The Aura of Femininity in Art

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The Aura of Femininity in Art
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Introduction

There on the middle shelf amongst other reminders of a womanly sort stood a hand painted (ceramic) vase. An unusual race he thought, related to us by marriage. What were these objects which had been collected and saved through the years, set forth like rarities in a museum preserved? He then turned to her and asked, "What is the purpose in making this object?" "It will only collect dust like all the others on the shelf."

There was one purpose clear enough for her to see and say certainly, "I desired to make a pretty thing," she said.

No, I would not consider myself a feminist. I have never desired to participate in any type of feminist movement. Rather, my interest lies with the word "femininity" and its implications on women's art. Do we really have an understanding as to what the words "feminine" or "masculine" mean? The word "feminine" has been defined by The American Heritage Dictionary as: 1. Of or belonging to the female sex. 2. Characterized by or possessing qualities generally attributed to a woman. 3. Possessing qualities generally attributed to a woman, although belonging to the male sex: "an artist of feminine and receptive temperament." (Havelock Ellis).¹

The interest of this thesis is not to draw specific conclusions as to whether there is a difference between a woman's art and a man's. Rather, I would like to ask if there are certain characteristics inherent in the imagery of women artists. If so, then I will write about them.
If a male artist is fortunate enough to possess some of these characteristics, perhaps I shall mention them.

This is where my curiosity lies.

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I
About Some Women Artists

There appears to be a thread of similarity that runs through art done by women. Some of the themes that seem to repeat themselves center around a desire to make their own work autobiographical. Central imagery, intimacy, sensuality and personal symbolism are some of these themes. Photographer Diana Michener describes her experiences in the following quote. "...Sometimes I am pushed back into the territory of my childhood...often this child darts through me...I draw the way people keep journals and diaries...My work makes my personal side visible." May Stevens has based several of her paintings on her own family background. "A major thrust of contemporary women artist's work has been autobiographical. This is true in my case and in many others: Pat Lasch does her ancestors, Audrey Flack her jewels, Alice Neel her granddaughter Olivia and her daughter-in-law Nancy."  

Through The Flower is an autobiography of artist Judy Chicago. It is a contribution to the feminist movement. The focus is on her struggle as an artist. It is about a woman determined to establish her identity in the art world.


\[3\] Ibid., p.115.
Much of the writing is politically orientated. Chicago makes references to the word "femininity" on several occasions. Her comments at times point out differences between a woman's image in art and a man's image in art, their different methods of working and the implications of the social environment in which both sexes work. She tends to hint at, rather than prove that women are the chief bearers of feminine qualities.

Chicago's sentiments are strongly tied to a woman's consciousness. She feels her work to be intimately connected to her femaleness (admitting at times that the feminine content of her work is not always obvious).

Throughout my reading of her portrayal as a female artist, I had difficulties in relating to some of her viewpoints. They were female orientated to the point where she needs to be more sensitive towards a male sensibility. Events in her personal life have caused her to acquire negative attitudes towards the opposite sex.

Aside from her ambivalent views on the opposite sex, I have selected the following four quotes from Judy Chicago's *Through The Flower* which represent her thoughts on femininity.

"I used the flower as the symbol of femininity as O'Keefe had done."⁴ One of Chicago's impulses as an artist was to make her work subject-matter orientated while

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still being abstract and at the same time, reveal intimate emotional material through her forms. "I knew through my study of women's work that it was primarily the content that differentiated women's work from men's when there was a difference." She also mentions that women could have different needs than men because they have been housekeeping, sewing, weaving, pleasing men and remaining in the background. Therefore their frame of reference for their work would be built upon these different experiences. "Most women are raised to value feeling over abstract ideas, responsiveness over assertiveness and small scale over large." "I wanted to go beyond my female identity into an identity that embraced my humanness. I wanted to make paintings that were vulnerable, delicate, feminine."7

Much of my study is about women artists who interest me. Although Judy Chicago's statements are of interest, she was the most politically orientated of the women I have researched. Therefore I have separated her from the rest.

The content and meaning of much of the women's work which I researched revolved around their lives. The content is based on remembered sensory experiences which is eventually transformed through impulse and the imagination.

