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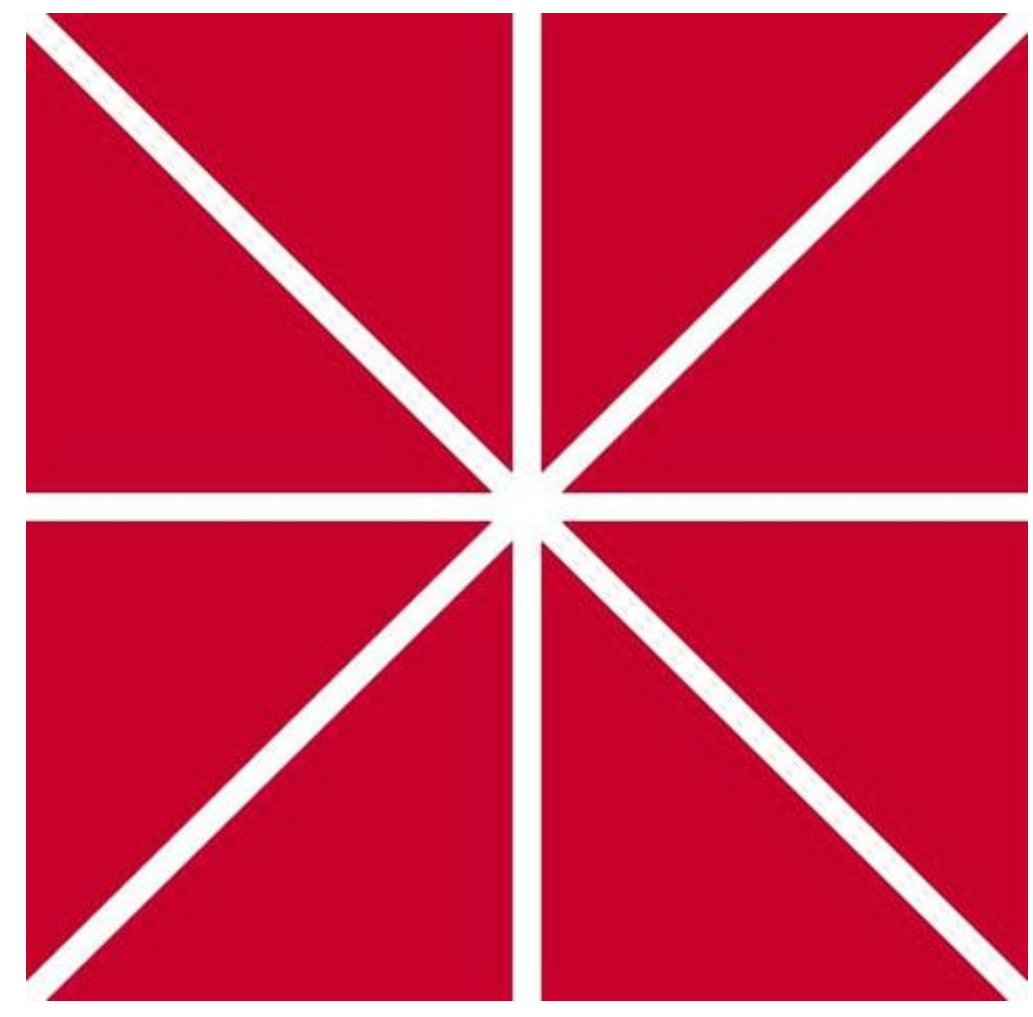
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French Women in Art: Reclaiming the Body through Creation

By Liatrix Hethcoat

Thesis:

Throughout history, representations of women in art have been created by men according to their gaze and inherent biases. Informed by French feminist writings, these four French female artists, amongst others, define their *own* experience as women by creating their *own*—therefore more authentic renderings—of female identity.

