

## ANOMALIES OF GENDER

Kate Mahoney

"...the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male, and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him... Transform the woman into a man... then notice the violence that that transformation does." (Geoffrey Batchen)<sup>1</sup>

As I near the conclusion of my postgraduate project, I have been more and more motivated to examine the issues that surround skin and nakedness and the gendering of the body. Lately I have been thinking and writing about the responses of viewers to my images, and it's become clear to me that these responses are based at least partly on cultural knowledge and expectations about the nude, gender, the artist and art. As Chris Townsend says: "The challenges to limits of propriety, decency, morality and shame are read into work by their audiences more often than they are intentionally placed within it."<sup>2</sup> This makes viewer responses valuable; because they are not under the artist's control, and they can bring insight and inspiration for future work.

The viewers I refer to are largely people who are interested in art, rather than the general public – art students, gallery owners, academics and practicing artists.<sup>3</sup> Challenging as it may be to base writing on viewer responses, I feel a need to satisfy my curiosity (which has been aroused by repeated similar responses to my work) and to investigate my consequent thinking about the possible common origins of these reactions.

An image of a reclining, or even supine, naked man seems to provoke several readings. One of these is an erotic reading, either an empowered feminine reading of the male nude referencing John Berger's<sup>4</sup> notion of visual sexual availability (traditionally through the *male* gaze); or, alternatively, a queer reading – the male nude taking the place of the female. In this article I will be addressing these readings and the ways I see them as interrelated. As well as probing further into the feminine gaze, I'll be exploring the links between the sublime and the abject in relation to gender and the erotic in my current art practice.

At least part of the response I receive to my work is directly related to its medium, photography. Ever since its invention, debate has raged around the nature of the photograph – is it a document; is it an unmediated 'slice of time'; has it brought about the death of art as it was known before its emergence? To quote Geoffrey Batchen:

...[Roland] Barthes has already discounted resemblance to reality as a way of defining photography... Photography's plausibility has always rested on the uniqueness of its indexical relation to the world it images, a relation that is regarded as fundamental to its operation as

a system of representation...It is as if objects have reached out and touched the surface of a photograph, leaving their own trace, as faithful to the contour of the original object as a death mask is to the face of the newly departed... For this reason, a photograph of something has long been held to be a proof of that thing's *being*, even if not of its truth.<sup>5</sup>

In my current work, my intent is to partially sever the image from its photographic referent, rejecting its link with 'being' and 'truth', and wrapping the viewer in a field of visual sensation, evoking an open-ended set of responses. In order to do this, I've extended my practice from traditional colour photography into the field of the digital image, and a significant part of my exhibition will now be large colour projections of details of skin. Alongside these works I'm also making small, intimate works in gum bichromate technique, which allow a closer physical approach to the work while at the same time – by being more painterly in effect – they are less grounded in the photographic referent.

Initially, the first thing people wanted to know about my body works was the gender of the subject. It seems there is something anomalous and unsettling in viewing a nude without knowing what the gender is. There is some disturbance of the scopical regimes implied by the persistence of these enquiries. As my work has moved closer and closer to the body, partially or completely obscuring gender, viewer responses have shifted from enquiries about the gender of the subject to the actual nature of the image content. The extreme close-up, while still referring to the body, presents it in such an ambiguous way that a further unresolved tension (outside of gender) is created.

Some of this tension relates to my use of the nude as it is inevitable that any photograph of the nude will reference the erotic. Imagery of the erotic, particularly photographic imagery (which is historically linked with pornography), is still largely seen as transgressive, the more so if it's a woman artist producing the images. When a woman photographs the male nude, in my experience, this is generally seen to be immodest, to be prurient, to be 'unwomanly'. This attitude reveals an anomaly of gender, as the relationship between the gender of the artist and the gender of the model is seen to be problematic. This is not a new situation – Imogen Cunningham, photographing her husband naked in 1915, found the response to her work so violent that she didn't allow the work to be



1: *Untitled*, 2006, digital image for projection.