5 Ibid., p.176.
6 Ibid., p.88.
7 Chicago, p.68.
Writer Eleanor Munro has interviewed several women artists for her book *Originals: American Women Artists*. Her research revealed that women are trying to salvage something from their past. Instead of all artists possessing a shared style in these transitional times, Munro has discovered the content to be private for each individual artist. "Many women are working this old new ground of natural human experience in various degrees of abstraction and remove."\(^8\)

In one of her chapter notes, Eleanor Munro questions how much of the modern woman artist's personal involvement with her past and nature is a common human affair and how much a social maneuver. Although the answer was uncertain, she did discover that of the contemporary artists she interviewed, most expressed this attachment to their personal lives.\(^9\)

"I have stored these fragments in my mind at one time or another, and I have found them and pulled them from their clusters of memoirs."\(^10\) Artist June Wayne wrote this of her own working process.

Going back to the time of Impressionism and to artist Mary Cassatt, the French writer Huysmans said:

Now for the first time, thanks to Miss Cassatt, I have seen the effigies of ravishing youngsters, quiet bourgeois

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\(^9\)Ibid., p.477.

\(^10\)Ibid., p.24.
scenes painted with a delicate and charming tenderness. Furthermore, one must repeat, only a woman can paint infancy. There is a special feeling that a man cannot achieve...their fingers are too heavy not to leave a clumsy imprint, only a woman can pose a child, dress it, adjust pins....

I do not necessarily agree when he comments that a male's fingers are too heavy to catch the moment. Edgar Degas was able to capture the movement of the ballet dancer, and Gauguin described the sensuous beauty of Tahitian women. Japanese artist Utamaro devoted his whole life to the pursuit of womanly beauty. He had the ability to depict feminine carriage, character and gracefulness.

Alexander Archipenko once spoke of how women would make a great contribution to the arts through their special sensibilities and perceptions.

"Men and women artists' images and visions overlap in many ways; nor should there ever be insistence on a separation. However, I believe that the special experiences of women, the quality of their life in the world which has affected their imaginations, has not been fully expressed in the plastic arts."\(^{12}\)

Helen Frankenthaler's sensual response to veils of color has made one critic claim that Frankenthaler had to

\(^{11}\)Munro, p.68.

be a woman. "...it was natural that Frankenthaler should adapt the staining technique, since it is free, lyrical and feminine."\(^{13}\) I would like to hear his comments concerning the paintings of artist Morris Louis. Would he assign the same qualities to Morris' paintings that float with color?

As to whether or not Frankenthaler believes her work to hold a female quality she remarks; "age, height, weight, history, nationality, religion, sex, pains, habits, attractions, and being female is one of the many in this long list for me...what you call 'female quality' is a serious fact that I enjoy, and part of the total working picture."\(^{14}\)

Miriam Schapiro calls her collages made up of doilies, handkerchiefs, laces, and bits of quilted material "Femmage." By working with these cloth materials, Schapiro's work has taken on the feminine connotations of cloth.

Later she became involved with developing a more universal symbol. A series of collages were made entitled Anatomy of a Kimono. This garment was not only worn by women but also by men. Here was an article of clothing for which a gender is not assigned. This is a suitable symbol for Schapiro.

"...The meaning of my art today, for example is in its origins in woman-life of the past. The collage ele-


\(^{14}\)Ibid., p.217.
ments in my paintings are the needlework of departed and forgotten women...I cherish the past while wanting the most out of the present...I do not cultivate loss. I connect. That is the basis of my life.15

Betye Saar also creates collages. At first she was a printmaker. This eventually led to making boxes. Then she needed objects to put into and fill her boxes. Sometimes Saar uses her intuition on selecting materials and at other times she searches for objects with symbolic value. Although she chooses articles from the past she claims her intentions as an artist are to remain with the present.

Lynn Kagan Price paints watercolors. They are large paintings done on paper in which the color is allowed to float freely over the surface. She prefers not to label herself as a feminist. Instead, the positive overtones of the word feminine appeals to her. "Too many of today's popular abstracts are done by men."16 Consequently Price feels she can offer a more feminine viewpoint, one which she considers to be more uplifting than what she has been used to seeing.

Elaine Starkman is a woman who opened a gallery in New York which displays only women's work. She believes there is a woman's sensibility in art.

