

Aesthetic Investigations

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Special Issue – Models and Sitters: the Art and Aesthetics of Posing

Empowered Amateur Posers

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Abstract: Aurélie Debaene cites a lack of research in aesthetics on the professional art model, concluding that the artistic enterprise of collaboration or ‘partnering’ between model and artist can lead viewers to under-appreciate their conjoined creativity and skill. I argue for a collaborative model used by artists that extends the notion of art model beyond the professional to the amateur art model/poser/performer. On this model, an artist can achieve success in an artwork by: (1) posing their self in a self-portrait and/or (2) inviting viewers to pose in artworks designed to ‘partner’ together in creating an aesthetic experience of shared creativity, skill, and pleasure.

I. SELF-PORTRAITURE

In exploring and expanding the aesthetics of posing, Aurélie Debaene identifies three kinds of possible posing in art-making contexts: *guided*, *collaborative*, and *self-improvised*.¹ These can be considered instances of ‘partnering’ between two persons—possibly both professional and skilled. In self-portraiture, however, we have a case of amateur posing in which the artist—who is always the first viewer of an artwork and requires no second creator with whom to partner—primarily engages in self-improvised posing by using their own face and body to place their self within a portrait. Self-portraitists relinquish their creative distance from the art object by literally inserting their *self* into the depiction. They are typically self-guided—influenced by past portraits, self-portraits, and their own previous artwork—and self-improvised. They choose a particular body position and facial expression in performing the dual roles of artist and amateur model.² There is no collaboration or partnering for the poser/artist except, loosely speaking, with the self. The artist can be described as seeing themselves in two roles—creator and poser (what Debaene calls ‘an immediate spectator’)—simultaneously and in dialogue.³ The artist pursues a dualistic agentic role, making artistic choices that will formally (colours, shapes, lines) and meaningfully (posing as oneself; posing as, say, Olympia) result in a self-portrait. As I have argued elsewhere, this genre has been especially important for women throughout history whose agency has been ignored or diminished by an entrenched patriarchal hierarchy of male artists, critics, buyers, art administrators, and ‘men of taste’ who have consistently denied women an agentic, self-determined, and creative role in the world of art.⁴ Consider some prototypical self-portraits by women that establish a long tradition of female agency and resistance to the masculinist norm, viewed by generations of ‘delayed spectators’ and ‘imaginary spectators’—Debaene’s terms for capturing viewers beyond the immediate presence of the artist in the studio or creative setting.⁵

Although the first documented male self-portrait has been dated to 1300 BC in Egypt, ‘no examples from early antiquity have survived that can be identified with certitude as self-portraiture’ of women until the Hellenistic era (400–315 BC) that include records of women artists and their self-portraits.⁶ A mural painting (see Figure 1) from a Roman villa at Herculaneum dating before the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 pictures a seated male figure on the left—dubbed ‘The Tragic Actor’—with a woman artist on the right painting an image of a mask dedicated to the gods. She is posed as creator and role model, not striking a pose to be seen or portrayed by another—possibly male—artist. In the 12th century, Claricia playfully yet noticeably drew herself hanging from the bottom of the letter Q in a German psalter from Augsburg.⁷ Numerous miniatures from 15th century French translations of Boccaccio’s 1362 text, *Concerning Famous Women* (alternately titled, *Noble and Famous Women*), often posed a woman surrounded by painting implements, seated at a work desk, looking into a circular mirror positioned to the left of a board



Figure 1: ‘The Tragic Actor (Actors behind the scene, dedicating a mask to the gods)’ (1st century CE), wallpainting from Herculaneum. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, New York, USA.

on which she painted.⁸ One translation included an ancient artist, *Timarete Drawing Herself on a Wall* (1402), while another provided an updated version of *Marcia Painting Her Self-Portrait in her Atelier* (1470, see Figure 2).⁹ What inspired these women to depict themselves as working artists? I contend that female artists posed and portrayed themselves *as artists* to empower themselves toward leaving a legacy of feminine-defined creativity that, in turn, continues to inspire agency, autonomy, and aesthetic experiences of pleasure in viewers over many millennia.

