



# Importance of Feminist Erotic Art

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This thesis is intended to answer a question why feminist erotic art is important.

Erotic art encompasses a diverse range of artistic expressions that delve into human sexuality, desire, and sensuality. It explores the intricacies of intimacy, pleasure, and the human body through various mediums such as paintings, sculptures, photographs, literature, and performances. Throughout history, different cultures have depicted sexual acts, nudity, and desire in their art, challenging societal norms and conventions surrounding sexuality. Erotic art evokes a wide array of emotions, from arousal and excitement to introspection and contemplation. It celebrates the beauty of the human form while delving into themes of passion, intimacy, and the exploration of desires. Though at times controversial, erotic art sparks meaningful conversations about the multifaceted nature of human experiences and the diverse expressions of sexuality.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

As primal sexual beings, humans possess a natural inclination for expressing themselves and a deep-rooted desire to create, a trait that has persisted throughout our ancestral history on Earth. This innate need to create has given rise to various forms of artistic expression, including the depiction of sexuality, religion, and creativity itself. These ancient representations of explicit imagery, commonly referred to as erotic art, have existed alongside the human race since its earliest days. However, the precise meaning of "erotic" art, like the broader definition of "art" in general, remains a subject of ongoing discussion and debate.

Erotic art is a diverse category of visual arts that includes any artistic creation meant to elicit erotic pleasure, typically representing human nakedness as well as sensual, erotic or sexual behaviour. Erotic art can be represented through many different mediums, such as sketches, drawings, paintings, photographs, engravings, performance, moving images, sculptures or installations. The definition of erotic art can be subjective because it is dependent on context. A sculpture of a phallus in some cultures may be considered a traditional symbol of potency rather than overtly erotic. Material that is produced to illustrate sex education may be perceived by others as inappropriately erotic.

Instead of claiming that erotic art is *about* sexual feelings or desires, one could say that erotic art *elicits* sexual feelings or desires. Erotic art is an artwork created to bring up sensual feelings or sexual sensations of the viewer.

In this thesis I will attempt to answer the question why feminist erotic art is important. I will be focusing on western world's erotic art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through female visual-and fine artists.

In this thesis, in addition to other artists, I'm giving a brief introduction to my latest artworks and presenting an interview with an erotic female artist. (Piibemaa 2023)

## 2 WHAT IS EROTIC ART?

Erotic art refers to artistic expressions that explore and depict themes of human sensuality, sexuality, and desire. It encompasses various mediums such as paintings, sculptures, literature, photography, and performances. Erotic art aims to evoke arousal, passion, and emotional connection through its depiction of intimate and sexual experiences.

It often navigates the boundaries between explicitness and aesthetics, provoking contemplation and engaging the viewer's imagination. Erotic art has existed throughout history, reflecting cultural norms, desires, and taboos, and serving as a platform for personal and societal exploration of sexuality. It can be a celebration of the human body, a means of challenging societal norms, or a form of personal expression and liberation.

Most commonly erotic art is often mistaken for pornographic art, since the line between the two can be subjective to one's culture, upbringing, environment and age. It's very important to distinguish pornographic art and erotic art, as the first wants more from the audience than mere stimulation and aims for sexual arousal, and the second has the intention to stimulate the audience sexually. Erotic art aims to relate to emotions rather than mere actions. On the other hand pornographic content tends to block out our cognitive faculties, leaving it difficult to appreciate the aesthetic grounds of the artwork.

One could also say that erotic art is an image without context. An image that lapses the norm by making the private, the intimate and the sexual public, expressing the power of the subconscious. How one refers to and views erotic art is subjective and what may present to some as an erotic artwork can be non-erotic to others. (Stanford, 2014)

An example from India, where in Bollywood actors are prohibited from displaying sexual natures toward each other and even kissing is not allowed. When we compare it to the Western world's filmography, there is a big difference in what can be shown on the moving image. There are basically no limits. Some countries declared that if Western cultural filth were allowed into their countries unimpeded, it would infect and destroy their religions, political systems, cultures, and ways of

life. On the other end of the spectrum we find Mesopotamia. Sex-themed art pieces were created long before the words “erotica”, “prostitution” and “pornography” became a part of Greek vocabulary.

So we can see that a cultural setting is a ground level of erotica and to what is claimed to be an erotic art.

Another example can be the one where In 2006, a court in Istanbul, Turkey, acquitted 92-year-old Turkish archaeologist - Muazzez Ilmiye Cig - of the criminal charge of inciting religious hatred. The crime with which Cig had been charged was connected to her academic research. Cig had written that the veil worn by millions of women in the Middle East— and by religious women in the Western world— was a religious and sexual artifact that predated both Christianity and Islam. She stated that five thousand years ago, the religious headscarf, or veil, was a symbolic garment that helped set sacred temple prostitutes or priestesses apart from other women . She had written that these sacred prostitutes had sex with young men in the pagan temple as an act of worship and celebration of the goddess of love, sex, and fertility- Aphrodite. Cig argued that wearing a headscarf in contemporary society should therefore not be taken as an expression of a woman’s morality or religiosity. Many Turks were not amused. The claim that the religious headscarf, or veil, was the distinguishing attire of temple prostitutes in ancient Sumeria was an explosive claim to make in Turkey, an Islamo- secular country. (The Gallerist, 2020)

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## 2.1 Erotic art

Erotic experiences permeate both our public and private realms, playing a crucial role in our lives. Society frequently portrays sex, utilizing it for commercial purposes, featuring it in television shows, movies, and popular music, and exploring it through various forms of art, literature, and poetry. Within the realm of art, erotica and pornography can also serve as potent political statements. In his work "Sex and Reason," Richard Posner suggests defining the term "erotic" as presentations or representations that are perceived by some viewers to be related to sexual activity in some manner. However, it is important to note that not every artwork or sculpture perceived as involving sexual activity automatically qualifies as an erotic representation. Instead of considering erotic art as solely about sexual feelings or desires, it can be viewed as art that evokes or stimulates such emotions and desires.