15Munro, pp.280-281.
"Personal and intimate feelings come across. Intellectual, clinical feelings more so in men's art. Impersonal. Particularly with abstract art. But women do tend to be more personal. Even when women are powerful, they're warmer."¹⁷

When entering a gallery, I sometimes ask myself whether a work is recognizable as belonging to a woman artist. Starkman herself was not certain. "I'm making great generalizations, but a Frankenthaler has a warmth that a Motherwell abstraction does not."¹⁸

Sometimes this can be a rather enjoyable thing to do. When walking into a gallery, try to determine those works of art you feel were done by a female artist. There have been times when certain pieces have taken me by surprise. Perhaps it is the medium in which the artist works that disguises his or her gender. Maybe it is the manner in which a line is applied to the surface that fools us....

I do not know whether artists are aware of their femininity or masculinity as they work. I do believe that interwoven within each of our personalities is this duality. Our territories overlap. We can each claim to have special experiences, but how can we know whether there is a distinct feminine style?

The following two quotes are related to the qualities in women's art. The first attempts to describe those qual-

¹⁸Ibid., p.12.
ities which could be inherent in their work. The second suggests that there is not a "feminine style."

"Relatedness, connection, continuity: these are the words I heard the women of all ages use. If there is a 'woman's art', perhaps it is here." 19

It may be asserted that women artists are more inward looking, more delicate and nuanced in their treatment of their medium. But which of the women artists are more inward-turning than Redon, more subtle and nuanced in the handling of pigment than Corot at his best? Is Fragonard more or less feminine than Mme. Vigee Lebrun? Is it not more a question of the whole rococo style of eighteenth-century France being "feminine," if judged in terms of a two-valued scale of a "masculinity" versus "femininity"? Certainly if daintiness, delicacy, and preciousness are to be counted as earmarks of a feminine style, there is nothing fragile about Rosa Bonheur's Horse Fair. If women have at times turned to scenes of domestic life or children, so did the Dutch Little Masters, Chardin, and the impressionists-Renoir and Monet-as well as Morisot and Cassatt. In any case, the mere choice of a certain realm of subject matter, or the restriction to certain subjects, is not to be equated with a style, much less with some sort of quintessentially "feminine" style. 20

The search for a feminine or masculine sensibility may not be discovered in the artist's work. We cannot prove that there is a different (female) perceptivity and indifference. We can only ask where does a feminine art get its identity. Possibly the sensible approach

19 Munro, p. 58.

would be to look within the individual.

Artist Barbara Nugent's work is a reflection of her own thoughts and experiences. "It used to be said that the word 'beautiful' when applied to my work was not enough. Make it 'tough,' 'strong,' etc., my instructors would say. Now I want the pieces to be beautiful, to be elegant, to be 'delicate' even. That is a visual concern. Whatever, they reflect my feelings, ideas, my responses to certain events. I can't help but believe that these are shared feelings, ideas and responses. I certainly hope so." 21

I tend to think that women artists are more apt to display feminine content in their work; either in the images chosen, the materials used and techniques (sewing), which are traditionally associated with women.

Everyone works and derives ideas from his or her human experiences. Those things which are familiar become more immediate sources for creativity.

As for myself, I happen to have a strong liking for quilts, handkerchiefs, knick knacks, and other objects that some people would not even bother to look at twice. They are articles which symbolize my sense of identity.

II
Metaphors and Other Things

Women inherit the color pink the day they are born and it remains their color until old age. Pink has been connected to such words as frivolity, indulgence and infantilism. I will trade blue for pink any day. Actually, I enjoy pink if it is used tastefully. Pink hearts, pink carnations, pink mints, and pink bonnets, pink is a link to that which is feminine. So, if you want to be feminine, paint with lots of pink and wear a few pink carnations in your hair!

The contents of a woman's vanity might hold such treasures as: pieces of lace, candles, ribbons, shells, feathers, photographs, miniature boxes (filled with this or that) a few scattered rose petals, beads, polished stones, and other small intimate objects, not to mention doilies, and handkerchiefs that happen to adorn other nearby tabletops.

Carol Hamoy creates assemblages that are made up of objects that women personally treasure. All sorts of small intimate objects are arranged in boxes and other container forms. The main emphasis for these works is on the personal, the individual, and the feminine.

