WHO'S AFRAID OF THE FEMALE NUDE?

PAINTINGS OF NAKED WOMEN, USUALLY BY CLOTHED MEN,

Salad Lover, 2016
ROBIN F. WILLIAMS

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THE

Undressing, 2015
JANSSON STEGNER

EMALE

ARE SUDDENLY SITTING VERY UNCOMFORTABLY ON GALLERY WALLS.

UDE?

"I QUIT DOING THE FIGURE. I'M ONLY DOING ABSTRACT ART."

Male artists wonder whether they can work with the female form, while the world questions what their intentions were in the first place. *By Michael Slenske*

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THE WESTERN ART CANON is in no small part a parade of famous female nudes, from Praxiteles's *Aphrodite of Knidos* from the fourth century B.C. to Manet's 19th-century prostitutes (notably the recumbent, unamused *Olympia*) to John Currin's *Playboy*-meets-Fragonard women—and almost all of them have been made by white male artists. Of course, as art historian Linda Nochlin famously observed, it was difficult for women to paint nudes when historically they weren't even allowed to attend figure-drawing classes because of the naked people necessarily present.

While feminist art critics have for decades pointed out the shortcomings of the "male gaze," the post-#MeToo reckoning with the art world's systemic sexism, its finger-on-the-scale preference for male genius, has given that critique a newly powerful force. And the question of the moment has become: Is it still an artistically justifiable pursuit for a man to paint a naked woman?

To answer this question, I reached out to a number of prominent male artists known for doing just that (as well as for painting nude men). But most of them—including Currin, Carroll Dunham, Jeff Koons, and the young Mexican-American painter Alex Becerra (some of whose nudes are drawn from escort ads)—declined to talk about their work's relationship to the current social climate. Presumably, they worried about unintentionally saying the wrong thing that would then echo endlessly across social media, damaging their reputations. For emerging artists, there is the fear of a possibly career-derailing gestalt fail. "I've been in conversations with other [male artists], and they were just like, 'I quit working with the figure. I'm only doing abstract work, because I don't want to touch it,'" says Marty Schnapf while walking me through his recent solo show "Fissures in the Fold" at Wilding Cran Gallery in Los Angeles. He thinks we could be living through "a new Victorian age"—or at least that's his explanation for the mixed responses he's received for his gender-confusing neo-Cubist nudes, which play out sexualized fantasies in hotel rooms and surrealist swimming-pool dreamscapes, and evoke Joan Semmel's erotic works from the 1970s. "I counted: There's actually more male nudes in my show," Schnapf says, though it wasn't immediately discernible to my eye, which is perhaps the point. One of Schnapf's female artist friends grilled him about the intent of the work, while a few collectors even gasped when confronted with the infinity loop of breasts, Day-Glo mane, and charcoal-blackened genital geometries of his ghost-lit spider dame, *Will-o'-the-wisp*.

It was 43 years ago that feminist British film theorist Laura Mulvey coined the term *male gaze* in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema": "The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact." The neo-Expressionist Eric Fischl (while clarifying that "I don't do nude, I do naked. Naked is psychological; it involves a much more complicated set of emotional relationships to physicality, to need, to desire, to pleasure"), believes that it's important to analyze how the male gaze works in making art. But he's also of the opinion that men looking at women is, to some extent, "a genetically engineered reflex for very particular reasons." To try to make it somehow "an unnatural aspect of being a man" doesn't make much sense, he says. "It would be the same as supposing the children of women who paint mothers and children said, 'Stop the motherly gaze; it's inappropriate, invasive, objectifying.' What would the women do? They'd say, 'It's natural for me to look at this aspect of womanness,' and the children would say, 'No, you're not treating me as though I'm separate and other.'" Fischl laughs.