Successive generations of women copied their foremothers in representing themselves in the act of painting: Sofonisba Anguissola (1556), Judith Leyster (1633), Artemisia Gentileschi (c. 1638-1639), Elisabetta Sirani (c. 1660), Rosalba Carriera (1731), Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1782), Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1785), and Marie Bashkirseff (1880). With the invention of photography, Kate Matthews pictured herself in black and white standing next to her cam-



Figure 2: "Marcia Painting Her Self-Portrait. Des Cleres et Nobles Femmes" (ca. 1470) by Giovanni Boccaccio. Ms.33, f.37v. France. Vellum. Spencer Collection. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. Photo credit: The New York Public Library / Art Resource, New York, USA.

era, ready to snap, consciously aware of her gender deviating from the male norm (1900). In 1925, Germain Krull, cigarette in hand, hid her face behind the camera to turn the focus on the viewer, while in 1933, Margaret Bourke-White posed in trousers, feet astride, hands on camera, boldly silhouetted in stark black and white.¹⁰

Feminist art of the 1970s—what Arthur Danto labeled ‘disturbatory art’—typically involved a woman’s body either in motion (Carolee Schneemann’s public performance of pulling a scroll from her vagina in *Interior Scroll* (1975), action (Janine Antoni wiping the floor with her hair in *Loving Care*, 1993), or remembrance/memory (Ana Mendieta’s ‘earth-body’ sculptures created by making impressions of her body in a soft, muddy riverbank, such as *Corazon de Roca con Sangre* (Rock Heart with Blood) (1975)).¹¹ In these art performances and many more, women took control of the way they viewers see them, whether historicised for posterity or judged as (radical) artists. They conceptualised ideas, executed them in public and/or recorded them in film or video, and navigated the consequences of denouncement, ridicule, and in some cases outright attack, at the hands of male art critics. Judy Chicago was castigated on the floor of the United States Congress for her installation

The Dinner Party featuring thirty-nine ceramic plates, many of which depict vulvic forms; while the infamous NEA Four took their case challenging the National Endowment for the Arts to the Supreme Court. A Black woman who could pass for white, Adrian Piper walked the streets dressed as a Black man in *Mythic Being* (1973). Cindy Sherman posed as a *film noir* actress in *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980). Bare-chested Laura Aguilar—hands and neck bound by a thick rope—was wrapped in two flags (United States and Mexico) in *Three Eagles Flying* (1990). Tattooed and pierced, Catherine Opie explored queer and transgender identities in *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993). For the series ‘Not Manet’s Type’ (1997-2001), Carrie Mae Weems posed nude to self-consciously comment upon imagining herself being used as a model by Degas, Picasso, and Duchamp; while Wendy Red Star posed herself amidst fake animals and staged sentimentality in *Four Seasons* (2006) in order to mock museum tableaux created by settler institutions that marginalise Indigenous peoples:

Red Star is driven by the complex narrative of her identity as an Apsáalooke woman and by an awareness of the difficulties that Native women encounter navigating the art world. In this sense, her series represents a strategic mode of intervention into the conventions of portraiture and can be understood through its signifiers of race, cultural rootedness, and female agency, tying this body of work instead to self-portraiture precedents like artists like Carrie Mae Weems, Ana Mendieta, and Laura Aguilar.¹²

Although these artists did not portray themselves in the acts of painting or taking a photo per se, they sought to explore deeper meanings of what is meant by ‘artist’ in the act of creating ‘art’ by posing as or performing the role of originator/maker. In our current era of overwhelming bombardment of visual images rampant on social media, shared amateur-level selfies, and videos posted with little to no imposed content limits, it is important to remember how novel and difficult it was for these women to stand—front and center, often naked, indeed vulnerable—as the self-referential content of their art. Internally, they had absorbed the artworld norm of the ‘male artist of genius’ and the ‘man of taste’ who consistently disqualified their female counterparts from equal status as ‘partners’ in co-creating. In Whitney Chadwick’s essay for the catalogue accompanying ‘Mirror Mirror: Self-Portraits by Women Artists’ (2001-2002) at the National Portrait Gallery in London, she cites the discomfort of the inequality of the sexes *still* experienced in the early twenty-first century, as invoked by Simone de Beauvoir’s words in *The Second Sex* (1946):

