1989

Portrait of a young woman

Anne M. Spenny

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Portrait of a Young Woman
by
Anne M. Spenny

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

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In Nomine Domini Nostrum Jesu Christi

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Introduction

The statement of purpose in my thesis proposal was, "...to make images of fabricated environments that deal with emotional and intuitive aspects of identity. By trusting these aspects of my identity, I expect to discover that they are universal." By delving into myself, I believed that I would be working with some idea or energy that would be of universal concern, and at the same time, strong interest to me. It was important for me to work on something I felt I should be working on, not something others felt would be important.

Because I believe intuition and consciousness are both important, I created my images intuitively and then consciously tried to understand their meanings and how they define a woman's identity. My conscious understanding came from criticism of the work, readings in related fields and examination of images by other artists.

My interests in a universal identity and intuition led to related areas of study in Jungian psychology, feminism, and mythology. Each of these areas gave me a better understanding of myself and my experiences and reinforced the importance of my ideas.

Jung's writings interested me because I began with the assumption that there was value in trusting my intuition. According to Jung, to become a full person, integrating unconscious and conscious, you must trust your intuition. In this process you begin to deal with your unconscious.
your unconscious is the part of identity that is universal. Archetypes are patterns of universal modes of behavior.

While reading Jungian psychology I became interested in feminism. I have always believed that women should have equal rights, but I didn’t understand the concerns of feminists. I learned that feminism doesn’t only deal with legal rights of women, but also with how our society defines women’s roles and relationships.

With some knowledge of Jungian psychology and feminism, I began to look at mythology. Myths reflect archetypes, including goddesses. They are examples of powerful women for a culture like ours which does not have a history of giving women positions of power. From the perspective of women, the goddesses are important figures.

The most important goddesses for me are Artemis (goddess of the hunt), Athena (goddess of wisdom) and Hestia (goddess of the hearth). Each of these represents women’s need to be independent and her ability to focus her attention on what is personally meaningful.

The images in this body of work reflect archetypal and mythological issues. They are metaphors for the strength and independence I discovered within myself and I believe are a part of every woman.

This paper has four main parts. The first three sections draw connections between my images and my research. The last section examines my images critically and identifies some unresolved issues.
Jungian Psychology

My response to Jung's ideas was similar to the "Aha!" that Jean Shinoda Bolen describes in *Goddesses in Every Woman*. This moment is when the reader recognizes what she has experienced, feels trust because she has a shared experience with the author, and understands more about that experience because of what she has just read. Jung provides logical explanation for ideas I intuitively embraced. His theories explain why the unconscious, intuition, and symbols are valuable.

According to Jungian psychology, to be physically and mentally healthy you must integrate your conscious and unconscious selves. This is done through identifying and understanding both personal and universal symbols which come from the unconscious and appear in dreams or in art.

This process of integration also involves the acceptance of the irrational. In our culture, value is placed on the rational and the irrational or instinctual are underrated. Thus, modern society has trouble understanding symbols because their meaning goes beyond what can be understood intellectually and logically.

Jung states that,

...a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider 'unconscious' aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason.

When I began to doubt my way of working, I read Jung.
Missing Page
the importance of myths and fairy tales. This also explains why there is a certain familiarity and similarity to myths. Although the reader may not have personally experienced what occurs in the myth, part of his collective unconscious has experienced it.

I want the viewer to feel that there is something familiar about my images that has no logical explanation. There are not many men or women who live in a cave made of fabric or run through woods that have a fabric floor. Yet, this integration of natural objects - the branches and dirt - and crafted objects - the fabric and furniture - often feels familiar, although it is obviously contrived. Perhaps the crafted objects make it easier to relate to the natural objects because they subconsciously portray the comfort of home. Their artificiality also allows the photographs to move beyond realism to the symbolic level. We have all experienced living within symbolic caves and the woods.