Brooklyn-based painter Kurt Kauper found out how tricky painting the female nude is earlier this year when his solo show titled "Women," featuring three larger-than-life-size female nudes, debuted at the Almine Rech Gallery. The website Artsy quickly sized up the problem he might encounter in an article called "The Perils of a Man Painting Naked Women in 2018." The perils soon became real when critic Brienne Walsh reviewed the show for *Forbes*: "Kurt Kauper's 'Women' Attempts to Depict Powerful Female Nudes, and Fails."

I meet with Kauper at Almine Rech, where his trio of nudes—drawn from black, Asian, and white models—stand sentry with their muscled physiques, clinically sculpted vaginas, and vacant eyes, which seem to follow us around the gallery as we talk. It feels like they've been plucked from the basement of retired android hosts on *Westworld*.

To Walsh, Kauper demonstrated a "white male" viewpoint of art history, "full of gaping holes." She also ruminated on "how disturbing a shorn vagina looks—to me, it implies acquiescence to porn culture, to a patriarchal society that prefers that women not smell, not offend, not grow up beyond little girls." This critique wounded Kauper, who's spent most of his career painting vulnerable-looking men disrobed. "She said I was trying to paint powerful women—I never said that," Kauper protests. "I was trying to put the viewer in an uncomfortable position of not knowing quite where they stand in relationship to these paintings physically, conceptually, and in terms of the genre."

But such arguments may seem naïve in these politically vigilant times. In February, the U.K.'s Manchester Art Gallery removed John William Waterhouse's sexy swamp girls painting *Hylas and the Nymphs,* to "challenge this Victorian fantasy" of "the female body as either a 'passive decorative form' or a 'femme fatale.'" In New York, there was the viral petition asking that the Metropolitan Museum remove or contextualize the Balthus painting *Thérèse Dreaming,* depicting an adolescent girl leg up, her eyes closed: "The Met is, perhaps unintentionally, supporting voyeurism and the objectification of children." While the museum didn't acquiesce, Balthus's reputation was already on the decline. Industry experts reminded me that, whereas in the boundary-pushing '70s, a Balthus was considered to add a sophisticatedly perverse note to one's collection, in recent years, he's regarded as a little skeevy.

DUELING GAZES
Is this painting by a man or a woman?

Self Portrait, 2017
LISA YUSKAVAGE

Woman #4, 2017
KURT KAUPER

PHOTOGRAPHS: PREVIOUS SPREAD, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS (WILLIAMS, STEGNER). THIS PAGE FROM LEFT, © LISA YUSKAVAGE/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK/LONDON (YUSKAVAGE); COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ALMINE RECH GALLERY (KAUPER).

In its "Here Are the Absolute Worst Artworks We Saw Around the World in 2017" roundup, ArtNet's Rachel Corbett singled out Richard Kern's photos of waiflike girls bent over stairs and/or smoking joints—subject matter he's been exploring for the better part of three decades. "The onetime documentarian of downtown New York's drug-fueled depravity was a force for sexual liberation in the 1980s and '90s … But times change and in our post–Terry Richardson world, I think we can strive to be a bit more thoughtful about how and why we use the female nude going forward … In 2018 I'll be looking out for more from photographers like Deana Lawson, Catherine Opie, Collier Schorr, or A. L. Steiner instead."

There does seem to be some recalibration toward valuing the female gaze, based on the careers of those four, not to mention the high prices recently paid for nudes by artists like Mickalene Thomas, Jenny Saville, Lisa Yuskavage, and Ghada Amer. But there's a lot to make up for: Only 27 percent of the 590 major museum exhibitions from 2007 to 2013 were devoted to female artists; only five women were among the top 100 artists by cumulative auction value between 2011 and 2016; and just a third of gallery representation in the U.S. is female.

