THROUGH THE KEYHOLE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE 'DESEXUALIZED' FEMALE NUDE

By Infiniti Robinson

The realist, impressionist, and expressionist movements are categorically different regarding motivation, desire, techniques, and time. However, the one unifying force of these individual movements is the desire to visualize the figurative and literal experiences of one of the most challenging to capture: Womanhood. More specifically, realist, impressionist, and expressionist artists, who were motivated to challenge and eradicate formal schools of artistic representation, intended to represent the woman in a way she had not yet been widely received: as a desexualized figure. As such, the female nude became a theme and apparatus of newer and innovative techniques, becoming a literal and symbolic concept to explore the formal compositions of the female body, challenge the literal and imagined viewer, and challenge how the female nude is displayed. Nevertheless, the attempt to desexualize the female body by using it to represent the development of newer and innovative techniques reduces her to a concept to experiment with and mutate to the likings of the male artists painting her. With the help of Edgar Degas' *After the Bath Woman Drying Herself* and other artworks of the female nude, I intend to argue that even with using the assumed and literal viewership against its mostly male audiences, the female nude cannot truly be freed from her sexualization when she is viewed through a keyhole-- she is linked to voyeuristic fascinations.

Due to living in a patriarchal society, male artists are overrepresented, which leads to the hegemonization of male gazes and perspectives in our society, notably high art forms. As such, we would think this leads to the underrepresentation of women artists and the women's perspective. After all, art historian Linda Nochlin published her book *Why Have There Been No*

Great Woman Artists in 1971 to talk of the institutional and societal effects of hegemonizing the male experience: it prevents women from working in the European and American art tradition (Spies-Gans 70). However, Paris Spies-Gans emphasizes Nochlin's point that the reason why we think there have been “no great women artists” runs deeper than their perceived existence, with historical evidence suggesting women artists, specifically from London and Paris, were quite successful with over 1,300 women artists displaying over 7,000 works of art and successfully selling and profiting off of their artistry between the years 1760-1830 alone (Spies-Gans 70). As such, there must be an investigation of why we think there have been “no great women artists” because evidence suggests it is not because they didn't exist. With this in mind, Nochlin concludes at the end of her 1971 book that the *true* reason why there are “no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol” is because women, although successful in their own right, were not given the right to enroll in art academies and study from nude models which, according to Nochlin, prevent them from gaining the necessary tools to create “great” works of art (Spies-Gans 71). However, this too has been questioned, as evidence suggests that women who studied as apprentices of male artists like Jacques-Louis David used the status of their artistic veterans to study the female nude (Spies-Gans 78). Although these revelations don’t argue against the structural and social hardships women artists, especially those without access to nude models, have faced in earlier centuries, it does show how politicized and scandalized nude drawings have been for centuries, both by way of their unconventionality and the debates surrounding those who can and cannot participate in nude representations and themes. As we came to find that the belief that there have been “no great women artists” isn’t factually backed up by the claim they did not exist and could not find loopholes outside of social conventions, we are left with the same question of why we, as a society, believe that male artists’ perspectives and

works of art epitomize brilliance. I believe that the notion that there are "no great women artists" stems from first, the belief that male artists of the realist, impressionist, and expressionist movements did an effective job of exploring topics and subjects outside of their realm of experience and second, the cycle that allows for women artists to only be acknowledged when necessary. Both of these widely accepted quotas could explain why works of art like Edgar Degas' *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself* are thought to have done an effective job at desexualizing the female nude.

Edgar Degas is grouped with impressionism, although he referred to himself as a realist artist, which hints at there being fundamental differences between the realism of the artists before and the more true and deeper realism that was desired by impressionist artists like Degas. As Lionello Venturi briefly explains in the 1941 *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, impressionist artists "saw every image not in abstract form, not in chiaro-scuro, but in reaction to the reflex of light, either real or imaginary. They had selected only one element from reality– light– to interpret all of nature. But then, light ceased to be an element of reality. It had become a principle of style, and Impressionism was born" (Venturi 35-36). This emphasizes that although Degas referred to himself as a realist, this realism that he referenced had much more to do with metaphorical and representational realism rather than realism that simply replicates what is being seen.

