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TIM TEEMAN

# How Women Really See Men: A Survey of 'The Female Gaze' in Art



The 'male gaze' has been much critiqued in movies and art. Now a brilliant New York show brings together a group of female artists whose images interrogate men and masculinity.



You could say that the latest exhibition at Cheim & Read gallery in New York's West Chelsea is the best kind of payback.



The "male gaze," as defined by the film theorist Laura Mulvey in 1975, was the governing focus for how women were seen and fetishized on screen, both by male characters and male directors. It is such a convincing thesis, and sadly all too relevant still, that the 'male gaze' as a piece of critical phraseology long left the ivory tower and entered common argot.



In this, the second "female gaze" exhibition at Cheim & Read (the first, in 2009, was dedicated to the work of female artists observing women), the works on display featuring female artists painting, photographing, and sculpting the male body. All this just in time for a world reveling in, then anguishing over, the sight of Orlando Bloom's penis.

Facing the visitor entering the gallery is Katy Grannan's "Anonymous, Modesto," a handsome man staring nervously out to the viewer. His intensity is matched by Catherine Opie's "Ryan," again topless, and lit in shadow, looking reflectively off to the side. Nan Goldin's "Warren In Bed" is cute but also captured unawares.

Diane Arbus's "Jack Dracula, the Marked Man" is more relaxed and languorous, lying in the grass, covered in tattoos, and at ease; in her photograph, a young male-female couple on a bench in Washington Square look both tough and vulnerable. Hanging in the first

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room is also a Louise Bourgeois sculpture “Fillette (Sweeter Version)” which is a dick and balls that also looks like a smooshed-up kebab or a dog turd.

In the initial part of the exhibition, what is notable is how unsexily or unconfidently the men appear. If “the male gaze” fetishized and sexualized women, the men here are captured much more matter-of-

factly.

Alice Neel’s “David Sokola” appears with his leg slung over the arm of a chair. Lynda Benglis’s “Smile” is a brilliant cast bronze sculpture of what first looks like a smile, then a boomerang, and then—up close—it is a penis, with a head at both ends.

The same artist’s “Secret 3” is a collection of photographs of a couple playing sexual dress-up, and having fun with a strap-on. Berenice Abbott’s “Cocteau In Bed With Mask, Paris” is an appositely surreal image of the writer asleep in bed, a stunning white mask next to his chin.

In the second room, the images of men and masculinity multiply intriguingly: the first image—Dana Schutz’s “Frank as a Proboscis Monkey”—is a playful riff on man-as-primate; Chantal Joffe’s “Man in a River” is of a slim, wasp-waisted fellow, his body a delicately melting mass; Sylvia Sleigh’s “Paul Rosano in Jacobsen Chair” is of a sexy guy, naked on chair, but again with no overt sexuality emanating from him. Lois Dodd’s “Caleb Martin” is a stunning profile of a face, made up of a series of jagged clefts and shadows.

ADVERTISING

Away from the conventional artworks are inventive conceptual pieces. [Tracey Emin](#)’s “Is This a Joke” is a blanket with an embroidered couple on top of one another; Jenny Holzer’s white marble footstool bears the legend, “Men Don’t Protect You Anymore.” [Cindy Sherman](#)’s

“Untitled” photograph is of a muscle man with black leather gloves, his head perversely screwed around, and hair sprouting from every orifice.

From here on in the show, the male body comes to be endowed with more overt sexuality and sensuality. Marlene Dumas’s “Morning Glory” is of a naked guy reclining with an erection, itself a blurred tower of brownish grey. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s “The Justifying Doctor’s Note” features a man, naked, looking very happy, lying on his front, head and long hair and perfect ass all in sunny alignment.

Catherine Murphy’s “Harry’s Nipple” visualizes a nipple breaking through the rip of a piece of material, and surrounded by hair. Louise Bourgeois’s “Male Figure” is a figure,

seen in cross section, a soft pink except for the raging redness of a blood-filled erect cock. Joan Semmel's "David" is of a naked man, hand on hip, his slim body a beautiful, swirling kaleidoscope of vivid brushstrokes and colors.

Katherine Bradford's "Fathers" sees a group of men, seemingly floating in space gazing into what is a pool of water (or is it a condom?). There is more playfulness in Kathe Burkhart's "Whore: From The Liz Taylor Series (The Only Game In Town)" in which an Elizabeth Taylor-like figure (an ethereal, purplish pale color) entertains a hot young stud, with—among other titles—a Laura Mulvey book on the nightstand: here the female gaze of Burkhart configures a portrait of female power, where the Taylor-like subject objectifies and controls the man opposite her. It is her desire that is the fulcrum of the painting, not his.

Gina Beavers's "Tag Yourself" is deceptively brilliant: a gorgeous male chest and rippling six-pack sculpted to rise from the canvas itself.

Betty Tompkins's "Fuck Painting" is similarly ingenious: a cock entering a vagina, although the sexuality of the moment is less affecting than the light, shade, and shapes of the moment as a piece of abstract art.

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Sarah Lucas's "White Nob" is a plaster sculpture of a penis, all white, rough and flaky at the base and the main part of the shaft, and sensuously smooth at the tip.

This pleasure in male sexuality, as visualized by women, is most beautifully captured in Cecily Brown's "Raspberry Beret," which sees Prince naked, his arm behind his head, a melange of oranges, blacks, whites and grays. Celia Hampton's images—of "Eddie" and "Ben"—see asses, cocks, and ball sacks painted delicately in soft swirls and pastels.

The last two images of this wonderful show sees the male gaze reflected back to the female. Collier Schorr's "Peter, Paul and David" features a man in a T-shirt, his penis hanging down, holding a picture of another man, while Grace Graupe-Pillard's "Dillon: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" is a painting of a handsome young man, paintbrush in his teeth, holding an iPhone in front of him.

Perhaps he is taking a picture of her or of himself. But whatever, it is his expression that is captured by Graupe-Pillard, her gaze that defines him.

This last image reminds us that the cleverly curated brilliance of this exhibition is to show the plurality of masculinities as seen by women: the nonchalant, the literal, the questioning, the swagger, the sweetness, the mysterious, all are here—examined, analyzed, and sometimes, refreshingly, played with and reconfigured. Any man coming to the show leaves realizing that he has much to learn by observing his gender as seen through female eyes.

[The Female Gaze, Part Two: Women Look at Men](#) is at *Cheim & Read, 547 West 25th Street, New York, until Sept. 2.*