2013

Bringing Back Color, Bringing Back Emotion: Exploring Phenomenological Empathy in the Reclamation of the Female Nude in Painting

Sophia R. Forman
Scripps College

Recommended Citation
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/187

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.
Bringing Back Color, Bringing Back Emotion: Exploring Phenomenological Empathy in the Reclamation of the Female Nude in Painting

Sophia Forman

Submitted to Scripps College in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Professor Susan Rankaitis
Professor Adam Davis
Professor Elana Mann

April 30th, 2013
Introduction: The Phenomenological Body

This project began because I wanted to paint myself, in the most honest way I could. I wanted to paint my body because it’s both a vital part of my identity and the clearest way to represent myself. I wanted to paint my body nude because, in innumerable ways, the nude body is the essential body. As Marina Abramovic has said, “The naked body physically manifests individuals in their most basic, reduced, pure, vulnerable state, their most equal state in relation to the rest of the world.”

But in painting my body, I didn’t want to just paint flesh, joints, limbs and features. For even longer than I’ve been painting the nude, I’ve been painting people in a broader sense, trying to capture their personalities and emotional states through body language and facial expression. I’ve never much liked the color of ‘skin’ that palette flesh tones have to offer, so I’ve never painted it like that. I love painting color that’s audacious and unabashed—color that jumps out at you or pulls you in, color makes you feel something, color that pays little attention to what it “should” be and becomes what I want it to be. Most of all, I love being in color. This may be something that runs in the family—when visiting me at home for the first time, guests always comment on the overwhelming presence of color. Each room in my mom’s house is a different saturated tint, while my dad’s is draped in strings of twinkling chromatic lights. My favorite part of Christmas has always been sitting in the living room after everyone else has gone to bed, basking in the colored glow of the tree.

A few years ago I began to consciously investigate the connection between color and the figure in my painting, or, more accurately, the connection between color and the person who that figure represents. And thus my painting has become a reflection of my own emotions, sensations, and psychological states. In translating these intangible aspects of myself, I have paid close attention to my represented body language and facial expression, figurative properties that I explore in large preparatory charcoal drawings. Yet my first instinct when attempting to visualize my emotions is to paint them with color. My feelings feel like colors, and colors feel like feelings. Thus my figures both

---

absorb color—their (my) skin is a complex gradient of tones and hues falling under an overarching category such as “blue” or “red”—and emanate it into their environment. There is no distinct cause-and-effect, but mutual interplay.

When painting my body, however, I’m never just painting myself. By painting saturated color, and painting a nude female figure, my work engages in much larger socio-cultural and art-historical discourses. My representation of my body is enmeshed in a historical canon of objectified and sexualized female bodies, traditionally painted by heterosexual male painters and intended as passive receptacles for the heterosexual male viewer’s domination and pleasure. It is also necessarily part of a larger movement by female artists to reclaim their own bodies in art, attempting to re-empower both their flesh and themselves through specific formal and contextual strategies. My use of color as emotional and psychological phenomena\(^2\) places my work within a secondary philosophical, cultural, and art-historical narrative about color perception, color symbolism, and the specific ways that color has been both celebrated and disciplined in painting over the last century.

At the nexus of these seemingly disparate topics is a critical consideration of phenomenology\(^3\) in both one of its most basic senses—as the experience of perceived phenomena—and as a larger philosophical position which, through its abstraction of perception to subject-object relationships, implicates the painted figure. Specifically, I will conflate the phenomenology of color with the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.\(^4\) Structured as a dialectic, this paper will

---

\(^2\) What something is like: “…phenomena are whatever we are conscious of: objects and events around us, other people, ourselves, even (in reflection) our own conscious experiences, as we experience these. In a certain technical sense, phenomena are things as they are given to our consciousness, whether in perception or imagination or thought or volition,” from David Woodruff Smith, “Phenomenology” in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/phenomenology/

\(^3\) The study of “conscious experience…from the subjective or first person point of view,” Woodruff Smith.

\(^4\) Although I do not intend to ascribe specifically to one philosophical movement (and thus also do not consider myself a formal phenomenologist, but find it pertinent and useful to this particular discussion), the work of continental feminist philosophy is particularly relevant to my aims through its focus on social conceptualizations of the female body and the importance of reframing this body in asserting multi-faceted subjectivity—“Especially with the phenomenology of [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty, continental philosophy sought to understand the body not as peripheral (or worse, opposed) to subjectivity, but rather as crucial to the lived experience of the human subject,” from Ann J. Cahill, “Continental Feminism” in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/femapproach-continental/#2.1.2
establish the most prominent views of both color and the female nude—the nude as a symbolic figure, color as perceptual experience—before delving into their various points of theoretical and art-historical intersection within these categories. I intend to argue in resolution that color can be a powerful tool in reclaiming the female nude figure, stimulating emotive bodies that inspire empathetic viewers and intersubjective⁵ rather than objectifying, or abjectifying,⁶ dialogues.

---

⁵ The recognition that our perceived objects are also subjects themselves: “Intersubjective experience is empathic experience; it occurs in the course of our conscious attribution of intentional acts to other subjects, in the course of which we put ourselves into the other one's shoes,” from Christian Beyer, "Edmund Husserl" in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/husserl/

⁶ From the abject—literally, “the state of being cast off,” used to indicate aspects of the body (or physical states) that disturb ideas of physical health or normalcy, or disrupt social orders (see Ch. 1).
I. The Canonical Female Nude and the Issue of the Gaze

In 1863, Edouard Manet painted a body that changed the fate of the female nude forever. Basing his image upon Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, Manet transformed the blushing Renaissance bride into a prostitute reclining in a brothel bed, her figure outlined in black line and her eyes directly meeting the viewer’s without shyness or coquettery. His subject wasn’t all that surprising—the prostitute, by that time, had become a widely accepted model. Her body was no more anatomically naked than the Urbino Venus or any Neoclassical or Romantic nude of his day. Yet *Olympia*, as he named his common whore, became one of the most controversial and influential works of the modern era.

