



I ONCE THOUGHT I WAS BEAUTIFUL. THEN I SAW A MAGAZINE

Essay Submission



DECEMBER 22, 2017
JASMINE MOMPOINT

Abstract

This essay offers a reflection on my own personal experience with a particular painting at the Lowe Art Museum on the Coral Gables campus of the University of Miami. It was a pivotal point in my learning experience here, as, in staring into the eyes of this painting I was effectively staring into the eyes of a key point in our society. Staring down the barrel of a gun loaded with the oversexualization and exploitation of women, all for the sake of advertisement. It made me feel dirty, to stand there and bear witness to this naked truth. Yet, it is this naked truth that spurs on my story. This essay I hope will incite self-reflection of others and the way they themselves view women, as well as consideration on the tactics often undertaken by advertisement companies. In short, be wary, for this very exploitation, I realized is here, and has almost always been.

I once thought I was beautiful. Then I saw a magazine.

The squat, small, awkwardly angular shaped building stared at me from across the two-way street and I stared back. Sun rays piercing boldly through the sky, ready to strike someone, anyone, or maybe just me. We were in a silent showdown; someone standing aways down the sidewalk would have looked upon us, the Lowe Art Museum and I, and seen something resembling a western film; gun in holster, hand on hip, cowboy hat in hand. We were battling over who would prevail, the artwork hidden behind its walls or me, the person who had come to see it. I do not think the museum knew I would not be as everyone else was: haughty, arrogant, similar to, as Winterson calls it, “some monstrous Roman Tyrant.” (14) A person who would come not to appraise the art, but to objectify it. One who looks beneath or behind the beautiful oil painting or the dark shading of the charcoal, searching for meaning in the painting in connection with their lives, that probably does not exist, ignoring what the art is truly trying to say. I told myself that this would not be me, for Winterson’s words had touched me deeply, and I knew that in acting as just about everyone else did, in believing that I myself was superior to the art I had come to see, I would only be cheating myself. Cheating myself out of the almost out-of-body experience that comes with viewing art. Cheating myself out of the journey to another world, time, and place, of which the artist was attempting to take on. Therefore, with this strange push and pull dynamic I had found myself to be in with the Lowe Art Museum, I told myself that maybe I was not there to prevail over the artwork, but rather to, for the time I was there, merge my own life with the life of the artwork.

Connecting with the art was challenging. Not because of the artwork itself. With such talented artists and impressive creations, there were several pieces that enticed me in countless different ways. No, it was just about everything else that made it difficult to fully immerse myself in the art on display. The “thick curtain of irrelevancies that screen the painting from the viewer.” (1) mentioned by Jeanette Winterson in her own essay on Ecstasy and Effrontery. The “low lights” and thick glass that kept the art in their own world and me in mine. The footsteps of the guards pacing close beside me, irritated me to no end—eyes focused on the side of my face, burning holes into the back of my neck. I suppose they were waiting to see me pick up one of the 12 x 14 paintings hanging on the wall and attempt to stuff it into my purse. I was not truly connected. Maybe if the “thick curtain of protection (was) taken away; protection of prejudice, protection of authority, protection of trivia, (then) even the most familiar of paintings (could) begin to work their power.”(10) But it wasn’t. The typical trivialities surrounding art were as tangible to me as the art itself and, because of it I did not feel as though I had the time to “fall in love” with the artwork as Winterson demanded. Luckily with the painting I saw, I didn’t have to.



The image that drew me in was the picture of the yellow girl. Constructed by Mel Ramos and entitled “Tobacco Rosie,” the screenprint encapsulates a nude woman, posed stiffly on two boxes of “Phillip Morris” cigarettes, holding a cup of coffee. The last notion is an almost comical aspect of the picture; a notion I suppose taken to maybe normalize the model’s actions in the screenprint; as if posing nude atop an open box of cigarettes, cup of joe in hand, is an everyday action for a woman. For a minute I stood in front of Ms.Rosie, and could not understand why exactly my eyes were drawn to her delicate fingertips, wrapped around the small, plain white cup. Then however I thought, that in art, or in a painting, there are no mistakes. The strangest of elements might be included within the piece, and, at first glance, might have no relevancy to the overall message being portrayed. However, this is not the case. I personally feel as though this, understanding that art can have aspects to it one does not necessarily understand, is one of the largest elements of art people struggle with. Believing there is no meaning behind something that has no meaning to them. This egocentrism disrupts our connections with art. If we only looked through the eyes of the artist, the truth of the artwork might rise above the surface. Bringing such thinking back to Mel Ramos’s painting, I imagined the eye he might have beheld when looking at the painting, and thought, that coffee cup is no mistake, no object half-heartedly included in the screenprint to add depth to the painting.

No.

Instead, in my eyes, the coffee is there to humanize the woman. Make her seem more natural in such an unnatural pose. It is there to make Ms.Rosie look sexy. What man’s fantasy would not be fulfilled if he stepped into his kitchen one morning and there, sitting at the table was a nude woman, beverage in hand? I can almost guarantee not a single hand would be raised.

The coffee sends a subtle message that rings true throughout our society. Women, do not get a moment just to themselves, in which they can relax and live their plain, unglamorous life. They must always be poised, beautiful, sexy, seductive. They must be ready for the camera first thing in the morning and perfectly coiffed even before going to bed. No one likes a woman who does not keep up with herself, right?

My brown orbs travelled away from the cup held in the model's fingertips and ran down her wrist; paused at her elbow and changed directions, making their way up Ms. Rosie's pale arm, around her shoulder, resting on her face. She was staring at me in almost challenging way. Daring me to back away from the powerful message she represented. The model in Mel Ramos' screenprint, "Ms. Rosie" had eyes that drew me in, eyes resembling a window pane. Look into her orbs and one would be looking at all the secrets hidden behind her eyes, fall into her emotions like one would fall into a bottomless pit. Look into her eyes and just lose yourself.

