Decent Exposure: Evolution of the Female Gaze

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"Decent Exposure: Evolution of the Female Gaze"

M.F.A. Graduate Thesis Paper

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“Decent Exposure”: Evolution of the Female Gaze
by Jill Silverstein

1. Thesis Statement

This work is my representation of how I believe women have learned, out of necessity, to extrapolate pleasure and satiate their desires. Historically, women have been the object for the male gaze. I believe this is true not only with respect to the display of pleasure, sexuality and erotica, but also with respect to the mass media. In this body of work, titled "Decent Exposure", I address the issues of the visual presentation of women in the media and the development of a visual media that caters to a woman's subjective point of view, in contrast and complementary to the historical presentation of women as objects and receptacles of the male gaze. I believe that women have been denied their subjectivity in the commercial media as well as in the various forms of erotica. Women have adapted and acquired a variety of means to seek pleasure and satisfy their sexual desires using these visual representations originally fabricated for a male gaze. Some of the images in “Decent Exposure” may appear perverse or preposterous to some viewers, but all

bodies are different and we all "turn on" in different of ways.

I believe that the media has shaped the presentation and representation of women. From alluring fashion models to “soccer moms” to aggressive corporate executives, the visual images of women in magazines, commercials, television sitcoms and many films reinforce stereotypes of women. In fact, many of the fabricators of these visual images need to rely on traditional views and roles of women to communicate a story or message. The audience, familiar with these traditional associations of women, help construct and further the story by recalling their own personal history and associations to the images presented in the photographs or on the screen.

In regard to sexual and erotic representations, we have learned that women who are sexual beings are glamorous models, prostitutes and "bad girls". Again, this view, presented by visual image makers, perpetuates traditional views of women and caters to a historical subject-viewer relationship in which the subject of the image is a female and the only viewer is a male.

I disagree with the views presented in this kind of visual representations of women. I submit that there is definitely a “female gaze”. There are many women mothers, cashiers, doctors, housewives, accountants, designers, journalists who are not represented as sexual
and are denied their subjective gaze because they are not male or do not fit into the historical perception of "women who like sex".

The media—especially photography and film—induces visual desires. It has conditioned and taught us what to want. Since the media historically appealed to a heterosexual male gaze to stimulate desire, women, who have been denied the satisfaction of their sexual desires through the media, have adapted and learned to extrapolate pleasure from these scenes.

This paper will discuss 1) photographic and other media images that fostered spectatorial desire; 2) the feminine experience and gender differentiation through the act of viewing; 3) how my photographic work fits into this context; and 4) the assimilation of the feminine experience and female gaze into popular culture.
2. Spectatorship and Gender Differentiation: The Endurance of Female Desire and Development of Feminine Subjectivity

There is a large body of work that addresses sexuality, spectatorship and gender differentiation. Included among those artists are Judy Chicago, Barbara Kruger, Marilyn Minter, Sara Charlesworth and Laurie Simmons, to name a few. However, it is notable that Cindy Sherman’s photographs and the HBO series “Sex in the City” relate most directly to my work and provide a perspective for review and historical context for the development and maturation of the “female gaze”.

A. The “Feminine Experience” and Gender Differentiation

Art historian and critic Jan Avgikos considered the question of whether there is a “gender-specific” perception, especially in the context of visual representation photography, painting, or film. She suggests that this is an important element in the discussion of “visual languages that express feminine experience.”

How do we qualify feminine experience, and then quantify that experience through visual representation? .... We can neither “reduce” existence to the body or sexuality to existence. Nothing

comes first, but all at once. Sexuality, and let’s assume gender as an equivalent term, is a series of relations and attitudes, less biological than a dialectical process. It is, in Freud’s assessment, that which causes us to have a history.³

Avgikos examined the contemporary erotic and pornographic images of Cindy Sherman and Marilyn Minter in contrast to the earlier feminist visual arts of Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago in her discussion of a feminine experience.

