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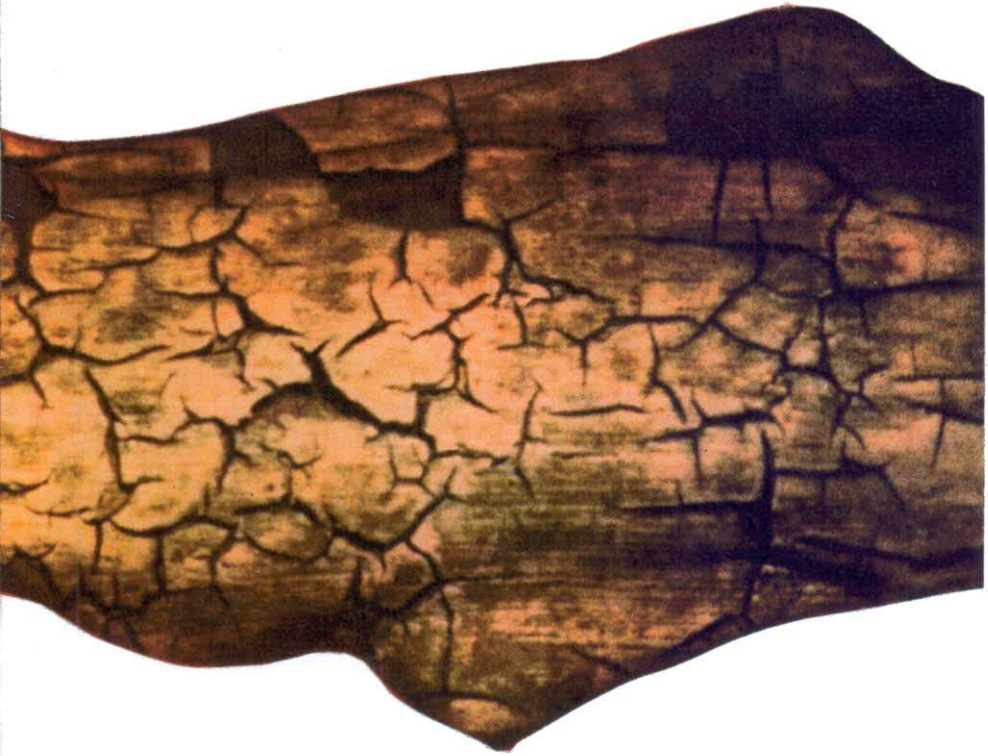
IS NOT

A CLEAN SLATE



CATHARSIS & MISOGYNY IN MALE ART

THE FEMALE BODY IS NOT A CLEAN SLATE:

Catharsis & Misogyny in Male Art

by Ben Kritikos

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I recently visited a gallery where a fairly well known artist was celebrating the opening of his exhibition. The appeal of new work from this particular artist attracted a large crowd. My own interest stemmed from an affinity with the subject matter of the work. Arriving with two friends, both women, we ran into several other acquaintances who had already arrived, also mostly women. We were surprised to find that the works of art on display depicted, among other things, female bodies being subjected to violence, some of it sexual. In one case, the audience was confronted with the brutal display of a woman's figure in a situation of torture and humiliation. We contemplated the symbolic value of this violence, in the context of all the works being exhibited. That the work itself was accomplished with technical competence suggested that one could expect to be rewarded by contemplation.

Scanning the gallery, it appeared evenly split between men and women; and though attendants milled around chatting (as they do at exhibitions fuelled with free booze) it wasn't difficult to discern a visible discomfort on the faces of the women present. My own acquaintances asked each other, 'what do you think?' Their answers were non-committal, as though it were not worth the effort of stating the obvious: <u>of course</u> the only female figures in all the works on display were being attacked, bound, mutilated. <u>Of course</u> a woman's body served as the figurative receptacle of cathartic male aggression.

Naming the individual artist and his exhibition described above is unnecessary. Instances of male artists of all disciplines deploying violence against a female body in a work of art are so common as to be innumerable. If we extend this consideration to design and advertising, they are reduced to a truism.

It is difficult to overestimate the value of women's bodies as a symbolic currency in the transactional relationship between artist and audience. Indeed, in the history of art, nothing spans centuries and disciplines

more completely than the female form. Not even pigment itself.

In 2017, in the situation in which women as a social group find themselves--perhaps by some measure a 'better' but by no means an acceptable one--the male artist's deployment of the female body as a catch-all signifier is fraught. The male artist should always ask himself at the outset, when choosing from the well-worn tools at his disposal, if deploying the female form in his work is a choice based on a desire to express that which cannot be divorced from the experience of being human in a female body. If the answer is no, he should step away and think again, search the toolbox for an implement better suited to his purposes, something fresher.

For, make no mistake, the woman's body has been weaponised: by men, against women, for centuries. Whether one intends harm or not, the tool at closest reach for the dealer in symbols tends to be the one wrought from someone else's dispossession; its efficacy is evidenced by its ubiquity, like the sweatshop production model of big clothing brands. Wilful neglect of such inequality, which is simply chauvinism, amounts to a failure of artistic judgement.

Such cack-handed oversight demonstrates a lack of fluency in the symbols humans use to produce and express complex meaning, a transaction that requires a certain degree of trust between the agents of exchange. If an audience cannot reasonably expect the artist to make good on their implicit promise to competently communicate, express, or elicit some worthwhile meaning, then the artist cannot reasonably expect the audience to bother with their work. Thus misogyny--even if unintentional; rather, <u>especially</u> if unintentional--is a form of imposture, of counterfeit; it is bad art. The spectacle of a man, an artist or otherwise, acting violently on a woman's body, framed as art or otherwise, is always something other than art. As artistic practice it is less an exchange than a mugging: we must stand by while the female body is impoverished of content, hewn to a malleable signifier, not by some immanent social force but by the artist himself. And we are all left the poorer for it.

When such art is deployed for political aims, this problematic is compounded. The (male) artist cries foul, highlighting an injustice, some instance of the strong treading on the weak. His rage, levelled at or deployed via the female form, reproduces the very power relation he aims to highlight. Ironies abound. (And what undercuts the expressive potency of art if not the self-inflicted contradictions and banalities that seem to elude it? Such blind spots are themselves instruments of the powerful, who exercise knowledge-power over those without it.) His rage is dispersed, lost in a haze of irruptive irony. This irony engulfs and subsumes the power of fluency at the heart of artistic gestures; a fluency which forms the basis for any transaction--emotional, intellectual, political--between human experience and human expression.

In the case that I have described, as in all such cases, the artist's efforts are undermined not by his inability to read his subject matter, but by his inability to read his audience. One may ask: What world is he living in? The answer is: Right here in the soup with his audience, for whom the female body represents not only the symbolic value he determines in the field of his expression, but a historically contingent and lived materiality. The female body is not a clean slate. In setting a woman's body to the task of absorbing the shocks of his violent gestures, framed as a work of art, the artist reduces the audience to witnesses of a banal cruelty played out on the chronically alienated bodies of women-in-general. This trope is nearly omnipresent, and for all its ethical and political implications it is also boring. The tacit agreement between artist and audience is impugned; it becomes not so much a transaction between free agents as an off-loading of injury from one location to another, a con job--all through the artist's failure to truly value the currency at his disposal. Each time this

counterfeit is put into circulation, the power of its legitimate referent is devalued and denigrated. And because such works of art are so common, they are the very definition of trite.