From the historic female nude—a nude, according to T.J. Clark, who “is a picture for men to look at, in which Woman is constructed as the object of man’s desire,” Olympia deviated in two essential ways: her confrontational gaze, and her undesirable, abjectified body. The historic female nude was something to be looked at, the object of the male viewer’s gaze but never the subject of her own. Olympia looked back. The historic female nude was the nude of male fantasy: tactile curves, smooth skin, and the healthy glow of youth. Olympia’s skin was sallow and chalky, her breasts flat and undefined; her face a masculine square: she was subtly but undeniably grotesque, and to the many male critics of Manet’s day, certainly not beautiful.

A similar tactic was employed by Picasso fifty years later in his Cubist masterpiece, *Les Demoiselles de Avignon* (1907). As Leo Steinberg emphasizes in “The Philosophical Brothel,” *Les Demoiselles*, while often described only as the harbinger of Cubism, is no less notable for its own non-traditional treatment of the female nude.

---

8 Critical comments about *Olympia* at the time of its first exhibition included those which called her “unclean,” asserted that “she does not have a human form,” argued that “The expression of her face is that of a being prematurely aged and vicious: her body, of a putrefying colour, recalls the horror of the morgue,” and concluded that she was “neither true nor living nor beautiful,” from Clark, 92-96.
Picasso paints his prostitutes with strange mask-like, grotesque faces,\(^9\) their stares bearing down on the viewer who—by virtue of clearly phallic symbols like the penetrating table in the foreground—is clearly assumed to be male.\(^{10}\) Although the formal and aesthetic qualities of *Les Demoiselles* share little with those of *Olympia*, Picasso reiterates Manet’s strategy for de-objectifying the female nude: he shifts his subjects’ sexuality from submissive to aggressive through confrontational body language and eye contact while simultaneously deforming their figures into perceived monstrosity. Describing the impact of this work on the expected and expectant male viewer, Steinberg asks, “How…could they relate to a vision of five bedeviled viragos whose sexual offering, visually inescapable, was decivilizing, disfiguring, and demonical?”\(^{11}\)

In thinking about Manet and Picasso’s methods from a contemporary standpoint, it is perhaps most useful to consider them as symptoms or conditions of abjection, described by Julia Kristeva as “what disturbs identity, system, order,”\(^{12}\) and that the lies “at the crossroads of phobia, obsession, and perversion.”\(^{13}\) The abject is what lies on the margins of the “proper” body, or those things that must be expelled by the body to be

---

\(^9\) African masks provided a major inspiration for Picasso in his figures, serving to illustrate them as “savage” and “barbaric,” from Leo Steinberg, “The Philosophical Brothel” in *October*, Vol. 44, Spring 1998, 53.

\(^{10}\) Steinberg, 24.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 55.


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 45.
good, pure, and whole—a complete subject or complete object. If, as contemporary art historian Lynda Nead states, “The classical, high-art tradition of the female nude plays on the ideal of wholeness and contained form...an uncompromised aesthetic experience,”\textsuperscript{14} then \textit{Olympia} and \textit{Les Demoiselles} are some of the first examples of an abject female nude in painting. Their liminal status as figures which breach the accepted confines of a healthy, feminine body also place them in a position of simultaneous attraction and repulsion.\textsuperscript{15} The figures are no longer mere objects of the male gaze, as their abjection “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened it rejects.”\textsuperscript{16} Thus abjection is not only a defiance of objection, but also of objectification. Although Manet and Picasso were by no means feminist artists, their parallel treatment of the female nudes in \textit{Olympia} and \textit{Les Demoiselles} in many ways has set a tacit precedent for progressive depictions of female bodies to this day. It is female artists, however, who over the past fifty years have most utilized the strategy of abjection to reject patriarchal possession when creating art surrounding the female nude. The canon of the abject female body includes work as far reaching as performance artist Marina Abramovic’s literal engagement with the grotesque through self-mutilation to Zoe Leonard’s parodic photos of performer Jennifer Miller posed as Marilyn Monroe, juxtaposing and critically interrogating traditional notions of feminine beauty by using a woman with thick body and facial hair as a model. Notably, however, this canon contains a relative paucity of painting due to the problematization of paint as a medium and as a means of visual representation.

\textsuperscript{15} My use of the term “abject” extends the term from its literal genesis to include disruptions of the socially “decent” body; this is an appropriation tacit in Kristeva’s writing and one that is commonly used in art-historical contexts, including the writing of Nead and Helen McDonald.
\textsuperscript{16} Kristeva in \textit{Powers of Horror}, 1.
Griselda Pollock wrote in 1993, “What has characterized a diversity of feminist modes is a refusal of an exclusive ‘visuality’, with its fantasies of looking...”\(^{17}\) implicating painting in several important ways: first, that the nude female figure’s static visual presence inherently indicates that she will be looked “at” as an object, and furthermore that this automatically converts her into a symbol of inescapable male ownership and desire. Through this statement, Pollock essentially marks an entire artistic tradition, as well as basic human sense, as pernicious. Contemporary historian Helen McDonald counters,

…Pollock was inattentive to ambiguities in art and visual representation, in that she was blinkered by a restrictive notion of gender…These aspects of her analysis raise questions about whether certain feminist art practices were rejected unfairly, and whether or not an antiocularcentric approach was the most effective means of countering the fact that visually explicit representations of the naked female body continued to proliferate in popular culture.\(^{18}\)

The *antiocularcentrism* favored by Pollock and her colleagues has been, and continues to be, artistically pervasive. The development of body-related but non-stagnant performance and video art by feminist artists such as Abramovic, Judy Chicago, and Carolee Schneemann was incalculably productive in confronting the male gaze and reclaiming the female body as a potent, present entity with its own agency. Yet it’s important to look at these works in their entirety, considering the ways in which they rely simultaneously on the abject. For “fantasies of looking” do not just apply to still, captured images—after all, live strip shows and video porn may also incur negative spectatorship of the female body. Thus female performance and video artists engaged in work that often attempted to repulse or horrify—Chicago’s live removal of a bloody tampon from her vagina is a particularly apt example.