2: *Untitled Manscape*, 2005, 25 x 40 cm.

shown again until the 1960s. These photographs, seen today, seem romantic, misty and, if not coy, at least modest.<sup>6</sup> The problem here seems to be not that a woman has depicted the naked male so much as that she has looked, and looked again, on an actual nude man.

Historically, women have been precluded from taking part in life drawing, painting and other activities where they might be exposed to a naked man. Tamar Garb, in "The Forbidden Gaze"<sup>7</sup>, makes an impressive argument for a Freudian reading of castrative disempowerment of the male by the female gaze. The basis of Garb's article is a fictional story published in 1883; her reading of this text suggests that the entry of women into art institutions was seen as so threatening as to be disruptive to society in general. I find it disappointing (but also interesting) that these attitudes, although not as overt, are still present today. One comment I received from a (male) reviewer of my master's entry submission was that my use of "young, beautiful males" as models was "questionable". What was questionable about it was not explained. His concern about my choice of model is evidence (if slight) that the attitudes encountered by Cunningham and explored by Garb are still influencing women's art practice today.

This leads one to query if a woman is entitled to the gaze. Since John Berger's writings of the 1960s, the debate over the ownership of the gaze has continued. Is the gaze exclusively male? Is a woman curiously split into a male 'spectator' and a female 'performer', while the man's responses are totally integrated and can be read as the mirror of his emotions? Is the male as simple and the female as complex as Berger thinks? The idea of the gaze as being a patriarchal dialogue between a passive (female) nude figure and a male viewer leaves someone like me – a female working with the male nude, in a curious position. Is the relationship the same? Am I exercising a matriarchal power over the subjugated male as he lies transfixed by my powerful gaze? Was this what was implied by the use of the adjective "young" in my examiner's comments?

According to Naomi Salaman,

...reversal is a far from adequate term to describe the process of women looking at men, as there is no symmetry in the construction of sexual difference, nor in the history of the male and female nude...When women artists attempt to represent men as the beautiful object they will not effect a social reverse of power; but they can affect the scopic regimes, and this can translate into new knowledge, new 'abstract power' in the debates of pleasure and representation... a modern female observer can look at the male body and play with the legacies of his vision without having to occlude her desiring body and its variety of identifications.<sup>8</sup>

By shifting my image-making exclusively to the male nude, I have entered more fully into this area of the 'feminine erotic', where the power lies with the artist and the viewer. What, then, is the role of the subject in this power play? Does the eroticised male subject become secondary to the struggle in which the artist asserts her bodily desires and must the viewer, like it or not, partake of this vision?

Salaman's placing of the feminine gaze in a different space from the male gaze seems to pose more questions than it answers. In this scenario, treating the male body as an eroticised subject seems to 'erase' the heterosexual male as a viewer. This is in itself curious. How can there be work that erases the viewer?

If the gender of the viewer is paramount in decoding imagery of the nude, this decoding can only take place in an erotic space, one where the eros of image and the eros of viewer engage with each other in a play of the gaze that empowers one and disempowers the other. Could it be that in viewing the erotic male image, the heterosexual male viewer experiences such a loss of power that he literally removes himself as audience? This would correspond with Berger's ideas on the gaze rather than with Salaman's – as in viewing the naked female form (always in an eroticised reading of the image) one can only imagine that a heterosexual female experiences this same 'erasure' when she sees an image that (according to Salaman's ideas) renders her unable to take part in the power exchange between image and viewer. However, in the case of women this does not seem to take place – instead a shift occurs, grounded I believe in a cultural reading of the nude, where the female viewer responds to the female nude as an object of beauty rather than of erotic power. Does this happen to the (heterosexual) male viewer of homoerotic material? My belief is that it generally does not. The male nude – except in cases where it is framed in a culturally acceptable manner<sup>9</sup> – seems to be visually inert or even repellent to many heterosexual men.

