

# Who's afraid of the male nude

## Dr. Tal Dekel on the work of Ora Reuven

Dr. Tal Dekel is an art historian at the Tel Aviv University

The artist's works are composed of large scale paintings of male nudes. Next to them are digital works of the same nature.

The digital works portray the male nude as a subject to seduction and voyeurism, wrapped in lace, laying on soft golden sheets, parts of his body peering at his viewer while his face is veiled. His gaze is highly erotic, as he turns to his partner, sharing the voyeuristic gaze with her, while creating an atmosphere which stirs desire in many women - lace, gold, burning candles, romance.

The pornography which men create is radically different to the one women create in their art works. Male-oriented mainstream porn usually and mostly depicts the woman's body fragmentarily, in extreme close up, while subjectifying the woman and eliminating her individuality. It is no more than functional pornography.

Man as a subject to female seduction is an act of role reversal. Over the past three decades, with the growing of the feminist awareness, many women artists have begun to deal in their work with reversing traditional cultural roles. Some placed themselves as powerful subjects against the weakened Man, Often depicting sex as an evil or destructive force. However in Reuven's work the reversal is of a different nature: the man is the subject to woman's desire. Meaning, instead of addressing the aggressive dynamics of man/woman relation, we find a new motion for the agenda at hand, where the woman treats her object of desire with a combination of tenderness, beauty and romance. The artist doesn't represent in this case a woman who is trying to take the man's place or power, nor does she try and prove her own strength to him. Rather, she is a woman expressing her femininity in relation to the man. Nevertheless, she does not conceal her own power, as a woman and as artist, as demonstrated by the willingness of the men which modeling isn't there profession, but still surrender and undress for her paintings and photographs.

Reuven's paintings are realistic, usually in medium sized format, with aged men appearing on them. Authentic, a far cry from the appearance of the young muscular, shapely and handsome male model common in contemporary mass media. At times their nudity is overt and direct to the extent of awkwardness. Most of the men are pictured sitting on a sofa, in a classic modelesque pose or laid on a bed, looking straight forth at the painter. Another man is "caught" while sleeping, oblivious to the fact that he is being painted - whereas in a different painting - stands a man hiding his face in the palms of his hands, his genitalia exposed to the viewer in utter discomfiture.

While the method of painting is traditional and the scene classical - a nude model sitting before

a painter, the accumulated substance of this arrangement is not traditional to say the least.

At first glance it seems that the male nude would be completely normal to the contemporary viewer, as he/she is experienced through the media to witness maximum exposure of the naked body. None the less, further examination will reveal that even though the male nude may be found in many a male artist's work, it is absent almost completely from the work of female artists.

Looking at the past thirty years, as women fought their way into the canon of art history; when the feminist era brought forth new spirits of sexual freedom and equality, allowing women artists to express their heart's desire, still very rarely did women use this freedom to depict the male nude and when they did so, it was their revolt which was at the heart of their work. Many of them painted distorted, horrifying, pathetic or repulsive naked men, at the beginning of the feminist revolution of the 1970s (one exception we can mention are the paintings made by Joan Semmel). By so doing they expressed their hardships throughout patriarchal history, a history which didn't leave any room for empathy, sensuality, eroticism, or love between the sexes - the love of a woman to a man.

The female sexuality - that black hole of the unknown, as dubbed by the father psychology - is treated by Reuven with courageousness and sincerity.

With time, elements of that black hole were being filled. "The Women's Liberation Movement", founded in the U.S.A. at the end of 1960's, opened a vast and active discourse about female sexuality and legitimised lesbianism, masturbation and generally the right of women over their body. However, few theoretical writings or artistic examples gave guide lines for women who wished to continue having relations with the men in their life. Few answers or ground rules were given to early feminist women who wished to live as sexual equals alongside their men. It was hard to find books or articles dealing with the female sexuality as adjacent to that of a man's. But this question is now raised in the work of contemporary feminist artist Ora Reuven.

Then again, maybe there is a different reason that prevented women from dealing in the past, and to an extent up to this very day, with the subject of male nude. Perhaps the taboo of male nudity is still evident to the degree that it's infringement is impossible. Perhaps the woman who expresses sexual interest in a man is still in danger of ostracism, still cautious of the social finger pointing, categorizing her as promiscuous, as wanton. Perhaps the respectable woman of the twenty first century, stills sees herself as "adequate" only through how the eyes of the "classic" male perceive an adequate woman to be - as a sanctified image, the mother to his children, practically an a-sexual being - and not as a light hearted nude model or rather an artist who paints nude images of men. That is to say, woman has yet to free herself from her male dictated perception of herself.

This perception leads us to John Berger's statement in his treatise "Ways of seeing" (1972) about how the man's gaze has the power to establish his own status as the subject and the woman's status as the object to the male gaze: The woman embraces the male gaze, and can only see herself through his eyes - as a sexual object. One can expand the discussion, beyond

the male's sexual desire, to Berger's insight about the difference between the saint and the harlot, a categorization which the woman artist still holds, consequently resulting with an unsympathetic attitude towards male nudity.

Ora Ruven has reclaimed the gaze. Yet her paintings, in which she studies and paints man's gaze and genitalia with the same amount of potency and bluntness - there is no sense of aggression, nor possessiveness, nor objectifying - as known from countless portrayals of female nudity made by men throughout art history.

The gaze, the main instrument of objectifying in art, is used by Reuven in this body of work to look at the male nude, subsequently is placing her in the position of power. But does she in fact make her perspective and her position of power into a control mechanism? In her paintings, the men are portrayed in all their masculinity, in full presence. Using warm colors and realism, these paintings respect the men, showing them as agents, as (sexual) subjects.

This body of work represents a feminine position that isn't constituted of dominant male culture. It is a liberated femininity that built itself independently whilst leaning on the heritage of freedom that the first feminist's of the 1970's created. And yet, it should be remembered, it's a freedom that even to this day is far from being fully accomplished.

2011