Of his hundreds of paintings, *Degas Bathers* is a series of drawings and paintings that show women in staged scenes that are meant to depict women "performing personal ablutions in an ostensibly private place" (Brown 331). Of the series, there is a pastel drawing titled *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself* (Figure 1), which centers on the subject, a woman hunched over to dry her hair. She is situated in a chair, back facing the viewer, and is twisted almost in a perfect

diagonal with one of her arms bent upward to dry her hair and the other placed on the back of the chair to help her turn. We cannot see her face but we can see another chair on the right-hand side, curtains in the left quadrant of the painting, and a colorful carpet underneath the subject. As emphasized by Degas, her position is intentional as it is important in the redefinition of the female nude: she's meant to be unaware and unapologetic in her nakedness, she's in the privacy of her room, thus not for public and sexual view and is not posing herself for the desire of those viewing her. As such, Degas contends that this female nude is meant to allow the viewer to feel "as if you are looking through a key-hole" (Thompson 13). However, I don't intend to argue against the success of Degas' or any other artist's ability to mend the positions of the intended and imagined viewer, but I do want to argue that this does not desexualize the female body as much as it allows for us to occupy the space as both participant and voyeur, which does not benefit the women who are subjects of the work, women who aren't subjects of the work, and non-male viewers of the *Bathers* series.

As seen in Figure 1, the subject is facing the opposite of her viewer. She's posed quite awkwardly, the way the subject is situated creates a harsh diagonal throughout the entire composition, with the highest point being her head/hair in the upper left region, and from there the eye traces down her arm, her back, and her legs to where the towels are pooled on the floor near the right bottom portion of the piece. Although nude, her position prevents the viewer from seeing her front-most area. The piece also gives the illusion of dynamic movement as we can almost visualize her body moving to pose herself to dry herself off. Despite her awkward positioning, a natural line forms to carry the eye from the top to the bottom of the piece. And despite embodying the de-sexualized female nude, she exists to challenge and acknowledge the pleasures of the imagined viewer and criticize social hegemonies. As mentioned before, she's

meant to be posed in a way in which we are not only a viewer looking at a female nude but could also be someone in the same space viewing the subject, in her state of unawareness, through a keyhole. So yes, her positioning is awkward because she doesn't know that we can see her, but she is then also reduced to an idea, not a real representation, of what a natural and/or unconscious female nude looks like, which based on Degas' representations, means we cannot see what would normally sexualize her (i.e Breast, genitals, etc). She is not sexualized because she is hidden, not because there's an effort to dismantle the sexualizing of her body.

In addition, Degas, like many impressionist artists of the time, is known for his use of color. Throughout the work, the colors are very noticeably unblended, appearing in visible strokes and lines that aid in the de-emphasis of certain areas and the emphasis of others, inspired by Japanese artists like Utamaro, who employed similar techniques that explored the intertwined powers of line and color (Abou-Jaoude 61). Art Historian Theodore Reff references the writings of Denis Rouart, who argues that Degas' artistic versatility was aided by the use of pastels (Reff 144). According to Reff, pastels that "--are rougher in texture and more vigorously executed, with strokes of vividly contrasted color over-lapping each other to create a flickering surface not unlike that in contemporary paintings by Monet and Pissaro" (Reff 144). With that said, the figurative realism of this work is advanced through the use of the pastel medium, the use of color, and line. They work together in areas like the lines of the back, where the colors are darker and the lines are sharper, accentuating the tension and twist of the back, and work differently with the softer strokes and peachy colors that are used to de-accentuate the lines of her arms, hips, knees, and chest.

In Degas' mission to de-emphasize certain areas, there's an intentional smudging and blurring of the otherwise 'sexualized' regions of the female body and the simplification of