Her eyes screamed out Berger's words, that "every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. (Or in this case a screenprint) Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights." (Page 99. Berger. The art of seeing) It was this sight that pulled me in because, I looked at the screenprint with the eyes of just about every woman who had ever walked the Earth did, and saw the same story. Confidence. Awkwardness. Beauty. Ugliness. Advertisement. Exploitation. Mel Ramos knew that there was an infinity of sights that he could have captured, but chose this one. To throw light on the exploitation of women in advertisement and the normalizing of oversexualization in the media. I saw the story.

And then she spoke to me.

Ms. Rosie, the model in the screenprint, was comfortable in her position, sitting forever in the uncomfortable way that she does, posed atop two ridiculously large boxes of cigarettes. She had gotten used to men ogling her; pretending to search for the meaning of Mel Ramos' screenprint when in reality, their eyes searched for her breasts. Ms. Rosie had on her poker face for this purpose; so that she could stare back at those staring at her and look bored, at ease, uncomfortable, sexy, and constipated all at the same time. She spoke of how the advertisement business had used her for the ad, as a body not as a real woman. Did she mind? Of course she did! But what could she do? She was just a small and yet, essential part of the advertisement industry, an industry that has used women to their advantage. It's a business who uses what ever tactics it must to get its products to appeal to consumers.

Furthering Ms. Rosie's message to me, is the blatant oversexualization of women not only in the advertising industry, but in our society as a whole. In taking a step outside of my own reality to observe the image, I could truly see the message Berger was trying to make in his dissertation on "Ways of Seeing." Berger had blatantly expressed that, "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relationship between things and ourselves." Resulting in our vision being "continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are" (98, Berger "Ways of Seeing") Truth was found beneath John Berger's words, deep down within me. Looking at Ms. Rosie perched atop her box of cigarettes made me think of the countless aspects of our society I had noticed were unfair to women dating back to my childhood. It made me question why a woman's full nude body could be showcased in film so openly, while the male counterparts dignity would forever be preserved. It made me wonder why female characters in cartoon movies were drawn so voluptuously more times than not—because of course the first message we want to send to

young girls is how inadequate their own bodies are. Reflect back on the ample curves of cartoon characters like Jessica Rabbit, Betty Boop, or 'Mom' in the children's show Dexter's Laboratory and consider just why the aforementioned women are drawn so sensually. All stemming from different time periods, 1980, 1930, and 1990 respectively, the timeline shows that the oversexualization of women is not a new guest to the table, and is most likely not on its way out either. It made me think of Playboy calendars and how a different nude woman was used to represent each month out of the year, so that one could fantasize about one woman for a whole thirty days before moving on to the next. It made me think of why in the hell someone would think to put a nude woman on top of a cigarette box.

Because it works.

Because sex, and sexuality, and anything that falls beneath this umbrella has become infused into just about all aspects of our society. Saving the 'innocent' minds of Americans from perversions has turned everything into a perversion. Seeing images like Ms. Rosie paraded about our society has made people fantasize constantly about what they can and cannot have, what they want. To see beautiful women with no imperfections, no self-consciousness, no holds barred, leaves people to fantasize and question just why they cannot have someone in such a way. Who wouldn't want to have the perfect woman, be the perfect woman?

It works.

Posing Ms. Rosie atop the box of cigarettes plays to mens ego and evokes the desired emotions of women. By just buying this box of cigarettes you have somehow displayed your manhood in the utmost of ways—smoking is what a man does right?— and are simultaneously permitted to take a sneak peek at a free pair of breasts each time you go out for a smoke. The health risks melt away. Instead of companies being honest with consumers about the dangers of

smoking or the ingredients stuffed into the cigarette sticks, their ads instead focus on the social effects of smoking; how cool you will look, how much everyone else does it and therefore you should too, how sexy it is. One might believe these types of social pressures have no effect on their willingness to buy an advertised good, in this case a box of smokes, but it does. The companies play to the unconscious; ignite the craving we have locked away at the base of our brain or the self-consciousness believed to be rid of since grade school. The anxiety that we all have buried deep within the base of our brain that we are not attractive enough, fit enough, smart enough, etc. is targeted with these advertisements, and the ad companies all know it.

It works for women. The advertisement of Ms. Rosie might not evoke such a mass sexual desire from the female population as it does in the male, but it does evoke sexual envy. Women should want to look like her, be thin or voluptuous like her, have hair like her, etc. This is dangerous, and has been for a long time. To have an entire population of people searching desperately for the unattainable, because, despite the extensive conversation I had with Ms. Rosie that lazy Sunday afternoon in the Lowe Art Museum, she does not exist. Advertisement companies have the fuel for the fire. All they need to do is light a match. Ms. Rosie is a photoshopped, edited version of what a real woman looks like. She has perfectly coifed hair and no split ends. She has flawless skin and long shapely legs, not short stubbs or too large thighs. She does not need a push-up bra like the rest of us to entice men. She has no lovehandles. She is perfect. She is not real.

Mel Ramos captures the basic theology of American society in his screenprint, which is how we are constantly striving to achieve the impossible; centering our dreams and fantasies around false delusions when amazing things are already in our own reality. Ramos captures the inner emotions of how a woman in the advertisement business might feel—exploited, helpless,

apathetic, numb. The screenprint does not just speak to me, but to all women, I think, if only they took a minute to listen. The screenprint is real.