I have been told these are very feminine images, and there isn't anything masculine in them. I made no conscious decision to only include feminine symbols. I recognized that fabric has been associated with women for many centuries because the making of fabric and clothing is traditionally a woman's activity. I didn't make the connection that trees and dirt would also be associated with women. I was taught that girls don't climb trees or play in the dirt, they play inside. The outdoors or exterior is more often associated with the masculine and the inside or interior is associated with the feminine. If understood as exteriors, the images
read as masculine. Seen as nature, the images are feminine. It was about a month into photographing that I recognized that the woman in my images had her own personality. This was important because it made the images more alive and emphasized that this woman in the wilderness grew from a part of me. As Peter O’Connor states in Understanding Jung/Understanding Yourself, "The goal is not to fall into unconsciousness, but to integrate and bring unconscious material into consciousness. That is, to maintain one’s critical faculties and differentiate between the image and oneself." 9

With this awareness, I began to understand my images on a more universal or mythical level. It became clear that it was important that the character was a woman and she was surviving by herself in this created wilderness. Once I understood this, I recognized that I was trying to tap into the strength all women have within themselves.10 This strength I am trying to communicate is strength in the archetypal form. Perhaps men can recognize the strength that their anima contains.11

I was aware that I was trying to communicate women’s strength but, while in the process of creating a photograph, I worked intuitively. My earlier work was often stiff when I was conscious of what I was doing because I was creating from the rational rather than the unconscious part of myself.
Feminism

In the spring of 1988, I felt that certain people were trying to dictate the kind of images I should make. Some viewers considered my images to be of a very passive woman - a woman as a sexualized object. Two images from this first series depict a woman seated in a flowery, fabric-filled space. She is wrapped in a fabric gown; only her torso and arms are visible. In the other, the woman sits with her side towards the camera, her back to a table with a book and a plant on it. In her hand she is holding a teacup. In both, the colors are lush and the woman is portrayed sensually.

While I had no conscious intention of representing woman as passive, the photographs communicated this. I was trying to photograph intuitively and was strongly motivated by the texture, color and pattern of the fabric. After arranging the fabric and plants, I put myself in the still-life because I thought that would give meaning to a basically formal arrangement.

It was a shock to hear the criticism that I was reinforcing society's negative view of woman. Several people implied I should stop creating these images. At that time I think that it was important to acknowledge that part of me which is passive. Now I am trying to reinforce the more assertive aspects of women's identity.

In an effort to fully understand the criticism of my images, I read John Berger's essay, "Women in Art" in his book, Ways of Seeing. I became confused and depressed from
statements like this one:

...Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.12

It seemed that there would be no way to create an image of a woman that made her the subject. By photographing myself I was emphasizing the separate entities of the surveyor and surveyed within myself.

The images I made after reading Berger´s essay were very self-conscious and stiff. In a conscious effort to avoid surveying myself while I photographed, thus making myself an object in the images, I surveyed myself even more. It was impossible to create images while I was concentrating on the surveyor and surveyed. I decided that I would have to ignore these issues. I wasn´t concerned with justifying my avoidance.

That summer, I discovered Margaret Atwood´s novel, The Handmaidens Tale. I felt the isolation and loneliness of the main character and although the circumstances were different it seemed that I was leading my life similarly.

I wanted women to identify with my photographs as I had with Atwood´s novels. I decided to explore what other women artists had created.

In the fall, I took a class called, "Women in the Visual Arts." The course material ranged from the stereotypes that have categorized women in art since the Renaissance to the
art that women have produced since then. I became aware of many issues that women artists must come to terms with and I began to understand how they affect me. For instance, an essay in Feminist Collage identifies a problem for the female artist.

Until very recently, women art students have observed few models of successful female artists. The majority of studio and art history classes are taught by males, who present male artists as exemplars of success. Gallery owners and museum curators have consistently discriminated against women artists, refusing to admit them to shows or purchase work for collections.