You can't force people to collect the "correct" art, of course. In January, L.A.'s Nino Mier Gallery inadvertently performed a kind of experiment, opening simultaneous shows featuring opposite portrayals of the female form: the lithe bikini-, skinny-jean-, and volleyball-uniform-clad glamazons of painter Jansson Stegner and the feminist "Propaganda Pots" (sculptures referencing Eastern Bloc posters about domestic morality, alcoholism, motherhood) by ceramic artist Bari Ziperstein. The former, priced up to $50,000 each, sold out before the opening; the latter, priced at one-tenth of Stegner's portraits, earned critical raves but sold at a more leisurely clip. The juxtaposition incited some online protests; as local gallerist Hilde Lynn Helphenstein told me, "Immediately in the wake of #MeToo and #TimesUp, the market made a clear pronouncement that it is still focused on work which is sexually exploitative of female representation." Yet, is it really a shocker that the pretty paintings of pretty young ladies were snapped up faster than the pots?

And let's not forget that Picasso's *Young Girl With a Flower Basket*—a 1905 Rose Period masterpiece (once owned by Gertrude Stein) of a fully naked, flat-chested Parisian girl—is expected to fetch upwards of $120 million and anchor Christie's big May auction, "Highlights From the Collection of Peggy and David Rockefeller." "Most of our buyers, their frame of reference happens to be art history," says the deputy chairman of Impressionist and Modern art at Christie's, Conor Jordan. "They want to be sure what they're buying has an importance within the artist's career or the broader circle around that artist or movement." Current issues just aren't as relevant to them, he says. "That happens in the lower levels of the market, where there's more supply, more for people to choose from."

In other words, any thoroughgoing change in which artists are deemed Important will take a while. And cracking down on male-painted female nudes as a means to this end seems pointless, at least to Marilyn Minter, a #MeToo supporter who nonetheless says she's seen a version of this before, when her "Porn Grids" ran afoul of anti-pornography feminists in the late '80s and early '90s. "I was a traitor to feminism, but my side won," she says. "Now it's the return of all that." Her larger point? "There are no safe places: This is the world, it's pretty awful, and it's pretty great at the same time. But the minute you try to pin down sexuality, it's going to spit in your face. It's totally personal, it's fluid. Trying to make rules is a waste of energy. Progressives can take each other apart—we do it all the time—when the bigger enemy is these neo-Nazis. That's where the energy should be, not trying to police fucking paintings." ■

Crippled by the Need to Control/Blind Individuality, 1983
JUDY CHICAGO

Callie and the Swan Toy, 2016
ERIC FISCHL

"WHEN I WAS YOUNG, THE BIGGEST COMPLIMENT WAS THAT YOU COULD PAINT LIKE A MAN."

Seven female artists weigh in on men painting women, and women doing it for themselves.
As told to Molly Langmuir

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Tracey Emin

SINCE I WAS 17 OR 18, I've been making paintings of myself with my legs open, masturbating. But the subject matter is really about being alone, purely alone, and everybody identifies with that, male or female. They're not meant to be sexy images.

As far as I'm concerned, people can fuck whoever they like, as long as it's equal. But Balthus, the way he gazes on those girls, is not equal, not balanced. I don't feel comfortable looking at Matisse, either, because he was making many of those paintings during the Holocaust and there's no reference to war whatsoever. Yet Matisse was a beautiful painter. Willem de Kooning was as well. But he was horrific to women. I have a massive argument with a female art historian I really respect about de Kooning. She says, "At the end of the day, all I care about is that he's a fantastic painter." But for me, I can hear a story about an artist that repels me from their work. Or I can hear a story, even if it isn't necessarily a good one, and it will clarify what I like about them.

Take Turner, who painted such wonderful sunsets and seascapes. He also painted all these paintings of prostitutes, but they're not objectifying. They're sensual and fantastic. And to know that he did that, it helps me understand his sunsets, which are so charged up and erotic. It makes me like Turner more.

Egon Schiele made paintings of himself masturbating too. Many of his images are so hard-core. But even the ones that include women, they're not about the male gaze. They're about the primal act of sex, how it feels to be turned on and to desire. He's not making images to show "I'm in control of this woman; I've made her some sort of object.

