



## Erotic and Pornographic Art: Lesbian

by Tamsin Wilton

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Lesbians who want to produce erotic art for the enjoyment of other lesbians face a unique set of problems. Until very recently the world of European "high" art was the exclusive preserve of men, both as producers and consumers, and this was especially so for erotic imagery.

The exclusion of women artists and the lack of female patrons continue to shape the fine arts today, and lesbian erotic art in particular. For example, the continuing male domination of art schools means, simply, that there are fewer gifted lesbian artists. This may be one reason why lesbian erotic art is dominated by photography, where a set of technical skills may be easily mastered without admission to art school.

### **The Mystery of Female Desire**

For centuries, female sexuality in European culture was policed and repressed with extraordinary rigor. Inevitably the imagery, codes, and signifying systems of erotic art were developed by men (whatever their sexual preference) to arouse other men. One legacy of this repression is that far less is known about the history of female desire than about male desire; another is that women's desire remains relatively mysterious even today.

The commercial failure of soft porn magazines aimed at heterosexual women suggests that there is widespread ignorance about what arouses women, and a substantial body of sexological research suggests that this ignorance extends to women themselves.

Considering that lesbians are subject to even more severe sexual suppression than non-lesbian women, it is remarkable that so much lesbian erotica has been produced in so brief a time.

### **The Male Gaze**

Many influential commentators follow John Berger in arguing that centuries of gender inequality in wealth, status, and sexual autonomy mean that while men are free to look, evaluate, and choose sexual partners, women's sexuality is restricted to narcissistic *self*-evaluation in order to attract men.

In the shorthand of cultural studies, "the gaze is male." This belief makes it difficult to conceive of pornography for anything other than a male audience, of whatever sexuality. Moreover, the routine use of girl-on-girl imagery for male titillation, whether in old master oil paintings of classical mythology or "lesbo" centerfolds in top-shelf men's magazines, makes it particularly difficult for lesbians to achieve a sense of ownership of sexually explicit lesbian art.

Before the development of photography only a minority of wealthy men had access to intentionally arousing images, but rapid developments in the reproduction and dissemination of visual material, especially via the internet, means that most individuals in industrialized nations will be familiar with the semiotic codes of male sexuality.

Lesbian erotic art, therefore, has to choose whether to adopt these codes or to construct some kind of alternative erotic language.

### **Production of Erotic Art by Lesbians for Lesbians**

The production of erotic art by lesbians for lesbians is relatively recent, and depended on women achieving some kind of economic independence. The wealthy lesbians of the "Left Bank," for example, were only able to live as they chose because of their class privilege.

Although the conventions of the time meant that they produced little that may be thought of as erotica, the lesbian artists who flocked to Paris in the 1920s and 1930s did begin to develop an iconography that reflected their own sexual culture. The paintings and drawings of Romaine Brooks and Djuna Barnes' ink drawings in the style of Beardsley, for example, breathe a self-consciously "perverse" eroticism that fitted in well with contemporary notions of what it meant to be a lesbian.

Thirty years later the Argentine-born lesbian surrealist Leonor Fini painted a world from which men are excluded (although their body parts sometimes appear in parcels or glass cauldrons) and in which lesbian sex is presented with electric intensity. Hers are among the earliest images that may appropriately be termed lesbian erotic art and her 1966 painting of women making love in a train, *Le Long du Chemin*, remains probably the most widely known erotic image painted by a lesbian.

### **Lesbian Feminist Art**

The "second wave" of feminism after World War II gave rise to a trenchant critique of the sexual objectification of women. Many lesbian artists went to great lengths to produce images that would celebrate the naked female body without recourse to the conventions of male pornography.

Monica Sjoo in England and Sudie Rakusin in the United States are in this tradition. Both celebrate lesbian identity by producing stylized images of female archetypes. Although some feminist critics argue that artistic ability is a patriarchal concept that should be ignored, the work produced by Sjoo and Rakusin is so weak aesthetically that it never made much of an impact outside small lesbian-feminist communities.

Frank sexuality begins to appear in the 1970s in the work of lesbian feminist photographers, such as Cynthia MacAdams, whose *Rising Goddess* series of nudes manages to express both sensuality and desire. However, MacAdams' work is often (not always) derivative, and her nude studies of young girls, innocent in the context of the time, would cause outrage if published today.

The undoubted star of lesbian feminist erotic art is Tee Corinne, whose defiant insistence that lesbian liberation must include sexual liberation broke new ground.

Corinne's detailed and loving visual exploration of women's genitals, genuinely shocking at the time, made a powerful statement in a context where such images were taboo, and offered lesbians an unfamiliar opportunity to enjoy the desiring "gaze" in freedom. Corinne's *Yantras of Womanlove*, published by Naiad Press in 1982, was the first ever book of lesbian sex photographs, predating Della Grace's *Love Bites* by nine years.

### **Lesbian Erotic Iconography**

In contrast to such attempts to devise a uniquely lesbian erotic iconography free from patriarchal contamination, some lesbians responded to the pornography debate by consciously reworking established pornographic codes.

Since these "sex-radical dykes" largely identified with the sadomasochistic community, the codes used depended heavily on S&M iconography, including leather, basques, stilettos, suspenders, and bondage paraphernalia. Critics insisted that such imagery could not be divorced from its sexist, often racist, origins. Nevertheless, whether because it "works" politically or sexually, or because it appeals to heterosexual white men, this genre has recently become the dominant one in lesbian pornography.