While women are encouraged to get an education, we don’t know or come into contact with women who are successful. This creates a contradiction for the female student. Unless she recognizes the discrimination, she can only assume women are inferior.

I never recognized that all of my undergraduate art professors were male while, half of the students were female. I never realized that in two semesters of photo history we studied only two women. It never occurred to me that there might be more women artists. I accepted that the important artists were male.

At this time, I also began to get a working definition of feminism. Although the feminist movement originated in order to gain liberation for all, people perceive feminism differently. There is not necessarily one definition that can be considered "the" definition. Even now, a majority of men and women consider feminists to be radical, man-hating, lesbians. A feminist may be radical, may hate men and may be
a lesbian, but I believe feminism is based upon women having the right to become complete human beings. Andrea Hinding defines feminists as those that "seek legal, political, educational, and other reforms that will allow women to choose lives that are compatible with their own interests and talents rather than accept those imposed on them by family, church, or stereotype." 14

During this time my images reflected my struggles. I was trying to reject the stereotypes that limit women. My photographs were of a woman crawling through a dense and ugly jungle. It seemed that she never made any progress. The woman was always in just about the same area of the jungle. Although I knew what I was trying to reject, I wasn´t sure what beliefs I wanted to accept.

As I began to comprehend complex issues brought up in feminism, I began to have more self-confidence. Demaris S. Wehr states in Jung and Feminism that, "Women are greatly helped by seeing that their demolished egos are the price of living in a society that devalues them: they benefit from realizing that their wounded state is not solely a private problem." 15 I began to recognize that in many situations I felt inferior not because I was inferior, but because society reinforced this feeling through stereotypes.

An awareness of women's history is important for women because it provides many role models. There is a certain strength that comes with the knowledge that other women have been artists. It proves that women have been able to break out of the stereotypes.
There have been some interesting discoveries about history through the feminist reevaluation of history and art history. It is believed that the first governmental systems were matriarchal, rather than patriarchal. Women were viewed with awe because of the mystery of life that their bodies provided. They were understood as the connection with the supreme being.

Gradually, men began to take over. For example, in the patriarchal society of Egypt a man could only become Pharaoh by marrying the woman that would give him the power of the throne. The heritage was traced through the woman's family, not the man's.

It is subtle discrimination that none of this theory is taught in traditional history courses or text, although there is evidence supporting it. That is part of the subtle discrimination. It gives women strength to know that at some period in time women were respected and had power. This challenges the assumption that it is natural for men to rule and hold all power.

My work presents a "primitive" setting in order to evoke a period when women had more power in society. My images, "Scepter" and "Staff" and Stone", specifically relate to the issue of power. Within these photographs the woman is gesturing in a way that is usually attributed to men. She is the ruler of herself and her world. These images acknowledge that women do have power and strength today even if it is not recognized in our society. If women have the ability to overcome the stereotyping of our culture they will find the
strength within themselves.

The readings that I have done in feminism have given me support. Not only have they given me a better idea of a woman's capabilities, they have given me conscious reasons to trust my intuitive responses.
Mythology

The study of mythology fits with my studies of Jungian psychology and feminism. Myths support the theory of a collective identity among many peoples and create heroic female figures in their goddesses.

In *Goddesses in Every Woman*, Jean Shinoda Bolen acknowledges goddesses as an inspirational force. “Just as women used to be unconscious of the powerful effects that cultural stereotypes had on them they may also be unconscious of powerful forces within them that influence what they do and how they feel. These forces I am introducing in this book in the guise of Greek goddesses.”

These forces of which Bolen is speaking can also be seen as the archetypes that Jung describes. Through the conscious understanding of these forces within, women can decide which archetypes need to be activated and which are less important to them.

Artemis, goddess of the hunt, Athena, goddess of wisdom, and Hestia, goddess of the hearth, became the most inspirational to me because they each had qualities that I needed to learn to exercise. Each of these goddesses follows her inner values and does not change according to society’s dictates. Because they are focused, objective and assertive each has the ability to accomplish what is important to her.