With respect to pleasure, sexuality, and erotic display, women, deployed as receptacle object by and for the male gaze, have historically been denied subjectivity. ... Although pornography has been produced, consumed, and theorized as being exclusively masculine, it has also been consumed though not produced for by a secret community of female viewers as well, providing erotic pleasure despite the prohibitions levied against our subjectivity. Not all bodies, including our own, turn us on in the same way, nor do we respond to all pornographic images in an entirely predictable way.⁴

In fact, the photographs and films of pornography and erotica have been a part of the long history of images that have defined a subject-viewer

³ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴ Ibid.
relationship between the object of the gaze, a woman, and the
"assumed" consumer of the that female subject, a male. However, there
is a growing number of photographs, films and criticism that recognize
that women are often the "viewer" and consumer of the female subjects in
erotica and sexual imagery.

For almost a century, women have learned how to look and what to
want through the images and vignettes presented in advertising. Art critic
and historian Vicki Goldberg reviewed the exhibit "Ninety Years of
Women's Images in Advertising" presented at the One Club in April 1993.

As for ordinary women, the cinema has been important in
determining their roles, too, with strong assists from fashion
magazines and advertising. But since television arrived, advertising
has probably become the most influential medium of all, with the
most outlets: television itself, magazines, newspapers, printed
matter like theater programs and travel brochure, public
transportation and public spaces.\(^5\)

Advertising images from the photography in magazines and billboards to
television commercials have had a significant influence on women and
the development of the female gaze.

Critic and historian Camille Paglia believes that the photographers of advertising have played an important role in bringing eroticism to mainstream popular culture. Bruce Weber’s photographs for Calvin Klein ads are among the examples she regards.

Advertisements have always used sexual motifs . . . People want to see sexual bodies, they take pleasure in it. Therefore it makes great sense to associate products with this pleasure.\(^6\)

Paglia disagrees with feminists who always assume that use of the female body in ads is exploitative and degrading to women; or that ads are sinister and are trying to twist one’s mind. Rather, Paglia believes that commercial photography has played a critical role in the sexual revolution of the 20th century. Sexual images in advertising photos are precisely the motifs of paganism\(^7\) and the ads rely on the enticement visual pleasure of a female (and male) body, beautifully crafted sets and familiar surroundings to engage the viewer.

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\(^7\)Ibid.
B. The Development of Spectatorial Desire

Film critic and writer Laura Mulvey addressed the topic of the presentation of male and female images in the media context of film in a series of essays written in the 1970s and 1980s, collected in the book *Visual and Other Pleasures*. In her essay addressing “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Mulvey describes “Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look”:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the *liemotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, first published in *Screen*

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magazine in 1975\textsuperscript{10}, Mulvey addressed the "relationship between the image of woman on the screen and the 'masculinization' of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex ... of any real live movie-goer."\textsuperscript{11} Mulvey explains:

In-built patterns of pleasure and identification impose masculinity as "point of view"; a point of view which is also manifest in the general use of the masculine third person. \textsuperscript{12}

Mulvey was concerned about the women in the audience, the "female spectator", and how she responded to the images of visual pleasure offered on the screen.

[I]t is always possible that the female spectator may find herself out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its "masculinization", that the spell of fascination is broken. On the other hand, she may not. She may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides.\textsuperscript{13}

Mulvey's comments on "woman as image, man a bearer of the look", and

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 29.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid.
the imposition of a masculine point-of-view on the female audience presents an insightful observation into the development of a feminine point-of-view or “gaze” by the adaptation of a masculine point-of-view to fit the needs of the female spectator.

I address the development of a more feminine point-of-view in the images and stories of my photographs in order to fit the needs of the female spectator. Although still images, the photographs in “Decent Exposure” present a narrative in that each image depicts a “scene” or “freeze frame” from a story that has a woman in the leading role—a wife, a mother, a secretary. In each photograph, the woman is engaged in some sexual foreplay or activity. Some of these actions may be familiarly stimulating to a woman, such as touching her nipple; others are more adaptations of a masculine approach, such as the woman holding down her man or masturbate while looking at a woman’s magazine. One of the central goals of my photographic work is to create visual pleasure in a narrative context that appeals to this “evolved” female gaze.