I have sold a number of pieces recently to men who identified themselves as gay; they all said they admired these images because of their beauty. The works were of cropped parts of the body, shot in the studio under soft, subdued lighting (see image 2). Up until now, I have used only one model, a middle-aged and far from idealised man. These images are a world away from 'beefcake' calendar shots, or the aggressively muscled, dramatically lit men photographed by Dianora Niccolini and later Robert Mapplethorpe. There are no penises, no overtly erotic images. The appeal of these works seems to be in their allowing a certain naturalism, passivity and fragility in the subject. This could imply that in a homoerotic setting, the gaze is not performed between equals, as one would expect when gender is the same, but between the active viewer and the passive, fixed subject. This overturns both Salaman's and Berger's view of the scopic regimes and suggests that rather than the gender of the viewer being paramount, the individuality (including sexuality) of the viewer also takes on a vital importance in the powerplay of the gaze.

I want to emphasise here that I am not attempting to represent the male as 'the beautiful object'. My work is framed in a more naturalistic way, presenting an older body in a way that reveals its blemishes and the nuances of flesh that has seen several decades of life. There is a beauty in older flesh – that beauty seen in the nude photographs of her mother by Melanie Manchot<sup>10</sup>, or the series *De Cette Femme*, made by Yves Tremorain<sup>11</sup>, both showing the effects of ageing on a woman's body. My work sits closer to Tremorain's, in revealing detail of skin alone, rather than that of Manchot, who allows her subject a dignified outward gaze. In the images I am making now, I prefer the skin to be the subject rather than the person inhabiting it.

Naturalism in this context can become symbolic, and most of the earlier more visually explicit images call up links with the landscape, in a similar way that bodily contours are evoked by the wrinkled, softened landscape paintings of Georgia O'Keefe, or, more recently, the large painted draperies of Jacqueline Morreau's *Fold Upon Fold*<sup>12</sup>; in both artists' works the implied

body is always present. In my more recent work, the play between the body and the landscape is exaggerated. The body, though present, is almost occluded by its own enlarged, intimate details. Shadows pool in hollows to suggest water; hairs become vegetal growths on the surface of strange, glistening surfaces.

My digital projection works are intended to be shown in a gallery setting, each covering a space of at least 18 square metres. Two revolving slide shows of eight images at a time will be projected at opposite ends of a darkened space, which will further emphasise the scale and detail of the works. Making work on such a large scale gives an unreal view of the body, one that cannot be effected by any human vision. Details of skin, seen on such a scale, can be overwhelming and repellent. Enlargement reveals the surface of the body, the skin and hair; the individual pores, moles and blemishes. This personalises the body, alluding to the individual and making the experience more intimate. At the same time the size, blurriness and luminous qualities of these images make them less real, and less accessible, and the subtle colour shifts that I introduce into the original images can suggest the pallor of death. This creates a dichotomous condition that leads to a sense of unease, while at the same time it is possible to experience the work as beautiful.

This same dichotomous condition is present in Mona Hatoum's *Corps Etranger (Strange Body)* installation of 1994, where she creates an environment based on projections of colour photographs of the interior of her body, made using an endoscope. The resultant images are both intimate and unrecognisable; as in my projected works, they suggest the body but also deny it by showing us the body as we cannot know it. These images are also much larger than lifesize, again fracturing the correspondence between referent and image. Through their undeniable mucosity and fleshiness Hatoum's projected images can call up feelings of disgust while also having a strange beauty and luminosity.

Hatoum's images are projected within an installation space, making a total environment that surrounds and encloses the viewer. I, however, want to create a sense of expansion, opening up the work and making it almost a background rather than an item that is simply 'viewed'. The use of large scale in my work renders the body fragment as a field: each becomes a static display that envelops the viewer and is intended to provoke feelings of sublimity through the expansion into the gigantic. Susan Stewart writes that the gigantic, being transcendent, always partakes of the sublime; that it represents nature on the loose, unmediated by culture.<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, writing on the sublime in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, gives examples of those things that might uplift us through "enjoyment with horror" and occasion a "feeling of the sublime": "mountains with peaks above the clouds, descriptions of raging storms..."<sup>14</sup>

These works cannot hope to provoke this feeling on a page, but in the proper context of large scale projection they have an overpowering aspect that can envelop the audience while still revealing clues to bodily existence and presence.

