Comparative Study
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Evolution of the female form in Art

The human form and changing notions of beauty have always acted as a source of inspiration for me. This study looks at the representation of the female form and explores how that has evolved and changed over time. I have looked at two very different artists for this study to investigate the influence that culture and differing contexts can have, not only on how the artist creates the work but how the audience perceives it.

This study compares Botticelli’s iconic ‘Birth of Venus’, the ‘symbol of feminine grace and beauty’ (Mental, N.p) with Jenny Saville’s controversial paintings of nude women that shatter the conventions of beauty and paints it the way it really is. I have looked especially at the effect the female and male gaze has influenced the representation of the female form and the role feminism has had to play in its depiction; ‘The history of art has been dominated by men, living in ivory towers, seeing women as sexual objects. I paint women as most women see themselves.’ (The Independent, 2016)
Botticelli was alive in the Renaissance era in Italy. This was a very influential time in history and is considered the bridge between the Middle Ages and modern history. The birth of Venus, 1485 perfectly captures the transitional stage of a Florentine painting in the late 14th century. Botticelli has combined the subject matter of the classical, pagan world with the righteousness of Christianity.

Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’ has been subject to interpretation through various perspectives such as the Christian perspective used to interpret the piece. The Christian interpretation suggests that the nudity of Venus mirrors Eve in the Garden of Eden. Speculation derived that Venus is a personification of the Christian Church. One should note, for instance, that the title of the Virgin Mary is "stella maris": star of the sea. Perhaps the sea gives birth to Venus just as the Madonna gives birth to Jesus Christ. (Birth of Venus, 2016)

Botticelli did not fully paint in the naturalistic style. Therefore he rarely gave weight and volume to his characters, and maintained a ‘narrow perspectival space’. Consequently the figure of Venus (like her complement in La Primavera) has a long neck and torso, while her classical ‘contrapposto’ (asymmetrical arrangement of the human figure) posture is physiologically impossible.

Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, known as Sandro Botticelli, an Italian Renaissance artist from Florence recognized for his paintings illustrating religious and mythical themes. Botticelli lived from 1445-1510, and in 1486, he painted one of his most famous works, The Birth of Venus. He went to the Florentine School under the influence of Lorenzo de' Medici, a movement that Giorgio Vasari would characterize less than a hundred years later in his Vita of Botticelli as a "golden age". Botticelli's posthumous reputation suffered until the late 19th century; since then, his work has been seen to represent the refinement of Early Renaissance painting. (Study.com, 2016)

There has been much debate on the premise that this painting was for Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-92) of the Medici Family, who was quattrocento particularly interested in classical mythology, and marks the conclusion of the revival of ancient myths, within the context of a humanistic Renaissance art.
ANALYSIS OF THE FORMAL ELEMENTS
Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, 1480

**Composition & Background Information**
The theme of the birth of Venus was depicted from ancient poet, Homer. According to the poet, Venus was born on a seashell and rode the sea foam to reach the island of Cythera. This account is relative to the painting where Venus is born out of the shell and rides on sea foam to the shore. On the left of Venus there is Zephyrus, which carries the nymph Chloris as he blows the wind to guide Venus. On the shore there is Pomona also known as the goddess of spring and waits for Venus with a mantle in her hands. The composition of this painting is similar to that of the Primavera, another known piece by Botticelli. Venus is slanted somewhat right of the center and her naked figure is isolated in the piece with no figures around her. Venus's head is tilted to the left and she leans in an awkward 'contrapposto' stance.

**Venus's Body**
**Texture & Tone**
Venus is painted with contours around her body so that her body is easily seen against the background meanwhile it emphasizes her light somewhat translucent delicate skin comparable to that of marble accentuating the sculpturesque nature of her body.

**Colour and Tone**
Using Egg Tempera as a form of producing this artwork, allows the colour to seem more delicate and rich. There is a large variation of tone and the colour that is more prominently seen is the colour green whether rich and dark to muddy green to turquoise and blues with hints of green.

