

Nudes: Recontextualizing the Female Nude in Contemporary Art

By Leah Monsour

Abstract

In this paper I will discuss my photographic project titled “Nudes”; the research that led to its conception, and the process in its various iterations. This project is a visual response to the male gaze. How we are trained to see, and who is allowed to be in control of this, has a direct impact on the images that are made. When the dominant lens we are trained to see through stems from patriarchal values, the power dynamic inherent in patriarchy is amplified. Photographs are seen as truth, and have the ability to reinforce or subvert already existing cultural beliefs. It is in confronting the gaze, subverting it, inserting new narratives, that we are able to challenge this cycle. My project aims to do this.

Keywords: photography, female body, women, male gaze, patriarchy, hierarchy, dominant narratives, power dynamic, truth, subversion

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I began this project shortly after Donald Trump's inauguration. The assignment, for my Contemporary Issues Class, was to confront an issue in our contemporary culture. Like many other oppressed people under this new national leadership, I had been thinking a lot about my body: my rights to my body, and where I fit in the hierarchy of bodies in patriarchal society. Trump becoming president did not instill patriarchy in the United States of America, but it did remind a lot of people where we are truly living, and put sexism, racism, and the patriarchal hierarchy of bodies on the forefront.

My experience has always been in a woman's body. The issues surrounding how we view women's bodies in this society quickly became my focus. I began with the thought that living in a woman's body in this society is a performance in and of itself, in thinking about the ways in which I myself had felt on display, or disconnected from my physical form. I researched female performance artists of the 60s and 70s, Ana Mendieta, and Carolee Shneeman to name a couple. Mendieta and Shneeman used their bodies in their work to varying degrees; this is inherently radical, if we are always performing anyway, why not be in control of it for once.

Mendieta created a series of "earth-body" performances in which she impressed her body into the land and recorded its imprint, sometimes filling the silhouettes of her body with organic materials¹ (fig 1). Mendieta's use of her body was to speak about her own experience as a woman and an immigrant.

¹ "Ana Mendieta | Corazón De Roca Con Sangre (Rock Heart with Blood) (1975)." *Artsy*, Artsy, www.artsy.net.

Shneeman in her performance *Interior Scroll* (fig 2) stood on a table and pulled a long scroll out of her vagina, reading it as she pulled. Shneeman said about the work, “the culture’s terror of my making overt what it wished to suppress fueled the image”².

Shneeman is discussing the fact that we as a culture refuse to confront women’s bodies and all that they are capable of. In mimicing birth with a scroll of her own words, Shneeman used her own body to act out and speak about our “terror” and “suppression” around the female body.

From here my research took a turn; this was all inspiring work, but our culture has changed greatly since the ‘60s and ‘70s. I began to look at the way the female form was being used in art more currently. I looked at Awol Erizku’s nudes of 2013, *Meskerem* and *Zewditu* (fig 3, fig 4). These images are beautiful and progressive in many ways; inserting the black female body into the mainstream visual language surrounding the nude is radical indeed. However, there was still something that seemed very off about these images to me. Erizku, a man, was very clearly in control in this situation. In her text *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey discusses the sexualized depiction of women in cinema, as a reflection of patriarchal ideas that assume women as pleasure objects. Photographic images, according to Mulvey, are not a reflection of real women or the real “normal”³. This text is the root of the term “male gaze”. Through this lens it is easier to see: Erizku’s images are sexualized, these women are submissive, they are created to satisfy the male gaze.

² Chernick, Karen. “10 Female Performance Artists Who Aren’t Marina Abramović.” Artsy, Artsy, 20 Dec. 2017, www.artsy.net.

³ Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 1989, pp. 14–26.

The more I thought about the nude, and how I could make nudes in a subversive way, the more I became troubled by it. For me it all comes down to this idea that art does not exist in a vacuum. When constantly confronted with sexualized images of women in advertising (fig 5), in cinema (fig 6), and in art, I am not confident that our culture has the ability to look at a naked woman outside of the lens of the male gaze.

I became extremely interested in confronting this dominant male gaze centered narrative, influenced heavily by the patriarchy we live in. The medium of photography became more and more important to this subversion, because of its power as a “truth telling medium”. In his text *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes examines how when we view a photograph, we don’t see the photograph itself, we see the subject of the photograph as unseparate from the subject itself, or what the photograph references. When we see a photograph of ourselves, we say, “this is me”, when in fact there are many layers between the subject and the resulting photographic image⁴. We often wrongly mistake photographs as icons, which within the study of semiotics refers to when the signifier directly resembles the signified⁵. Photography is different from other art forms in its assumed “truthfulness”.

This is where shifting the gaze comes into play, and why it matters. How we are trained to see, and who is allowed to be in control of this, has a direct impact on the images that are made. When the dominant lens we are trained to see through stems from patriarchal values, a system of oppression, and the dominant perspective is male, the power dynamic inherent in patriarchy is amplified. When photographs are seen as truth or as icon, already existing cultural beliefs are either reinforced or subverted. It is in

⁴ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. The Noonday Press, 1988.