But does erotic art need to be explicit? Take Nobuyoshi Araki's famous close-up photograph of a woman's eye, entitled *The Look*. The artist has tilted the picture 90 degrees to make it suggestive of female genitalia, thereby soliciting sensuous feelings and associations in spectators. It is highly erotic, though it has no explicit sexual content.



Picture 1. (Nobuyoshi Araki "The Look" 1993)

Levinson (2005) makes a useful distinction between erotic art and what he calls *erotica*, that is, images intended to sexually stimulate but not to reward artistic interest (such as provocative lingerie ads).

Erotic art also seems to fall within the broader category of *sexually themed art*. All works of erotic art have a sexual theme, it could be argued, but not the other way around: many artworks with a sexual theme are not works of erotic art.

Another example might be Tracey Emin's *Is Anal Sex Legal?* (1998), which simply consists of that question with large and pink neon light. (The piece is usually exhibited together with its complement, *Is Legal Sex Anal?* also from 1998).

### **2.1.1 Feminist erotic artists**

There are many noticeable erotic artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but I could point out: Here are some notable 21st century erotic artists: Marilyn Minter, Nobuyoshi Araki, Lisa Yuskavage, Cecily Brown, Wangechi Mutu, Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin, Marlene Dumas, Kehinde Wiley, Vanessa Beecroft, Mickalene Thomas, Jenny Saville, Lisa Brice, Harmony Hammond, Mickalene Thomas, Linder Sterling, Ghada Amer, Sterling Ruby.

### **2.1.2 Tracey Emin**

One artist that I feel a deep connection through their work is Tracey Emin. Tracey Emin is a prominent British contemporary artist known for her deeply personal and confessional artwork. Her work often explores themes of love, sexuality, vulnerability, and identity through various mediums, including drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, and neon signs.

One of Emin's most famous works is her installation piece titled "My Bed" (1998). It consists of an unmade bed surrounded by personal items such as empty bottles, cigarette butts, discarded underwear, and other intimate belongings. Through this raw and provocative installation, Emin offers a glimpse into her personal life and emotions, creating a powerful and immersive experience for the viewer.





Picture 2. (Tracey Emin "My bed" 1998) via artsy.net

Emin's artwork is characterized by its emotional intensity and a sense of raw honesty. She uses her own experiences, memories, and struggles as the source material for her art, blurring the boundaries between her personal and artistic identities. Her work often reflects on themes of sexuality, trauma, and the complexities of human relationships, inviting viewers to confront their own emotions and vulnerabilities.

In addition to her installations, Emin is also known for her bold and expressive drawings and paintings. Her artworks often feature gestural marks, vibrant colors, and emotionally charged imagery, capturing the intensity of her personal experiences and inner world. Through her artistic practice, Emin challenges traditional notions of art and addresses deeply human concerns with an unflinching honesty and vulnerability. (White Cube)

Tracey Emin's work has been highly influential and has garnered significant attention and critical acclaim. Her exploration of personal narratives and the intimate aspects of life has made a profound impact on contemporary art, opening up new avenues for artists to delve into the complexities of their own experiences and emotions.

### 2.1.3 Lisa Yuskavage

Another artist I would like to point out is Lisa Yuskavage. Her work has been highly influential when it comes to my own practises and she has ground breaking and powerful erotic works.

Lisa Yuskavage is a contemporary American artist celebrated for her distinct and provocative paintings. Her work primarily centers around the female figure, exploring themes of sexuality, beauty, and desire in a highly stylized and often fantastical manner. (Yuskavage)

Yuskavage's paintings feature voluptuous and exaggerated female figures, often depicted in erotic or suggestive poses. Her use of vibrant colors and intricate details adds a sense of heightened drama and seduction to her compositions. The figures in her paintings often possess a dreamlike quality, with their exaggerated features and playful, sometimes exaggeratedly sexualized, expressions challenging traditional standards of beauty and femininity.

The artist's unique blend of classical techniques with contemporary subject matter creates a tension between the familiar and the unexpected. Her works combine elements of both realism and abstraction, blurring the boundaries between representation and imagination. Yuskavage's skillful handling of light and shadow creates a luminous quality in her paintings, further enhancing the sensuality and allure of her subjects. (Nathan, 2011)

Yuskavage's artworks invite viewers to confront their own perceptions of sexuality, gender, and the female form. Her provocative imagery challenges conventional norms and expectations, often exploring the complexities of desire, power dynamics, and the gaze. Through her paintings, she pushes the boundaries of figurative art and encourages dialogue about the portrayal of women in both art and society. (Piibemaa 2023)

Lisa Yuskavage's work has garnered significant recognition and has been exhibited internationally. Her thought-provoking paintings continue to captivate audiences with their boldness, beauty, and unapologetic exploration of the female experience.



Picture 3. (Lisa Yuskavage *Triptych* 2011) David Zwirner Gallery, New York

#### 2.1.4 Vanessa Beecroft

Vanessa Beecroft is an Italian-born American contemporary artist known for her thought-provoking and visually striking performance art pieces. Her work often blurs the boundaries between art, fashion, and installation, exploring themes of identity, beauty, and the human body.

Beecroft's performances typically involve the staging of live models, often arranged in static poses or tableaux vivants. The models, predominantly women, are carefully selected and positioned within a specific environment or setting. The performances often incorporate elements such as minimalistic clothing, props, and meticulously designed compositions.