C. Active Looking Through a Woman’s Eyes

Cindy Sherman is one of the most influential artists in the production of images that address sexual representation in photography, film and television. Her work presents the image or figure of women in very familiar settings with familiar accessories, but the images as a whole are often disconcerting, prompting thought and criticism of the feminine image. Critic and art historian Jan Avgikos reviewed the work of Sherman for *Artform.*

Like her rehearsal and performance of permutations of [her]self, the many feminisms that have been read into her work mirror both shifts in feminist thinking over the years and the current, internecine struggles over sexuality and representation that are erupting within our communities.¹⁵

Many feminists cast the nature of Sherman’s work as reflective of “human (and human always means “male”) desire.” But Avgikos notes that feminist commentary criticizing Sherman’s work is symptomatic of the very problematics that her work addresses . . .

from the patriarchal framework upon which they are grounded?"  

Avgikos notes that Sherman does not assume a "given femininity", rather she challenges and "dislodges" the mechanics and processes that have "historically defined and imposed the feminine as a social category."

In examining Sherman's photographic series in which she uses merchandise from a medical supply house, including anatomically correct genitalia, Avgikos examines the impact of these photographs as a continuum of Sherman's commentary on feminine aesthetics in the patriarchal framework. Avgikos notes that this work raises certain questions:

Can photos be porn if they don't pass the "wet test", if, indeed, the bodies are plastic? -- are inseparable from the larger, more urgent ones [questions]: is the social economy of pornography different from that of art? Is porn antithetical to feminism" Do women see "differently"?

Avgikos proceeds to answer her own questions.

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16Ibid., p. 74-76.

17Ibid.

18Ibid., p. 76.
By framing such questions as dependent on distinctions between artifice and the real (distinctions on which she has long staged in her investigations), and my inscribing them within the pornographic, Sherman integrates female identity, representation, contamination and taboo. By presenting images that ask what’s okay, and what’s not, in picture-making, fantasy and sexual practice, she opens wider the Pandora’s box that polarizes contemporary feminism . . . 19

Part of the explanation for Sherman’s work is the

moralizings on the victimizations of women in society. For the problems of oppression and objectification that surround pornography do not reside exclusively in the image, but in the very act of looking, in which we ascribe sexual difference. 20

Avgikos submits that looking at photographs is through the eyes of the photographer, understood as a masculine point-of-view. But in Sherman’s work

active looking is through a woman’s eyes, and this ambiguity make them [photographs] both seductive and confrontational. Sherman demarcates no privileged space for the female spectator per se, yet the role in which she casts us, as both viewer and subject, parallels

19Ibid.

20Ibid.
the defamiliarizing effects of plastic dummies having real sex.\textsuperscript{21}

Sherman's photographic series using artificial genitalia as props to enhance her own body shows what women are up to when left to their "own dark fantasies."

Part of the strength of Sherman's message rests with the fact that she is in control as director and produces all of "her own visual dramas". She deprives her audience of a proprietary gaze because desire can only be partially satisfied by artificial flesh. Her images combine desire and disgust.\textsuperscript{22}

I have taken a similar approach in my photographs. In an effort to engage both female and male viewers, I created narratives and physical sets that were familiar and relied on the personal histories of the viewers. However, the scenes did not quite match the familiar patriarchal sexual fantasies historically presented in photographs and film. The women in my images are never nude, yet they are definitely engaged in sexually stimulating activities from the touch of a gloved garbage man on a mother's bare breast to masturbing in midst of dirty laundry and unmade beds.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid. See the Appendix for selected photographs of Cindy Sherman, at the end of this Thesis.

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid.
Finally, the women in all of the photographs are “normal” women - not unattractive, but not the fashion model or seductive prostitute often presented in sexually alluring images of advertising and erotica.

The satisfaction and visual pleasure that a male viewer usually enjoys in traditional sexual spectatorship are denied in my images by the fact that these narratives do not offer a woman as the subject of his gaze and they do not offer a complete sexual fantasy. My images combine desire, frustration and disconnection.

In 1987, critic and art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau curated a photographic exhibit entitled “Sexual Difference: Both Sides of the Camera” in order to address more directly the “complications” presented by woman as photographer, woman as subject of the image, and woman as spectator, and how this affects the representation of women. In conjunction with this exhibit, Solomon-Godeau wrote an essay in which she discussed these issues and how the work of the featured artists addressed these issues. Featured artists included Sarah Charlesworth, Connie Hatch, Louise Lawler, Richard Prince, Martha Rosler and Cindy Sherman, among others.