Judy Chicago

A DECADE AGO, I was teaching a graduate seminar at the University of

PHOTOGRAPHS: THIS SPREAD FROM LEFT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SALON 94, NEW YORK (CHICAGO); COURTESY OF THE ARTIST (FISCHL); COURTESY OF TRACEY EMIN

This is life without you – You made me Feel like This, 2018
TRACEY EMIN

Portrait of Jazz Mitchell, 2014
HENRY TAYLOR

North Carolina in Chapel Hill, and a young man made a sculpture of a woman where he hacked her mouth then covered it with a bandage. The women in the class got really upset. When I was younger, I would've completely supported them. But my position now is to not censor but, first, engage in dialogue, and, second, try to create a level playing field. The problem is that masculine imagery is more prevalent than feminine, which means women are subjected to the brutalities of the male psyche while men are not subjected to the counterpart. So I told the students I sympathized, but the human psyche is not politically correct. It is full of unpleasant feelings because we're all brought up in a patriarchal, sexist, misogynist society. And when one begins to make art and plumb one's psyche, all sorts of things come out.

In the 1980s, when I first showed "PowerPlay," my investigation into the construct of masculinity, I gave some lectures about it. Women in the audience were often so provoked by the images [such as *Crippled by the Need to Control/Blind Individuality,* in which a male figure grabs a kneeling woman by the hair from behind, her profile a study in agony] that afterward they'd scream that I hated men. They were just so unaccustomed to seeing a woman have such raw feelings about men. Actually, it was men who stood up and said I was telling the truth. I saw how healthy it was that the images produced that discourse. So no, I do not think the answer is to remove everything unpleasant in art. We have to be able to make mistakes.

Today there's more space for women to express themselves openly in art, and for artists of color, too. When I was young, the biggest compliment you could get was that you could paint like a man. So there's been a lot of change at that level. But institutionally, it's hardly changed. Do we go to the museum and see Alice Neel next to Lucian Freud? Do we see Suzanne Valadon next to Utrillo, whom she trained because she was his mother? We don't.

In some ways, we've even gone backward. I see young male artists today painting the female body as if the last 30 years of feminist theory never happened. That gets me furious. The thing is, people sometimes pick on the wrong targets. It's easier to go after a Balthus than a contemporary artist. Think about how many women over the years have attacked me, even though my entire life has been devoted to trying to improve conditions for women in the art world. So excuse me, girls, go attack the Museum of Modern Art, would you? Get off me. It's easier to attack somebody who's vulnerable than a fortress. But it's more important to attack the fortress.

Robin F. Williams

"I'd never tell another artist what they can or can't do. And I wouldn't say that because a man painted this naked woman we shouldn't look at it. But I do think whenever anyone paints a naked woman, there's a high bar. And I'd be lying if I said it didn't help to have a female-identified experience to make the type of work I make.

One painting I made recently, for example, is of a woman masturbating over a bowl of salad (see page 46). I had it in studio during Greenpoint Open Studios, and a guy came in with this huge telephoto lens strapped around his neck, a very big, phallic camera. He gestures at the painting and says, "What. Is. This." I tell him it's about the way women are told there are certain foods or products that are going to give us so much pleasure, and salad is one of them. No one is ever going to be mad at a woman for liking salad. So I'm imagining this woman taking that to its logical conclusion and having it tip over into

Descent, 2016
NAUDLINE PIERRE

Nice 'n Easy, 1999
JOHN CURRIN

eroticism—she's feeling the constraints around female sexuality closing in and decides salad is the only safe thing.

The guy gives me a side eye and, totally serious, says, "Well, you know there's nothing phallic about that salad, right?" As if I were a silly person who'd neglected to put a penis inside of her. Then he asked if he could take a picture with his big penis camera. All day, there were men coming into my studio mansplaining my paintings to me. It was surreal.