Through her work, Beecroft raises questions about societal norms, gender roles, and the idealized notions of beauty and perfection. Her performances often challenge traditional expectations and confront viewers with uncomfortable or

controversial themes. By presenting live bodies as artistic subjects, Beecroft explores the intersection of art, voyeurism, and human presence. (Piibemaa, 2023)

In addition to the live performances, Beecroft also documents her works through photography and film, creating a lasting visual record of the ephemeral nature of her art. The photographs and videos often capture the tension between the human form, the surrounding space, and the viewers' gaze.

Vanessa Beecroft's work has been exhibited internationally and has received both critical acclaim and controversy. Her performances prompt discussions about the objectification of the female body, societal standards of beauty, and the boundaries between art and the real world. Through her thought-provoking and visually striking art, Beecroft challenges viewers to reconsider their perceptions of the body, identity, and the ways in which we experience and interact with art.(Beecroft)



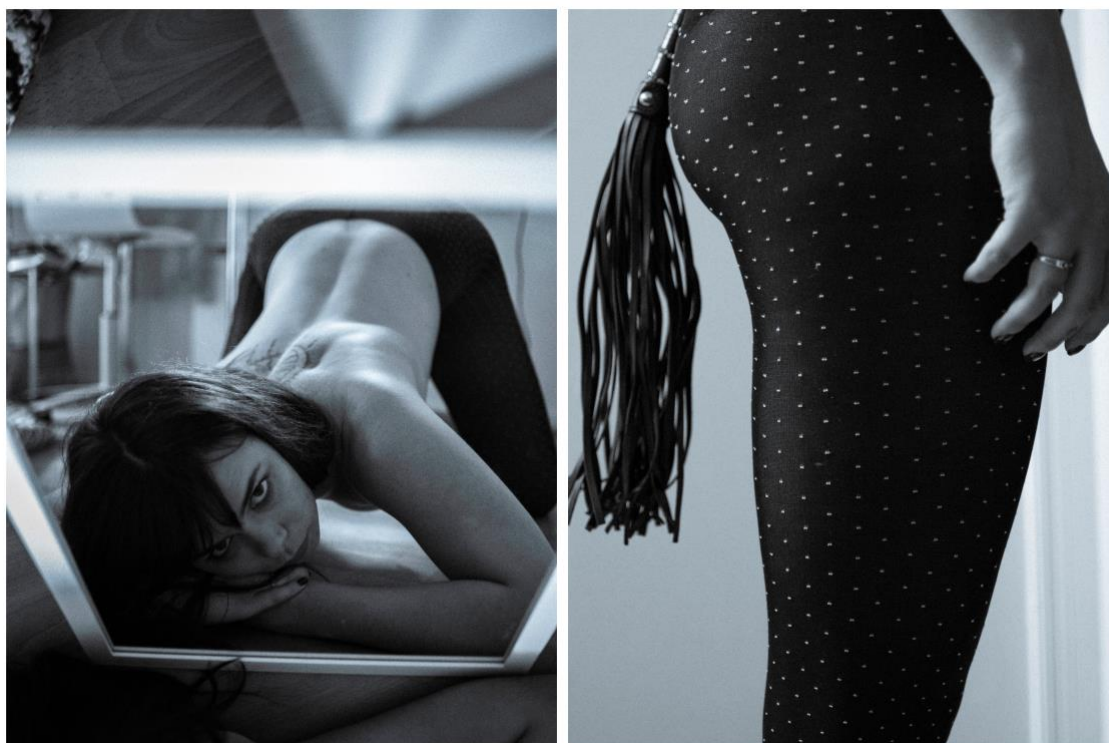
Picture 4. (Vanessa Beecroft *UNTITLED*. Performance detail, 1999) The New York Times shoot

### 2.1.5 My own works

I am a Tampere based, Estonian artist.

As an Estonian living in Finland, I find inspiration in the huge societal and economic differences that these two - seemingly very similar - countries hold. While struggling with mental health and the stigmas surrounding them, I find escape in my digital and traditional art and a way to express my intrusive thoughts in a harmless manner.

With my work I focus on the sore spots within our society and with dark humor, shine a light on the life of a modern, 21st-century woman. My creations are also a way of dealing with an internalized misogyny that has been placed on my shoulders by generational curses and societal pressures and I intend to dissect how women are being portrayed by the outside world as well as my own inside world.



Picture 5. (Teini Piibemaa "Untitled" 2020)

My most recent series is called *HEADLINE 2022* and *HEADLINE 2023*, the last being also my graduation exhibition work.





Picture 6.(Teini Piibemaa "IMI" 2022) as part of a series *HEADLINE 2022*

*HEADLINE 2022* is an ongoing photography series, inspired by the tragicomedy genre, where dark humor meets shocking tragedies. *HEADLINE 2022* invokes the intended response of both the tragedy and the comedy in the viewer, where comedy acts as a coping mechanism to reflect the pain from presented headlines.

The series is based on women, nonbinary people and the LGBTQAI+ community suffering from various negative outcomes birthed by patriarchy. Empowering photographs have been layered with problematic statements, which have dug deep roots in our current society. Using outrageous magazine headlines as a channel for this artwork, I draw attention to the absurd, backhanded comments, which are blurted out in casual conversations and often in authentic journalism channels. Many photographs are self-portraits of myself.

The series is reflecting my personal experience but mainly the stories of other people who have trusted their stories to be presented on this photography project. The project started as a self-reflection mirror and ended up as a shared experience of all people.

*HEADLINE 2022* can be hard and offensive to watch without first knowing the statement. With this element, I wish to make the viewer experience the same initial shock of receiving these vulgar comments, as me and others had while living through these situations.