Solomon-Godeau agreed with Laura Mulvey’s observations and critique that the camera has had a profound influence on creating sexual difference, and defining the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of subjects in the
camera’s eye. Solomon-Godeau noted that Mulvey articulated three categories of “looks” related to the camera: “the look of the camera (the camera eye whose place is taken by the spectator), the look of the spectator, and the look of the characters within the film itself.”23

Cindy Sherman designed the mis-en-scene and implied narratives to address the male and female spectator in different ways. Solomon-Godeau also commented that and she persuades the viewer into acceptance of Cindy Sherman in guise presented in her photographs. This combination of the viewer is an accomplice in the construction of a femininity that has already been exposed as altogether fictitious.24

Solomon-Godeau observed that in the work produced by Sarah Charlesworth and Richard Prince “base much of their work on the interrogation of the means by which the mass media above all, advertising - both produces and induces spectatorial desire, it inevitably devolves on totemic icons of the masculine and the feminine.”25

...[P]hotographs... demonstrate the ‘feminization’ which often (always?) accompanies the role of the object of desire, irrespective


24 Ibid., p. 21-22.

25 Ibid., p. 21.
of gender. In this sense, feminization may be understood as a consequence of a physical presentation of the body which emphasizes ... its to-be-looked-at-ness. In other words, the problematics of spectacle are by no means confined to the representation of women. The position of subject-made-spectacle, understood in structural terms, can be filled by any(body). Because the medium of photography tends automatically to set up such viewing relations, it becomes the difficult task of critical, feminist practices to attempt somehow to reckon with them.\textsuperscript{26}

Indeed, photographs and film create a subject-viewer relationship because the mediums encourage viewing or gazing by virtue of the fact that the subject cannot interact with the viewer, and the viewer cannot interact with the subject. The relationship is constructed by the photographer fabricating the photograph or the director guiding the camera.

My photographic work relies on the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the subject, yet attempts to create a gaze that caters more a female point-of-view. I do this by implied narrative in which the woman in the image or "scene" is engaged in (or has just completed) a sexually stimulating activity or fantasy that appeals to female subjectivity.

Important to each of these narratives is the construction of a scene or "set" that is familiar to most women: a kitchen littered with children's

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., p. 18-19.
toys and juice boxes, a bedroom with sleeping husband and awake wife reading women's magazines, a children's bedroom with toys, a family room with couch and end tables and Oreo cookies or M&Ms. The construction of the "mis-en-scene" of these photographs is intended to remind the viewer of personal experiences, and to evoke "visual pleasure" for the female viewer at the same time.

Consequently, I utilize familiar masculine and feminine icons and narratives to construct a viewing relationship in which the photograph induces desire to gaze by both male and female viewers. However, I have designed the scenes and directed the models so that the presentation of the female and male subjects in the photographs demonstrate female sexual satisfaction and control of the scene not male. Thus, the "active looking is through a woman's eyes."27

27See footnote 16.
3. “Decent Exposure” Dramatizes the Feminine Experience

In the photographic images of “Decent Exposure,” I pose the question of “How do women satisfy their sexual desires?” In consideration of the above discussion, I believe that many women not prostitutes or “bad girls” - have sexual cravings and are not always satisfied. That as a result of media conditioning, women have learned to seek pleasure and satiate desires in a variety of practical ways. One important adaptation of women has been to learn how to extrapolate sexual stimulation and fantasy from the visual images originally created for a male gaze. Advertising images, films, and sexual erotica have too long ignored the possibility that in addition to the male consumers of these images, the female viewers or “consumers” are also sexual and want to experience visual pleasure.

A. The Process and Approach to Constructing the Photographic Scenes

My photographic work and narratives directly address the traditional roles of women at home, and the psychological impact of those roles on women. I try to present scenes of everyday life; similar to a social documentary, but with a heavy dose of dramatization. Each of the photographs in “Decent Exposure” were carefully designed, casted and
staged. Most of my ideas came from personal experiences and memories, stories and photographs from magazines, and advertising images and billboards. I kept all of my thoughts, drawings and magazine scraps in sketchbooks. As I thought of a story or theme, I would always sketch the scene first, then make a list of props and elements to be included in the scene.

