauty, but that the painting goes beyond, revealing a prying quality. He recounts: “Literary Romantic voyeurism is reflected, for example, in the finely wrought paintings of the Romantic Period. An example of the voyeuristic posing as the sublime and beautiful is Delacroix’s ‘The Death of Sardanapalus,’ painted in 1827. Delacroix’s painting depicts Sardanapalus looking on nonchalantly, yet curiously as the women of his household are murdered” (Tudor 94). Tudor continues to contend visual evidence not only of Sardanapalus’ nonchalant attitude but also of his pure enjoyment at the scene (Tudor 94). If this is to be taken

as an accurate description, it paints a new idea of the work and of the artist's intention. Tied to intention, Tudor argues that the painting is an example of the "male gaze" where women are unaware they are being viewed and that the implied viewer would be male (Tudor 95). Here again is the implied sentiment of Delacroix's use of the female form to entice and most likely to shock. As stated, the true intention of the work might never be concretely agreed upon, but the transformation of the original tale to one of death and carnality is both a mark of the Romantic era and of the moderation (if even reduction) of female individuality and verity.

The Rococo style of the 18th century is also an era in which artistic changes occurred and more shocking images were produced. Honore Fragonard's *The Swing* is a famous, or rather in its time infamous, example of this phenomenon. It is recounted that at that time in European history the commissions of royal and wealthy patrons such as Louis XV were highly influential to art. Fragonard was influenced by the particular tastes of such patrons. Those tastes that were, "pleasure-loving" and it is known that these pushed, "...Fragonard towards those scenes of love and voluptuousness with which he will always be associated" (Carroll, "Movement in Art"). *The Swing*'s particular history showcases the era's trend of eroticism with many symbols:

Happy Hazards' [*The Swing*] iconographic and formal structure accords with the well-known story of its commission. 'A gentleman of the Court' was sent to Fragonard after approaching another artist to paint his mistress 'on a swing that a bishop would set in motion.' The patron asked to have himself included in the scene, positioned so that he 'would be able to see the legs of this beautiful girl'....Conventional iconography and en-coded motifs build upon the patron's erotic intentions. Swinging alludes to the fickleness of women in the emblematic tradition, but also, with its rhythmic motion, to the act of lovemaking. More

specific symbols--a tossed shoe (female abandonment to passion), an unshod foot (lost virginity), an eager lap dog (impatient desire), a statue of Cupid who silences with one hand and pulls arrows from his quiver with another (love at work), and a hat that caps a budding bush (sexual engagement)--all collude with the primary emblem of the swing to create an encoded, erotic scene (Milam 549).

This work was interestingly recreated in life size and 3D existence by another artist, Yinka Shonibare. This work, titled *The Swing (After Fragonard)*¹, "...spoofs the famous painting. In Fragonard's work, painted in 1766, a lovely young woman on a swing lifts her leg, granting her lover, lying below on the grass, a peek up her skirt. Shonibare's off-with-her-head version wraps the girl in a vibrant African print, stamped with Chanel's double-C logo" (Stamberg, "Headless Actors On A Global Playground"). Here, we are able to see the 3D view of what the male lover in the original can see: directly up the young woman's skirt. Much like in the Romantic era, the female form here serves as a sexual symbol meant to inspire lust. This painting, like all the works detailed here before it, has some history of showing the female role as a sensual one. Of the many roles of women in art so explored here--muse, harlot, crone, virgin, goddess,

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possession, lust-object—yet another archetype is present in these examined original works: that of pious daughter.

In 1460, Rogier van der Weyden painted a lady, and this lady was a full embodiment of the time. In this era of history, during the Northern Renaissance, much of Europe was trying to mend. Kleiner describes the era, “In the Late Gothic world, western Europe north of the Alps experienced the calamities of war and plague, and the social turmoil and dislocations that accompanied dying feudalism (Kleiner 425). During this time of such death art was what began to flourish. Works of the 15th century focused, “on the major aspects of life at the time—piety and political power, and the relationship between the two” (Kleiner 426). As a skilled portraitist, Weyden was an artist to capture this relationship. Not only did great patrons wish to have their image immortalized but they also intended to establish their, “identities, ranks, and stations” during a politically important period in which such identifies were key (Kleiner 443). Portraiture also often helped arrange and secure marriages. Royalty and nobility would commission a painter to travel and take the likeness of a potential bride or groom (Kleiner 443). Weyden’s lady might have been the perfect example of an ideal choice of a man in the late 1400s. Not only did the painter capture a likeness but he also revealed her character as a reserved and pious woman. She seems a plain and quiet subject with, “[H]er lowered eyes, tightly locked thin fingers, and fragile physique [showing] a reserved and pious demeanor” (Kleiner 443). Art historian Erwin Panofsky describes also the underline sensuality saying, "In the...Portrait of a Young Lady....the hands are analogously placed but the intertwined fingers reveal a smouldering excitability which, even more severely repressed, lives in her veiled, downcast eyes and full, sensuous lips" (Panofsky 292). Religious dedication as well as beauty would have been

highly regarded in any future bride. This work shows yet another feature of woman as object: a pious possession to be acquired by a man.