Strong feelings of abjection also seem to be provoked by some of my images (see 2 and 4). The object is situated in an area which is outside the symbolic order, and at the same time constitutes a threat to this order. Julia Kristeva explains it as a sense of horror, caused by a breakdown of

the barriers between individuals, which thus accesses the pre-symbolic order; the area devoid of language where reactions are felt on a visceral level. The triggering of a pre-symbolic state elicits a feeling unmediated by the consciousness of the individual. According to Kristeva this reaction is tied up with our realisation – through the fracturing of the symbolic order – of our own individual death.<sup>15</sup> In all my recent series of works, I have used the close-up to render fine detail in the skin, but only in part of the image. The rest becomes unfocused and blurry, creating a backdrop against which selected details can stand out. Manipulation of the tones, giving a cool colour cast, adds an unreality and suggestion of deathly pallor. In the larger works the scale helps to break down those barriers between the individual and the work to instigate feelings of abjection.

Abjection and desire (and its fulfillment) are closely related, also according to Kristeva. If the abject is bound up with both fear (phobia) and *jouissance* – “One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it (*on en jouit*). Violently and painfully. A passion...” – then an object expressing this quality can be equally attractive and repellent, fascinating through its repulsiveness and at the same time erotic and powerful. Using the term *jouissance* (sexual climax), makes a direct link between the abject and the erotic.<sup>16</sup> Presenting the body nude and in great detail shows it as shockingly animal, shockingly biological and at the same time unavoidably erotic.



3: *Untitled*, 2006, digital image for projection, 2006.

To return to Berger: "...nakedness acts as a confirmation and provokes a strong sense of relief..." Nakedness is personal, however, and nudity or more particularly 'the nude' is not, as it is formalised within conventions, and breaching any conventions can cause disquiet. Any work expressing nakedness outside the acceptable conventions will cause disruption to the expectations of the viewer. Removing the naked body from its comforting frame of the classical causes confusion, shock and sometimes anger.

Art, after all, is a social construct; the viewer expects to be able to understand the work on an intellectual level, and to be able to digest it and add it to his or her cultural 'stock'. When working within the area of both the sublime and the abject, however, one would expect to transport the individual to a place which is at the limits of intellectual understanding, and is felt more as a bodily experience. A liminal experience such as this is not so easily assimilated. "Certain kinds of art ...invite participation rather than 'viewing'. As such, there is no definitive interpretation, no higher meaning, and the experience is often profoundly (and intentionally) disorienting."<sup>17</sup>

The smaller works don't seem to provoke the same responses of abjection as the large projections, except when they are particularly ambiguous. The image *Close to You #5* (see opposite page) seems very disquieting, apparently because of its perceived subject matter; most people initially see it as an image of genitalia and find it repulsive. When I had a full-colour conventional print of this photo shown in an exhibition, a prospective buyer had the gallery ring me to find out what part of the body it showed. The power of this image rests in its ability to shock and disturb by its connection, through the abject, to the erotic, or even the pornographic. That this response is deliberately manipulated does not make it any less powerful, and the patent relief (usually expressed in laughter) when I reveal that the image is actually of an armpit (and a man's), is universal. This laughter seems to be cathartic, releasing the tension caused by the image's ambiguity and allowing a return to the banal. "We need the banality which we find in the first instance of disclosure [of nakedness] because it grounds us in reality."<sup>18</sup> A photograph of anonymous parts of the body can be very unsettling, simply because it disrupts this banality of nakedness by presenting an image of nakedness within the conventions of an image of the nude.

By partially removing the nude subject from the photographic through blurring, changes in scale and technical manipulation, I hope to provoke such disturbance and to produce a shock of revelation unmediated by the relief Berger speaks of, which after all is a relief of familiarity, of categorisation.<sup>19</sup> The very power of the contexts of the abject and the sublime lies in their lack of explicitness – their difficulty of assimilation.