Attitudes such as Pollock’s nonetheless put a taboo on two-dimensionality. McDonald writes,


Many feminist artists in the 1980s who were engaged in painting of photography, which referenced the female body or was in some way ‘representational’, felt justifiably slighted by deconstructive critics …the legacy of feminist deconstruction persists in many areas of postmodern art practice.\(^\text{19}\)

Although this taboo is clearly non-absolute, and visual representations of the female body have been utilized in effective and celebrated ways by a multitude of female artists, visuality is still often considered problematic. With such visual media, I’d like to focus specifically on issues surrounding the medium of paint itself. Although in one sense more malleable than photography in terms of the limits of creative representation, painting poses particular problems to the feminist artist. The most conspicuous difficulty lies in its historical legacy—most objectified female nudes have historically been painted nudes, and thus we culturally associate a painted nude with a misogynistic gaze. While sexually explicit, male-serving commercial photos of the female nude body are contemporarily omnipresent, their more recent emergence has allowed feminist artists to produce positive counter-representations almost concurrently. Reclaiming thousands of years objectified female bodies in painting seems much more daunting and potentially dangerous.

A no less relevant issue, however, is the tactility of paint. Nead writes about oil painting, “Light caresses form, shapes become voluptuous, color is sensuous, and the paint itself in luxuriously physical,”\(^\text{20}\) emphasizing the sexualization of both paint and color. She adapts a Derridean theory concerning the stylus-paper relationship in which the canvas becomes the empty female receptacle and the paintbrush as the phallus.\(^\text{21}\) By this model the traditional male artist’s act of putting brush on canvas is a sexual act, further emphasized by his employment a sexual but subordinate medium—paint—that the male artist must control. In considering the subject of the female nude, Nead extrapolates,

\(^{19}\) McDonald, 92.  
\(^{20}\) Nead, 56.  
\(^{21}\) Derrida, “…there is always the weight or examen of some pointed object. At times this object might be only a quill or stylus…Such objects might be used in a vicious attack…an attack whose thrust could not but leave its mark, could not but inscribe there some imprint or form…its spur as a means of protection against the terrifying, blinding mortal threat (of that) which presents itself into view” in Nead, 56-57.
...this structure is then repeated; for woman’s body is itself a metaphorical blank surface which is given meaning through values of the dominant culture. In Derridean terms, the female nude marks a double inscription—it is a kind of surface within a surface.22

The female painter undeniably complicates this relationship, but she does not inherently reverse it: again, historical precedent is not easily undone. These analogies are specific in a critical context, but generalized in a larger cultural context so that the basic symbolism of the female painted nude as a submissive sexualized object remains despite the painter’s switch from man to woman.

In escaping the trappings of the painted female nude, feminist artists have subsequently turned to mechanization and cyborgification through technology. In a startling blatant statement against idealized femininity, feminist theorist Donna Haraway stated in 1991, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.”23 McDonald, after Haraway, argues that we are all, to some extent, cyborgs—a position not unusual if we consider the ways in which our bodies are mutated in multiple ways by modern technology. Yet as a strategy in art, cyber feminism is not just an attempt to reflect the state of the body today. Haraway states, “The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation,”24 which McDonald interprets as an argument that “the alliance between art and technology has the potential to produce bodies that avoid the imprint of patriarchal gender distinctions and ideals.”25 In a sense, our cyborgification would eliminate the qualities of biological humanity that dictate any gender at all. Artists working in the vein of Haraway included Linda Dement, whose digital work Cyberflesh Girlmonster (1995) featured female body parts spliced and fused to create monstrous figures accompanied by sexual phrases which played clearly into the hybrid and fetishist aspects of the abject.

22 Nead, 57.
24 Ibid., 150 in McDonald, 197.
25 McDonald, 197.
The problem, which opposing feminist critics quickly pointed out, is that the rejection of a gendered identity is also a rejection of a female identity. Furthermore, a cyborg body is a rejection of the fleshy, round, soft body of a woman in the most traditional sense, but also the rejection of the potentially maternal body of any biological woman and thus womanness itself. The legacy of Italian Futurism provides a powerful underscore to this problem, as we can see the eerie parallels between Haraway’s plan and that of Futurist philosopher F.T. Marinetti. At the crux of the Futurist’s glorification of masculinity, war, and industry was a deep revilement of the female. Marinetti’s “dreams of metallized flesh” were dreams of a body not born of a mother, but able to perpetuate itself through technology and industry, and there is no stronger misogyny than the dream for a world that no longer needs woman for even their most debased purpose: to birth children.

This is not to say that the intersection of art and technology is not a viable and rich arena for feminist artists to work. Yet as an escape from the fleshy, painted body and a renunciation of biological femaleness, it fails to achieve its feminist goals and merely reinforces the denigrated corporality of the female nude. Furthermore, the exclusion of

---

26 McDonald, 197.
visual media as a potential mode of positive representation imposes unfair self-limitations on female artists. If the representation of this body began in painting, rather than avoiding this particular combination of media and subject and allowing it to stand as a symbol of misogyny, it seems of the utmost importance that female artists challenge and reclaim the painted female nude.

The question then becomes: how does an artist paint a feminist female body? The first path seems fairly clear—invoke the abject. Grotesquify the figure, disrupt her health or inscript violence upon her body; engage directly the assumed male spectator and replace with desire with disgust. But this should not, and cannot, be the only option. The reaction by many feminists to the problem of the female nude has thus far been largely enantiodromic: in such an effort to disengage the objectifying power of the hetero-male gaze, many have also rejected unqualified beauty and disallowed vulnerability. These repercussions of the abject are often acknowledged by the artist and in fact intentional. Yet the overwhelming monopoly of abject-derivative strategies on representations of the female body has essentially narrowed the playing field for female artists. There needs to be room for something else.