**Depictions of Femininity**
A lot of attention went into Venus's hair, long flowing locks is a symbol of femininity. Venus's face is without blemishes and has light illuminating her features on the right side of her face. Nudity was something that was not common in the Middle Ages with only little exceptions. The stance and position of Venus's limbs reflects that of the Aphrodite statue named the 'Aphrodite of Cnidus'. Where the goddess covers herself in the attempt to withhold some level of modesty.
'The history of art has been dominated by men, living in ivory towers, seeing women as sexual objects. I paint women as most women see themselves. I try to catch their identity, their skin, their hair, their heat, and their leakiness. I do have this sense with female flesh that things are leaking out. A lot of our flesh is blue, like butcher's meat. In history, pubic hair has always been perfect, painted by men. In real life, it moves around, up your stomach, or down your legs.'

According to Jenny Saville, men paint women according to their stereotypes. Jenny Saville is more concerned with painting women as they really are. She gets the viewer to feel like they are forced to confront the image of women in all its glory and confront maybe the most shocking aspects of the female body, made clear, symbolized by the female privates presented to you at eye level.

"When I made Plan [showing the lines drawn on a woman's body to designate where liposuction would be performed], I was forever explaining what liposuction was. It seemed so violent then. These days, I doubt there's anyone in the western world who doesn't know what liposuction is. Surgery was a minority sport; now that notion of hybridity is everywhere. There's almost a new race: the plastic surgery race."

"Modern life, and modern bodies, those that emulate contemporary life, they're what I find most interesting."

World-renowned self-portrait painter, Jenny Saville was born in Cambridge, England in 1970. She received her BA of Fine Art with Honours from the Glasgow School of Art in Glasgow, Scotland. Her preferred medium is oil paint, and she uses this to layer the paint with thick brush strokes to give character and dimension to the skin of the bodies she paints.
ANALYSIS OF THE FORMAL ELEMENTS
Jenny Saville's The Plan 1993

Oil on Canvas Painting technique
FORM & TEXTURE
Jenny Saville’s medium of choice is Oil on canvas. She embodies the female concept in large scale nude paintings. The process in which Jenny Saville takes is best described in an interview with Simon Schama.

Jenny Saville: “I have to really work at the tension between getting the paint to have the sensory quality that I want and being constructive in terms of building the form of a stomach, for example, or creating the inner crevice of a thigh. The more I do it, the more the space between abstraction and figuration becomes interesting. I want a painting realism. I try to consider the pace of a painting, of active and quiet areas. Listening to music helps a lot, especially music where there’s a hard sound and then soft, breathable passages. In my earlier work my marks were less varied. I think of each mark or area as having the possibility of carrying a sensation.” (Extract from Interview with Jenny Saville by Simon Schama, n.d.)

MESSAGE & MEANING
Saville painted the body with contour lines similar to those on a topographical map. The areas where these lines are shown such as the thighs and stomach suggest that they are accentuated to seem much larger than what they appear to be and to highlight the dimension in these areas, which are not flat but curved with dimples such as a mountain or hill range. The marks are similar to that of a surgeon’s pen so this painting also discusses the topic of the female body and how people in society want to keep changing their body to fit the female stereotype through surgery. I think that this painting speaks volumes about the female body, which society is so quick to modify to fit its ideals of perfection. The paint is spotted like live skin, giving it a very natural feel. "In this painting Saville combines the image of a female subject’s body with the suggestion of landscape. The lines painted on the body's surface resemble contour markings on maps, while also suggesting areas of the body's topography indicated for liposuction, the surgical removal of unwanted fat. In this mapping of the body as an area of problematic terrain a relationship is set up between perceptions of the natural and the planned. The question of who is exercising control over this 'plan' remains troubling and implicates the viewer of the image" (Phelan and Reckitt 187).
Colour & Texture
In this oil painting Jenny Saville uses cold colours, a lot of blues, purples and pinks making the skin have the texture of a slab of meat or pig. Jenny harshly highlights every curve and bulge in a pasty cold way.

Composition
The angle of this painting is unusual, with all of the focus on the woman’s body, perhaps representing the way in which women are sexualised in the media. The Painting is raw and natural, not glamorized or flattering but unglorified and undignified. All is exposed and not elegant or demure, which are words you would associate with being a woman because Jenny wants to confront these stereotypes.
Body language is tense and awkward; she is gripping and pulling at her arm. Her face looks somewhat contorted. Her mouth is open and her teeth clenched, she is looking directly at you confronting and holding your gaze. Jenny Saville used herself as a model for this painting. You can see that the body has been distorted making it look larger as if warped. The way the woman is positioned makes her seem intimidating as if towering over the audience.