otherwise complex poses and forms of the human body. Degas' attempt to desexualize the female body is attempted only through first, the use of blurring and smudging processes and de-emphasizing the form entirely and second, the concealment of her form due to our gaze through this keyhole. An important note about this composition is that, as mentioned before, it exists as just one part of a multi-part series that is referred to as the *Degas Bathers* series. The fact that this pastel composition is only one part of a series is important because analyzing the composition as both an individual and unified entity can lead to a more conclusive understanding of how this female model is meant to operate in the totality of the *Bathers* narrative. None of the other compositions of the series, including *Woman in the Bath Bathing her Leg* (Fig. 2), show any visual indications that anyone else is in the same space as the subject, and knowledge that Degas wanted the drawings to look as if we are looking in "through a keyhole", we know the subject is meant to represent the literal and metaphorical state of aloneness and unawareness. This raises an interesting point that Laura Mulvey brings up in *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema*. Although written to explore how fascinations in film are oftentimes reimagined social fascinations, it can explain how we too look to a different art form, including the visual arts, to arouse the "pleasure of looking" (Mulvey 806). Specifically, this "pleasure of looking" is an expansion of Freud's *Three Essays of Sexuality*, in which Freud discusses scopophilia and associates it with a process of taking in people, in this case, our women drying themselves, as objects, and subjecting them to controlling and curious gazes (Mulvey 806). What's interesting about *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself,* is that Degas doesn't deny that this exists, in fact, Degas desires to force his viewers to confront this "pleasure of looking." However, this in itself doesn't desexualize the body but rather forces the viewer to confront their desire, which is not effective if not consumed by the anticipated viewer.

As mentioned above, as important as the subject's representation of unawareness is in

the composition, we must also acknowledge that the de-emphasis process through blurred lines and soft strokes of color plays a role in the censoring process of *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself*. This begs the question: are we actively desexualizing the body or simply distorting it? After all, the de-emphasis process through blurred lines and soft strokes of color only censors what we tend to sexualize in the first place, thus this representation underlines that the female nude is only desexualized through censorship and the assumption that the viewer accepts the position of both voyeur and participant looking at her "--through a key-hole" (Thompson 13). For the successful women artists of the time, occupying the position of voyeur and participant do nothing if they are the metaphorical and literal subjects of this pleasure of looking in real life. Even beyond the engagement of successful women artists, we must consider the times that the models in Figures 1 and 2 are living in. Throughout the nineteenth century, many professional models were working-class women, even more of them being immigrants and/or prostitutes whose stories were written for them by the very men that they were seen to be opposing based on their profession (Lathers 28). These oftentimes fictional accounts were taken as fact, and almost all of these models were condemned and shamed by society by their profession of choice and the artists themselves for asking for said attention (Lathers 28). Not only that, but these distortions lead to the familiar notion that nude models are inherently sexually available with the help of these stories mixing with the regular adversities they faced based on gender and socio-economic status. In addition, female models increasingly become representative of the dangers of femininity on the artist, which is exemplified by sculptor Pierre Clemenceau's account that when he killed a model it was her fault because of his inability to distinguish between the 'two-sub categories' of women: mothers, characterized by purity and "women" characterized by their sexual availability" (Lathers 40). This suggests that during the 19th century, the very same time

that Degas depicted the unconscious nude model, there were active and public debates on the dangers of femininity on society and even the artists themselves, coming as the conception of sexualizing not only her profession but the assumption that her status as a nude female model makes her inherently more promiscuous and open to sexual activity. With that said, does blurring her body and inviting the participant inward inherently desexualize her, or rather just acknowledge that her sexualization exists? In order to actively desexualize, there needs to be a focus that the body isn't inherently sexual or requesting sexual activity, not that she is only desexualized because you can't see her.

As I conclude, I find it important to emphasize that first, I don't mean to challenge the significance of Degas' work in his efforts to recognize social and artistic intersections, especially having to do with the "pleasure of looking." I also recognize that as a twenty-first-century art history student, I have the ability to compare current evolutions with documented and oppressive past mindsets. However, I wanted to my privileges in time and access to challenge how desexualization works and who exactly has the power to deem something as desexualized. It's widely accepted that 'for the times', Degas' *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself* did a good job of both desexualizing the female nude and forcing his viewers to confront their own voyeuristic desires, however, it is also necessary that we evaluate the basis in which this female nude was desexualized and lead to the confrontation of male desire. As she is only desexualized because of her censorship, she is not truly desexualized, as the message is that her naked body, if not out of view or blurred, is inherently sexual. As the female body is a canvas that metaphorically embodies non-traditional techniques, her body turns into a literal object that can be used to force men to confront their desires, but in a world where she is already blamed for the desire men have for her, this does nothing more than reinforce that the naked model and body

IS justified as a source of voyeuristic pleasure if not censored and covered.

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Figure 1. Edgar Degas, *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself*, 1892. Pastel on woven paper, 40.7 × 38.8 in.

Figure 2. Edgar Degas, *Woman in the Bath Bathing her Leg*, circa 1892. Pastel on monotype. 19.7 × 41 cm.