I relied heavily on these notes when I finally conceived and designed a “scene”. I would draw in detail what the photograph would look like. It was like a very detailed storyboard for a film. All of the photographic work was previsualized, and the stories behind the photograph or “film still” were elaborate.

Selecting the models for each image was more like the process of casting talent for a film. I found that all of the models I used wanted to know the story, and all could understand or identify with the emotions associated with the story. This kind of identification with the narrative and scene of the photograph proved to be instrumental in the staging and posing of the models.

The preparation for the models included a storyline and emotions they should feel or recall in each pose. All of the photographs involved were very sexually suggestive if not explicit. However, all of the models who agreed to participate were willing to pose and often offered
suggestions for the scene, drawing on their own experiences. This kind of relationship with the models was encouraging for me as a director and creator of these images.

B. Use of Familiar Narratives to Present a Feminine Experience

In consideration of images ordinary women have consumed over the past century, especially those of advertising, fantasy and erotica, I created sets and narratives in "Decent Exposure" that were directly reminiscent of these very images. I produced scenes that were excerpts from daily life preparing dinner in the kitchen, reading magazines in bed a night, cleaning up the kids’ bedroom. Importantly, these were scenes that would be familiar to most female viewers. I wanted my female audience to identify and be able to access the scene or narrative I created.

Then, I wanted to add to these familiar scenes the visual pleasure, or even delight, that a woman could experience viewing the bodies of women and men engaged in sexual stimulation. I purposely constructed scenes that involved sexual fantasies extracted from a women’s magazine or romance novel.²⁸

In an effort to dramatize the concept that these “domestic” or “mainstream” women have sexual desires that are not always satisfied, I

²⁸Radway, 186-208.
have included food familiar and nicely packaged items such as M’n M’s and Twinkies as part of the scene in the photographs to suggest that these women must always supplement their sexual appetite with food.

**C. Accessibility to the “Characters” and “Narratives”**

The accessibility of the viewer to the characters and narratives was very important to the thesis work as I wanted to establish that the feelings of sexual desire and visual pleasure were not limited to prostitutes, bad girls or beautiful models. It was important that viewers understood that many women experience these feelings and that many women have fantasied and extrapolated pleasure from the images and narratives originally constructed for a male gaze and male experience.

In the conceptualization and construction of the images and stories for “Decent Exposure,” I drew heavily on images from advertising, pornography and television, as well as the articles and stories I read in a variety of popular “mainstream” women’s magazines. My personal experiences and these popular images suggested the locations and provided the material I needed to create the scenes and assemble the props for each photograph or “still”.

The selection of the model was an important aspect to each of these photographs and the “look” of each model would greatly influence the
scene and implied narrative. I realized that if I could cast models who looked “normal”, familiar and imperfect, then I would be able to create a narrative which the viewer could understand and even empathize with because the “characters” in the scene were familiar, and thus accessible. So much of the story was dependent upon the “look” of the models.

The inspiration for casting the models in all of my scenes was primarily based upon my personal experiences and observations of family, friends and co-workers. Similarly, the story of each “character” and “narrative” for each photograph was based upon personal experiences, observations, and fantasies drawn from women’s magazines and pornography. Thus, the real experiences I shared with other “real” or normal people provided the foundation for the images in “Decent Exposure.”

D. Lightbox Presentation and Diorama Effect

I wanted the display of the photographic images in “Decent Exposure” to be in large, illuminated lightboxes. I designed the presentation as a large backlit transparencies in slick, 4x5 foot brushed aluminum lightboxes to emphasize the glossy media presentation we are accustomed to in advertising, television and cinema. Inspired by the visual seductiveness of watching films or television, the colors in the
photographs are more brilliant and the pure visual attraction to the image is stronger, even the content of the photographs may be sexually abrupt or unattractive. 29

In addition, the lightboxes add a three-dimensional element to each photographic scene. The scale and three dimensional effect of the images simulate dioramas - the kind one might see in a natural history museum or an aquarium. I intended this kind of dimensionality and museum-like experience. The viewer could consider these images to be excerpted scenes from “real life” of an ordinary woman. This allusion reinforces my theory that “real” mainstream women have adapted ways to experience sexual pleasure despite the historical denial of their subjectivity. 30