Rather than accepting the female body as an object and merely attempting to transform this objective body into a repulsive rather than inviting one, we could reanimate the female nude as a living, breathing, thinking, feeling person. Rather than seeing the only path to this re-animation and empowerment through anger, violence, and aggression, we could allow for a full spectrum of complex emotional and psychological states. Instead of alienating the viewer, we could try to engage them in empathy—feeling what we feel. And in thinking about what it is to feel something, to sense something, to perceive something, we could go back to basics: to color.

---

28 From Greek, literally “running the other way”; the pendulum swing of anything to its direct opposition.
II. Phenomenal Color/Cultural Color

Color, as an immutable facet of our lives, is at once omnipresent and disregarded. Our daily lexicon is full of references to color: we use it as a descriptor of people, objects, and our environment; we base decisions of what we buy, wear, and eat around it; we observe and reflect upon it constantly. While some of this is conscious—i.e., buying a green car because we know we like it—much is unconscious. Our psychological and physiological reactions to color inform much of our experience of the world, a fact that is utilized (or, in some cases, exploited) by advertising agencies, manufacturers, and, most relevant to this discussion, artists in nearly every medium.

Yet while we may all be familiar with the clichés of basic color theory, as we “feel blue” or “see red,” our relationship with color is far more complex. It lies at the nexus of the science of perception, cultural and historical context, and linguistic usage. Thus before moving on to how color is specifically employed by artists, I would like to provide a brief discussion of the phenomenological aspects of color, using John Gage’s *Color and Meaning* and several key essays from *Readings on Color: The Philosophy of Color* as the primary sources.

Our experience of color begins with its perception; or, the translation of an optical message received by our eye into sensory information. And yet this posits a problematic situation for analysis, because our sensory experience of color produces no tangible sensory effects—our knees don’t hurt when we look at something green, and viewing the color blue does not inherently cause us to feel sorrow. Furthermore, our own experiences of color are necessarily subjective and cannot be interpreted as absolute or universal. In their respective essays *Phenomenal Character* and *Explaining Objective Color in Terms of Subjective Reactions*, the contemporary philosophers Sydney Shoemaker and Gilbert Harman systematically dissect the question of color perception and come to similar conclusions, both of which allow for the existence of tangible color but do not link tangible color directly to our perception:

---

29 This excludes, of course, direct pain to the optic nerve due to inundating light or color.
Possession of a perceptual concept of color is to be understood functionally: objective color leads to experiences in which the perceptual concept of color is manifested.\(^{30}\)

One’s experience of, e.g. a ripe tomato represents it both as having a certain color and as having a certain phenomenal property, and that these two properties are conflated in the content of the experience…we see the color of a thing by seeing a phenomenal property it presents.\(^{31}\)

Perhaps most essentially, within these analyses both agree that while our experience of color is phenomenal, color as a phenomenal agent produces responses that we can assume to have commonalities among different individuals. Red, as its phenomenal manifestation (R-experience, as Shoemaker expresses it), will invoke similar experiences in all those who view it as such. Although the possibility of “spectrum inversion” may exist, in which some people may experience red as the phenomenal manifestation of green (G-experience), for example, if we assume that most will have an R-experience of the color red, we may then move on to the specific qualities of that R-experience through its cultural, linguistic, and historical ties.\(^{32}\)

Let’s stay with red (as representing the R-experience) for a minute. John Gage, in one of his introductory chapters, presents several modes of analysis that have been used in attempt to attach meaning to color perception. The first is anthropological—we associate red with blood and fire, resulting in impressions of heat and violence.\(^{33}\) Another is psychological: according to metrics like the Luscher Scale that have tested subjects in terms of their color preferences and interpretations, colors inhabit certain emotions—for example, red “is eccentric, active, offensive, aggressive, autonomous and competitive, and hence expressive of desire, domination, and sexuality.”\(^{34}\) The final is linguistic: by the fact that there are only a certain number of terms for “red” in any language, all of


\(^{32}\) Harman, 254-257.


\(^{34}\) Ibid., 32.
them describing a color opposite to “green,” we can assume that the color we call “red” always refers to the same R-experience and the associations mentioned above.\(^{35}\)

Gage takes issue with each of these methods for their unilaterally Western-centric viewpoints, their oversimplification and generalizations, and, interestingly, their problematic interplay amongst each other. For example, he writes about the Luscher test in relationship to linguistics:

> For the historian of culture its chief weakness is that it gives no consideration to the crucial question of whether the psychological response to colours is chiefly to their names, and hence to a general concept of each of them, rather than to their specific appearance.\(^{36}\)

While this is a problematic aspect of the color psychology model as presented by Luscher, and I agree with Gage that each model is overly narrow, Gage’s analysis is itself problematic in its lack of deeper consideration for the theories put forth by Harman and Shoemaker. If our perceptions of colors are always of their phenomenal expressions, then our conscious recognition of them—let alone our psychological response—is inherently tied to them as a concept rather some sort of pure perception. In other words, how can we ever isolate the meaning of our color perceptions outside of exterior influence when color, when the transition from initial perception to felt experience is seamless? It seems as if Gage is arguing that the anthropological, linguistic/semiotic, and psychological modes of analysis are all invalid because they are clouded by the messy influence of culture. He cites the “instability of colour-perceptions,” and states that these sorts of methodologies “[are] far more concerned with ideas about color than with colour-perceptions themselves.”\(^{37}\)

Yet if we wish to look at the phenomenal properties of color in a comprehensive way, it doesn’t matter how our phenomenological experience with color is constructed, only what happens after the moment of perception. We cannot divorce science from society, and the drive for purity in discussions of color-perception seems counter-

\(^{35}\) Gage, 29.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 23.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., 33, 26.
productive. In really understanding what it means to see the color red—or to be immersed in it—we must accept that our first conscious acknowledgment of red as a perception contains our definition of the word “red”; the primitive linkages to blood and fire leading to a dialogue of heat, passion, and anger; and an opposition to the melancholy and calmness signified by blue or green. We must recognize the cultural specificity of this perception and understand that it is not universal, although we may also retain the idea that there are some non-cultural aspects to our perception of red, perhaps not innate to but common within the R-experience.