Man, feeling and wishing himself active, subject, does not see himself in his fixed image; it has little attraction for him, since man’s body does not seem to him an object of desire; while

woman, knowing and making herself object, believes she really sees herself in the glass.¹³

Chadwick notes the complexity of past identity categories based on ‘gender, race, age, class, beauty, and occupation’ that are imposed from outside oneself, but notes changing norms and emerging strategies to psychologically navigate one’s own self-image:

Yet a belief in the visuality of feminine self-identification, and the power of the image to mediate between art object and human subject, continues to endow the self-portrait with its power to work on our imaginations.¹⁴

Consider perhaps the most famous professional model to pose in an artwork, Victorine-Louise Meurent (1844-1927), who posed nude, shocking viewers as a ‘real’ woman, i.e. a prostitute on display, and not an idealised Venus; for Édouard Manet’s scandalous painting *Olympia* (1865). Meurent provides a compelling example of a model who worked with artistic ‘partner’ Manet—for whom she chose to pose professionally, again and again—yet posed in her own painted self-portrait as well.

An artist in her own right who exhibited alongside Manet in the Paris Salon of 1879, Meurent first exhibited her paintings in the 1876 Paris Salon that had rejected Manet’s submission. One long-standing narrative held that Meurent was unable to attain even moderate success with her own work due to the many restrictions on women’s creativity in the 19th century and the denigration of her as ‘a wretched lower-class model from the streets of Paris’.¹⁵ In a 1994 hybrid novel with autobiographical tones, feminist art historian Eunice Lipton wrote about the famous painting of *Olympia*, particularly the outward stare of the model who engages the viewer’s gaze:

...the model surveyed the viewer, resisting centuries of admonitions to ingratiate herself. Locked behind her gaze were thoughts, an ego maneuvering. If later on Freud would ask, ‘What do women want?’ then this woman’s face answered. You knew what she wanted. Everything. Or rather she wanted, she lacked, nothing. And that is why in the spring of 1865 men shook with rage in front of *Olympia*... She was unmanageable; they knew she had to be contained.¹⁶

In researching rumours of the model’s later descent into prostitution, alcoholism, and early death, Lipton noted that the shock to the public of Manet’s presentation of the red-headed Meurent—his ‘preferred’ model—was repeated in other works, most prominently when she was portrayed nude, as in *Déjeuner sur L’Herbe* (1862-1863).

Manet painted her seven more times between the years 1862 and 1874 for the paintings *The Street Singer* (1862), *Portrait of Victorine Meurent* (1862), *Mademoiselle V. in the Costume of an Espada* (1862), *A Young Lady in 1866 [Woman with a Parrot]* (1866), *The Guitar Player* (c. 1866), *The Croquet Game* (1873), and *The Railway* (1873). In eight of these nine works, in Lipton's words, Meurent 'examines the viewer with Olympia's unflinching gaze' where the power of the model was too much for viewers to bear; their gaze had to be diverted, directed elsewhere, relieved of the pressure to visually engage.¹⁷ For Lipton, the professional model Meurent violated the unwritten rules of female poser for male artist: be docile, available, and powerless. In effect, she gazed/glared back. But was this look one of control or empowerment on the part of Meurent?