Bolen describes dreams of women in whom the archetypes of Artemis and Athena dominate, "...the dreamer is often
exploring unfamiliar terrain alone. She is in the role of the protagonist who struggles with obstacles, climbs mountains, or ventures into a foreign country or underground landscape. "19 This accurately describes many of my images.

Our logical and technical world is in the process of creating myths. In Women as Mythmakers, Poetry and Visual Art by 20th Century Women, Estella Lauter says, "Scholars now generally concede that mythic thinking is a continuing process and not a stage that human beings passed through thousands of years ago when the dominant religions of the world were formed."20

According to Lauter, a myth is an unusually powerful story or symbol. The story or symbol is "repeated until it is accepted as truth."21 Because of this it is often difficult to identify myths that are a part of our culture and much easier to identify the myths of another time or place. To identify myths of our culture, we must look for the elements that are similar to the Greek or Biblical myths and/or look for a repetition of images, ritual gestures or themes.

Art can be a contemporary expression of myth. The book Marks in Place deals specifically with contemporary response to primitive rock art.22 It has images and essays by several photographers. Overlay, Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory, compares primitive and contemporary art. In it, Lucy Lippard describes the current interest in primitive art and culture, "It testifies to a basic need, expressed by men as well as women, to re-evaluate the socio-esthetic
structures and values of the society in which we live." 23
The archetypes and myths in my photographs relate.

In my work, some people feel the power of the mythical, primitive world was broken by the images that were of more contemporary rooms - "Sowing," "The Bedroom," "Watering" and "Reflection." I don't believe these images destroy the myth, rather they create a different myth.

If my images of the artificial world of the cave woman were the only ones shown, they could be understood as an unsuccessful attempt to build a still life that was a convincing replica of the real world. Once rationally explained, they can be forgotten. By adding images that go beyond this the viewer must go beyond rational thinking. The struggles, the journeys that the woman in my images has gone through and her ability to survive are metaphors for the strength that I, as well as other women, have. The viewer must recognize the environments as a metaphor of an interior world.

It is important that a woman is creating her mythical world. "Sowing" shows a woman planting the beginnings of this mythical space. This woman is not passively accepting the environment, but actively changing it. In the role that patriarchy has assigned women, they may be the inspiration for creative work, but they do not possess creative forces - except in motherhood.

I believe my work is a part of the mythmaking process that Lauter describes. "If we think of myth as a structure for dealing with shared crises of self-definition in the
face of the unknown, we need only locate mythic stories created by women in order to know which of our experiences have been most critical or enduring."24 She also notes that we have to be careful that mythic work is not seen as a final definition of the nature of women, but as part of an ongoing and always changing definition. When it is understood in this manner, the possibilities for growth are endless.
My images present a portrait of woman that is not found in many images of women. The woman is active as creator of the mythical space, she is proceeding with her actions for herself, not because she is aware someone is watching her. She is not acting as the surveyed - she is being herself.

Jung and Feminism

Many feminists believe that Jungian psychology limits women's possibilities by stereotyping them. His theories suggest that receptivity is the strongest feminine characteristic. Another problem that feminists have with Jung's theories is that he believes the influence of the unconscious is greater than social conditioning.25

I embrace both feminism and Jungian psychology. I believe that there is middle ground on both of these issues. While receptivity is a characteristic of the "feminine", it need not be the only characteristic that is developed or used. Both the unconscious and social conditioning have an effect on human development.

Contrary to many feminists' beliefs, Jung does value what he labels as 'female characteristics.' He believes that receptivity is a very important part of being a whole or individualized person. If you are male, you must learn to accept the feminine aspects of your identity. They are as important as the masculine aspects. If you are female, you must learn to develop the masculine attributes.
I believe that both the collective unconscious and social conditioning are important to the formation of both males and females. There is a certain part of us that is instinctual. Both male and female are capable, to some degree, of moving beyond what is considered to be natural—having sex and reproducing is natural but it can be a matter of choice rather than a response to instinctual desires in both sexes.

