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An Experiment in Painting: The Quiet Siren

Jeanne Harris

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AN EXPERIMENT IN PAINTING: THE QUIET SIREN

AUTHOR

JEANNE C. HARRIS

CANDIDATE FOR THE MASTER OF FINE ARTS

COLLEGE OF FINE AND APPLIED ARTS

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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ADVISORS

FRED MEYER, CHAIRMAN
CHARLES ARNOLD
LAWRENCE WILLIAMS
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DEDICATION

This thesis book is dedicated to 'pink painting',
Michael, Mr. Meyer and Federico Fellini.
INDEXING OF ILLUSTRATIVE MATERIAL

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INTRODUCTION
Introduction

Statement of the Thesis Proposal

I The Purpose of the Thesis: The purpose of this thesis is to paint a visually feminine experience by using delicate objects as subject matter and uniting them with quiet textural surfaces.

II Scope: The thesis will be based on investigations into the universal definition of feminine. In addition, I will research both painters who are concerned with textural surfaces, and those whose main interest is the delicate, the sweet, and the romantic. After being satisfied with the pace of my work prior to this thesis quarter, I shall keep this same schedule of producing approximately ten paintings, and choose from them the ones which most successfully support my thesis.

III Procedure: Research and painting will take place simultaneously. I will continue to work with several combinations of media, such as: canvas, sand, plaster, and aluminum leaf.

IV Alternate Proposals: 1) AN EXPERIMENT IN PAINTING: QUIET POP

2) TEXTURAL SURFACES IN PAINTING
Investigations into the Universal Definition of the Feminine

fem'i·nine (fēm′i·nīn), adj. [fr. OF., fr. L. femininus, fr. femina women.] 1. Female: of the female sex. 2. Characteristic of or belonging to women; as feminine interests. 3. Grammar. Of the class of words distinguished for females. -- Syn. See FEMALE

fe'male (fē′māl), adj. [fr. OF., fr. L. femella, dimin. of femina woman.] 1. Belonging to the sex the conceives and brings forth young. 2. Peculiar to, or carried on by, woman; feminine.

Syn. Female, feminine, womanly, womanlike, womanish, effeminate, ladylike. Female (opposed to male) applies to animals and plants as well as to human beings, and always suggests sex; feminine (opposed to masculine) denotes that which belongs to, or is characteristic of, women, and often suggests gender rather than sex. Womanly suggests esp. a woman's deeper, tenderer, more gracious qualities; as, a womanly grace. Womanlike is more apt to suggest characteristically feminine faults or foibles; as, womanlike, she acted on impulse. Womanish is a term of contempt; as, your tears are womanish. Effeminate emphasizes unmanly delicacy, luxuriousness, or enervation; as an effeminate fop. Ladylike is often used sarcastically to imply a dainty and finical affectation. 1

These definitions appear shallow when we search for a universal definition of the feminine. They do not state any significant or meaningful discoveries that could be applied universally to females, or to objects that are feminine in nature; along with Webster's inadequate definition, there are many writers who have failed to see the importance of character analysis or differentiation when they are discussing the feminine. Most books, the numerous television shows, newspaper and magazine articles, etc., are unable to give us any more understanding as to what are the basic characteristics of the feminine nature, than a dictionary. For the most part, they leave us in the dark with mystical words and concepts that cannot be concretely applied. These writers are not questioned, because they attribute their lack of clarity to the mysterious nature of the female.

This quote by Beauvoir sums up the attitude of those who are unsuccessful in finding a definition for the feminine: "The man who 'does not understand' a women is happy to substitute an objective resistance for a subjective deficiency of mind; instead of admitting his ignorance he perceives the presence of a "mystery outside himself; an alibi, indeed, that flatters laziness and vanity at once".²

Thus, in order to find some of the answers to this complex mystery, objective psychological studies are necessary. A serious study of this kind would give us greater insights into the nature of the feminine, and would enable us to see more clearly what can be called basic feminine characteristics, and why women gravitate towards certain functions. Once these characteristics are established, then, and only then, can we begin to understand what femininity means.

Fortunately, a recent investigation has solved many of the mysteries of the feminine mystique. It was conducted by Erik H. Erikson. He states in his findings the basic traits in the female as contrasted with the male: the female is primarily concerned with inner space or inward projection while the male is involved with outer space or outward projection. Mr. Erikson attributes these differences to the biological differences between the two sexes rather than to the social or environmental structures which very often influence our lives.