Finally, I wanted the images to be "pretty" and easily watched something similar to television or movies. Although these images might appear unusual or perverse at first glance, I want the viewer to become captivated and comfortable with them. A backlit display in a gallery with low light has an effect similar to watching a film in a theater or television

29 See the artwork of Jeff Wall and related discussion in and article by Thomas Crow, “Profane Illuminations: Social History and the Art of Jeff Wall,” Artform, February 1993, 62-69. Although Wall’s intent in displaying his photographs as mural-sized transparencies to “a specific opposite to painting” [Wall’s word], Crow notes that “the analogy to film is unavoidable.” Ibid., p. 66.

30 See footnote 24, Avgikos, 40.
at home. The presentation of the images is seductive and captivating, regardless of the content.

The goal of “Decent Exposure” was to demonstrate how photographs and visual narrative can be created to appeal to the evolved female gaze. I wanted to create a feminine experience by implying a narrative that entertains female subjectivity and provide a kind of “visual pleasure” that was originally created to be consumed by a female viewer. My photographs recognize that many women - especially “ordinary” or mainstream women - are sexual, and that they seek visual pleasure and erotic display as a means to satisfy their desire for a sexual feminine experience.
4. Assimilation of the Female Gaze into Popular Culture

Women - ordinary, mainstream women seek visual pleasure and crave a feminine sexual experience that caters to a female gaze was one of the basic assumptions of my thesis in “Decent Exposure”. The passage of several years since the initial presentation of this thesis has allowed for the assimilation and acceptance of the premise of a female gaze and female sexual experience into mainstream culture. Although I could review the thousands of photographs from advertising magazines and the exaggerated sexuality of female teens (an entirely separate subject that has many other implications), I think the strongest evidence in support of my thesis is the hit HBO series “Sex in the City”.

“Sex in the City” is about four thirty-something-ish women who are looking for love, great shoes, intimate relationships and good sex (not necessarily in that order) in New York City. The viewer follows the interweaving stories and experiences of four friends Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte. The premise of the series could inflame many a feminist, as seeking sex appears to be the main goal of the show. However, that did not happen.

Joyce McMillan, senior editor and television critic for salon.com welcomed the second seasons of “Sex in the City” much to her surprise.
McMillan explains:

OK, I admit it -- at first I was put off by “Sex” for reasons succinctly articulated in this season by Carrie’s friend, feminist lawyer, Miranda (Cynthia Nixon): “How does it happen that four such smart women have nothing to talk about but boyfriends?” But gradually, the show won me over. Producer Darren Star (“Melrose Place”) and regular writer Michael Patrick King juice up Bushnell’s pseudo-anthropological premise with dazzling guilty-pleasure voyeurism.31

McMillan continued: “Sex [in the City] is horny and witty, goofy and wise....[it] is literary sociology with a graduate degree in smut, and, boy, is it fun.”32 McMillan’s response to Sex in the City is an endorsement that it is publicly “OK” for women to discuss and embrace their sexual desires, the same way men have for years.

Cynthia Nixon (“Miranda”) stated that “TV has room for a series about single women with active libidos who aren't discredited as "loose."33 Nixon continued:


32Ibid.

I think the greatest thing about the show, in terms of whether it's 'real' or not, is the number of men these women have ... As viewers, we know them and love them, and we don't think of them as sluts. They're just women who have a lot of sex.34

Sex in the City attracted a lot of attention because of the explicit sexuality of the characters. However, the series continued to grow in popularity, won Emmy Awards and completed six seasons. In fact, viewers can rent complete seasons of “Sex in the City” at their local BlockBuster video store. To me, that indicates complete assimilation into popular culture. 35

The feminine sexual experiences and female subjectivity presented

34Ibid.

