



Can Porn-Inspired Art Be Feminist?

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Jessica Lichtenstein's art takes its cues from Japanese anime porn—yet most of her buyers are women. Lizzie Crocker talks to the artist about her subversive message.

At first glance, Jessica Lichtenstein's hyper-sexualized Japanese anime figurines and paintings objectify the female form in all its pinup glory: busty, with a slim waist and curvy backside. We see her female characters in provocative poses—wearing a skimpy apron while baking, for example, or perched in their lingerie on the edge of the toilet—as if their only purpose is to satisfy the male gaze.

But that analysis might be too narrow and too easy—for it fails to grasp both the complexity of female desire and of Lichtenstein's work.

Most of her collectors are women who, like the artist herself, are embracing a contemporary feminist notion that being empowered and being a sex symbol are not mutually exclusive. Lichtenstein's modus operandi, she explains, is appropriating depictions of women from one culture and placing them in a context that either subverts or exaggerates their sexuality. In her most recent work, she paints anime girls inspired by those in pornographic comic books into landscapes reminiscent of the Renaissance period. In "Bliss," nudes emerge from flower petals like Venus from her shell, while others hide their nakedness amidst the lush, overgrown grasses, evoking Eve cast out of Eden. Similarly, a recumbent figurine wearing lace panties and garters is juxtaposed against depictions of classical nudes, from Goya's "Naked Maja" to Renoir's "Reclining Nude."

"Ever since I was a kid walking through museums with my parents, I was drawn to 18th- and 17th-century paintings of Greek goddesses or nude women in beautiful landscapes," says Lichtenstein, 33, whose interest in representations of femininity and eroticism was further piqued while studying art history at Yale. In putting pornographic anime characters into these classically-inspired landscapes, Lichtenstein argues, they're no longer simply pornographic but part of a long tradition of fascination with the female form. "There's something beautiful and empowering about staring at women and being reminded that they've played a large role in history," she says.

Lichtenstein's professional life hasn't always allowed her to explore her interests in art and women's sexuality. After college, she became a lawyer, working mostly with men until a neck injury forced her to take an eight-month leave of absence three years ago. Bedridden, she began working with her hands again in a creative fashion—or, as she describes it, "playing with dolls." She bought Japanese Manga figurines and styled them in handmade outfits and scenarios that would stoke stereotypical male fantasies. During that time, she organized her dioramas into an exhibit titled *Undressed*, which went up in early 2010 at a gallery in downtown Manhattan and sold out within a month, allowing her to quit her job and work on her art full time.



"When I was working as a lawyer, I always felt like I couldn't show my feminine side very much because of the women who had so bravely paved the way for me to work in a man's world," she says. "But in retrospect, I realize we're at a time when we can reclaim our femininity and still stand as equals. You don't have to act like you're a man in a man's world anymore."

Times have changed, but some viewers and critics will obviously call foul on Lichtenstein's rhetoric. Traditional feminists would turn their noses up at any artist who fetishizes women, regardless of intent. Just because Lichtenstein's a chick doesn't mean she can paint porn-y tits and ass and call it art—or does it?

"If a guy was doing the same work I'm doing, I guess it would be different because it wouldn't have that feminist tilt," she says.

It's true. But what's more interesting is that a cultural shift has already taken place, so that a woman who flaunts her sex appeal isn't necessarily slut-shamed anymore but embraced by her avant-garde feminist bosom buddies.

Still, Lichtenstein recognizes our society's fixation on women as the objects of sexual desire more than as the agents of it—a dichotomy she toys with in her work. "When you turn on HBO you're more likely to see 20 naked women than men," she says. "Is it gratuitous? Is it beautiful? For me, the female form hearkens back to that strong, powerful muse throughout art history who isn't just eye candy for men but for humanity."

Just as Daniel Bergner's new and hotly-debated book *What Women Want* argues that women get aroused by the idea that they're being lusted after—even objectified—Lichtenstein's art makes a similar point about female desire. Bergner references women getting turned on in a strip club as they fantasize about being wanted by everyone in the room. Lichtenstein's ladies are also desiring because they're being desired, which is perhaps why women find them so appealing.

"There's nothing wrong with feeling sexy in a sexually heightened environment," says Lichtenstein of Bergner's strip club theory. "It should be something that's communal and celebrated among women. In the same way, I hope that when a woman walks by my pieces, she can relate to their sexuality, so much that she suddenly feels an extra skip in her step."