Even though Hamoy has an individual attachment for these objects, they happen to be universal artifacts. If one peered inside the chest of drawers of all the mothers
and grandmothers one would discover similarities amongst the contents.

Hamoy deals with themes which are of central importance to women both past and present... other works deal with babies, childbirth, women's dress, issues currently being reevaluated by many women. Many of Hamoy's objects function metaphorically within the works, as well as representing themselves...birthday candles refer to the passage of time and aging. 22

Aging is an important concern of women today. By holding on to rememberances of the past, women feel that they can capture those special qualities which once belonged to their youth.

Liv Ullman in her book Changing said: "It might be the lost kingdom of childhood I am in constant search for." 23

While Hamoy works with literal recollections of the past, another artist, Marcy Edelstein deals with the more recent past. Her memory goes back to experiences on the beach one summer ago. Edelstein depicts the spaces in empty beach tents and beach houses, the interplay between interior and exterior space. She has chosen pastel as the medium in which to work her oversize drawings. Her color is soft and translucent.


I also happen to work with soft, translucent color. This allows me to suggest an illusion of time as one object moves in front of, over, or behind another.

The fan has become a popular symbol of contemporary art. Although a practical object, its meaning is constantly evolving. The flat fan was used in religious services in Western civilizations. The folding fan, invented in Japan became a European fashion accoutrement for women. Eventually, the practicality of the fan declined. During the 1970s, the fan was looked upon more as a decorative, intimate object, an intimate object holding feminine connotations.

Many artists are attracted to the shape of the fan and have explored the compositional possibilities in their work. "Pissarro, like Degas, was challenged by the fan shape, and this is especially interesting in his case. He usually had little time for delicate or feminine art."24

Several women have and use the image of the fan in their work. "For most Westerners, the fan is a feminine accoutrement. Harmony Hammond, Linda Benglis, and Miriam Schapiro have all effectively exploited that preconceived notion and imposed on their fans a personal mixture of aesthetic, historical and cultural concern."25


For Hammond the fan represents a woman, Linda Benglis' plaster fans hint at ladies with parasols and wide-gathered skirts and for Miriam Schapiro the fan is a perfect icon.

There are a myriad of meanings which can be given to certain objects. When picking up a string of pearls, a silk scarf, or pieces of fabric we are gently reminded of a feminine identity.
...It seems that I cannot work for a very extended period of time on one and the same thing. I must change between, or do something fun at the same time, like eating pumpkin seeds while I'm reading a tough book. Perhaps this is why I get involved with so many things. I like to have excuses for not concentrating on something and pursuing it in depth...on the other hand, and this may sound like a contradiction, I am unable to ration things to myself...once I get into things, I become engrossed and gobble them up in large doses.  

I had a desire to collect at an early age. Not everything in sight interested me. The articles either had some personal sentiments attached to them, or they were just pretty to look at.

Perhaps I inherited this interest from my mother. Rummaging through the various rooms (they were not even very large) one would discover a wide assortment of objects to delight the eye. Her clothing particularly caught my attention. She happened to own many skirts of all colors with a variety of patterns. There were also a few delicate white blouses, innocent in appearance.

My grandmother's garments are of another sort. I especially took a liking to her hats. There are hats with feathers, flowers, bows and beads. What head ornaments

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they are! However, she mostly wears them to church on Sundays. She rarely goes out.

My grandmother has plants that decorate her sitting room. When the sun flickers through the shades of her porch windows, shadows are created by the leaf shapes.

One time I was allowed upstairs in the attic of my hometown library. The wallpaper was worn and faded. The windows cast rectangular patterns over the wall. A radiator with its paint chipped and cracked stood against this wall. I decided to photograph this, and later entitled the photograph; *Patterns On The Wall*.

My work is about patterns, familiar objects floating in space, and little shapes created from my imagination. Matisse created patterns that appear to be animated, dancing with color. I equally enjoy the subtle patterns and usage of color in the intaglio prints by Mary Cassatt. Her work emits a tranquil feeling. There is little tumultuous action to be found. The colors are reminiscent of Japanese prints. A transparent pink might be used to represent a woman's dress, browns and tans for the surroundings, a touch of light blue and yellow to describe a floral pattern.