In The Emotional Brain, neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux explores specifically the way in which sensation is translated to emotion. While embedding his research in biology, LeDoux takes a largely relational stance that fits very much in line with Gage. Most useful in for our purposes is his discussion of the stimuli-emotion relationship, based on the philosophy of Amelie Rorty. LeDoux argues via Rorty,

The real cause of an emotion is not necessarily some immediately present stimuli, but instead may involve the interaction of these with a causal history stored in memory…implicit and undetected meanings of consciously perceived stimuli can do the same.38

This ‘indirect’ mode of stimuli to emotion produces feelings no less real than a “direct” mode (although these terms suggest an inaccurate binary in of themselves). While learning that one’s pet has died and seeing a photograph of that pet later on may produce sad feelings of unequal weight, the sadness felt upon viewing the photograph is not merely an echo of the original emotion. Although different in magnitude, this associative sadness is still a complete and affecting feeling.

The aforementioned example is one in which a specific personal experience creates a precedent that enables a relational emotion later on. But this precedent—this “causal history”—might also be constructed by socio-cultural and historic influences. Let’s take the color blue; a dark, deep blue like ultramarine. We already know there is nothing essentially sad about this blue, but we do know that it has come to symbolize this emotion through a complex process of association involving natural imagery (water, the

night sky), its opposition to red, its linguistic appropriations (“I’m feeling blue”), and the art-historical and literary patterns which couple blue with imagery that depicts scenes we could explicitly qualify as “sad.”

If this was the extent of it, then when we saw a blue monochrome painting we would only have the capacity to think that it was sad, not to feel sadness. But if, in our favorite movie, the heroine finds out her husband has died and—because the movie’s producers are fully aware of color associations—she is shown crying on the couch on a rainy night, a blue tinge cast over her and the room, our very somatic, internalized, “real” experience of feeling an empathetic sadness and crying along with the character is recorded as our own. It’s the accumulation of hundreds of minute experiences such as this creates the personal precedent of blue as sad. And as LeDoux emphasizes,

The fact that emotions...are activated automatically (without any conscious effort) means that their presence in the mind and their influence on thoughts and behavior are not questioned. They are trusted the way we would trust any other kind of perception.  

This is not to argue that seeing the color blue in an independent context produces any major degree of emotional sadness—in fact, it might not produce sadness at all, and depending on the person viewing it, may elicit a completely different set of emotions. Yet while we can never know how anyone else experiences color, or describe in words what color “is”, we can form generalized ideas about its effects by studying the larger societal and historical narratives that both respond to and inform it. The cultural and societal construction of color sensation thus bridges the divide between theory and visual effect. In his comprehensive survey *Color Codes*, Charles A. Riley posits,

For painters, the essential character of color beyond sensation is crucial; for philosophers it is impossible...the painter attends to the appearance—what is experienced—whereas a philosopher has to attend to the description of the experience and how it might relate to what is experienced. 

---

39 No matter that it wasn’t our husband that died, anyway: even this emotion is relational rather than essential, because again, what is essentiality, really—emotion is emotion if we feel it.  
40 LeDoux, 63.  
Essentially, the construction of our experience with color, when translated to painting, matters much less than our experience itself. Known logic rarely impedes, and never invalidates, felt experience. Whether we consider it nurture or exploitation, painters’ conscious use of color—coupled with other emotional, psychological, and sensorial indicators—in their paintings can ultimately produce real cerebral and emotional reactions in the viewer. Because of cultural, societal, and historical influences, these reactions or phenomenological experiences inherently share commonalities among individuals and can thus (to a certain point) be purposely deployed.
III. Theories of Color in Modern Painting:
Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko

Thus far our discussion of color has been largely abstract, looking at the ways in which cultural, historical, and linguistic factors interact with our psychological and emotional reactions to color in no specific mode or medium. At this point, I would like to establish a concrete basis for these theoretical concepts within an art-historical framework. In doing this, I will focus upon the formative ideologies of color posited by the Modernist painters Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman,42 with particular emphasis on their use of color as a sensorial and emotive agent.

Matisse, whose career spanned nearly the first half of the 20th century, provides an excellent entry point into our analysis. As the leading member of the Fauves,43 Matisse spearheaded a movement that embraced the use of brilliant, highly saturated colors to represent the sensation provoked by an object rather than mimic the pigments of the object itself. In his 1908 *Notes of a Painter*, the artist gives us one of the first discussions of phenomenal color in painting. Describing his artistic process in painting an autumnal scene, the painter writes:

> The chief function of colour should be to serve expression as well as possible. To paint an autumn landscape I will not try to remember what colours suit this season. I will be inspired only by the sensation that the season arouses in me: the icy purity of the sour blue sky will express the season just as well as the nuances of foliage. My sensation itself may vary, the autumn may be soft and warm like a continuation of summer, or quite cool with a cold sky and lemon-yellow trees that give a chilly impression and already announce winter.44

In dissecting Matisse’s statement, it may be helpful to first focus in on the artist’s specific mentions of color: the “blue sky” and the “lemon-yellow trees.” Matisse links the blue of the sky with the adjectives “icy,” “pure,” and “sour,” and the lemon-yellow of the

42 My exclusion here of the natural third—color field painter Clyfford Still—is only for the sake of brevity, and the opinion that his work is less exemplary of a polarity than that of Rothko and Newman.
43 From French, “the wild beasts.”
trees with “cool” and “chilly.” In other words, Matisse proposes that these specific tints of blue and yellow evoke, in both him as the artist and in his viewer, feelings of coldness. And yet Matisse’s choice of subject—an autumn day—complicates this reduction. We cannot isolate the colors in the painting as evoking within us a certain reading of temperature, because we also associate the imagery of autumn with feelings of chill. Matisse’s point of contrast with a “soft and warm autumn” is notable. In essence, he proposes that by using alternate colors to paint the same scene—we may assume reds, oranges, and browns—the temperature we read from the painting may completely change. Yet again, this association is quite literal: we perceive feelings of warmth because, in the context of this representation, we associate reds, browns, and oranges (“warm colors”) with changing leaves and early-autumn sun.