Naudline Pierre

I USED TO HAVE a hard time going to the Met or sitting in an art-history class. I was approaching it not only as a woman but as a black woman. I felt like, *Where are we? Where do we fit?* There have been times where I'm like, *I cannot go into a 19th-century wing and look at paintings of women as props.* But now I feel like I've found a way to co-opt classical language, to subvert it in a way that can give me a feeling of agency.

The main figures in my paintings are female, and the other figures are often genderless. I don't usually paint male figures—I feel like I have enough male energy in my life—but I add male genitalia sometimes. When I'm painting the female form, I'm taking time getting into the shape of it, I'm enjoying it. But when I'm painting a man, it's more like I made a genderless figure, and now I'm going to slap a penis on it. The penis feels comical.

I've known of men who make careers off painting women lying naked on lush sheets—not great careers, but careers—and I've heard them say their work is about empowering women. I wish they'd just call it what it is so we could move past this shroud of fake whatever-it-is. You like color, light, flesh, the female form. Just say "I like boobs." And a lot of artists, their time is up. Bye. Leave space for the rest of us making work that's interesting and moving the needle. When I see that Jeff Koons work with Cicciolina, it's a big yawn for me. I'm over it.

Ghada Amer

THE PETITION to remove the Balthus painting, that surprised me. I thought, *Where am I?* Because this is exactly what they do in the Middle East. I come from a very religious background, and my mom always says to me, "Stop doing those nudes. It's not beautiful." She finds it offensive because it's sexual. It's the same with those who are against the Balthus, except one says they're against a painting because it's not feminist; the other says it's forbidden by God.

You know how many paintings of women have been painted through art history—we should remove all of them? A painter paints what he or she likes, whether it's a body or a flowerpot. It's an object. How can you paint something other than an object? Say you don't paint a nude but a religious painting. Even Christ—he is nude and suffering, but it's almost like he's having an orgasm. And then there are the little baby angels, all nude. What is this, objectification?

I often hear about my work that because I take images from porn, I'm objectifying women. But I find that what people call porn is just something erotic they put a moral judgment on. I've always had the sense that women must be proud to be sexual beings—I was shocked when I moved from France to America and discovered Americans are so prudish. People try to hide their sexuality, but that's much more problematic than to assume we have to live with it. We are animals as well.

PHOTOGRAPHS: THIS SPREAD FROM LEFT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST (PIERRE); RICHARD DREW/AP PHOTO (CURRIN); COURTESY OF THE ARTIST/PHOTO BY COKE O'NEAL (FRANK).

Christina Quarles

"AS A WOMAN, as somebody who's queer, as a person of color, it's important to me to not perpetuate the passive consumption of the body. But it's also what I love to do, paint the body. So I try to find ways to not allow for a passive reading. I see my work as exploring the ambiguity of identity. My figures I see as moving between genders. I do tend to have breasts in the work, but I see that more as an opportunity to have gravity expressed through this weird, fleshy, lumpy thing.

I don't think that issues of gender should only be explored by women-identifying people, though. Saying only a marginalized group should be able to explore issues of gender identity actually gives more power to a patriarchal position—it suggests the male is the natural state of things. But while theoretically a male artist should be able to use the female body in an interesting, nuanced way, I can't actually point to anyone doing it.

With stuff that deals with race or gender or sexuality, there can be a problem of turning away from the joy and perseverance that can keep marginalized people afloat. This is why I also like to make beautiful paintings. If the narrative is always the same, it can perpetuate a victim mentality and an oppressor mentality.

Tschabalala Self

"IF SOMETHING is not a lived experience for you, I don't know how sincere a conversation you can have about it, because you probably don't understand all the ins and outs. In that case, your intention in articulating that figure is more likely to show something about you. The Balthus work at the Met, that's about how men experience the world, how men view prepubescent girls. It's not about that girl's sexuality. That's just the truth.