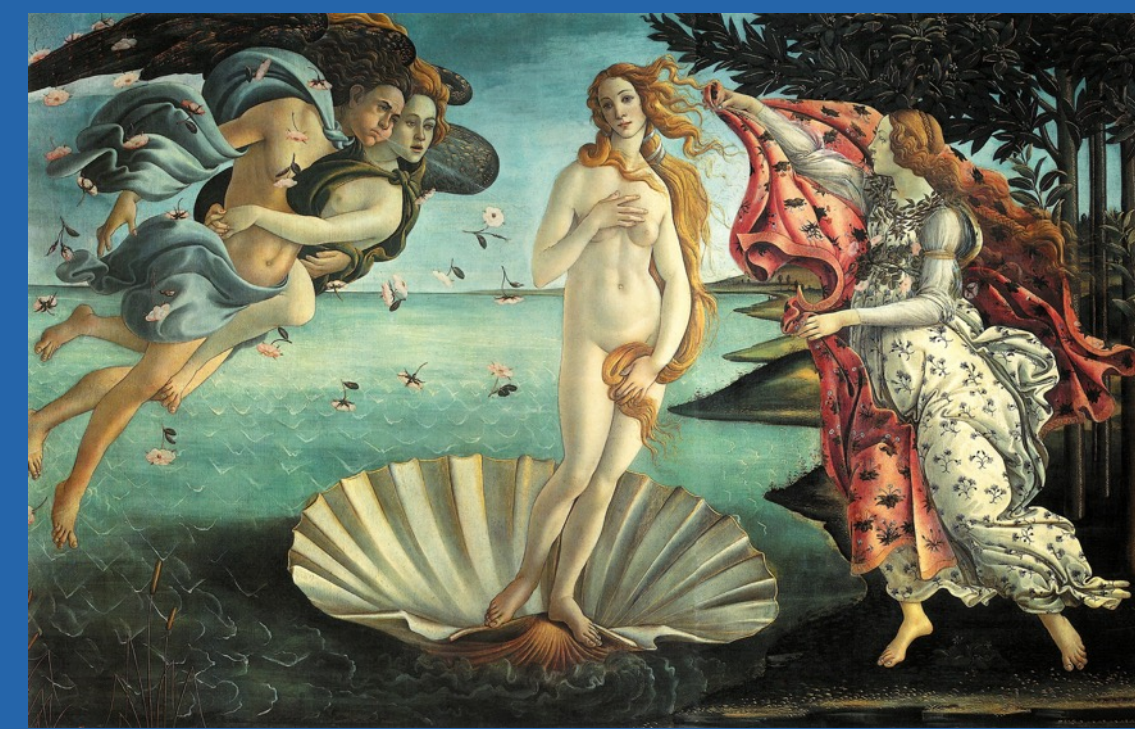
Background: From pre-history to Impressionism and beyond, culture has produced art which portrays women either as vessels to carry offspring, pornographic stimuli for men's gaze, the virgin martyr or the unattainable goddess (whether it be monotheism as in Christianity, or polytheism, in Greco-Roman culture). All these images are one-dimensional—none a true representation of the complex woman.

Prehistorical: The Venus of Willendorf, c. 28,000-25,000 BCE, found in 1908



- Fertility figure
- Pornographic
- Defines woman by body as vessel for male seed, tactile pleasures

Renaissance Inspired by Greco-Roman: Sandro Botticelli, *Nascita di Venere/The Birth of Venus*, 1484–1486



- Goddess representation
- Idealized, unattainable image
- Eroticized

Religious: Sandro Botticelli, *The Virgin and Child or The Madonna of the Book*, 1480.



- The Madonna image
- Virginal martyr
- Role of dedicated mother
- Sexless/Pure

The Royal Academy at the Louvre: Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie Antoinette ('en chemise')*, after 1783



- Realistic/Humanizing
- Accessible image which failed due to her power as queen
- Functional garb
- Political Backlash
- Powerful, laid-back woman threatens gender norms & power structure

