

THE RETURN OF THE NUDE

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We inhabit a contemporary, sexually sophisticated landscape, surely far removed from those coy, ungainly, prudish fig leaves painted over or plastered upon ancient art torsos. But the metaphorical fig leaf still possesses our cultural imagination. This folded edge where leaf meets flesh marks the tension between disclosure and suppressing: a tightly coiled machine of 'visual pleasure'.

The justly celebrated July 1985 *Art and Text* collection of Pierre Klossowski's drawings of naked men and ladies bound together with his essay 'The decadence of the nude' once more enacted the fig leaf drama when the magazine turned up, who knows how, in a city studio I was sharing in mid-1986. We were all a little young and embarrassed. I suspect we all perused the issue in guilty solitude. To my great shame I have only read the Klossowski essay some eighteen years on. It is a compelling analysis of visual arousal in European high culture's licensed arena of erotic desire, on the surface of the Nude. That studio moment of looking and not looking, of viewing the drawings but not staggering through the text reveals the immediate possibilities of the visual as opposed to the lengthier duration of reading. To treat the essay as a subordinate veil or fig leaf to the drawings is to miss the point. This act renders the words as mere registration marks rather than one surface describing vision's sexual power.

Even these remarks may continue to misconstrue the point. Klossowski directs us to the power of image making. Unacknowledged but surely influential on this ex-seminarian is the origin of the 'unveiling complex' in the account of Genesis. After eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve discover that 'the eyes of both of them were opened' and 'they saw that they were naked'. Visuality is intimately imbricated in prohibition. 'Truth' or a more complex self emerges from shadowy invisibility by being visualized: an event activated by the unauthorized glance.

In the moment of looking, according to Klossowski, the self is actualised. This intricate self comprises desire, lust, shame, transgression and violence. Only a certain mode of representation can enact this moment. Klossowski locates himself between two extremes: the intellectual disinterest fostered by a certain mode of modernist abstraction and erotic painting purged of 'the explosive potential' of the look. He reminds us of representational painting's incantatory power. Art possesses a perversely redemptive function and that's okay, unfashionable perhaps, but it catches the tick of theology borrowed deep in the heart of western aesthetics.

According to Klossowski only a certain kind of representation structures the viewer's identity formation. The female nude must be consciously aware of her own nakedness and the spectator must be aware of this – we might say – in order to acknowledge the transgressive nature of what he views. Like Adam and Eve, the Nude knows herself to be naked, to be illicit. This open secret is signaled in covert ways, through her gaze or through her 'secretive', internal location within the image, poised in an enclosed architectural interior, or within a landscape where she is enclosed by a fold of drapery, a billowing bush, a darkening glade. It would be easy to construe her gaze upon herself (literal or symbolic) as an echo of the active, possessive look of the viewer, a moment in which she becomes an object and thus a partial outsider to herself. However Klossowski's remarks on the nude's consciousness may help us re-read the conventional wisdom of art history.

Two high modernist moments fractured the complacent dirty manners of the traditional nude genre. Both TJ Clark and Leo Steinberg have palpitated over the startling

emergence of the nude self-possessed by an intense physiognomy, directly addressing herself to the viewer. (See TJ Clark's account of Manet's *Olympia* 1863 in *The painting of modern life* 1985; and Leo Steinberg's reading of Pablo Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* 1907, in 'The philosophical brothel', *October* no. 44, 1988). For the first time in European painted history the naked woman would seem to be empowered. Clark observed of the traditional nude's gaze, 'That candour, that dreamy offering of self, that looking that was not quite looking...'. Against Clark I would argue that the woman's partly withheld look, her dreamy outlook, provides us with a way into reading both Klossowski's nudes and the traditional nude. Between visual possession and imagined or real entry into her body there are many folds and turnings. Within the traditional nude the woman withholds something from us. She withholds part of her self. Held and withheld, the nude repines up on a powerful threshold.

Klossowski's drawings mark a tension between containment and flight. Roberte, the perverse 'heroine', is often tied or bound or her legs or arms held by others. But she often gazes in a stilled moment of contemplation or absorption, looking away from those who hold her, finding a space outside the drawn frame, or withdrawn into an inner meditative self. Her absorption retains a profound power. The drawings suggest something beyond a moment of desire bound only by transgression, a moment in which the complexity of the viewer's desire is enacted as a deliciously licentious act. They direct our attention to a complicated power struggle. A viewer is marked by social prohibition but more importantly, by the power of those who appear to enact our desire for their submission. Those S and M roles are birched by domination on both sides. The power in desire unsettles us all, making ourselves both strangers and familiars.