When examining sublimity and abjection side by side, they seem to address a common theme – the dichotomous attraction of the fearful, and the horrible. The erotic, as an embedded element of the abject, must therefore also be involved in the play between the horrible and the delightful. If I return now to Batchen's remarks on the photograph's indexical link to the real, it is easy to make the connection between the perceived link with the reality of the photographic object and the shock of 'reality' that defines the abject in Kristeva's writing, as well as underlying the sublimity of Kant, later discussed by Stewart.

The area where these correspondences intersect is also the site where the scale of my large works becomes powerful and suggestive; creating an experience that is both sublime and abject at the same time. That these two states are contiguous is not surprising: writers on both topics use similar words to describe their effects. Horror is mentioned by both Kant and later Kristeva, as well as by Burke and later Stewart: "...that mixture of horror and excitement; the dual impulse to look away [and to] keep watching, to see *more*", according to Suzannah Biernoff on the corporeal sublime.<sup>20</sup> A further correspondence lies in the 'unmediated' nature of these states – both Stewart and Kristeva use this word in relation to their subjects.

A disruption of this contiguity occurs, however, if we accept that Kant's sublime, with its historical association with landscape, was seen as being the masculine preserve, while the beautiful was the expression of the feminine aspect of landscape. The abject, through its association with fluidity and bodily excess, also occupies a feminine space. When translating sublimity from the landscape to the gigantism of the projected, enlarged body, there is, perhaps, understandable confusion in the gendering of responses.

My recent digital works attempt to translate my experience of *another* body, not my own, into visual terms for the consumption of *somebody else*. I am presenting, not interpreting, that experience for the viewer. This is an ongoing preoccupation: the eliciting of a type of synaesthesia – one which transfers a sensory response *between* individuals rather than from one sense to another *in* the individual – in my imaginary, anonymous and ubiquitous 'viewer'. My intention is to provide an experience through accessing feelings of sublimity and abjection. This is not an attempt to communicate, as: "Communication implies the transmission of a message or meaning and its decoding by the recipient. But grief, passion, longing, fear [i.e. emotions]: these states are often about the absence or suspension of meaning or understanding. Their 'representation', if we can use that term, is corporeal."<sup>21</sup> The intention is to move into that unmediated space that Kristeva and Stewart describe; that place where a visual shock occurs and propels us into an individual experience, that is, perhaps, grounded in the experience of the artist, but rests ultimately in the perceptions of



4: *Close to you #5*, 2005, gum bichromate print, 15x10 cm.

the viewer: I suggest that it is in this anomalous, eroticised and fluid space between the sublime, the abject and the familiar that the power of the unresolved gender questions in my work may reside.

- 1 Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001).
- 2 C Townsend, *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking* (Munich & New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1998).
- 3 This article is tangential and complementary to my master's dissertation. As such it is written in relation to conversations with such people.
- 4 John Berger; *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).
- 5 Geoffrey Batchen, Op. cit.
- 6 Margery Mann, "Imogen Cunningham", in "Imogen! Imogen Cunningham, Photographs 1910-1973 (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1974).
- 7 Tamar Garb, "The Forbidden Gaze", in Kathleen Adler and Marcia Poynton (eds), *The Body Imaged: The Human Form and Visual Culture since the Renaissance* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1993).
- 8 Naomi Salaman, "Regarding Male Objects", in Naomi Salaman (ed.), *What She Wants: Women Artists Look at Men* (New York & London: Verso, 1994).
- 9 As in an art historical context: classical or neo-classical imagery being an accepted cultural framing of the male nude or semi-nude.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 William A Ewing, *The Body: Photoworks of the Human Form* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).
- 12 See <http://www.morraux.co.uk/jackie/website/fold.html> as last visited on 7 October 2006.
- 13 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1993).
- 14 P Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime; from Morality to Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 15 Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection", in Kelly Oliver (ed.), *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Suzannah Biernoff, "The Corporeal Sublime", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art, Affect and Sensation*, Volume 2, #2 2001 & Volume 3, # 1, 2002, 61-75.
- 18 John Berger; Op. cit.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Suzannah Biernoff, Op. cit.
- 21 Ibid.

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