At least one noted philosopher and one influential art historian have found her irresistible. In attempting to explain this shared fascination with Olympia's 'elusive' and 'unabashed' gaze, her 'frank stare,' Alexander Nehamas argues that Manet painted Olympia while she herself was being photographed.¹⁸ This explains why the painting fails to make narrative sense as a painting, i.e., the beholder becomes the photographer, before shifting into the client's role: 'Olympia's look, aware and indifferent, acknowledges her clients as it casts them aside.'¹⁹ The typical male gazer is gratified, titillated, and challenged. The painting has 'a double being—both inanimate matter and alluring creature,' and as such is a paradigm of Manet's multi-layered modernism. One is tempted to contrast other readings of Olympia that further complicate the spatial dynamic on view. Charles Harrison posits a 'psycho-logical transaction between a solitary spectator and a representational image' that renders the male gaze part of intentional irony on the part of the artist; within the complex picture plane, the viewer stares at Meurent who 'unabashedly challenges male buyers, mocks male artists of the past, and assumes an active role by exercising power over the gazer's anxieties', thereby saving Manet from the charge of misogyny.²⁰ The debate deepens. I contend that Meurent-as-model is not empowered or if so, very little. Rather, she is posed by Manet who is in control; she is nude, reclining on a sofa in the iconographic tradition of Titian's seductive but objectified *Venus of Urbino*. What else can she do but stare back at the viewer (buyer), or the photographer, or the artist, or some combination thereof?

And what about the 'other' woman in the painting, the one that goes unnoticed, the Black model who remains 'unseen'? One might be tempted to attribute some measure of agency and power to Meurent, perhaps, because she poses such a contrast to 'her counterpart, the domestic worker, whose darker skin tones melted into the brothel's lush background, equally advancing the painting's proto-abstraction'—the flatness or lack of modeling of Meurent's body, attributed to Manet as the innovator of modernism.²¹ But as artist Lorraine O'Grady argued in 1992, Western culture not only relegates black women to the margins of white femininity, but it also charges

them with synthesising a dialectic of deviance and nurturance. Laure, the professional model whom Manet used for Olympia's maid, is: 'Jezebel *and* Mammy, prostitute and female eunuch, the two-in-one. . . like all the other "peripheral Negroes," a robot conveniently made to disappear into the background drapery'.²² One can only speculate what Manet intended with her hovering, helpless presence.

More recently, the author of the novel *Victorine* (2021) suggests that the dominant narrative about Meurent may be misleading. Drema Drudge challenges the poverty of a supposed sex worker who was an alcoholic who 'traded on her past "fame" and died young,' because in fact, she lived to age 83.²³ New evidence suggests that she not only earned a living painting, but she taught music and attended art school at the Académie Julian, though after posing as Olympia. Moreover, she exhibited in the Paris Salon six times, supported herself into the 1880s by modelling (also for Edgar Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec) and was inducted into the Société des Artistes Français in 1903 with the support of one of the founders of the Société. Acknowledging that most of her paintings are now lost, what about her acclaimed 1876 self-portrait that 'bested' Manet (see Figure 3)? It is signed and shows her looking out at us with what author Drudge calls 'defiance and self-delineation.' It



Figure 3: "Self-portrait" (ca. 1876) by Victorine Meurent, image courtesy of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts

shows us how she saw herself, in contrast to more than thirty paintings of her by male artists.

Does Meurent embody the power of de Beauvoir's notion of active (not passive) subject (not object) who refuses to see herself as a fixed image, an object of desire? Does she display empowerment unlike her Olympia pose? I argue that her self-portrait is more likely to embody a stronger sense of identity, agency, and power than any portrait posed by a male artist, particularly in extending the demeaning tradition of a nude Venus reclining on a couch. In her self-portrait, she looks at the viewer, but she is clothed, upright, determined, and strong. She is a fitting example of a female artist who wrests control away from any possible partner or collaborator in asserting her self-righteous autonomy and independence. Can a viewer not see it in the choice of pose for her self-portrait?

II. SELF-EMPOWERMENT

Utilising self-portraiture as a model, visual artists can also create works of art that invite viewers to collaborate, pose, and/or perform. Consider my series of artworks known as 'Picture Yourself Here', for which a viewer assumes the role of a model, e.g., Manet's *Olympia*, such that an amateur poses as a professional (Meurent), who is depicted within the original work. The model is guided by the original representation, collaborates with the artist to create art together, and self-improvises to pose like the original or intentionally differ from it. This is a partnering of artist and viewer that results in a potentially enriching experience for both active collaborators present as well as others watching—or viewing records of posing online.²⁴ It has been my experience that in a festive atmosphere such as a gallery opening, with peoples' inhibitions freed by the flow of alcoholic beverages, a myriad of expressions can result from numerous cooperative participants. Alternately, some viewers refuse to participate at all, shunning the spotlight of poser. Attracted to large interactive works of art, viewers are inspired to participate or are simply left to watch. Peer pressure from friends can inspire posers to imitate the original faces (hung separately on the wall) or make up their own, for example, a woman who posed in Edward Munch's painting of a nude female girl (*Puberty*, 1894) simultaneously imitated the male face in *The Scream* (1893).²⁵