As a queer woman, sexuality and gender are present topics in all of my works. Being shunned off from many projects because of my “intense” and “outrageous” works, I still aspire to initiate an educational conversation and to uplift the feminist movement. (Piibemaa, 2022)



Picture 7. (Teini Piibemaa “Irina”2023) as part of a series *HEADLINE 2023*

### 3 HISTORY OF EROTIC ART

Artists from diverse cultures and across centuries have produced erotic art. While Paleolithic images and sculptures stand as some of the oldest surviving examples of sexual representations, erotic artwork has been created by numerous civilizations throughout history. Even predating the well-known erotic depictions of Pompeii, this genre has roots that stretch back thousands of years. In ancient cultures, sexual acts were often linked to supernatural forces and integrated into religious practices, consequently intertwining with religious depictions. The earliest known erotic representation can be traced back to Paleolithic cave paintings, which date back nearly 2.5 million years. An exceptional instance of early erotic art emerged approximately 37,000 years ago in the rock shelter of Abri Castanet in Southern France. This groundbreaking artwork featured a meticulously carved vulva, not only standing as the earliest known erotic artwork but potentially also the oldest cave engraving ever discovered. (Frank, 2015)



Picture 8. A prehistoric petroglyph of a vulva via wiki commons



Another Paleolithic example is the sculpture Venus Of Willendorf. Venus of Willendorf, also called Woman of Willendorf or Nude Woman, Upper Paleolithic female figurine was found in 1908 at Willendorf, Austria. Very little is known about the iconic limestone sculpture now known as "Venus of Willendorf," created between 28,000 B.C. and 25,000 B.C. in Willendorf, a village in Lower Austria. Now, however, the curvy woman with a prominent labia has become an iconic example of early artistic renderings of the fertile female nude.



Picture 9. Venus of Willendorf via Wiki Commons

### 3.1 Erotic art through the world

While depictions of sexual intercourse were not prevalent in ancient Egyptian primal art, there have been discoveries of primitive drawings portraying intercourse on ceramic fragments and in graffiti. One notable example is the Turin Erotic Papyrus found at Deir el-Medina, which showcases a series of twelve women and men engaged in various sexual activities. Produced during the Ramesside period (1292 BCE to 1189 BCE), the papyrus's high quality suggests

it was intended for a wealthier segment of society, which was relatively limited during that era.

Throughout history, glimpses of eroticism have always emerged in art. The well-known frescoes from the ill-fated city of Pompeii, for instance, featured explicit depictions of oversized erections and sexual acts. Artists in India, China, and Japan have long captured explicit scenes of sexual activity with a sense of freedom and aesthetic beauty.

The embrace of sexuality in European art would occur much later, coinciding with the emergence of the libertine movement. This marked a significant turning point for erotic art; however, the specter of censorship still cast a shadow over its expression.



Picture 10. A Roman marble group of two lovers (c.1st-2nd century AD) Credit: © Sotheby's

Erotic art has made its way into the public sphere through traditional artistic mediums such as drawings and paintings. Even today, paintings crafted by renowned artists continue to spark conversations within the art scene, providing a foundation for the flourishing of erotic art.

In Europe, the history of manufacturing erotica for the pleasure of the elite can be traced back to the Renaissance period. An example of this is the commission received by Raphael from Pope Julius II to adorn chambers in the Vatican exclusively reserved for the religious elite. Following Raphael's death, the task of completion fell to Romano, who incorporated sexually explicit scenes depicting mythological and historical couples. These illustrations served to explore the fundamental sexual nature of human beings. (Gebhart, 2021)

### **3.1.1 Erotic art in the 60s and 70s**

The perception of the past often conjures images of an era when sexuality was considered a taboo subject, until significant social changes took place during the 1960s and 1970s.

The emergence of photographic erotic images can be traced back to the introduction of photography as a new technology in France in 1839. Throughout the 19th century, professional photographers utilized various processes such as daguerreotypes, tintypes, albumin and gelatin silver prints, and stereocards to create and distribute erotic material.

During a time when societal expectations dictated that women remain at home and lead quiet lives as devoted wives and mothers, actresses in erotic imagery were viewed as deviating from their presumed "God-given duty." Despite social disapproval, some actresses managed to achieve fame and novelty.

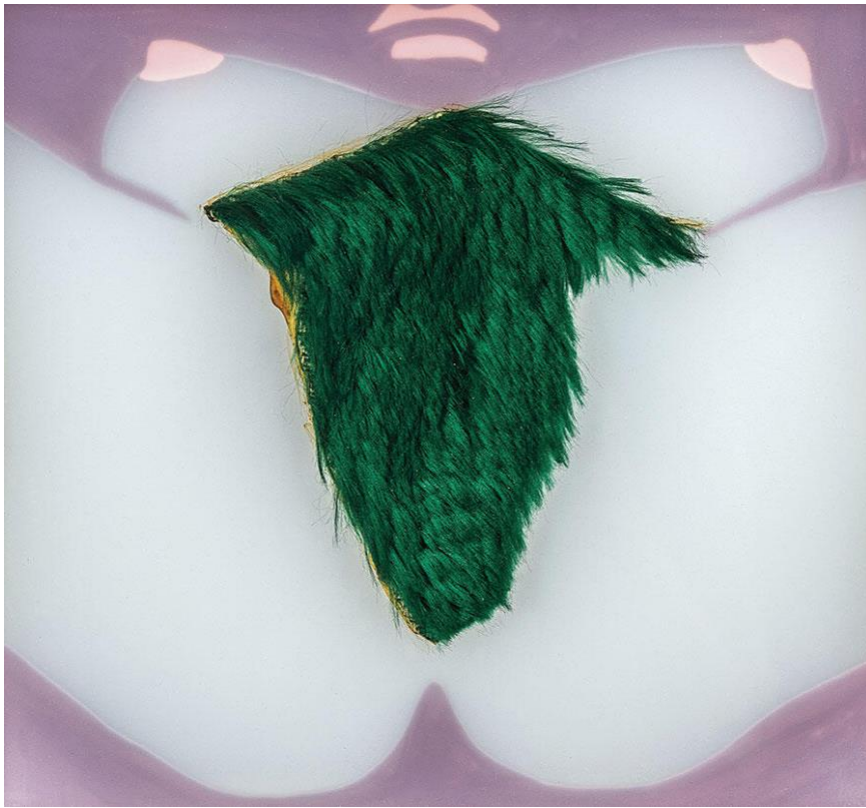
With the advent of the sexual revolution and feminism, the realm of erotic art became a subject of questioning and conceptual challenge. Prominent artists of the 1970s, including Nicola L, Peter Hassman, Carolee Schneemann, Rosaline Drexler, Evelyne Axell, and many others, spearheaded a new era of diverse artistic practices. Women artists employed performances and photography to draw attention to gender power dynamics and explore the blurred boundaries between pornographic imagery and art. The utilization of new media allowed for the portrayal of nudity and sexuality. However, some pop artists like Evelyne Axell and Rosalyn Drexler faced criticism, accused of reinforcing objectification through their specific interest in female pin-up aesthetics. This photographic posing