It may be added to the long record of woman as object, as something to be held up and arbitrarily adored. This adoration is ever present in the idea, once more, of muse. Therefore, the woman as muse must be put to death. As lovely and romantic as it is, women of these works of art--and those works of the future—must kill the muse as it stands as “a source of inspiration; especially: a guiding genius”. For this is truly an idea of woman and not a reality. Would it not be even more romantic if women themselves in their image were not the source of genius, but that these women themselves in their individual entity were creators of their own guiding genius. In the event of this, the muse can die a quiet death, one full of appropriate romance. And we may come to not miss her at all.

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CHAPTER V

ARTIST STATEMENT

I recall a class discussion early in my college career about whether the contemporary photograph is even considered art. This question was brought forth in the class's shared text: *The Photo as Contemporary Art* by Charlotte Cotton. Cotton reviews the historical periods of time when the answers to the question of "What is art?" were changing. She recounts artists like Marcel Duchamp breaking ground with radical ideas and works that paved the way for other forms and mediums of art-- like photography --to be able to enter the world's collective consciousness of art at all. Today, photography is one of the most pervasive modes of personal expression and high art in the modern world. Millions of people call themselves photographers and millions more are moved by the experience of the photograph as art. I include myself in both the former and latter, an easy enough proclamation, but one that holds a depth I could have even a short time ago never imagined.

Cotton's book changed my artistic life and views about photography. I had always loved picking up a camera and using it to record the little, wonderful, and sometimes strange details I saw in the world around me: bugs, dormant trees, garbage cans in a quiet alley. It had always been a tool for me to notice what I would have otherwise passed, as if simply holding the camera made me more attune and made my vision clearer. It was not until college, until Cotton, that I found myself feeling jolted awake by the idea of deeper meaning that is possible for even just

one photograph. I found myself unbearably in love with the capacity a photograph has for storytelling. For me now, narratives create my photos and my photos in turn create narratives. I will sometimes create works representing stories I love or want to visualize and at other times my works construct characters and scenes and thus from these a narrative is born, and in my deepest hopes, lives a little life inside its viewer, even if it is a short time. For some reason, which is still largely unknown to me, these narratives often come alive using female models and often describe female experiences. This impulse most likely derives from the simple fact that I am female and that these stories (the ones I create and others) interest and inspire me. More than anything else, it is my compulsion to visually see and then internalize a narrative by way of a photograph that drives me to create.

This drive to create also stems from my love of the strange and how I find beauty in what wakes me up to the world and to myself. I constantly want to wake to newer or deeper knowledge of things than I had before. Because of this and because of my serial style of mixing narratives with the female form, my greatest sources of inspiration are men and women who often do the same. They do so by reflecting on the unexpected and fantastical and have the ability to tell an unforgettable story. The hundreds of characters and lives of Cindy Sherman, the “film still” qualities of the work of Alex Prager, the blank and assaulting girls of Hellen van Meene, the haunting and question creating scenes of Gregory Crewdson, the enormous and extraordinary worlds of Tim Walker, the insignificant lives made real and focal by Diane Arbus: all of these have changed me in some way and urge me forward in my own attempts to add to the body and history of photographic storytelling.

More specifically, Helen van Meene’s *Untitled #99* as a single image relates to my work in content. Its showing of a girl with floating hair is alike to my impulses to create an image

with something magical or strange happening. It is visually confusing at first for the girl's hair looks to be floating on its own. This type of double-take effect is often what I work for as well. Similarly, Alex Prager's series *Week-End* pairs females with narrative and creates images where the story is not quite known and the viewer must deduce what is happening and what it all means. This series is not only beautiful but it has a stunning strangeness. It is haunting in a way that sticks to you and does not want to let you go: exactly my aim in all my work.

In technical form I am drawn to and often implement very high shutter speed to capture motion and to create a moment in time. I am also apt to slightly overexpose images and make them lighter than they "should" be. It gives an often ethereal quality to the works. Working with high contrast elements in both color and black and white is another technical style I employ. I love for my images to be rich with lights and darks. In size, I am drawn to extremes. For me, works presented in small and intimate ways make the viewer effort more to understand. Small sizes force a viewer close and defy the "normal" space in which we usually perceive art. On the other end of the spectrum, I am drawn to allowing works to become very large and to, once again, force a relationship with the viewer. Large or small, both sizes make the viewer more forcefully participate with the works. This is a very good thing.

My style and works are constantly evolving, but I foresee always holding to my instincts of mixing a story with female characters. It is what makes sense to me and is currently allowing me to create a story about myself. Although this is true, stories in general are where my artistic life lies. My work will always have a subtext, something to say. It will always have something odd happening, hopefully something you have never seen before or something done in a new way. This obsession to create something new or never-before-seen is what all modern artists mostly work for with pieces, but for me it is not about hubris but about the natural love for

adding to the world. I want my work to live inside someone. I want it to become a memorable part of a human experience. I want my work to move someone in a single moment and add to a collective self in some small way, even just in one person, for a lifetime.