The test took the form of observing preadolescent children whose nature for the most part has not been influenced by environmental pressures. The children were California boys and girls, aged ten, eleven, and twelve years, who twice a year came to be measured, interviewed, and tested in a non-clinical setting at the "Guidance Study Center" of the
University of California. A nonverbal approach was used to aid in understanding what these small children were not able to communicate in words. Over a span of two years, 150 boys and 150 girls were seen three times and presented, one at a time, with the task of constructing a "scene" with toys on a table. The toys were rather ordinary: a family; some uniformed figures (policeman, aviator, Indian, monk, etc.); wild and domestic animals; furniture; automobiles; and a variety of blocks. The children were asked to imagine that the table was a moving picture studio; the toys, actors and props; and they themselves, moving picture directors. They were to arrange on the table "an exciting scene from an imaginary moving picture", and then tell the plot. This was recorded, the scene photographed, and the children complimented.3

The observer then compared the individual constructions with about ten years of data in the files to see whether it provided some key to the major determinants of the child's inner development.4

The results were as follows: Girls expressed space differently and are naturally talented for "inner space", which would also be called "personal knowledge": the kind of

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4 Ibid.
knowledge that is never independent from the knower, and never strictly theoretical or removed from the knower. It's never purely rationalistic, but has to do with the person who holds the knowledge. In the test the independent ratings showed that considerably more than two-thirds of what Erick Erickson subsequently called "female" configurations occurred in scenes constructed by girls and more than two-thirds of the "male" configurations were in the constructions of boys.\(^5\)

A typical point: the girls' scene is an \textit{interior} scene, represented either as a configuration of furniture without any surrounding walls, or by a \textit{simple enclosure} built with blocks. In the girls' scenes, people and animals are mostly \textit{within} such an interior or enclosure, and they were primarily people or animals in a static (sitting, standing) position. Girls' enclosures consist of \textit{low walls}, only one block high, except for an occasional elaborate doorway. These interiors of houses with or without walls were, for the most part, expressly \textit{peaceful}. Often, a little girl was playing the piano. However, in a number of cases, the interior was intruded by animals or dangerous men. Yet the idea of an intruding creature did not necessarily lead to the defensive erection of walls or the closing of doors. Rather the majority of these intrusions had an element of lightness and of pleasurable excitement.\(^6\)

\(^5\)Ibid., 9.
\(^6\)Ibid.
In comparing the girls' scenes to the boys', the following can be said: Boys' scenes were either houses with elaborate walls or facades with protrusions such as cones or cylinders representing ornaments or cannons. There were high towers; and there were exterior scenes. In boys' constructions more people and animals were outside enclosures or buildings, and there were more automative objects and animals moving along streets and intersections. There were elaborate automative accidents, but also traffic channeled or arrested by the policeman. While high structures were prevalent in the configurations of the boys, there was also much play with the danger of collapse or downfall; ruins were exclusively boys' constructions.

In summing up, it can be said that the male space was dominated by height and downfall and by strong motion and its channelization or arrest; and the female space was dominated by static interiors which were opened or simply enclosed, and peaceful or playfully intruded upon with an element of lightness and pleasurable excitement. Mr. Erikson also suggests that these modes in spacial expression" come more naturally", to the male and female respectively, but either is not necessarily doomed to one spatial mode or another.7

7Ibid., p. 13.
If we accept this investigation as valid, then it can be said that by seeing how young girls naturally express themselves, we now have a greater understanding of what are considered universally feminine characteristics. These characteristics of the feminine can be seen in the creative work of female personalities who have remained true to their nature.

Unfortunately, no one would dispute the statement that few women have achieved much in the arts. Paul Farnsworth, in "The Effects of Role-Taking in Artistic Achievement", suggests that women's failure is a result of their easily accepting a world where the basically masculine figure dominates.8 Where strong environmental forces in education and social traditions are under the purposeful control of men.9 Where history places creativity in the arts as an enduring characteristic of the male attitude whose identity is based on a fondness for 'what works' and of what man can make whether it helps to build or to destroy.10 Keeping this in mind, we can see how our environmental structures could easily disassociate women from creative activity by giving them specific functions or roles to fulfill. These functions are: "women as mother

9 Beauvoir, op. cit., p. vii.
and nurturer", which has been the main function of women in most societies; "women as temptress or seductress", often a very special group of women who live for the purpose; and more recently, "women as knower", women as the bearer of knowledge and wisdom.\(^{11}\) Here, as mentioned earlier, are some of a number of the meaningless generalized functions that leave us in the dark as to what is the nature of the feminine personality.