proved problematic for anti-essentialist and anti-pornography factions within feminist art criticism, potentially hindering their recognition within feminist art histories. (Epps, 2021)



Picture 11.(Valie Export, *Action Pants: Genital Panic* 1969)

In the late 1960s, Axell abandoned oil paints and canvas, choosing instead to work on the floor using an electric saw to cut shapes into large sheets of Plexiglas. Axell made the enamel-on-Plexiglas painting *Small Green Fur*, where her bush was comprised of emerald faux fur. (Epps, 2021)



Picture 12. (Evelyne Axell, *Small Green Fur 2*, 1970)

### 3.1.2 Contemporary erotic art

Sex is one of the oldest subjects in the history of art, but never has it looked the way it does in 2023. In an age when romantic liaisons are often mediated through screens and an embrace can potentially be fatal, sex has become something else for a new generation.

Portrayals of sex in art aren't just about pleasure and arousal—though, of course, that's still part of the fun. Such a provocative subject, and one that is so highly subjective, isn't as easy as it might seem at first glance. Steeped in so much history, prejudice, and politics, sex might actually be one of the most difficult subjects to deal with in art today.

Contemporary erotic art encompasses a wide range of artistic expressions that delve into themes of sensuality, sexuality, and desire in contemporary society. Erotic artists push the boundaries of conventional art forms, exploring diverse mediums such as painting, sculpture, photography, performance, digital art, and more. They challenge societal norms, question gender roles, and address power

dynamics through their provocative and thought-provoking creations. These artists often aim to evoke a range of emotions, from arousal and passion to introspection and social commentary. Through their work, they invite viewers to engage with their own desires, fantasies, and perceptions of sexuality. Contemporary erotic artists continue to navigate the complex interplay between explicitness and aesthetics, forging new paths in the exploration and representation of human sexuality and intimate experiences. Their contributions contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding sexuality, identity, and artistic expression in contemporary art. (Jansen, 2021)

Many erotic artists of today must now conform to strict social media laws, that prohibit any and all kinds of nudity. It does seem to be more concerned with female nudity, considering that the male chest is allowed yet a female's chest is not. (Piibemaa, 2023)

### **3.1.3 Marlene Dumas**

Marlene Dumas is a renowned contemporary artist known for her captivating and provocative works, which often explore themes of sexuality, identity, and the human condition. Her paintings and drawings possess a distinct style characterized by bold brushstrokes, expressive lines, and a keen attention to the psychological nuances of her subjects. Dumas delves into the complexities of desire, intimacy, and vulnerability, presenting figures that challenge traditional notions of beauty and confront societal taboos.

Dumas' exploration of eroticism goes beyond mere depiction of the body, delving into the emotional and psychological aspects of human sexuality. Her works often confront themes of power dynamics, gender roles, and the intersectionality of desire and identity. Through her intimate and introspective portrayals, she invites viewers to contemplate their own relationships with sexuality and confront societal constructs that shape our perceptions.

Her provocative and thought-provoking pieces have gained critical acclaim and recognition in the art world. Dumas' ability to capture the rawness and



vulnerability of the human experience, combined with her skillful handling of color and composition, creates a compelling narrative within each artwork. Her work challenges viewers to confront their own preconceptions, biases, and social norms surrounding eroticism and invites a deeper exploration of the complexities of human desire.

Marlene Dumas' contributions to contemporary art have had a profound impact, expanding the discourse surrounding erotic art and its connection to broader societal issues. Her ability to merge technical expertise with profound emotional depth has solidified her reputation as one of the most influential and celebrated artists of our time.

Dumas is reported as saying: "That little painting exposes nothing, really. It is quite abstract. Very gestural." She once remarked that: "No painting can exist without the tension of what it figures and what it concretely consists of—the pleasure of what it could mean and the pain of what it's not." (Artnet)  
Perhaps what the artwork exposes is a suggestive space between what we gratuitously imagine exists there between the woman's splayed fingers and what the painting actually contains.



Picture 13. (Marlene Dumas "Miss January" 1997)



Picture 14. (Marlene Dumas "Fingers" 1999)

Marlene Dumas's works have inspired me to view contemporary feminist erotic art from a whole new perspective. Her contributions to art have affected my own way of pursuing and expressing my ideas. Like Dumas, I also started with depicting just the body and the sexuality of how our physical form affects us. Now I'm more focused on gender roles and power dynamics, all being influenced by Marlene Dumas's works. (Piibemaa, 2023)



## 4 IMPORTANCE OF EROTIC ART

Feminist erotic art carries significant importance for several reasons. Primarily, it disrupts and challenges traditional perceptions of sexuality and the male gaze prevalent in historical depictions of eroticism. By reclaiming and reinterpreting erotic imagery from a feminist standpoint, this art form empowers women and fosters a more inclusive representation of desire and pleasure.