Let’s look, then, at a work by Matisse that provides a more complex link between color and subject. Matisse’s *Harmony in Red* shows a woman in an abstracted interior, heavily patterned and painted an almost uniform bright red, with one window revealing a blue-and-green pastoral outside. About this painting, Matisse wrote,

> I have before me a cupboard, it gives me a sensation of vivid red, and I put down a red that satisfies me…put a green near the red and make the floor yellow, and again there will be relationships…the relationship between the tones must be one that it will sustain and not destroy them.45

Our immediate sensation of the interior is one of heat—a warm, comfortable haven from the cold night outside; we may assume Matisse had a similar sensation, and not only used the color red to convey warmth but painted the blue/green exterior through the window to emphasize the contrasting cold outside. In this case, our reading of the red room as “warm” is not the direct result of the painting’s iconography—we are most likely influenced by socio-cultural constructions of red as signifying heat, re-enforced by the inside/outside dichotomy and the logical assumption that a dining room would be warm during what appears to be blustery night.

45 Matisse, 75.
Yet as with the autumn scene, the sensations provoked by the painting do not permeate the body and manifest as emotion. It was in attempt to surpass these limitations, and reach an emotional, psychological, or “spiritual” color that Kandinsky, the father of abstract art, rejected representation in his 1911 treatise On the Spiritual in Art. Kandinsky wrote that, in viewing color, “There occurs a purely physical effect…the eye is titillated…It can be calmed or cooled again. These are all physical sensations…They are also just superficial, leaving behind no lasting impression if the soul remains closed.”

These superficial sensations can “give rise to other, deeper sensations and set off a whole chain of psychic experiences, so the superficial effect of color can also develop into a deeper form of experience,” however, “On the average man, only impressions caused by familiar objects will be superficial.”

For Kandinsky, our recognition of any real object matched to a hue that even somewhat resembles its “natural” color consigns our phenomenological experience of color to one of fleeting surface sensations like heat or cold. We are thus prohibited from developing this sensation into emotion, while “any new phenomenon…exercises immediately an impression on the soul.”

Kandinsky acknowledges the possibility of associative influence in color, but oversimplifies them to direct analogies, i.e. that some shades of red “will cause pain or

---

47 Ibid.
48 For example, Matisse’s Harmony in Red.
49 Kandinsky, 43.
disgust through association with running blood.”

He also creates a problematic dichotomy, suggesting that some colors may produce phenomenal sensations due to distinct associations (dark red=running blood=pain), while some phenomenal responses to color occur “directly,” or entirely outside of influences. He also fails to reconcile associative color with psychological color experience, and by viewing them as mutually exclusive comes to the conclusion that color “directly influences the soul.”

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Kandinsky’s color theory is his belief in universal synesthesia, or each color’s particular resonance with a certain texture, sound, and shape. While his propositions—“in music light blue is like a flute,” “the effect of deeper colours is emphasized by rounded forms (e.g. blue in a circle),” provide insight into his own work, synesthesia free of cultural influence has been largely disproven.

Yet while his interpretations of colors as emotions must be treated cautiously as generalizations indebted to an archaic theory of chromotherapy and heavily swayed by grasps at spirituality, they nevertheless represent common interpretations of phenomenal color. These interpretations persist as widespread phenomenological experiences—for example, blue as a peaceful color which begins to dissolve into grief as it reaches black—and support a conscious partnership of subject and color in an emotional and psychological manner that will prove useful to our later discussions of color and the body. His theory of color relationships—for example, the polarity between blue and yellow that he proposes as the basis for color-perception (yellow as lively, light-hearted, and warm; blue as calm, cool, and deeply emotive, each active in opposition to the passive interludes of green or purple)—suggests the ways in which the formal balance of colors influences their phenomenal impact. Lastly, in his own work Kandinsky represents an essential marking point in the progression of phenomenal color in painting, as he divorces himself from representation while retaining figuration.

---

50 Kandinsky, 44.
51 Ibid., 45.
52 Ibid., 47.
53 Gage, 268.
54 Kandinsky, 57.
The inevitable next step, then, is color without representation or figuration: the color field paintings of Abstract Expressionists Rothko and Newman, completed during the 1950s and 60s. In his text *Paths to the Absolute*, critic John Golding outlines the ways in which, while these two artists shared a multiplicity of similarities, their modes and motivations for creating their paintings varied wildly. Subsequently, their stylistic and compositional choices, and their treatment of paint itself, create radically different readings for the fields of color they laid down on the canvas.