⁵ D'Alleva, Anne. *Methods & Theories of Art History*, Second Edition. Lawrence King Publishing.

confronting the gaze, subverting it, inserting new narratives, that we are able to challenge this cycle.

Taking all of these ideas into account, I began to think about a new approach to the nude. I pictured myself in Erizku's shoes, a camera in my hand and a nude woman in front of me. To make the obvious image would be upsetting. In this situation I have a choice, as the photographer I hold the power of creating the resulting image. In a cinematic moment of epiphany, the idea came to me: what if I just don't photograph her body? All wrapped within this simple shift in perspective, this project became a commentary on objectification, a reclamation of the gaze, and a space for vulnerability without exploitation.

Ideas are exciting, but what is more important is execution. In deliberating how to make these *Nudes*, I decided to use the 4"x5" view camera (fig 7). This piece of equipment relates back to my earlier ideas surrounding performance; as a photographer using this camera you are performing to a certain extent. It is intimate and beautiful and large, and the subject photographer dynamic is far different than when using a DSLR. Towards the beginning of this project I toyed with the idea of me being nude as well. But quickly it became clear that would not work, that idea is quite different in that it would become a documentation of an experience. For this project to be a successful commentary on the gaze, a more typical photographer-subject power dynamic needs to be present. It is within this dynamic that I as the photographer use this power to make the choice to shift perspective.

I shot people in my greater New Paltz circle for an entire semester, cementing my process. The shoots were scary at first, I struggled to create balance between getting

what I wanted and feeling like I was asking too much of my subjects. They got easier and easier. Shooting people I already know became important to me, as a way to more organically create this intimate space and make my gaze even kinder. The resulting images were intimate, strong, the gaze of the women was powerful, especially when displayed as a group (fig 8, 9, 10, 11).

As the project progressed I looked for ways to expand it. I began shooting portrait videos, the same idea except with a moving gaze, asking the subject to stare into the camera for one minute while I sat by. These were not quite working, the gaze was strong but hesitant, it became clear that my presence in the room along with the time restriction created a more artificial space than was appropriate. I decided I needed to leave the room, and to tell the subject to stare into the camera for as long as they can. This process became a way to allow these women to confront the gaze: to look back at this phallic object that the camera is. In the moments in which the subjects would look away involuntarily, it became clear that when they weren't looking at us, we were looking at them. These moments become a time for viewer self reflection. We become self conscious of how we look at her as soon as she looks back at us.

Through photographic exploration, *Nudes* aims to challenge the male gaze. As a truth telling medium, photography can be used to create new narratives, and subvert the narratives that already exist. Through extensive research, I developed a new approach to the female nude, and new perspective on women, creating images that aim to make us question our way of looking, and flip the gaze, giving it to the ones we so often gaze upon.