Another crucial aspect is its role in dismantling oppressive systems and confronting societal taboos surrounding women's bodies and sexuality. Through celebrating women's agency, autonomy, and sexual expression on their own terms, feminist erotic art offers an alternative narrative to objectification and commodification. By questioning established power structures, it contributes to broader conversations on gender equality, body positivity, consent, and sexual empowerment. (Piibemaa, 2023)

From Rome to India to Japan to America, erotic art existed thousands, if not tens of thousands years ago. Sexuality is part of the human experience since our inception as a species.

In Bhutan, it's not uncommon to come across large, colourful phalluses painted on the walls of homes. They're sometimes hairy and sometimes wrapped by a fire-breathing dragon, some with angry eyes and some even ejaculating. They're painted in honour of Lama Drukpa Kunley, a 15th century saint known as the "Divine Madman" for his unorthodox and sexually-charged ways of teaching – Kunley is said to have subdued a demoness with his "thunderbolt." Ironically, the Bhutanese believe the phalluses offer protection from evil and dispels malicious gossip.

Ancient Pompeii is known for its erotic art and one of its goals was to promote brothels. Paving stones as well as stones in the walls reveal phallic symbols that point the way to the brothels, portraying all manner of sexual adventures. (Solly, 2022)



Picture 15. A fresco in Pompeii depicting the Priapus, a rustic fertility god, stealing from Mercury, the god of commerce. Dated between 89 BCE and 79 CE. Pompeii, Italy.

#### 4.1 Erotic art as a sexual education tool

I can't help but draw parallels with the outrageous witch trials back in the 17th century, which took place not only in colonial Massachusetts, but in multiple places around the world. People were executed simply because of their genetics and lack of education. If you happened to have red and curly hair, bright eyes or even a birthmark in an unfit place, you were condemned as a witch. The wind happened to blow some leaves around right as you unfortunately raised your arm? Witchcraft. A fellow village folk was jealous or plotted revenge? You got snitched on, it was that easy. Hundreds of innocent people were murdered, families torn apart and generations scarred for life, simply because back then people lacked the proper education. Superstition was a form of control and its feeder was ignorance. We can trace it way back to the old wives tales that were told to children to keep them out of trouble. (Piibemaa, 2023)

In today's context- being a sexual creature (bonus points if you identify as a woman)- you are a target of ignorance. And superstition in this day still circles around erotic art, like it's something to fear or label as a taboo.

Yvonne Owens and Toyin Adepaju are researchers of sexual nature and witchcraft. They bring up an interesting fact about Renaissance artists and their portrayal of female witches. Baldung portrayed images of desirability as an effective visual strategy in his witchcraft images. He would have figures of women and witchcraft, intimately engaging and attractive, erotic and pornographic displays set against disturbed acts and 'polluted,' feminine, genital leavings. That gave power to the 16th century witch hunts and allowed any woman to be prosecuted as one. (Adepaju and Owens, 2021)

Through the use of erotica, it is possible for a person to think with the senses and feel with the mind. It is an opportunity to connect, explore and express without judgment.

One good example of sexual education through erotic art is the Erotic Heritage Museum (EHM), which is located in Las Vegas. The grand patron of this museum is Harry Mohney. The museum opened in 2008 and its sole purpose is to perform educational, scientific and literary functions relating to sexual, emotional, mental and physical health. The museum accomplishes this through innovative exhibitions, education, interpretative programs and direct access to a comprehensive academic library. The Erotic Heritage Museum houses more than 17,000 square feet of permanent and featured exhibits designed to preserve wonders of the erotic imagination as depicted through the artistic expression of acts of sex and love. The museum is dedicated to the belief that sexual pleasure and fun are natural aspects of the human experience, that such pleasure must be made available to all, and that our individual sexuality belongs to each of us. Its mission: Sex Education through Art.

There is a direct correlation of sexual art (containing erotic art) and sexual education. Sexual nature can be found in almost every day life- the literature, moving image, still images, paintings and even songs. To furthermore understand our role in erotic art, these mediums should all be explored thoroughly and with an open discussion. (Deanaletta, 2023)

I can see erotic art becoming a part of the curriculum in schools as a way to expand the sexual education purposes. Examples of erotic and sexual art can be traced back as long as we have had tools to express ourselves.

One can't look away from the fact that the development of a tradition of female nudity in art is related to the concept of objectification. A good literature example of that is "The Scarlet Letter" (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Prejudice or alienation is almost always a theme, whether we are talking about literature, cinematography or fine art. This novel uses irony to expose the faulty logic behind the types of prejudice. In *The Scarlet Letter*, there is irony against the treatment of Hester, who is a publicly announced pregnant adulterer in a Puritan community. During her trial, she never reveals the identity of her child's father, leaving her to bear the consequences of this act alone. She is forced to wear a bright red letter A on all of her garments, which leaves her completely isolated from the community and battling with inner turmoil. She constantly suffers intense humiliation because the Puritan community functions on a system of hierarchy and superiority. I am describing a time when being an adulterer was equalized with being a murderer. A woman was an object. And to some extent- she still is. (Hawthorne, 1850)

#### **4.1.1 One could say all art is important**

Art is a way to express innermost feelings. One thing about art-it isn't always pleasant and easy on the eyes. When we look at erotic art, it's important to think about the reasons which led the artist to create that kind of piece. What was it for? Was it to break down societal norms? Was it to celebrate their own personal sexuality? It could be a way to educate the public on some kind of level. Was the erotic artwork created to resolve deep feelings that could not be expressed in any other way? The questions could go on and on. It's very important to trace back to the source of inspiration that the artist had, in order to enjoy and explore erotic art to its deepest core. (The Editors, 2022)

Art is a form of self-expression. Whether you write poetry about how much love hurts or paint pictures that show every detail about someone who has hurt you

(or vice versa), this kind of self-expression can help us heal ourselves by allowing us to take control of our lives – and become stronger people because of it.