I feel most influenced by her work and that of Japanese artists. Many of the Japanese prints evoke a delicate, whimsical world, a world where the feminine ideal of beauty is elegantly portrayed.

Sometimes a leaf shape or flower will float across the surface and off the picture plane of my work. The
viewer may see only a glimpse of an article of clothing. It is similar to how actors enter and exit on a stage. Occasionally a bit of animation or whimsy may creep in, enlivening the quality of my work. For the most part, there is a serenity, a sense of nostalgia. The mood of my work is dependent on my mood at the time I am working. If I happen to be feeling sentimental that day as I look at something, chances are this feeling will come across in my work.

When I did the print There Was This House With Three Park Benches, I worked from a photograph taken one summer. There actually were three pastel colored benches on a hill, in front of a home resembling a dollhouse. The benches looked as if at any time they would begin dancing to the bottom of the hill.

A lithograph entitled It Was An Oriental Party developed as a result of the collection of fans I have strewn about my room. They either dangle from the ceiling or rest at the edge of a shelf. Ribbons are also scattered about. The scene reminded me of the aftermath of a party or maybe the beginning of one.

As for the work which deals with articles of clothing (mostly women's), there is a sentimental attachment. It is the feel of the material, the print on the fabric and the particular character of the garment which inspires me to paint or reproduce it graphically.

Once in awhile someone might catch me day dreaming, but actually I am intently looking at something. I enjoy
observing what is around me. I prefer smaller objects (which can be found on tabletops and mantels) to large, simply because they are easier to pick up and handle. For me, large is impressive because of size, small is intimate, for it causes one to look closely.

As long as I can remember, I kept a journal of my daily activities. At first it was a routine, something done at the end of the day. Now I use it to jot down impressions, poetry, and phrases that catch my attention. It has become my diary of images and ideas.

A part of a poem by Merrit Malloy is written in my journal...memories grow out of memories like sprouts... each remembering is slightly distorted from the one before.

An artist who uses a wide assortment of objects such as tablecloths, vases, and wicker furniture is Carolyn Brady. Carolyn Brady works in watercolors. They are lush and extravagant, and they tell us about who she is through the way she lives. The endless stream of her material comes from her home. She brings us into her interiors with her attention to detail. "Her paintings retain that quiet mystery inherent in the lingering presence of a person who has momentarily left the room." 27

Her titles are delightful conjurings in themselves; Anemones With Yellow Chair, Pink Table, Blueberry Jam.

As for my titles, I want them to add to the feeling of the work, for example, *She Would Wear It on Summer Days*.

I would like to think of my work as telling about who I am. It is a distillation of information akin to that of a Japanese print. My imagination plays an important part in the making of the image. The elements are added one at a time, not like a still life, where the objects are all arranged compositionally together.

So many things collected from childhood to the present flood my repertory. There is such an assortment to choose from. An old hat pulled from a box in my grandmother's attic, scraps of wrapping paper from someone's birthday or a postcard from the Cape may be gathered together to be painted. It's similar to rummaging through a trunk of clothes, trying to find what you want to wear. I seem at first to keep pulling out these articles that don't quite fit together. Eventually a combination is found, and everything clicks.
Conclusion

Thoughts women artists have about their work and women's art in general have been touched upon in my thesis. Much of the content in women's art is derived from remembered sensory experiences. This is surely true of all artists. Both women and men artists have used imagery based on intimate subjective experiences.

Although my writing concerns women artists, I am not excluding men from having similar qualities and experiences shared by women. There are women as well as men who show a sensitivity in their art work. Individual tendencies in addition to physiological, social and cultural factors influence the mode the artist wishes to follow. Gender is just one of these factors.

Certain subject matter can be categorized as "feminine." Women and men artists have painted plants, quilts, vases, table tops and other objects which have feminine connotations. It is the choice of subject matter which allows one to believe that a work of art was created by a woman.

When viewing a work of art, one may be able to determine whether there is feminine content. However, an absolute judgement cannot be made as to whether there is a recognizable "feminine" style in a work of art.

Through the years, women have been told which qualities they should express in their work, by a male dom-
inated society.

My intention was not to answer the question as to whether there is a "woman's art." Rather, I have been searching for clues that lead to her identity.
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