How would a person who has been tempted to accept a role composed of these functions express herself in art? For the most part, when a women is confronted with creative problem solving, she finds herself reluctant to accept the challenge because society, has considered it a man's prerogative. What she does not realize is the feminine nature of her solution could be a valid and meaningful artistic statement. In addition, she finds herself discouraged because her work is not bold or dominated by strong motion, organization, and power, and thus, she gives up easily under the persuasion of an inferiority complex that takes the form of rejection of her personality.

There are many people who feel the need for a more equal balance between the feminine and masculine attitudes in life in general, and in art in specific. "True equality

can only mean the right to be uniquely creative. Breton, has also stated that today we await the restoration to women of her true value in life, the time has come "to declare oneself in art unequivocally against man and for women". He believes that it is impossible to comprehend the delicacy of women and their sensitiveness without first being delicate and sensitive, and this is becoming an impossible task as long as the bulk of our environment is dictated by the male attitude. Another author, Stendhal, brings to our attention what he would ask of women: it is first of all not to permit themselves to be caught in the snares of seriousness, and because of the fact that the things supposed to be of importance are out of their range, women run less risk than men of getting lost in them; they have better chances of preserving that naturalness; that naïveté, that generosity which gives them much merit. He is stating quite simply, that women should be alive, because they know that the source of true values is not in external, superficial things but in human hearts.

Considering these comments on the feminine personality, one can see why the female must play an important part in the establishment of creative values, and how unfortunate it is

\[12^\text{Erikson, op. cit., p. 26.}\]
\[13^\text{Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 222.}\]
\[14^\text{Ibid., p. 231.}\]
\[15^\text{Ibid., p. 225.}\]
that so few women are active in creative problem solving. And yet, there are a small number of women who have achieved in the arts, and who have remained true to their feminine nature while under the pressures of a serious commitment and environmental discouragement.
"It is fun to dream. It takes some of the matter-of-factness out of my life."

"Life should be fun don't you think?"

"Too many people take themselves seriously and sit around and analyze themselves and then don't get anything done."

Sali Frantz
The work of Mary Cassett expresses feminine values which show her interest in motherly love and affection. She was concerned with the women around her who were caring for children. Aside from this interest in what would be considered feminine subject matter, she treated these subjects with delicate care that men could not achieve who worked with similar subjects. Figure 1.
Grandma Moses also expresses her feminine personality in her paintings which are basically peaceful, almost static, with the exception of an element of primitive humor. In Figure 2 this other element takes the form of a 'dotted Swiss' curtain. These white dots make the entire painting sing with joy.
Georgia O'Keeffe's work is involved with a pleasurable experience that takes shape in the delicate forms of nature. Her works are extremely peaceful and silent. She is not concerned with humor but rather with large simple shapes of quiet color. Figure 3.
The ability to know the delicate and the sensitive is obvious in the work of Florine Stettheimer: She symbolizes a comic sensibility, and a keen poetic sense of the comedy of commercialism. Miss Stettheimer's high instinct for joy made even her most satiric aims lyrical, somewhat like this poem by Emily Dickinson:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you — Nobody — Too?
Then there's a pair of us?
Don't tell! they'd advertise — you know!

How dreary — to be Somebody!
How public — like a Frog —
To tell one's name — the livelong June —
To an admiring Bog! 16

The light gayety of Dickinson's poem bears a relationship to the lightness in the work of Stettheimer. Figure 4.