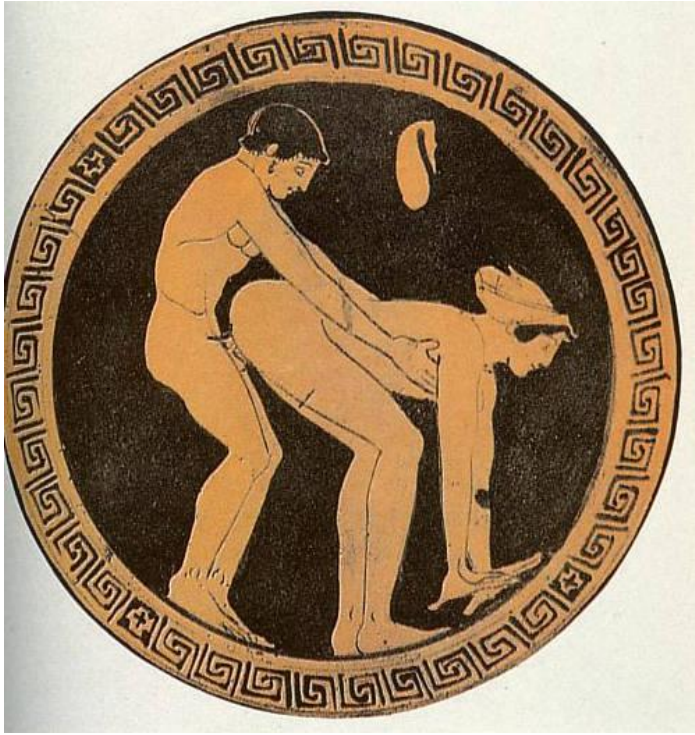
Erotica is important, because it can be used as a form of communication and as a tool to better understand the world around us. Through erotic art you can express your political or social views. Are we frustrated on how different gender/sexuality people get treated? Are we fed up with the lack of equality? Erotic art can express that.

Erotic art can be used to tell stories and share experiences. It's no secret that sexual violence is as high as ever (at least we see that in the reporting numbers). Sharing a sexual assault story through erotica can bring many communities together, give them a peace of mind and get a sense that they are not suffering alone.

Erotic art can help us to connect with other cultures. When it comes to sexual art the way it's brought up (or if it even is brought up) is different and varies from culture to culture. Depending on their history of erotic and sexual art, it can help us understand where generations of people are coming from and how they view erotica around us.

Erotic art can also be used to bring awareness to important issues, for example like mentioned before-sexual aggression. It can make people see the issues in new ways. Almost a clearer picture. But it doesn't have to be all gloomy and hard to digest. Erotic art can also bring light to sexual liberation of different minorities and even broaden our self-image view.

One thing erotic art can do is bring joy and make people happy in their lives. For example this image of an ancient wine jug depicting a customer and a prostitute (a money pouch is hanging on the wall) dated between 480 and 470 BCE, Greece. The notion that this image was on the wine jug and promoted prostitution can be hilarious in our modern world.



Picture 16. Ancient wine jug depicting a customer and a prostitute 480 and 470 BCE, Greece

Talking about promoting prostitution and brothels, erotic and sexual art can be used to market certain essentials or tools to its consumers. Advertising often uses images of beautiful people or scenes of nature: these images entice customers to buy the advertised product because they also want to experience life like portrayed on these images. Erotic art surely would have its own target audience, but it's important to point out that that audience exists. (The Editors, 2022)

Erotic art can be used to raise money for important issues. For example in 2022 I was part of an auction which took place in Tallinn, designed to raise money for Ukraine. I auctioned one of my erotic paintings "That time of the month" and all the proceeds went directly to the Red Cross assisting Ukraine.

Like in Bhutan, erotic art can be used to create public art which makes cities more attractive to live in. Of course in the Western world it's not common but there are regions in the world that have erotic art on their streets (mostly due to superstitions). So why shouldn't it be out on the streets? One could even say that the often seen graffiti phalluses are a form of erotic art. (Campus Magazine, 2021)

Being a sexual artist myself, I have always felt loneliness and feeling left out from the artistic world. That is when I discovered CU46 Gallery which is dedicated to sexual and erotic artists and any art medium. They have brought me a sense of community and belongingness. When people of the same interest come together they are able to share their own perspective and ideas and get those from their peers. In addition, art can be used to foster a sense of belonging and pride in a community. (Piibemaa, 2023)

#### **4.1.2 Erotic art is a way to break down patriarchy**

Erotic art can be political and liberating at the same time. There are artists who use erotic art as a tool to deal with the patriarchy. When we dissolve the patriarchy we know what's the cause. And once we know the cause we can start healing. (Piibemaa, 2023)

During the sexual revolution of the 1960s, erotic art in the United States became a catalyst for discussions on sexual liberation, the portrayal of the nude body, and the gendered dynamics of visual pleasure. Rachel Middleman's book, "Radical Eroticism: Women, Art, and Sex in the 1960s," examines this era. An important event explored in the book is the "Erotic Art '66" exhibition held at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. This exhibition, analyzed by Middleman, highlighted how erotic art transcended artistic mediums and styles, challenging the presumed autonomy of art by emphasizing the role of sexual desire. Notably, the exhibition featured only one female artist, Marisol Escobar, shedding light on the marginalization and biased reception experienced by women artists in the genre of erotic art, ultimately stemming from patriarchal norms. The Guerrilla Girls, known for their activism on such issues, have also addressed this significant societal concern.