Consider my version of Manet's *Olympia* entitled, *Picture Yourself Here: Edie Manet's Olympia, the Artist* (2007). It is a replica of the original, measuring 60.5" x 96.5" and painted with oil on 1-inch foam board that stands upright on an iron stand so that viewers can walk behind it. The face of Victorine Meurent hangs on the wall behind the painting, so that when a viewer is positioned correctly, one can see her face through a hole cut in the canvas board and the painting appears complete. But if one does not stand directly in front with the proper perspective, one simply sees the hole and must reposition one's body in order to see it as a whole image. The artwork



Figure 4: "Picture Yourself Here: Edie Manet's *Olympia, the Artist* (2006). Oil on foam board. 48.5 x 96.5 x 1.5 inch. Based on Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, 1867. Photo credit: courtesy of the artist.

implicitly invites the viewer to pose and partake in the impromptu creation of a portrait of a contemporary person replacing Meurent. The title, as with the others in this series, imagines the artist to be female, for example, Edie Manet, who offers other women (and men) an opportunity to experience posing as the nude prostitute within Manet's renowned work. Whether old or young, male or female, people can position themselves in place to ponder the power of the pose, the lived experience of disrobing, and sitting for an artist who is primarily in control. Does one feel empowered staring out at the viewers, or does one feel manipulated by Manet, experiencing a loss of agency and autonomy? There is no correct answer, of course; it is art that is meant to make us think.

In fact, I dub these artworks (there are ten in the series) FVPs (Feminist Visual Parodies) offered as a way to understand feminist art and intentionality, defined as:

1. a feminist satire, and
2. a complex imitation of an original work of art by a male artist.²⁶

To unpack the definition, consider a feminist satire to be 'a work of art that expresses and values a woman's point of view as it makes fun of prevailing artistic conventions and societal norms established by men' and a complex imitation to involve an artist 'copying the style of an original work of art, resulting in either an implicit or explicit commentary on the original'.²⁷ Humour is often invoked in parody and satire as many feminist artists of the past fifty years have shown. Other 2006 titles include *Sandra Botticelli's Venus Surfing (On a Seashell)*, *Alexandra Cabanel's Venus Birthing*, *Paula Gauguin's*

Spirit of the Nude Posing, Edna Munch's *Puberty Liberated*, Goldie Klimt's *Judith (with the Head of Holofernes) Beheaded*, Eva Schiele's *Standing Female Nude with Crossed Arms Emancipated/Emaciated*, Pamela Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Appropriated*, Wilma de Kooning's *Woman I*, while Thomasina Wesselman's *Double Parody of Sunset Nude with Matisse Odalisque* is a more complex piece dated 2009.

I place this body of work within the context of other notable feminist contributions intended to subvert the status quo, disrupt the hierarchy of male power and star-making (the rewarding of 'male genius'), and circumvent the male-dominated gallery and museum structure to allow and highlight more opportunities for women, LGBTQI+ and/or BIPOC artists. For too long, male artists told women how and when to pose; too often, they controlled professional models in order to create 'master' pieces that appealed to a masculinist gaze. Consider the byline of the Guerrilla Girls' visual parody of the nude female poser in Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' 1814 painting, *Grande Odalisque* (1814), which asks 'Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. [Metropolitan] Museum?' (1989, 2005, 2012).²⁸ To create an FVP, the Guerrilla Girls used humour for their original billboard and 2012 poster. The poster's secondary message for the artworld says, 'Less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 76% of the nudes are female.' The Guerrilla Girls—self-appointed 'Conscience of the Art World'—sought to bring attention to the skewed numbers that result in power imbalances within art institutions. In another way, 'Picture Yourself Here' brings agency to viewers/amateur models who can subtly subvert and, like Wendy Red Star, stage a 'strategic mode of intervention into the conventions of portraiture'.²⁹ They thus interrupt the continuing tradition of professional models cast as reclining female nudes that are now replaced by elite female athletes in soft porn poses, such as images found in *Sports Illustrated*, *Playboy*, *Maxim*.³⁰ 'Picture Yourself Here' thus encourages an aesthetic experience of empowerment and pleasure in defiance.