Unlike the work of Cassett, O'Keeffe, Moses and Stettheimer, Helen Frankenthaler is primarily concerned with the abstract. Her abstract visual shapes relate directly to the words which have been used to express feminine characteristics. The quiet and peaceful color shapes are floating areas which dance in simplicity before the viewer. They are light and free and gay and emphasize the inner relationships of line, form, color, and edge. Figure 5.
Lee Bontecou is also concerned with abstract inner space in her reliefs. Although more somber, these works are involved with creating a variety of musical forms within a progression that occasionally teases the eye into investigating the inside structure. Again, as seen in the works of other female artists, Bontecou's attitude is one of peacefulness that requires the viewer to be willingly captured by the charm and delicacy of the inner space. Figure 6.
Working along similar lines is Louise Nevelson. Her inner space also contains forms that set up rhythmic progressions within individual structures that unite into one work to create a fresh visual experience. Within each of these single units there are always a few forms that are playful and exciting; and again, a unity within the forms creates a peaceful image. Figure 7.
Working with very different sculptural forms is Marta Minujín. She makes increasingly large absurd structures, figurative and non-figurative, with mattress ticking in gay colors. Figure 8.
Another sculptor, Niki de Saint Palle, has the same obvious qualities of lightness and gayety as expressed by Minujín. In her work, these elements take form in funny paper-maché balloon-like figures which are very whimsical and perhaps best fit the introductory quote by Sali Frantz. Figure 9.
For the most part, the works of these female artists have expressed the feminine characteristics towards peace, or whimsey, or a combination of both while they explore the inner space of their work. These same characteristics have also been seen in the investigations of Erik Erikson. In the artist's work, these feminine qualities were seen in subject matter which can obviously be associated with the female or in other works, the viewer could immediately feel the elements of quiet peacefulness or whimsey even though the paintings were abstract. Nevertheless, it would be a false assumption to believe that all female artists work like those just mentioned.

The female artist is not necessarily restricted to a totally feminine response, and the opposite is also true of the male. Let us assume the female can accomplish the opposite shift, and introduced masculine qualities as a counterpoint to balance her work. This suggestion of the male attitude in the female would be called the animus: the male within. It is apt to take the form of a hidden conviction that is preached with a loud, insistent, masculine aggressiveness imposed on others by means of brutal emotional scenes. The animus can be an equally hard, inexorable power, even in a woman who is outwardly very feminine, one may suddenly find oneself up against something in a woman that is obstinate, cold, and completely inaccessible.
Likewise this same principle applies to the male artist. There is sometimes a suggestion of the feminine attitude, or the anima*, in the creative man. This characterizes a minority of the artistic and creative men who specialize in wondrousness and sensitive indwelling usually ascribed to women. This inner life compensates for their being biologically men by enabling them to ascribe to women's feminine virtue. E.E.Cummings describes as a poet's task the ability to leave the "measurable doing world for the immeasurable inner world of living".  

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*The Anima: the woman within. The anima according to Jung is a personification of all feminine psychological tendencies in a man's psyche, such as vague feelings and moods, prophetic hunches, receptiveness to the irrational, capacity for personal love, feeling for nature, and reaction to the unconscious.  

17Erikson, op. cit., p. 18.  
18Ibid.  
"He who knows the male, yet cleaves to what is female
Becomes like a ravine, reviewing all things under heaven
(Thence) the eternal virtue never leaks away,
This is returning to the state of infancy"

Tao te Ching
Male Artists

There are several examples of the anima in male artists, but for the most part, these artists are exceptions to the rule rather than the rule with regard to male expression. The finest examples of this are the works of Victor Pasmore, Philip Guston, Paul Klee, Mark Tobey, and Paul Tschinkel*. All of these men have the characteristics of female expression in their work: elements of playfulness plus delicate peaceful sensitivity.

I have chosen the works of Victor Pasmore as shown in Figures 10, 11, and 12, to make clearer the feminine elements that are within these male artists. Mr. Pasmore attributes his interest in quiet peaceful space to his desire to create the space of classical traditions, as they relate in music, to space within the picture frame. In these Figures we can see the peace and harmony of his quiet organic shapes being intruded by irrational lines and spaces. These small intrusions are whimsical and tease the eye with their sharp contrast. In these works we are able to see this playful harmony between two contrasting elements. The impact of the

*Paul Tschinkel is new on the art scene, he has been just recently recognized for his artistic ability by the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York City.
original works is much more subtle and delicate. For example, Figure 12, is pale blue and tan with thin black lines creating a very cool mysterious and peaceful image.

Victor Pasmore is just one of a few men who are concerned with peaceful interior space. Tobey, Tschinkel, Guston and Klee, also have this musical harmony which show the efforts of sensitive and delicate people. Their works dance in pictoral space and remain peaceful without being either boring or overly forceful.