In the first chapter of Middleman's book, the focus is on the provocative body art performance by artist Carolee Schneemann titled "Meat Joy" (1964). "Meat Joy" is a film composed of footage from a series of performances that took place in Paris, London, and New York in 1964. Even after half a century since its inception, this work continues to captivate audiences with its audacious

exploration of the sensual and carnal realms. The performance involved men and women clad in feather-trimmed bikinis and briefs, engaging in dance while rubbing raw fish, chicken, sausage, and wet paint onto their bodies. A maid, dressed in a maid outfit and serving as an attendant, was also part of the performance. The presence of the maid sparked intense controversy, leading to a shocking incident where one enraged man attempted to strangle her, prompting three other participants to come to her rescue. (Middleman, 2018)

We can see erotic art tackle the patriarchy from Marlene Dumas, Schneemann, Tracey Emin, Betty Tompkins, Cecily Brown, Jenny Saville and many more. Patriarchy is strong but also very brittle. It doesn't take much to provoke it since it has overtaken almost every aspect of our lives. Doesn't matter if it's the 60s and a performance or the 21st century and a still image- erotic art is and will be a valid tool to try to transgress over it. (Piibemaa, 2023)

#### **4.2 Interview with a sexual artist Maria Seltsova**

I chose Maria Seltsova for this interview because she holds an important place in my erotic artistic career. It was hard to get my work to be seen and recognised anywhere since most of my work can be hard to digest and also be viewed as vile or taboo. Maria Seltsova is a founder of CU46 Gallery in Brazil, which during the pandemic she moved it into an online platform. She gave me an opportunity to exhibit my erotic art for the first time to a bigger audience and this is when *HEADLINE 2022* was born.

1. In your own words, please describe what is erotic art?

"I don't like to define erotic art as a particular type of art movement, I include it in the sexual art definition. Because erotic art is more focused on exposure and arousal by what you see, sexual art is more about the discovery of sexuality, body, and gender. It's not always something pleasant or even erotic but makes you think about the issues that pushed an artist to make such kind of art."

2. Do you think there is an importance in erotic art?



"I believe there is importance in any kind of art. Because for me art is an expression of your internal pain or feelings, it's what I call art. Otherwise, it's just a beautiful picture."

3. If the previous answer was yes, please describe in what way is erotic art important?

"In my opinion, humanity needs to accept the creative energy that comes from sexual energy. In terms of energy, it's the same source - 2nd chakra. We forgot how it is to be creative every day, everyone, not only artists because it has been a shame to let this energy flow. I believe, that it's the time of acceptance that this is normal to be sexual, and erotic because it means to be creative."

4. Have you practiced erotic art in any artform and could these works be viewed for the public eye?

"Sure thing, my works with video-art performances where I masturbate and paint at the same time were shown in London, Barcelona, and online exhibitions."

5. If the answer to the previous question was yes, could you tell more about your work and practices and how long have you been contributing in the field of sexual art?

"I made the first piece of the "Love Yourself" series in 2017, and I was banned from most of the galleries. I explained that it is more sexual than erotic because the paintings are abstract and you just need to know (see) how I made it, to understand what is in front of you. That's why I started my project, called CU46 Gallery in Barcelona. (CU46b means "See you for sex" in sexting in the US). The pandemics killed it offline, so I moved online with CU46 Project as a platform for like-minded artists who were also banned from viewings because their art is too explicit, too much."

6. What is your earliest memory of sexual/erotic art?

“Old Japanese etching depicted some sexual acts in a very beautiful way. I saw it when I was a kid, as well as Kama Sutra sculptures. My mum educated me sexually since I was 9.”

7. Do you think there is a correlation between sex education and erotic/sexual art?

“Definitely, there is a correlation, but I still would like to start with soft erotic pictures, not to traumatize a kid. There is a time for everything.”

8. Do you think there is a difference between erotic/sexual and pornographic art? If yes, what kind of differences there are?

“Pornography is a very edgy topic. I had experience making adult films, but it was porno aesthetics, feminist porn, which was shot in a beautiful manner, with a lot of sensuality. I do not like pornography in the way people know it. So, again, eroticism in art is more sensual for me, when pornographic art is explicit and you need to be ready to see it.”

## 5 DISCUSSION

As discussed in this work, feminist erotic art carries significant importance for several reasons. From disrupting and challenging traditional perceptions of sexuality and the male gaze prevalent in historical depictions of eroticism to reclaiming and reinterpreting erotic imagery from a feminist standpoint.

Erotic art holds significant importance as it explores and celebrates human sexuality in various forms of artistic expression. It serves as a powerful medium to challenge societal taboos and patriarchy, stimulate discussions around desire, pleasure, and the human body, and promote a more open and inclusive understanding of sexuality. Erotic art allows individuals to explore their own sensuality and desires, providing a platform for self-expression, liberation, and the affirmation of diverse sexual identities. By depicting and celebrating the beauty of the human form and the intimate connections between individuals, erotic art can foster a deeper appreciation for human experiences, relationships, and the complexities of desire. Furthermore, it has the potential to challenge and reshape cultural norms, promoting acceptance, empowerment, and the recognition of sexual agency for all individuals. Ultimately, erotic art plays a vital role in broadening our understanding of human sexuality, breaking down stigmas, and encouraging conversations about intimacy, consent, and pleasure in a visually captivating and thought-provoking manner.

As mentioned before- all art can be considered important. Researching this thesis work has been eye opening and inspirational as to how to continue with my own practices and how exactly erotic art has influenced the every-day and more specific versions of our lives.

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