Voyeurism

Voyeurism is an unresolved issue in these images. While there are some elements that add to the viewer's feeling of voyeurism, there are also elements that negate voyeurism. While it is true that the viewer is peering into a space, the woman is in most cases active and never performing for a viewer. The objects placed in the front of the image make the viewer feel that the space continues past the frame. Therefore, the viewer is also a part of the mythical space.

Rosemary Betterton describes voyeurism as a male pleasure that is, "...Connected to a sense of power and control over the image. The woman's body is posed and framed for him, while his own body remains doubly hidden."26 Part of the reason that my images may be considered voyeuristic is because they are lush and sensual. My images have been influenced by the male dominated culture. While they convey many of conventions of female beauty, I have tried to define woman by her actions rather than her appearance.

It has been suggested that if the woman in the images
was aware that she was being watched, the images would not be voyeuristic. Although this may be true, it was more important that the woman be acting for herself and not for a spectator. If the woman had looked at the viewer the issue, instead of being voyeurism, would have been performance for the viewer.

It is frustrating to know that because woman was the subject of my images, voyeurism becomes as issue. Griselda Pollock describes an image of a man that appeared in "Viva" magazine.

The figure is active, self-contained, does not engage with the gaze of the spectator whose hypothetical position can only be as some wood nymph catching a fleeting glimpse of the sylvan god through the blurred bushes of the foreground. What is absolutely lacking is any conceivable position of ownership or possession offered to the spectator.27

It struck me that this passage could be a description of my images if I had photographed a man. A majority of my images are not be understood as a fleeting glimpse of the goddess but as a long stare. The difference between reading images of men and women occurs because of the meanings that each signifies.

Unless an individual identity is placed upon a woman in an image, she is unconsciously understood to be passive and a sex object. This makes the use of woman in any image a reinforcement of the very things I don't want to emphasize. This is especially a problem in my images where more of the body is shown and the figure is not active in the image.

In Looking On, the issue of women as signifiers in
images is addressed.

The only solution is to grasp and reconstruct it (Sign: woman), through the exposure and contradiction of the meaning it conveys. We cannot pull out of thin air a new and utopian art - or a new and utopian sexuality. Both must be arrived at through struggle with the situation in which we find ourselves.28

Unless mistakes are made, new things tried and then problems defined, new ground will never be broken. This is where my work fits in. Certainly it is not perfect, but it is a step towards the new definition of woman.

Woman and Nature

Traditionally, women have been closely associated with nature. Many women are outraged with this association because it opposes women to culture. While I believe that women do have a close association with nature. I do not believe that this means we are ruled solely by instincts. I found a certain power or strength in the recognition of this association. Recognition of the ties that women have to cycles can help explain certain reactions or feelings. When there is an understanding of reactions and feelings, we can control our actions, rather than respond instinctively. This makes the association of woman and nature positive and valuable. A valid way of trying to promote equality for women is recognizing the value of what is considered "feminine".

Titles

For me, naming my images was an assertive act. For the first time I declared what I thought my images conveyed.
Previously, I thought that the viewer would interpret more from my images than I did – making the images stronger. If I named the images, I would limit the viewer’s possibilities.

The titles do direct the viewer toward my intentions. For some viewers this added information helped them to understand the image. For other viewers it did limit the possibilities. It was not my intention to take value from the images by adding words.

Part of my interest in naming my images was in understanding all of the definitions of the words I had chosen. I realize that most people are not aware of all these meanings, but I think that a word, like an image, can communicate things subconsciously.
Conclusion

If after reading through, you feel as if this is only a beginning, you are correct. The information available and the ways in which these subjects interconnect is infinite. What I have tried to do is draw a few specific ties and highlight what was important for my growth.

