

THE MALE NUDE

WHAT IS SO CORRUPTING ABOUT THE PENIS?

BY JANE NEAL

I was recently at lunch with the neuropsychiatrist, Dr. Anthony Fry. We were discussing my upcoming exhibition for Sotheby's S2 Gallery in London: 'The Nude in the XX/XI Century'. Originally I had wanted to curate a show focused solely on the male nude, but the gallery and I had decided this might feel too exclusive. A friend also commented that: "men (and women) generally prefer to buy female nudes these days, unless of course they're gay men". I relayed this story to Dr. Fry who promptly exclaimed: "What's so corrupting about the penis?! We almost never see it on public display any more!" We were sitting in the restaurant of his very traditional London club at the time. I imagined a few heads turning, but of course everyone was far too polite to appear shocked, and indeed why should they be? After all, what is so corrupting, or shocking about the penis?

According to Dr.Fry, there should be nothing concerning about the image of the penis, more troubling is why it appears to be increasingly hidden from view in general society, especially considering the rise in nudity and sexual imagery in film and television. It's certainly true that in the general media, the focus of attention is on the female body. Art has undoubtedly played a large part in reinforcing this. While the male nude dominated over the female nude as the preferred subject until the 17th Century, this position was reversed in the 18th and 19th Centuries. By the early 20th Century, the female nude had not only become the favoured subject for a large number of well known European artists, but women were typically objectified in society through the pointed focus of the male gaze. It took decades of struggle by women, for women, to battle not only for equality but to reclaim their bodies for themselves, to subvert

the male gaze and thus to try and redress the imbalance of power between the sexes in life and in art.

It is unsurprising then, that the gender politics surrounding art since the 1970s have often reflected a strongly feminist agenda. In addition, from the 1980's, Queer Theory has also gained ground as a lens through which to read and re read art and art history. While hardwon and significant, these developments nonetheless pose a challenge for the male nude and for the state of maleness in general. Is it still possible, for example, for a male heterosexual artist working today to produce a male nude, other than a depiction of his own body, that is not automatically sexualised, i.e., interpreted as aggressively heterosexual, or read as a gay image? The penis is almost entirely absent from general modern media, yet it is prevalent in gay journalism.

There is a strong argument that the penis has come to be associated with an aggressive stand for male dominance in the heterosexual arena, or acceptable only as a physical symbol of male sexuality within the gay community. Our contemporary society has an obsession with sex and sexual images - predominately mediated through Internet pornography - so should we not be concerned by such a onesided drive to focus on the female body and the female sexual organs?

One of the best examples of the imbalance between the gratuitous display of female versus male nudity in our western world, occurs in the hugely successful HBO series 'Game of Thrones'. It has become notorious for its portrayal of often extreme violence and graphic sex. In four series it has depicted the slitting of a woman's throat; the stabbing of a pregnant woman's belly, group sex, incestuous sex, women being brutalised and murdered, a child being thrown out of a window and another one set on fire. In short, almost nothing has been shied away from, and little has been left to the viewer's imagination, no matter how graphic, except for one very obvious and deliberate omission: the erect penis. This apparently is too shocking for the contemporary viewer to behold. It should also be noted that the viewer hasn't had much access to the flaccid penis either - I counted three male nude full frontals and interestingly, none of these was a depiction of what we might call: 'a leading man'. Conversely, almost all the leading female characters on the programme have been shown naked at least once, usually more than once, and often during the act of sex.

'Game of Thrones' is just one very notable example of prudery concerning the hiding of the penis, but perhaps this act of hiding is very revealing too. This 'preciousness' concerning the penis could be said to be demonstrating a reluctance to objectify the male body. Women's bodies have been objectified - first in art and then in the media - for hundreds of years. Men however, are not used to seeing themselves portrayed as nothing more than sexual beings. Men have enjoyed the privileged position of being portrayed as 'rounded and multifaceted characters'. This has empowered them. The male organ has been afforded a sanctity that women's genitalia has not.



The Barberini Faun, c.220 BC. Glyptothek, Munich. Image Courtesy of Sotheby's. Next page: Robert Fry, Red 12, 2012, Acrylic, Oil and Enamel on Canvas, 198x285 cm.



more troublesome is what occurs after that pleasurable activation of brain regions tied to motivation, which drives seek sexual release, and the decision making system is to experience; it's almost like the men are hypnotised."