In this contemporary exhibition *The decadence of the nude*, the artists display a fine, wry understanding of these familiar codes and adeptly reconfigure them. If, as I have argued, one of the major structural devices of the nude is what is hidden or withheld, these works amply demonstrate this code. Jonathon Nichols' paintings display just a provocative hint of nipple. Furthermore the young woman's mouth is hidden by the arch of her fingers curled over a fat cigar. She inhales. Post-Monica Lewinsky's famous cigar, we cannot fail to find the sexual charge in smoking or in the proffered match. Phallic signifiers proliferated in traditional nudes, as vases, bows, arrows, horns, conch shells, snakes, dolphin tails. Signs of erection and promised entry beyond mere visual possession directed the viewer to a painting's subtext. Nichols' subject focuses her breath, her downturned eyes, her hand, her conscious focus on the act of inhalation or setting the cigar alight and yet her partly concealed naked flesh surrounds an everyday act, striking another sexual context. Like the traditional nude, the hand that holds the match offers the viewer a position within the picture space. However the surface of the painting, its facture, the flesh tones more heavily delineated, the hair flat plastered to the surface remind us that we cannot merely dissolve the image into a cornucopia of erotic imaginings. Paint depicts and fractures the easy path of our sexual imaginery.

Leo Steinberg famously enunciated the revolutionary confrontation with the nude's power base in the female subject's 'intensity of address'. The works in this show remember that this address was matched by a demand for a more attentive viewer and duration of engagement. Art makes us look longer, requires a little more agility and refuses easy erotic consumption.

Raafat Ishak's wall panting reminds us that even minimal figuration serves to activate desire, albeit of a wry, bestial kind. In his work our national fauna are happily rooting around in the flora: the emu taken from behind by the kangaroo. Amongst the avenue of honour, sacred symbols of the fallen war dead or genocidal subjects are jumbled with fears of miscegenation, sexual violence and the happy gamboling of interspecies sex.

High culture nudes are earnest in their disavowal of eroticism. They are often unintentionally amusing in their ridiculous mechanisms of suppression. Ishak notes that even perversely funny nature 'documentaries' and nationalistic iconography possess an unbidden erotic charge. Given the right context, humour governs pornographic fantasies. Symbols of things we would normally disavow (animals, amputees, obesity) unravel some curious disconnected thread into the heart of sex.

Whilst Klossowski refuses the disinterest offered by certain forms of 'abstract' representation, his own drawings denote a certain minimal representational threshold. The pornographic imaginary is full of ready clichés easily activated by the sketch. Vivienne Shark LeWitt's *The true legend of Lady Godiva* is gloriously stylized: depicting a profile portrait outline of three determined, mounted women. The tip of the Lady's breast is rather inconveniently withheld from the viewer: wryly covered by another head's modest cap. Such a coy covering replays the fig leaf motif: modesty and exposure are juxtaposed. The ladies remain purposeful (they are not bunnies) and attendant to their own political desires. The artist's iconographic choice suggests how earnestly preposterous was the long tradition of the western nude, requiring legendary pretexts for its sexual absorption. Yet Godiva is somehow redeemed in LeWitt's depiction of her easy grace, studied focus and quiet bearing.

And now I come to what I regard as the most erotic and I imagine most easily misconstrued images from the exhibition: the delicate paper cut-outs of Sangeeta Sandrasegar. I have only viewed the JPEG versions of this sequence of works, a kind of simulation of the way in which erotic images are now easily delivered. I may miss the quiet materiality of these pieces. The sequence, gloves imprinted with traditional profile portraiture, a woman on the phone, her hand distractedly in hair, a blurred frenzied abstract piece and then the final image of a rope-bound woman. The last three images are contained within the frame of a delicately decorated, tattooed or hennaed foot. The final work is the most confronting. Bound, blindfolded and perhaps gagged, this young woman appears to enact a narrative of traditional submission.

And yet against the drama of possession Sandrasegar's patterns of image-making intervene *and* suggest a body in action. The very material of the cut-out doubles and undercuts the content. Outline and shadow engage so that a twinned silhouette animates the nude. This suggestion of a moving nude undoes our own threads of certainty. She may struggle against her bonds or be mid-arousal. Even if we grant this generous reading we cannot deny her blindness: her gaze is blocked, veiled, blindfolded. This may signal her complete surrender and the complete power of the viewer. But like the fig leaf or veil this covering may further twist our platitudes. Desire's exploding force undermines the viewer's self-possession. In S and M role-playing the position of submission holds a power of desire and control. To be desired by another is to unleash or acknowledge the other's incapacity to completely summon and submit their own self. There are qualifications of course. But the terms dominator, dominated, active and passive refuse to nestle in cosy niches.

Our pornographic sexual imagination is sedimented with clichés. This, I suspect, is part of the deal with sex. No amount of self-righteous denunciation will ever completely cancel this account. And how might we manage it anyway? Klossowski's decadent nude reveals how certain structures beyond and larger than the self – painting – catch us and reveal our own alterity. Desire and sexuality, even spiked with humour, even in the age of streaming internet porn, are so deeply folded around and within us that even the overt materiality of an art image cannot dissuade us from feeling transgressive and aroused, from feeling the magnetising force of desire.