Fig 1: Ana Mendieta, *Corazón de Roca con Sangre (Rock Heart with Blood)*, 1975

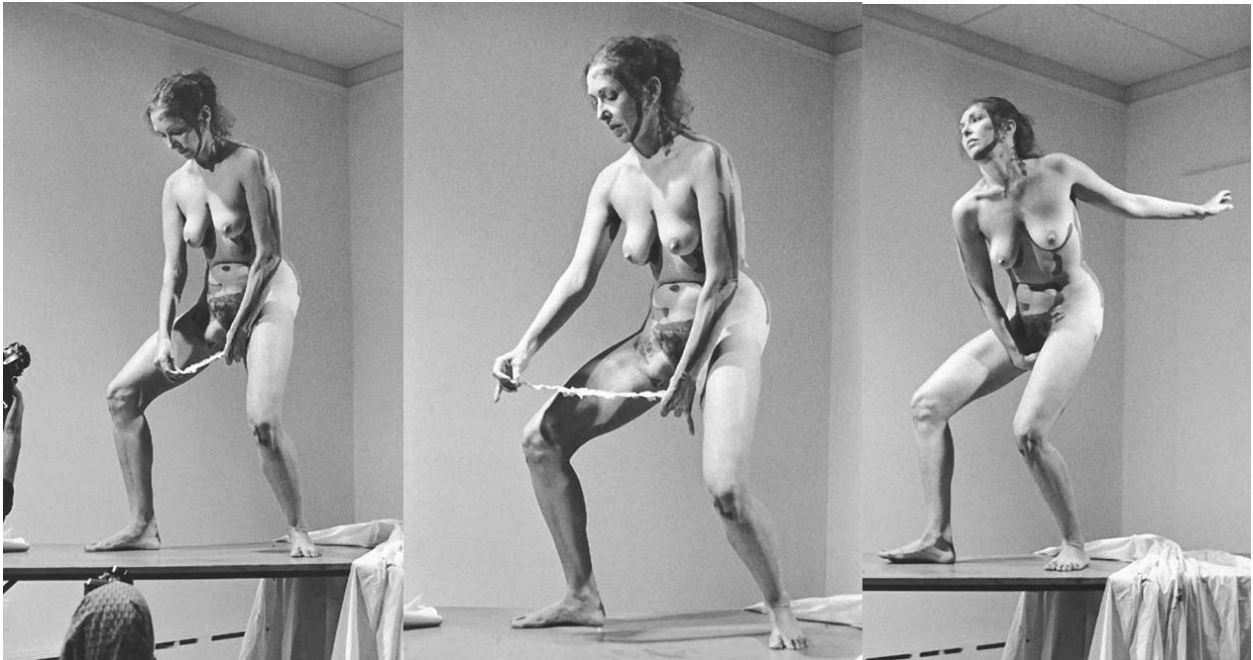


Fig 2: Carolee Schneeman, *Interior Scroll*, 1975



Fig 3: Awol Erizku, *Meskerem*, 2013



Fig 4: Awol Erizku, *Zewditu*, 2013



Fig 5: 2017 American Apparel Ad



Fig 6: Megan Fox, *Transformers 1*.



Fig 7

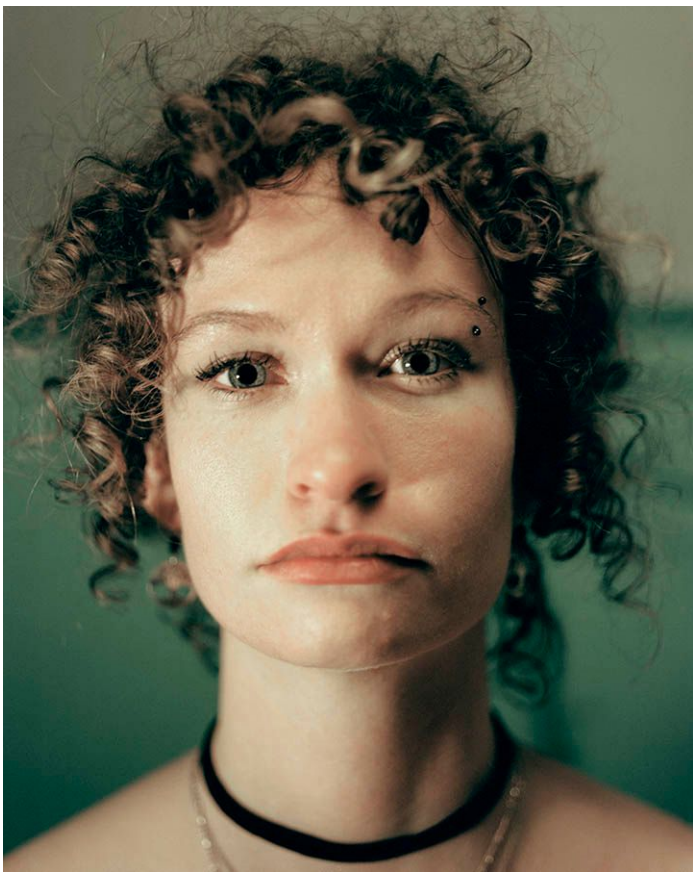


Fig 8, *Brenna*

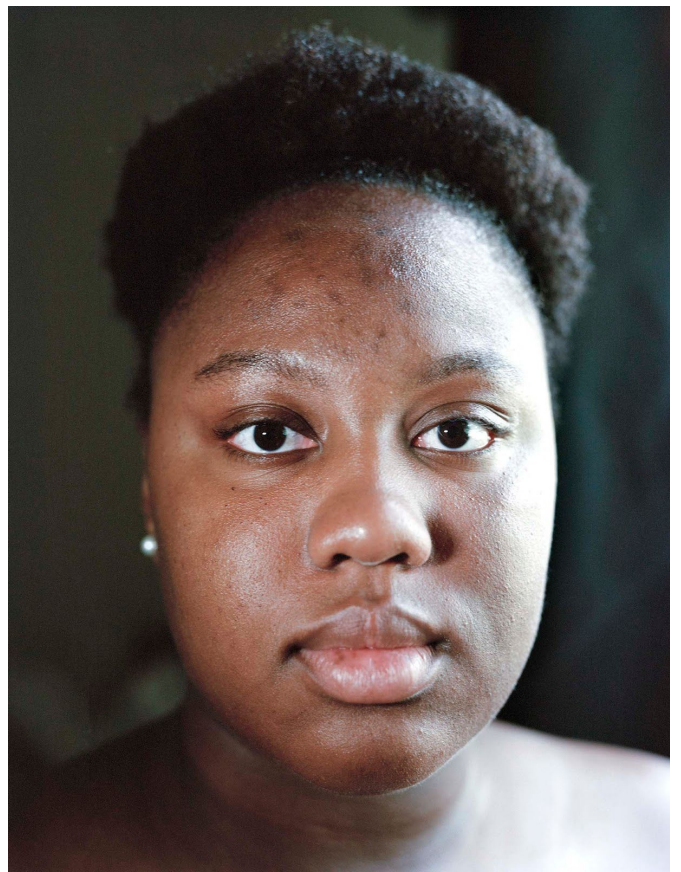


Fig 9, *Geraldine*



Fig 10, *Julie*



Fig 11, *Deborah*

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