A useful comparison is that between Newman’s iconic *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue* series (1966-70), and Rothko’s *Green, Red on Orange* and *Red, Dark Green, Green* (1951-52). Both of the works are painted with triads of almost pure color in large geometric forms. Yet Newman’s color is flat, his edges sharp, and his message—clear through his title—is ironic and slightly mocking. Newman writes about his project in a formal sense, speaking in an almost Matisse-like way that he first placed red on the
canvas, and, in search for aesthetic balance, found that yellow and blue were the only possible accents. He writes,

I was now in confrontation with the dogma that colour must be reduced to the primaries, red, yellow and blue…I had, therefore, the double incentive of using these colors to express what I wanted to do – of making these colors expressive rather than didactic.\(^5\)

Golding argues that Newman essentially failed in both technical execution (“his reds tend to sag and go brown”) and in surpassing draftsmanship in order to achieve expression.\(^5\) In discussing Rothko’s earlier triad works, however, Golding suggests that the artist worked with color in a conscious, considerate way that recognized color for its phenomenal resonance thus succeeded in creating a relationship within the individuals colors and between the painting and the viewer. He begins by proposing,

Green tends generally speaking to be a pervasive, spreading color, probably because of its association with renewal and growth in nature. Red by contrast is a more immediate and also a static color….In the earlier work by Rothko the upper green area is smaller than the lower red one and floats above it, anchored by a darker fringe or banding at its lower edge, but at the same time expanding and spreading so that it gains equivalence with the larger, complementary red hue below.\(^5\)

In the second painting, Rothko switches the red and the green and expands the dark band—the “area of suspense”—to support the “aggressive” red, now on top.\(^5\) In this way he maintains the balance the work in a sensorial sense. For while we may point to the fact Golding’s bold statements about color—the “aggressive red” and the natural, “growing” green—are, once again, generalizations, we must understand that they must have some aspect of truth for Rothko’s formal experiment to have succeeded.

The give-and-take of the red and the green, an active and passive relationship according to Kandinsky, create formal harmony that allows color to transcend the

---

\(^5\) Golding, 231.
\(^5\) Ibid., 220.
\(^5\) Ibid.
aesthetic into the emotive and psychological. Rothko’s canvases were designed to be slightly larger than body-size and intended to be viewed from a certain distance; the now-participant viewer subsequently feels as though he or she is entering the painting, enveloped by color. This aspect of Rothko’s color fields became the leaping-off point for California light and space artists like James Turrell, who translated the atmospheric painted environment into three-dimensional installation spaces into which participants would enter, immersing themselves in light.

Yet in terms of painting, it’s also possible to see Rothko as marking the partial demise of a certain way of thinking about color—as a phenomenon with powerful emotive, sensorial, and psychological properties. This phenomenal color was largely abandoned in painting in the 1960s and 70s as its prevailing treatment became one more akin to that of Newman—a formal balancing act, concerned with color as a compositional surface quality rather than an imparter of meaning. Riley comments about this divide, “By eschewing the ‘laboratory’ mentality that ties colorism to purism, Rothko maintained the connection between his colors and a symbolic or emotional life beyond the paintings…they create a color element or atmosphere that envelops the viewer.” Artists like Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, and Roy Lichtenstein, while perpetuating color as a major aspect of their work, have distanced it from any felt association other than the blinding of the eye.

At this point I’d like to posit a series of questions:

How does the specific and limited use of color in contemporary art intersect with the wide-scale dissipation and eventual rejection of the figure in painting? How do the prominent artistic developments of the last century enforce a distance between the represented figure and color, and require interventions of technology, commerce, or

59 Riley, 164.
kitsch upon occasions of their intersection? How is this related to the emotional or psychological distancing of color from the figure viewing it? How has color been mollified, controlled, and generalized? Why did the emergence of a feminist art movement in the 1960s involve little discussion of color, at a point when many of their male contemporaries were defining its future?

Who is allowed to use color, and in what ways is it permissible?
IV. Phobias of Color: the Feminine, the Sexual, the Emotional

In his groundbreaking book *Chromophobia*, writer and artist David Batchelor argues that a larger societal fear has developed about color itself through the same historic and socio-linguistic narratives that attribute meaning to a specific red or a blue. Through a process of chromophobia color has been relegated to the sphere of the “other” (the Eastern, the queer, the disturbed) and become an intoxication, something foreign, uncontrollable, dreamlike, druglike, saccharine, distasteful. Color is the “fall” out of the status quo of neutral whiteness and shades of gray—order, sobriety, gravity, and reality. And although the paths to this fall are multitudinous, the ways in while color has been feminized and sexualized are at its core.

Batchelor traces the feminization of color to a basic dichotomy of structure versus cosmetics, with major linguistic cues indicating the shared Latin and Middle English roots of color with concealment, decoration, or disguise. The notion of color as make-up creates a clear association of color as feminine while simultaneously insinuating negative connotations of superficiality, frivolity, and deceit: “Figuratively, colour has always meant the less-than-true and the not-quite real.” Reaching back to Aristotle, the division of *disegno versus colore* has established a formal hierarchy in which ornamental, primitive, feminine color becomes something that must be penetrated and controlled by the venerated masculine line—an analogy similar to Derrida’s canvas and brush. Charles Blanc, the 19th century French critic whom Batchelor cites for his stereotypical projection of this dynamic, stated:

> The union of design and colour is necessary to beget painting just as is the union of man and woman to beget mankind, but design must maintain its preponderance over colour. Otherwise painting speeds to its ruin: it will fall through colour just as mankind fell through Eve.

---

61 Ibid.
62 Line vs. color, from Batchelor, 53.
Blanc’s mention of Eve both affirms his feminization of color and hints at its simultaneous and interconnected sexualization. As Eve, color is a seductress. It attracts the tacitly male painter-viewer with its banal but alluring beauty, threatening to swallow him under false pretenses of superficial splendor—it cannot go unbridled. “Colour is often close to the body and never far from sexuality,” 64 Batchelor argues. Rich orientalist fantasies, saturated hallucinations, color as the baseborn savage against the sword of the line: all conflate color’s lack of restraint with its femininity to connote a wanton licentiousness. Rejection of color is a rejection of its salacious wiles, a control through chastity.

The somatic aspect of color—its “closeness to the body”—is difficult to pin down, but essential. In fact, Batchelor himself mentions the body only briefly in his discussion of sexualized color. In unpacking the links between flesh and color, we must also involve the inextricable ties between flesh, the natural world, and femininity. Here again the Italian Futurists assist in elucidation, stating explicitly in their written materials that the soft, feminine body is also a natural body, a body against which men—if they wish to progress into the future—must clad themselves in cold steel. However, the Futurists were also colorists in their own right.