Gender issues are very important to me now. The strength, or self-confidence, that I have gained through this project is immeasurable. I found that I do have the ability to be my own person.

While the completion of my thesis show gave me confidence, a large part of my confidence came from what I learned in my research. This is why I have included many ideas that may not seem directly connected to my work. These ideas are related because my personal growth resulted in the growth of my images.

There are issues that are unresolved in my work. I addressed these issues in the last section of this paper. With time and experience some of these will be resolved. I am very proud of the work that I have produced for my thesis. I have certainly benefited from it.
Thesis Proposal
April 29, 1988

Purpose

My purpose is to make images of fabricated environments that deal with emotional and intuitive aspects of identity. By trusting these aspects of my identity, I expect to discover that they are universal.

Background

A couple of years ago, an experience on a camping trip helped me recognize that I feel at peace when I am in the woods or standing by a lake. This is because there is a solitude in which my identity starts to emerge. Without the distraction of other people, I start to be aware of my feelings. I don't have to behave according to their expectations. I am able to come to terms with myself and learn to trust my intuition.

Trusting myself created a relief so intense that I began to photograph the woods and lakes. But these photographs didn't communicate the feeling. They were ordinary, pretty photographs of ponds and trees. In frustration, I abandoned trying to communicate a feeling and began an effort to communicate an idea. I thought I would have more control over an idea than an emotion.

I started working in a studio, gathering objects and making arrangements that felt right to me. As I made my
arrangements, I thought about the different losses that can be associated with death - the end of a relationship, the loss of innocence, change, et cetera. By assembling my own setting, not only was I able to communicate the idea of death, I was also communicating sorrow for some of my losses.

I became aware that I often don't trust my intuition. If I am ignoring my intuition, I am not acting as a complete person. My ideas come from the outside, rather than from within.

My attempt to trust my intuition is an effort to reduce other people's control over my life. By trusting my intuition, that peaceful feeling I experience in the woods can be my experience anywhere.

Procedure

The process of creation of and environment in the studio situation is a balance between an intuitive and a conscious procedure. Because I have control in creating my own scene, I will be able to visually emphasize different elements of the photographs rather than find a space in the environment that feels and looks right. Materials used will be considered for their formal characteristics (color, pattern, texture, size) as well as for their symbolic characteristics. (In my current work, flowers are being used to symbolize sexuality, shells and green leaves are being used to symbolize fertility. Fabrics are often associated with women and the roles that they have had in society.)
I will then consciously try to understand what the photographs mean and how they define identity. This understanding will be used to influence the next work that I create. This process allows me to learn about identity through intuition as well as verbal analysis.

I plan to expand my knowledge of symbolism, archetypes, and color theory through readings in psychology, mythology, women's issues and art history. This knowledge will supplement what is occurring intuitively.

The issue of scale is one that I would like to experiment with. Some of my images may work better on a large scale, while others work better intimately.

Because I want the ability to make large prints, I need to experiment with larger formats. Currently I am using 35mm. This experimentation will take place during the rest of the spring quarter and into the beginning of summer. It is important that I begin to get comfortable with a different format.
Notes

1 For more detailed explanation see thesis proposal.


4 Ibid., xi.


7 The definition of identity that I am referring to is: the state of having the same nature or character with; absolute sameness, as opposed to mere similarity. Webster's Dictionary, 1977 edition.

8 Jacobi, 36.


10 In consideration of Jean Shinoda Bolen's theory. For more information see the introduction of Goddesses in Every Woman.

11 As m woman's animus helps her get in touch with the masculine part of herself, the man's anima helps him recognize his feminine characteristics. For more information see Peter O'Connor's book, Understanding Jung/Understanding Yourself.


17 Bolen, 1.

18 Ibid., 36.

19 Ibid., 43.


21 Ibid., 1.


24 Lauter, 8.

25 Wehr, 12.


27 Ibid., 42.

28 Ibid., 248-249.
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