But I don't think it's helpful to take down *Thérèse Dreaming*. Where does it stop? There are many other images that are way more pervasive. Take some of Britney Spears's old videos. They were supposed to seep into your mind and make you feel something about a girl at a certain age. But with *Thérèse Dreaming*, it's historical, and people should know this is how this man viewed this girl. People have to know that's the reality, girls especially. It doesn't protect anyone to ignore it. ■

"DO I HAVE YOUR PERMISSION?"

Natalie Frank's *Story of O* pictures scared a lot of people. Including her gallerist. *By Carl Swanson*

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PEOPLE ARE SOMETIMES surprised that painter Natalie Frank is not more, say, goth, given the often depraved sexual theatricality of her artwork. In person, the rather sensible 38-year-old Yale graduate, who lives not far from Union Square, could easily pass as the vice-principal of your child's grammar school. Last summer, when I visited her at her Bushwick studio, we talked about the research she did for a series of fleshy and direct portraits of dominatrices and their subs (she'd spent a lot of time in dungeons, she told me, and was interested in how the encounters seemed less about sex than enacting a rigorous therapeutic fantasy). And she revealed that her next project, a series of pastel illustrations, was based on *Story of O*, the anonymously written 64-year-old classic of the transgressive literary canon that coolly recounts a woman's journey into sexual submission, complete with elaborate affirmative-consent rituals. ("Do I have your permission?" "I'm yours.")

Frank's dominatrix pictures showed at Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, paired with portraits she'd done of ballerinas. She'd been without New York representation for a while when her friend Sara Kay, the founder of the nonprofit Professional Organization for Women in the Arts, decided to open a space in Noho and scheduled an exhibition of the *O* pictures for this spring.

Story of O VII, 2017-18
NATALIE FRANK

But then, shortly before Christmas, Kay called Frank to cancel the show; it was, she felt, inappropriate given the social climate, since the broader culture, as well as the art world, was in the midst of what's become known as the Reckoning. "It was a difficult decision, but I had a very real concern that the content of *Story of O* could act as a trigger for victims of abuse and violence," Kay wrote me in an email, adding that she has recently become "a trusted colleague who women call when they're experiencing gender bias or harassment in the workplace."

Frank was stung. For one thing, she'd recently written an essay for ARTnews about her experiences with predatory men in the art world. But more to the point, "As a feminist, it's your job to take risks," she says. "As a supporter of women artists, it's important to take those risks."

She set out on a frantic search to find a new home for her pictures, contacting her network of fellow artists and curators. But for practical reasons (exhibitions are planned months in advance), as well as #MeToo exigencies (so why exactly would we want to do such a potentially controversial show?), the task would prove difficult.

I first encountered Frank's work in 2015 at the Drawing Center and admired her darkly funny illustrations inspired by the retranslated, unsanitized *Grimms' Fairy Tales,* which include incidents of incest, cannibalism, and rape. Claire Gilman, the chief curator at the Drawing Center, who worked with Frank on the show, says the traditional Brothers Grimm stories were told by mothers to their children as "tales of caution" about such very real concerns as being married off against your will. That said, the Grimm pictures don't send "simplistic" feminist messages, Gilman says. They aren't all "images of empowered women."

Frank didn't have a simplistic read of *Story of O,* either. She first picked it up at a bookshop when she was 15 and blushed constantly as she read it, while also, she admits, getting a kind of exhibitionistic thrill from doing so in public. It was a portable totem of boundary-breaking for the well-raised daughter of a Dallas pediatrician whose mother had accompanied her to life-drawing classes (she was too young to sketch naked people by herself!). Not incidentally, the head of the art department at Frank's private high school refused to let her display her drawings, deeming them pornographic. "Until I got into Yale early," Frank recalls drolly. At that point, she says, he allowed her to put up the pictures of women, but naked men were still off-limits. When I tell Frank I'd actually never thought to read *O* until I saw her work, she deadpans, "Well, you didn't grow up a woman in the South."