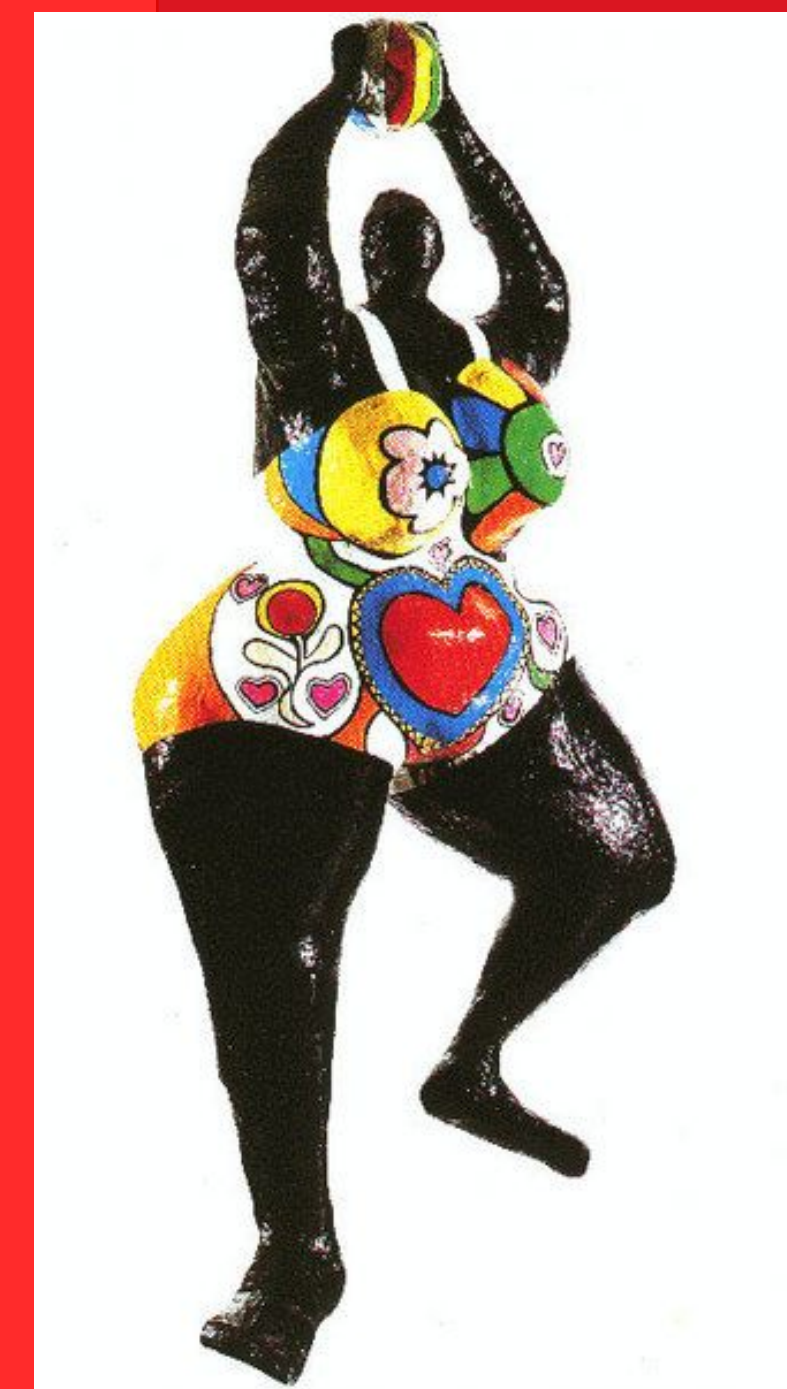
Impressionist: Even in a movement that claims to be forward thinking, as part of Modernism, women are excluded and representations subjugate women



- Édouard Manet, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe/Luncheon on the Grass*, oil on canvas, 1862-63
- Men engaged in civilized conversation
- Women as sensualized playthings
- Value of women is their bodies and not minds
- Denied participation in education and society's intellectual groups

20th Century Female French Artists and their Reactionary Works:

Niki de Saint-Phalle: *Black Venus*, 1967



- Subversion of traditional fertility goddess
- Empowering the non-Anglo woman
- She appears to be embracing and in charge of her sexuality rather than passive
- Has a vibrant personality

Louise Bourgeois: *Moi, Eugénie Grandet*



- Reimagination of Balzac's Eugénie Grandet character as herself and Medusa
- Theorist, Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of Medusa*—establishes idea of "l'écriture féminine"/"feminine writing"
- Reclamation of the negative title that is thrust upon women and reappropriating it for own use
- Beneficial to personal, female narrative

Agnès Varda: *Jane B. by Agnès V.*, 1988



- Portrait/self-portrait duality
- Movie still of scene
- Response to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538)
- Clothed
- Ownership of own body
- Strong, head-on gaze which reclaims female agency of body
- Female gaze in film
- Reimagination with female agency

Annette Messager: *My Jealousies*, 1972



- Rejection of media which polices feminine identity and enforces myth that happiness can be bought
- Embraces societally frowned upon emotions
- Critique of unrealistic body image standards
- Traditionally delicate materials (e.g.; yarn) which she repurposes

Conclusion: Women's reactionary works are important because women must write their own stories/control their own images so they will not be defined by the narratives written by men. In order to avoid the stifling male gaze, women need to voice their own perspectives and experiences. It is essential that women tell their stories in each & every form. After all, the "personal is political." If women do not share personal experiences through their authentic lens, they leave representations of their identity in the hands of a male-dominated society who may claim ownership over females' bodies and rights.