### **Adopting Established Codes**

Artists who adopt the established codes from either gay or straight men's pornography may do so in ways that strive to wrest control of the gaze from men.

Photographer Della Grace, for example, conscious of the exploitation of women in heterosexual pornography, has explored different ways of confronting this problem in her work. One exhibition of her staged sex photographs featured audio tapes of the models talking about their feelings during the shoot, and she went on to photograph herself in explicit sexual scenarios, shutter-release bulb visibly in shot.

Others may parody the traditional codes of male pornography, may use them ironically, or may attempt to subvert them by incorporating them into butch-femme role play. For example, English photographer Tessa Boffin reworks the classic tale of the sex-hungry sailor and the tart, by reversing the gender of the protagonists.

Morgan Gwenwald's photographic sequence of a lesbian couple in butch-femme drag, playing out staged sex scenes in New York's Central Park, exploits the iconography of sleazy heterosexuality. Similarly, her shot of a femme in lacy bra unzipping the fly of her butch to reveal a disconcertingly life-like silicone penis is both an ironic comment on the "lesbian phallus" and a knowing reference to lesbian sexual pleasures.

### **Politics and the Sex Wars**

The contextual problems of lesbian erotica mean that it seldom attains the unselfconscious raunchiness of gay men's pornography. Much sexually explicit lesbian art is intellectual, ironic, or overtly political in a way that is not the case for other pornographic traditions.

Lesbian erotica must also be seen in the context of the "sex wars," which split feminists into two groups: those who believe sexually explicit imagery to be irrevocably contaminated by sexism and others who insist that sexual exploration is central to women's liberation. This conflict led to the development of a unique phenomenon that might best be described as "agit-porn," whereby lesbians used painting, photography, and performance to push the boundaries of representation of lesbian sexuality and challenge pro-censorship feminists.

The best example of this phenomenon is the Canadian collective Kiss & Tell. This trio of lesbians, Susan Stewart, Persimmon Blackbridge, and Lizard Jones, set out deliberately to challenge both feminist and state-sponsored censorship by producing explicit photographic images exploring lesbian sexuality.

For their participatory exhibition, "Drawing the Line," which toured Canada, the United States, and Australia in 1988, Kiss and Tell asked viewers to write comments on the walls alongside the images (men wrote theirs in a book in the center of the gallery), and these comments were then published with a selection of the photographs in a pull-out postcard book.

The last card in the book was self-addressed to the collective, and encouraged readers to contribute their own comments. This combination of encouraging sexual arousal along with democratic participation in political debate is unique to lesbian sex art.

### **The Power of Lesbian Sexuality**

Many argue that lesbian sexuality has been so effectively erased from cultural production that any image of women arousing or pleasuring each other is radical. The appropriation of fetish-chic by the mainstream in the 1990s brought the dildo-wielding, shaved and pierced dyke into the fast lane of popular culture and even onto the catwalk. But such images comprise the minority of lesbian erotica, the bulk of which is far simpler and more straightforward.

Stripped of all pornographic signifiers, "real life" lesbians of all shapes, sizes, colors, ethnicities, and (dis)abilities enjoy the ordinary pleasures of lesbian sex. The power of such images is deceptive. To show a woman clearly getting off on rimming her partner as Jill Posener does in *1988: Untitled* (1988) or two young black women kissing with obvious passion as in Katie Niles' *1978: Untitled* (1978) is to show what the heterosexual mainstream wishes to keep secret--the simple fact that women, whatever their cultural background, do not need men for sex.

### **Lesbian Sex Magazines**

The growth of a self-confident lesbian identity, partly post-Stonewall and partly as a result of second-wave feminism, gave rise to a small explosion of lesbian sex-magazines. Because very few women have access to capital, and because many feminist bookshops continue to exclude publications they believe to be pornographic, lesbian sex-magazines struggle to survive.

The longest-lived is the United States title, *On Our Backs* (an outright challenge to the feminist publication, *off our backs*), while Australia has *Wicked Women*, and even England managed to support, for a tantalizing five issues, the beautifully-produced *Quim*.

These pioneering publications offer work to lesbian photographers and illustrators producing explicit erotic imagery, thus providing the essential economic foundation that is so taken for granted by producers and consumers of men's pornography.

### **Diversity in Lesbian Erotica**

Many forms of social exclusion operate within lesbian communities and acknowledging this fact has been influential in lesbian erotica. Sexualized images of individuals who are fat, disabled, or beyond middle age occur far more frequently (and with more positive intent) in lesbian porn than in pornography aimed at any other group.

The challenge of producing arousing images of black and minority ethnic women, without falling into racist stereotypes, has led to some particularly interesting work from photographers such as Jacqui Duckworth, Laurence Jangy-Paget, and Mumtaz Karimjee.

Lesbian erotic art cannot be detached from the social and political context in which it is produced. It is, perhaps, ironic that the legacy of the "sex wars" that divided feminists in the 1970s and 1980s should be a vibrant, rich, and diverse body of lesbian erotic art. It is also worthy of note that no comparable body of work produced by heterosexual women exists.

The appropriation of fetish imagery from dyke porn by the mainstream may be problematic--this debate continues--but the fact that there is a substantial body of work that may be raided in this way is undeniable evidence that lesbian sexuality is visible now to an extent that it has never been before.

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