Frank rereads the book every year. The O of the title is a young fashion photographer who is taken to a château outside Paris by her lover, René, where, to prove her devotion to him, she allows herself to be chained up, whipped, continuously sexually assaulted by a number of rather beastly men, and then, apparently to up the ante on her sexual slavery, passed off to a family friend, who brands her and attaches a tag to her labia. After the book won a small French literary prize, the authorities considered charging its publisher with obscenity, and its fame spread. At one point in the 1960s, it was the most-read contemporary French novel outside of France. It caught the attention of anti-porn feminists, too, who thought it pandered to male fantasies and were horrified by O's consent to violence. (Andrea Dworkin, in her 1974 book *Woman Hating,* calls it "a story of psychic cannibalism, demonic possession.")

In 1994, the year before Frank discovered the book, the prominent journalist, editor, and translator Dominique Aury (née Anne Desclos), then 86, revealed herself as its author. The story of *Story of O* was that Aury had worried that her lover, Jean Paulhan, a noted philanderer and one of France's preeminent editors and literary critics, would leave her. "I wasn't young, I wasn't pretty, it was necessary to find other weapons," she told *The New Yorker.* And when he told her he didn't think she was capable of writing erotica, she set out to prove him wrong. Frank calls it a "love letter of seduction." (The two stayed lovers, and Paulhan not only helped get it published but wrote its introduction.)

> "As a feminist, it's your job to take risks," Frank says.

Frank divided the book into 15 different drawings. "I only have one sex scene and one whipping scene," she says. To Frank, while the book may keep track of O's butt-plug size, "it's not about sex. It's about power and sexuality and identity and the imagination … She is the main actor in all of the lines." The model for O in Frank's pictures is a friend of a friend who reminded Frank of a "sidewalk Catherine Deneuve." She looks like someone you might know, half-satiated and out of it, the only solid form in a woozy phantasmagoria. The model asked that she not be pictured fully nude, which, one could argue, makes the images kinkier.

Frank considers the book a testament to the power of a woman to manipulate the tropes of pornography to suit her ends, including proving her condescending lover wrong. And for what it's worth, when Aury outed herself as its author, she stressed that "there is no reality here. Nobody could stand being treated like that. It's entirely fantastic."

"What I appreciate in what Natalie is doing is that we need more complex feminist stories in this #MeToo era," says Veronica Roberts, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas, Austin, which showed the Grimm series after the Drawing Center. "Why is it that female desire is something which is so scary?"

In her ARTnews piece, Frank wrote about how some men in the art world took her work as some DTF come-on directed at them. She detailed a studio visit from an older artist who first informed her that he could "tell what kind of girl" she was, before offering, "You know what you need? You need to be fucked up the ass." By way of good-bye, he asked her to send him 25 nude self-portraits, as if his charisma had been so compellingly pungent that she'd swoon and fall seamlessly into the role of his sexual submissive. God only knows what he would've done had he seen the *O* pictures.

Eventually, one of Frank's friends, the artist Nathaniel Mary Quinn, introduced her to Bill Powers and Erin Goldberger, who run the Half Gallery on the Upper East Side, and they agreed to do the show. It opens May 16. Powers admits that he's a little nervous about it, that its sexuality "seems quite honestly a bit scary in these times." But he ultimately believes the risk is worth it, even necessary, in the wake of controversies like the one around Dana Schutz's painting of the lynched body of Emmett Till lying in its casket. "There is this hyperawareness that can lead to self-censorship in the art world, which I don't think is a good thing," he says. "And if you think that the purpose of literature is to educate and entertain, this body of work achieves that."

"For the longest time we didn't even want to talk about power and sex, and denied their connection, but that time is over," Frank says. "I've been painting and drawing women grasping at sexual power for ten years. Now is the exact time to be having this conversation." ■