Finally, in our current era of digital art, one can radically expand the possibilities of imagining and empowerment through past works of art without having to pose or be physically present. Consider apps that invite viewers to 'express yourself' in over three hundred 'artistic filters' to 'create realistic masterpiece edits' such as AI Gahaku: AI Portrait Maker app, a Renaissance Art Filter Camera for iPhones developed by Kazuya Saito.³¹ You are invited to imagine yourself as a Renaissance portrait painting. Used by over ten million people worldwide, it enables users to create ersatz masterpieces by Warhol, Modigliani, Picasso, or Rembrandt 'with no picture editing or Photoshop skills needed'. Another version, AI Portraits, was reportedly so popular that it crashed.³² Developed by researchers at the MIT-IBM Watson AI Lab, it compares photos to 45,000 paintings in the program 'from Old Masters like Titian and Rembrandt.' Yet another program—released by Google—will match a face to a famous painting in their digital collection of

artworks from over 1000 museums around the world to ‘find your fine art doppelganger’.³³ These apps, which point toward the future, join deep fakes in further complicating portraiture’s already substantive issues associated with appropriation and authenticity. Nonetheless, it seems highly unlikely that amateur models and amateur artists who take selfies will forego the fun and pleasure of posing in other artists’ artworks: past or present. Issues of identity and self-exploration will entice viewers to experiment and experience the fun of faking the role of a professional model.

In conclusion, the creativity of ‘posing amateurs’ is perhaps less skilled, but more personally meaningful in co-creating a collaborative artwork for all to publicly see, judge, and appreciate. Posing can be elevating, empowering, and elating for artists and amateurs alike.

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ENDNOTES

1. Debaene 2019, 218; 2021b, see also; 2021a.
2. Indeed, the notion of performance has been extended even to music listeners: ‘Listening . . . is not a passive consumption of organised sounds, but based on an embodied activity, an invisible enactment of the heard. . . audiences, in listening, themselves perform’. Peters 2010, 1.
3. Debaene 2019, 216.
4. Brand [Weiser] 2023.
5. Debaene 2019, 216.
6. Cheney and Russo 2000, 1.
7. Borzello 1998, 21.
8. Borzello 1998, 20.
9. Cheney and Russo 2000, 11.
10. Borzello 1998, 118, 133, 134.
11. Brand [Weiser] 2022b.
12. Fella and Bloom 2019.
13. Chadwick 2001.
14. Chadwick 2001, 9.
15. Lipton 1994, 7.
16. Lipton 1994, 4.
17. Lipton 1994, 3.
18. Brand [Weiser] 2007, Nehamas adopts Jean Clay’s 1983 theory.
19. Nehamas 2007, 120.
20. Brand [Weiser] 2005, 153.
21. Sparks 2019.
22. O’Grady 1992.
23. Drudge 2020.
24. See the series of photos at <https://www.pegbrand.com/#picture-yourself-here/>, 1 - 17.
25. <https://www.pegbrand.com/#picture-yourself-here/> 8.
26. Brand [Weiser] 2006, 180.
27. Brand [Weiser] 2006, 180.
28. Guerilla Girls 1989, See also poster for purchase at <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/store/dowomen-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-2012>.
29. Fella and Bloom 2019.
30. Brand [Weiser] 2022a.
31. See <https://apps.apple.com/tr/app/ai-portrait-maker-ai-gahaku/id1539131522>
32. Prior 2019.
33. Larson 2018.

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