

The Male Gaze and the Female Nude: Why Desexualisation Matters in Contemporary Drawing

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The way the female nude has traditionally been represented in art continues to be shaped by what Laura Mulvey describes as the male gaze: a framework in which women are positioned as objects to be viewed rather than subjects with agency (Mulvey, 1975). Even though Mulvey wrote about cinema in the 1970s, the concept feels extremely relevant now. Today, rather than a passive viewer sitting in a cinema, we carry the “gaze” around with us in our phones and participate in it through social media. This shift in how we look, and how we expect to be looked at, creates a cultural background where the desexualisation of the female nude through drawing becomes not only an artistic choice but a political one. In my own practice, this means using drawing to question these assumptions rather than reinforce them.

Social media plays a major role in shaping how young people understand the body, especially in the UK. The Women and Equalities Committee (2020) found that social media has a stronger influence on body dissatisfaction than older forms of media like magazines or television. This matters because the type of imagery people now consume daily is very different from the imagery found in traditional art history. Instead of oil paintings that might take months to produce, we are surrounded by instant, digitally altered images uploaded by friends, influencers, and celebrities. When these images are constantly edited, filtered, or staged, it creates the illusion that everyone else looks effortlessly perfect. The problem is not just that these images exist, but that we see them so frequently that they start to feel normal. In this sense, idealised online imagery becomes a modern extension of the gaze Mulvey criticised, only now it reaches into everyday life.

This influence is not limited to passive viewing. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok encourage users to not only consume images but create and curate their own. Mills et al. (2018) showed that exposure to idealised Instagram images significantly increased body dissatisfaction among young women, and part of the reason is that users compare these images to their own lives. What interests me here as an art student is how strongly the context of viewing affects emotional responses. The same image placed in a gallery might be viewed analytically or aesthetically, but on a phone screen it becomes something to compare oneself to. It becomes personal. This blurring of artwork, lifestyle, and aspiration helps explain why the gaze is now internalised; many young women begin to evaluate their own appearance based on how it might be judged by an imagined audience.

The emotional consequences of this internalised gaze are visible in UK mental health trends. The Mental Health Foundation (2019) reported that a large portion of teenagers worry about their body image because of social media. What feels worth discussing here is not just the statistic itself but what it suggests about the changing relationship between self-esteem and visibility. The need to be visually acceptable or to appear desirable online places people in a position where they are constantly anticipating how they will be perceived. This expectation

mirrors the dynamic that Mulvey described: women learn to see themselves through the eyes of others. Only now, instead of being framed by a painter or cinematographer, the frame is often self-created through selfies, filters, and editing apps.

These pressures extend into real-world behaviour. The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (BAAPS, 2021) has raised concerns about the influence of social media filters on younger people seeking cosmetic treatments. For me, this raises important questions about how the line between the “digital body” and the physical body is becoming blurred. If someone becomes accustomed to seeing a filtered version of themselves every day, their real body might start to feel inadequate. From an artistic perspective, this highlights the importance of creating spaces (including art spaces) where unedited bodies can be seen and appreciated without judgement. It also makes desexualising the nude more urgent because it challenges the idea that the body should always be modified, perfected, or presented in a way that fits aesthetic expectations.

In this environment, drawing the female nude from life becomes a meaningful counteraction. Unlike the images that dominate digital culture, drawing requires slow looking. It asks the viewer and the artist to pay attention to details that are often edited out: scars, folds, subtle asymmetry, texture, weight. When these features are included honestly, the result is a representation of the body that does not depend on sexual appeal. Instead, the body becomes a site of presence, personality, and lived experience. For me, this is where drawing becomes political. By choosing to represent the body without eroticising it, I challenge the expectation that the female nude must automatically be sexual.

There is also something important about the ordinary nature of many life-drawing poses. A relaxed or grounded posture can strip away erotic associations and give the viewer time to recognise the human being behind the form. This can be uncomfortable for some people, not because the body is sexual, but because they are not used to seeing female nudity without sexual framing. That discomfort is valuable. It reveals how deeply the gaze has been internalised. It also opens the door for new conversations about how we understand and respond to the nude in art.

Desexualised drawing also offers a potential antidote to the “performative” nature of online self-presentation. When viewers encounter representations of real, unidealised bodies, it can help broaden their understanding of what normal bodies look like. Instead of seeing one narrow type of beauty repeated across platforms, they encounter variation, texture, and authenticity. This has the potential to shift attitudes, not just toward art but toward one’s own body. When variation becomes visible, acceptance becomes easier.

Ultimately, my intention in drawing the female body in a desexualised way is to challenge a culture that still views women's bodies through a lens of judgement and desirability. By focusing on natural, unedited forms, I hope to reclaim the nude from the pressures of both historical objectification and modern digital perfectionism. Drawing, in this sense, becomes not just a method of representation but a tool for questioning and reshaping how we see the

female body. After all, if the gaze can be learned, then it can also be unlearned, and art is one of the spaces where that unlearning can begin.

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