35Note that not every woman or man has accepted this view, nor does everyone embrace the concept that pornography and erotic images are consumed as much my women as men. A recent front-page article in the International Herald Tribune, published by The New York Times, noted that “porno-chic” lingerie “goes mainstream”. The department store Galeries Lafayette in Paris invited hundreds of guest to opening of its flagship store in Paris “to sip champagne, stroll down a ‘street of temptation’ named Le Red Hot Boulevard and examine 80 different brands of ‘strings’ -- the French word for ‘thongs’ -- brassieres, bustiers, corsets, panties and garter belts.” The store also offered free lessons by professional striptease artists to help the women learn the “art of revealing” their new brassieres and thongs. Feminist groups are protesting this and other sexually explicit advertising campaigns for lingerie: “The pornographic and the idea of woman as prostitute have become universal, ordinary” said Florence Montreynaud, the head of a feminist group. Elaine Sciolino, “Parisians’ Tie Knickers in a Knot,” International Herald Tribune, 4 November 2003, p.1.
in “Sex in the City” continues the evolution of visual pleasure that caters to a female gaze. My thesis, presented ten years ago, predicted the course of events. The endurance of female desire forced a change in the visual presentation of women and full development and acceptance of a female gaze. Women would not be denied their subjectivity. As more woman become the photographers, writers and directors of the narratives, the more the media will cater to the visual pleasure and sexual desires of women.

Today, the “active looking is through a women’s eyes.” Our culture has accepted - rather embraced this point-of-view. I believe that the photographic images produced for “Decent Exposure” and my thesis accurately predicted this evolution of images and narratives in popular media.
5. Epilogue: The Impact of Ten Years’ Perspective

I presented “Decent Exposure” to the public in Rochester, New York in October 1993 in the RIT Gallery of Art. However, it took me ten years to complete the writing of this report in explanation of the thesis work. Although I had completed much of the research and academic support for my work in 1992 and 1993, the actual composition of the statement and discussion of the work proved to be extremely difficult and illusive to me. The work in “Decent Exposure,” as well as my other photographs, writing, film and video work, was very personal and raised issues that I didn’t realize would be so intimate and so difficult to face and defend.

My work in “Decent Exposure” directly addressed the repression of female desire and a feminine point-of-view by a patriarchal society; one that is dominated by a male point-of-view and vision that defined traditional female roles. My personal experiences before, during and after creating this work are all about breaking free of a male dictation of women’s [my] roles and the subordination of women’s [my] needs and desires to those of the men [in my life]. The corralling of women into these roles through alternating criticisms and rewards was something that I personally experienced and had fought hard to refute.

For me, the really sensitive issues were the subordination and
repression of my desires - sexual and professional - to meet the needs and expectations of patriarchal influences. However, I could not (and would not) understand and accept the personal motivation for my work ten years ago. I could easily find the academic basis and trace the history of visual images to support my work - that part was easy. However, addressing the emotional strength of the images and narratives was just about impossible for me.

I explored the adaptations and sometimes “dark fantasies” that women and not just me have evolved to experience physical and sexual satisfaction. I found that casting the characters, staging the photographs and recreating these narratives drew on memories and feelings that I could not even recognize, much less articulate, before creating the images. The distance of ten years gave me the time and space I needed to grieve and heal from the pain and anger that motivated many of these images. I was too close to the work ten years ago.

This thesis experience has forever influenced me. I have learned many things, but most importantly, I have realized that the issues and strategies I presented in “Decent Exposure” I continue to address everyday - whether in my personal film and written work, in the exhibitions and interactive media I produce in work-for-hire, and in the classroom teaching my students. I have always been interested in the presentation of
women in the media and the development of film and photographs that appeal to a female gaze and feminine experience; I have always been interested in the roles of women in our Western society and the patriarchal imposition of rules and morals on women; I have always been interested in presenting my interpretation of “history” and telling the story of “real” experiences.

I look back on my photographic work and have to remark at the consistency of my interests. I would not have been able to offer this kind of perspective and thought about my images ten years ago.

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Untitled from the series “Decent Exposure,” 1993
4’x5’x8” Fujitrans, fluorescent lights, brushed aluminum
Untitled from the series “Decent Exposure”, 1993
4’x5’x8” Fujitrans, fluorescent lights, brushed aluminum
Appendix - Selected Photographs of Cindy Sherman

Untitled 1992

Untitled #264 1992

Untitled #263 1992