

New Work Part III

3 Oct — 3 Nov 2018 at the Cob Gallery in London, United Kingdom

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New Work Part III. Courtesy of Cob Gallery

Cob Gallery is proud to present New Work Part III: Subject. The exhibition is the third instalment in a series of group shows programmed across 2018. Following on from both Form and Material earlier in the year, Subject marks the continuation of a series format partly inspired by the work of curator Richard Bellamy at Green Gallery, New York. Between 1960-1965, Bellamy chose to exhibit the work of emerging artists who were redefining and questioning what art was while also taking it in new directions.

NEW WORK PART III: Subject investigates the paradoxes and ambiguities which arise between constructions of beauty and latent violence. Seduction, glamour and repulsion are all significant themes among the work of an international roster of 15 emerging and established female artists. So too is the 'female gaze', an idea developing on that of the 'male gaze', identified and defined by film theorist Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. According to this idea, representations of the female form have historically been determined by male desire and power. In the process, the feminine role has been reduced to one of passivity and pleasure.

The works in this show directly confront many of the ironies and hypocrisies presented by the male gaze in art. Along the way, they raise different questions about what a female gaze might actually mean. Captured behind a scrim of nostalgia, classicism, romance and veneers of glamour, these female artists challenge historical male objectification and the infinite play of female mutability by this very act of questioning and critique.

The works and artists in NEW WORK PART III: SUBJECT are connected by the gestural motif of the hand. The hand's position in loaded representations of the female form are explored as a way of activating and unpacking tensions between the female and male gaze. As a motif, the female hand has often had a charged status as a metonym for temptation, pleasure and the spontaneous, almost accidental endowment of women with sexual allure. In this exhibition, ambiguous or fetishistic presentations of the hand provocatively challenge the active and passive roles expounded in Mulvey's theory.

The origins of the female hand gesture as a catalyst for male temptation can be found in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Over the centuries, this story and its many misogynistic interpretations have defined the image of woman in Western civilisation, forming a bedrock of the social and political relationship of the sexes, underpinning our perceptions of sex and gender and thereby influencing how both women and men are represented in art and culture. Eve's immortalised image is often found holding or presenting the forbidden fruit to her male counterpart. This action, which has come to define her legacy, has successfully been used to present ideologically-founded 'truths' about women as universally valid. In this way, a simple gestural motif is profoundly implicated in the whole history of restrictions on the social, sexual, religious, political, and economic freedom of women.

Another germ of the exhibition arises from a photograph taken by Lee Miller in 1930. 'Untitled (Exploding Hand)' is a work that is as mysterious as it is revealing, taken in front of the Guerlain parfumerie in Paris (the 'exploding' effect is due to the scratching of the glass of the door by countless diamond rings). With it, Miller achieved that 'convulsive beauty' identified by André Breton as the hallmark of Surrealist art, marking the surrealist commitment to compromising traditional aesthetics by shocking audiences with a range of unspeakable human expressions: hysteria, obscenity, pornography, and violence. As the conceptual artist Richard Wentworth has put it, in Miller's photograph 'the visual noise and the abrasive contrast to the sexual metaphor of grasping a handle chase each other around in this picture.' His analysis precisely locates the uneasy, latent violence that underpins the outwardly glamorous appearance of the image. Furthermore, Miller's picture reads as a distinct confrontation with the male gaze, capturing a version of femininity that men weren't prepared to see or accept, and which perhaps could only have been captured or observed by a woman.

Throughout this exhibition, the works on display attempt to expose the falsehoods that underpin female objectification as they straddle the poles of attraction and repulsion. Fragile and unsustainable artifices of glamour are bolstered by the images of women preserved in the roles of ageing movie stars and fashion imagery, or works that examine the world of social elites through flawed beauty and stark reality. Although these are works that have been produced by women, the male gaze in many ways continues to haunt the images, fraught with the dynamics of power in the representation of women by men. Various works on display probe for fresh ways to engage with art's long history of sexualised images of women, by working from, appropriating, and indeed reversing the intent of the very imagery which has come to define the male gaze in culture – whether within cinema, fashion or pornography. Here, the female gaze acts as a filter to these subjects as a means to interrogate the phenomenon of the male gaze.

Other works explore the notion of the female gaze by offering a mutually exclusive dialogue between the experience of femininity and the creative process, inviting the viewer to inhabit an emotional landscape intrinsic to the personal viewpoint of the female artist. Making women looking at men the focus of the work – or indeed making the female experience of the world the subject matter – these artists directly engage with versions of womanhood that challenge traditions of the 'muse' in art.