Normally images displaying regions of a more private nature are displayed as erotic or appealing however the way in which Saville portrays this is in a way that’s confronting this stereotype or this idea of women, which is not necessarily reality, as women are not always groomed. Saville challenges the portrayal of women in the past as the version which painters felt most fit to paint but this concept is not applicable to society or how women actually look. This painting is from a worm’s eye point of view with Saville’s face not shown as much. The little that is shown from the face can be seen as having a look of discomfort or seduction.
ANALYSIS OF THE FORMAL ELEMENTS
Jenny Saville’s Propped 1992

ANALYSIS of Propped 1992
The image to the left, entitled “Propped-1992”, by Jenny Saville, pictures a distorted human form sitting awkwardly on a dark object. The composition is primarily organic as Saville emphasises the round natural form of the human body in the background, as well as the messy writing in the foreground, layered over the image of the woman.

Colour & Texture
The colours used give this pink sort of skin tone, much like a pig, and her positioning may give off the idea that she is put out to be a pig ready for slaughter.

Analysis of the Physical Features
The facial features can be considered to be ones of either lust or distress but this is not very clear. Her expression is contradictory to the action of her nails digging into her flesh which would suggest that she is uncomfortable with being this naked and vulnerable, although at the same time her expression seems to be inviting. As this figure is very much in-your-face it forces people to tackle their own first impressions of the piece and makes them question why it is that we feel uncomfortable that way. Jenny Saville’s aim was to tackle these problems, changing and challenging the way men view women according to their stereotypes. It could also be sending a message to women to not feed into the expectations the media and society uphold for women but to be comfortable in your own skin. Jenny Saville, using perspective and positioning has made people confront this problem face on of what a real women looks like, however exaggerated, to make her message have more impact.

Composition
In terms of composition of the piece there is one figure of a woman, which is centralized in the painting. This makes the viewer only focus on her. The viewer sees the woman’s figure from a worm’s eye perspective. Being in a worm’s eye view of the naked woman propped on a stool, gives the allusion that she appears larger than she is distorting her true figure. In contrast to ‘the plan,’ where the female figure is seen more vulnerable and covered up, the figure in this piece seems more out there as if ‘propped up’ and put up for show. Saville uses the black pole also as a symbol of the vulnerability of the woman’s body and weak state being exposed or presented to the public as if she were a monstrous animal in a dusty museum cabinet, being criticized by spectator’s passing-by.
Background, colour and texture
The background is plain and saturated with cold and harsh colours with horrible lighting, somewhat like the lighting seen in hospitals. The grip the woman has on her thighs where she digs her hands into her flesh can show a sense of self loathing, this can be seen as dismorphia. The writing scrawled in the background is backwards, suggesting that is has been written on a reflective surface, perhaps a mirror. Could Jenny Saville be telling women to confront the negative feelings we have about ourselves and to stop conforming to the stereotypes that society projects on to women. The skin has blue and yellow and red tones, these dark and deep colours highlight every dimple and dent this woman has. The brush strokes are very visible and the paint visceral to emphasise the true colour of flesh, which is far from perfect.

Depictions of Femininity
The only thing this woman is wearing is her shoes. This adds to the idea of how women are portrayed in the media in advertisement. How their bodies are used to sell products. It can also provoke women to be portrayed or seen as superficial and materialistic as well where Saville does a good job at confronting that stereotype. Heels are a symbol of both femininity and sexuality. It can be something that women do to empower them but also to appeal to men.