Though men might experience powerful drives as pornography, and the debate about the consequences of for society continues to rage, the question of whether nudity has to equal intimacy, is - and should be - a separate. Certainly in the ancient world, The Nude as an artistic born from its relationship to philosophical and cultural formal ideals. The Nude first became significant in the art Greece where athletic competitions were undertaken in celebrated the male body in a manner since unparalleled. considered athletes to be the embodiment of the best and thus the male nude form became associated not only sical prowess, but with glory and even moral excellence. gods were always portrayed in athletic form, however the of the body amongst the ancient Greeks contrasts sharply attitude of contemporaneous societies in other areas of world, where nakedness was often associated with disgrace promised morality. Perhaps the most pertinent and long example of this is how the Genesis account of Adam and to cover their bodies after eating from the tree of the knowledge good and evil has become ingrained in Judaic, Christian cultures.

The idealisation of the male nude persisted throughout story until the 17th Century. According to storian, Kenneth Clark, idealisation is the of the 'true' male nude, as opposed to works be considered more descriptive or realistic. ment was increasingly called into question 20th Century when artists such as Egon Schiele cien Freud, sought to tackle the genre of The to portray their figures with a greater sense gritty realism. The Nude, then is still very brated in these works, but as a vital, breathing rather than as a hermetically sealed vessel, more suggestive antique statue than living, breathing flesh. Intriguingly, sation of the male body has returned in the 21st Century no small part to the influence of the media, the pressure to a 'worked out' 'gym body' (aided by a rapidly growing protein based, muscle building foods), and sometimes cement and augmentation via steroids and cosmetic surgery.

While both the younger heterosexual and homosexual nities have been affected by the move to see the body as can be improved upon, the majority of heterosexual men an aversion to male nudity - either in terms of their own others. It could be that the majority of liberal and tolerant been educated to equate a direct vision of masculinity sion. Anxious to avoid being perceived as chauvinistic and stic, they are therefore unwilling to celebrate the penis, symbol of masculinity.

Why is this? We might think that this status quo would give men a feeling of superiority or strength, yet strangely men, or rather heterosexual men, seem to be suffering from a crisis of confidence. Increasingly, they appear to be covering themselves up. Take the beach scenario. Throughout most of the Western World, gone are the so-called 'posing-pouches', speedo swimming trunks of yesteryear, or even flirtations with naturism, 'in' are baggy shorts, often knee-length and complemented by full beards. It's a far cry from the idolisation of the smooth, lithe Adonis.

Today the portrait of a beautiful young man - whether in the image of Ghiberti's David, or, (more recently), a Mapplethorpe subject - immediately seems to equal gay icon for most people. Conversely, the sight of a more macho naked man - aka Michelangelo's David - is troubling because the male member has become linked with aggression. Commenting on the depiction of The Nude in a controversial exhibition in Vienna in 2012, Art historian Eva Kernbauer provided some valuable insights into Western society's differing attitudes to the male and female body: "To put it very simply, male nudity was closely linked to strength, invulnerability and heroism, the female nude to beauty and erotics. Also, the 'Venus pudica' [the shameful Venus] was already developed in ancient Greece, so the depictions of female chastity and female nudity are historically deeply interlinked. The female nude is not threatening at all - female nudity is vulnerable, because it acknowledges the gaze of the beholder." Kernbauer went on to comment that this classical model is still powerful today: "Male nudity is very often linked to the exposure of sexual organs - the penis - and this is often done in a way that responds to the classical model of aggression and strength."

A young gynaecologist (who didn't want to be named), told me in no uncertain terms that the first word that comes to mind for her when she considers the penis, is 'weapon'. When I asked why, she explained that she had recently been working in the Accident and Emergency Department of a hospital, and spent most of her time dealing with young girls who had experienced terrible internal injuries after having sex with boys who were enacting out often brutal pornographic fantasies. Several of these girls were as young as 13 or 14 and most of the boys were of a similar age. 'It's not about a process of engagement for these boys' she commented. 'This is about perpetration'.

It has long been argued that pornography is linked to a debasement of women because it encourages the objectification of women and the absence of emotional attachment and respect. Dr. William Struthers, a bio psychologist and the author of 'Wired for Intimacy', says that while pornography can rewire the brain in as much as 'pornographic images seem to activate a man's visual system in a manner that goes beyond just looking at trees or even people, the reality is that our brains are regularly being rewired - we wouldn't learn anything otherwise.' However, he goes on to say that: "Perhaps

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tedly growing at 1.5 times the rate of women's, we could wonder whether we are starting to see the objectification of men in order to boost sales and increase market growth. The truth is that the sight of a nude image will always be arresting. Coupled with this, male full frontals remain the last taboo of our supersexualised society and still have the power to shock. Writing in 1956, Kenneth Clark argued: "No nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling, even though it be only the faintest shadow - and if it does not do so it is bad art and false morals."