Message
This piece's background is much darker than most of Jenny Saville's paintings and the patchy nature of it along with the backwards writing across the painting makes it seem as if this piece is seen through a mirror and the backwards words presented to the figure are just words which women in general should reflect on, giving a deeper meaning to this painting. The words 'If we continue to speak in this sameness - speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other again...’ are presented on top of the naked figure of the woman and are a plea from Jenny Saville for women to stop fulfilling the stereotypes and to stop speaking badly or thinking badly of each other because if we do that we have failed and nothing will change but patterns will continue to repeat.
COMPARISON OF THE 3 ARTWORKS
Jenny Saville’s *Propped* 1992
Jenny Saville’s *The Plan* 1993
Sandro Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* 1480

- Other people and figures are presented in the background.
- Whereas in Saville’s paintings the message is put forth in Botticelli’s the message is more of a mythical back-story that explains the piece.
- Angels and gods in the background
- Idolized proportions
- Venus colours are richer, luxurious, adds to the appeal using Tempera, as it is the application of thin layers so warmer tones are accomplished and pure tone or porcelain tone is achieved.

- Worms eye view: less flattering
- Saville’s artwork of the female form is isolated and lonely to be the main focus and have no distractions in the background
- No hair is shown to represent femininity.
- Clinical colours with harsh lighting
- Blue and pink undertones: unwell.
- Females not drawn as the ideal representation of women but as their realistic or exaggerated state.
- Bodies are portrayed as more flawed could even say it seems grotesque.

- Worms eye view: less flattering
- Saville’s artwork of the female form is isolated and lonely to be the main focus and have no distractions in the background
- No hair is shown to represent femininity.

- Rich colours
- Both cover privates
- Naked female in center
- Eye contact with viewer
- All are cover body parts one way or another
- All represent what women would look like at the time

- Both covering breasts
- Cool colours however texture is very different.

- Private parts are explicitly displayed
- Lines are put on the body whereas in other pieces the body has not been drawn on

- The only piece out of the three where the female figure is not standing but relying on a stool for support.

- Whereas Botticelli’s Venus covers privates as a form of modesty, Saville represents this female to grip erotically and suggestively at her inner thighs.

- Figure is wearing shoes—not making explicit eye contact with the viewer and is tilting her head in either distress or seduction.

- Piece is much more graphic and first thing viewed is the privates.
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FORMAL ELEMENTS

Connections between ‘Venus’ and ‘The Plan’
In both of these paintings the figure is presented as trying to cover their breasts. In the plan the figure is forceful trying to hide her breasts seeming more vulnerable whereas Venus is only partly covering her breasts with her stance suggesting she is more relaxed rather as she is not desperately gripping her body. Venus is presented as calmly placing her hand on her chest which suggests that she is in more control to the viewer and could even seem seductive whilst Saville’s harsh grip as her fingers dig into her opposite shoulder whilst attempting to cover herself insinuates uncomfortable feelings associated with being exposed. You could suggest that the figure Saville paints attacks the view and stereotype by being more realistic but with exaggerated ‘flaws’.

Connections between all Paintings
Colours used in all paintings are similar but the hues and tones vary. Botticelli used warm coloured tones throughout his work, which provokes feelings of happiness and making the artwork more appealing, these soft warm colours are partially achieved due to the fact that Botticelli used egg tempera as a technique to paint Venus. The meanings behind the paintings all are what and how women would be presented at that time. However they are represented differently, as Venus is beautified, possibly because it is drawn from a male’s perspective, Saville’s is not. Whether deliberately or not all the three figures painted whether from Saville or Botticelli, they all cover one aspect of their bodies, whether out of modesty or to be suggestive and erotic.

Connections between ‘The Plan’ and ‘Propped’
Both Paintings storms eye view, which is universally known to be less flattering as it makes you look larger. Saville’s artwork of the female form is isolated and lonely to be the main focus and have no distractions in the background whilst in Botticelli’s painting the other figures, which are fully covered, add to the story behind the painting giving it cultural context and methodological context. In the ‘Plan’ and ‘proped’ No hair is shown to represent femininity as all the focus is on the body and the emotions whether good or bad they provoke to the audience. The colours used are clinical colours and the harsh lighting adds onto the unflattering aspects of the body or accentuates the flaws. Although in ‘the plan’ the figure is not propped like its counterpart, it does have lines, which are usually seen in maps indicating gradient in areas, which emerge more from the ground, this is respectively not seen in ‘proped.’ Blue and pink undertones are prominently seen in Saville’s two paintings, which are usually interpreted as being unwell and sickly. Both females are not drawn as the ideal representation of women but as their realistic or exaggerated state. The females are portrayed as more flawed and you could even say it seems grotesque.