These days, most people in the West still associate the male nude with an Adonis. The success of the persistence of this idea in the general consciousness across millennia, is partly due to politics. The creators of the Renaissance and indeed of every empire that followed, realised the significance of commissioning art that elevated ordinary men and women into gods and goddesses. It is a device that contemporary advertisers employ when marketing perfume in particular. The ancient Egyptians associated perfume with the gods and considered fragrance to originate from the sweat of the sun god, Ra. The ancient Greeks believed that wearing a sweetsmelling fragrance would please the gods. The idealised male nude of the ancient world would not only have looked good but would therefore have been expected to smell good too. The airbrushed models on the pages of fashion magazines today also look like they would smell good. There is little to remind us of the flesh and blood that lies beneath their taught and lightreflective skins. No wonder then that faced with this, men, like many women, are turning to surgery to help sculpt and smooth. Is it possible that the men of today are unwittingly attempting to turn themselves into the marble gods of yesterday?

Fortunately, though we might at times long to be statue-like, humans and notably artists, are also fascinated by the abject nature of the body. The question is whether the pull of corporeality is sufficiently strong as to counter the god-like forms we persist in idolising. The penis too is caught up in this idolatry. Certainly the erect penis is not always the most aesthetically appealing appendage, and real sex can be very messy. We see enough female nudity to know that women's bodies do not conform to one, unified type, and in the same way, a cross section of real men do not equal an army of Adonis-like gods. So why not redress the balance and show more male nudity, and vanquish the sanctity of this little body part? After all, it's just a penis. And what is so powerful or corrupting about that?

By Jane Neal She is an independent curator. She is best known for her work with international contemporary painters and for 'bringing a generation of Romanian artists to world attention.' (The Evening Standard, London, 2009). Neal recently curated the exhibition: 'The Nude in the XX and XI Century' for Sotheby's S/2 Gallery in London. During the course of her research for the show, she became interested in the discourse surrounding male identity in relation to the male nude and intrigued by the absence of the penis in both high art and popular culture.

This aversion to male nudity goes back considerably further than modern day feminism. The French Renaissance philosopher, Montaigne noted that, "Man is the sole animal whose nudities offend his own companions, and the only one who, in his natural actions, withdraws and hides himself from his own kind." While this reveals a longstanding inherent discomfort or even a deep seated fear of male nudity in the western consciousness, it doesn't explain it.

Gymnophobia is the term used to describe a phobia of nudity, even if the person recognises that his or her fear is irrational. A gynmophobe may worry about being seen naked or seeing others naked. Their fear may arise from an anxiety about sexuality or the sexual act, or from a fear that the state of being naked renders them exposed and therefore vulnerable, or because they believe themselves to be physically inferior to what society might consider normal. However, others fear nudity because of what The Nude represents, believing the sight of an explicit painting, photograph, drawing or sculpture to be potentially corrupting. Fear can result in violent reactions, and this extends to the male nude, where the sight of a naked male body - especially one that is overtly sexual, can engender such discomfort as to transform into disgust. This can even manifest in an act of physical aggression towards a work, which at this moment, ceases to be purely an artistic image or object for the viewer, but becomes instead a threat to be destroyed, and simultaneously an indicator of the temperature of tolerance or intolerance in society.

Perhaps it is fear that is behind the covering up of the male member. Yet paradoxically this small organ could also be symbolic of the last vestiges of male dominance over women; even in absentia. It is possible that the penis gains more power in the heterosexual arena than it deserves because it is hidden. After all its sanctity is preserved by being cloaked in invisible mystery. As a friend commented, wryly: "Once it's up and out, there is no denying a man's state of arousal and also his vulnerability: he can pretend all he wants about what a big man he is, right up until then."

Some men though, have sought to seize on the ridiculousness of maintaining the proverbial fig leaf. In Paris last January, the designer Rick Owens sent out several of his male models down the catwalk wearing tunics with peepholes cut to reveal their swinging genitals. It unleashed a media storm and the Instagram hashtag: 'Dick Owens'. More recently, the biannual style magazine 'Man About Town' featured the model Michael Morgan nude on its cover. The picture was shot by Alasdair McLellan and the limited run of 500 sold out in 10 minutes. Ben Reardon, editor-in-chief of 'Man About Town', claimed his nude cover was not intended as a PR stunt, though it certainly earned them a great deal of attention. "It wasn't meant to be specifically shocking or erotic, just honest. When you see male nudes it's all very airbrushed and the pubic area is always shaved, like an Adonis". Perhaps fashion is taking a lead on inequality, but with the men's fashion industry repor-