In the paintings of Futurists like Carlo Carrà and Giacomo Balla, color is absolutely saturate, and in fact many ways phenomenal—Carrà even wrote about color in a very phenomenological 65 way:

> For us, painting must express color the way one senses music…in which the material of color is expressed in all of the manifold possibilities our subjectivity can create. For to us Futurists, form and color are related only in terms of subjective values. 66

64 Batchelor, 63.

65 This is somewhat ironic, as Carrà’s is writing in stated opposition to Cézanne, whose work has been distinctly categorized by founding phenomenologist Marcel Merleau-Ponty as phenomenological itself. Carrà seems to believe that any representation negates the possibility of phenomenal color, while Merleau-Ponty sees the potential for phenomenal color in figuration or landscape.

Yet Carrà, Balla, Boccioni and the other Futurists also proclaimed themselves “against the nude in painting, as nauseous and tedious as adultery in literature” and pleaded an end to “arrays of wholesome flesh.”

The Futurists thus suggest an embrace of vibrant, powerful, sensorial color, but also the stripping of that color from the feminine, the sexed, and, in particular, the naked flesh. While singing color’s praises, the Futurists were busy industrializing it, making it mechanical, and forcing it under their unabashedly masculine control.

Thus color’s gradual distancing from the body has also been its transmutation from natural form into shape and line. From Matisse to Kandinsky to Newman, it path to abstraction has also been a path to control. The same can be said for paint as a medium itself: de Kooning said “Flesh was the reason oil painting was invented,” and as Batchelor notes, the industrial paints adopted by the pop artists and postmodern minimalists like Stella “form a skin, but they do not suggest flesh.”

Color was, and continues to be, synthesized into a post-Futurist ideal of shining surfaces, fluorescent lights and neon Plexiglas—ripped from luscious, lecherous pigment and made synthetic, the line multiplying into virtual grids. Simultaneously, the new postmodern surface relates “an inexpressive, mechanical depth. It is not psychological or emotional….It is

---

68 As they industrialized, made mechanical, and forced under masculine control the body itself.
69 Original source unknown, in Batchelor, 99.
70 Batchelor, 99.
sharp, hard and live, in a vulgar kind of way, and its vulgar sharpness is part of its attraction.”

If color becomes inexpressive when it is mechanized, then paint is inherently tied to emotion. Simultaneously, if paint is symbolic of flesh and thus the body, then a distancing of color from paint is a distancing of color from the body. If color is removed from the body, and removed from paint, then color is ripped from both its first-level phenomenological aspect—as a sensorial, emotive, and psychological agent, but also from its second-level symbolism as femininity and sexuality. Whether color is muted into shades of grey and brown, or forced into the unnatural tints and surfaces of man-made material, it is controlled when it is emptied of its emotional core. I’d like to draw a parallel. Whether the female figure is painted as an over-sexualized “piece of meat” devoid of agency or self-possession—as it has been by many male artists throughout history—or ripped from paint and hardened, vulgarized, or made mechanical through an involvement with the abject, it has been also been robbed of an emotional core.

Thus a simultaneous effort to revive color, paint, and the female nude provides an opportunity to explore and promote the powerful links between them, finding new ways to reclaim the body both as flesh and as the location of emotion. Yet this reclamation is itself by no means free of self-imposed limitations. Feminist painters working with the figure navigate loaded terrain, and their work shoulders the weight of their medium’s history transparently. Furthermore, the abject—with its historical precedent as the ‘go-to’ strategy for feminist artists in dealing with the female nude—persists as a presence in much of their work, threatening to overwhelm the subtle color-body-emotion relationship. At this point, I’d like to turn to a specific analysis of contemporary figurative painters Jenny Saville, Dana Shutz, and Joan Semmel, examining their treatment of color and the nude body in reinstating both self-possession and humanity.

---

71 Batchelor, 106-7.
72 By paint I am referring to oil paint unless otherwise noted.
73 Or second and third, if initial perception is the first.
V. The Feminist Nude in Contemporary Painting:
Jenny Saville, Marlene Dumas, and Joan Semmel

Perhaps the best-known painter of the nude female figure today is Jenny Saville, whose female nudes are massive in every sense of the word: filling canvases larger than ten square feet, her figures are most-often overweight and fleshy in the most visceral sense of the word. An antithesis to synthetic, cosmetic “skin,” Saville’s flesh is an unapologetic embrace of oil paint’s unctuous tactility. Her surfaces, and thus her bodies, owe much of their physicality to her use of color. Most obvious is a spectrum of highly saturated reds, which break through the more muted cream of her base “skin tone” and irrupt in specific areas like the face, hands, and genitals to intimate carnal heat—a sort of sensorial color that we might identify with Matisse. Saville also makes frequent use of blues and greens, most often employed as “tints” that envelop the entire figure, indicating both coldness, and, at times, hinting at a more emotive atmosphere. As visually stimulating, unabashedly womanly nudes and textural, distinctly painterly paintings, Saville’s works take on and reclaim key aspects of femininity in the traditional female nude while also consciously using color to emphasize sensorial impact.

Yet the abject is also eminently present, the pervasive factor which removes this carnal, voluptuous fleshiness from the realm of the possessive male gaze. This is not a condition of the figures’ obesity itself. While obesity often lies outside traditional male ideals of the female body—although in the work of Peter Paul Rubens we can find historical evidence to the contrary—it is not grotesque in a Kristevean sense of disrupting the wholeness of the subject or eliciting responses of horror. In description only, Saville’s work could seem an attempt to expand the limits of accepted female beauty.

In the way she represents these obese figures, however, this is clearly not the case. Saville’s nudes are intentionally, irrevocably grotesque, confrontational in the most horrifying way possible. Already domineering in size, the figures force their flesh at the viewer explicitly, pushing their bulbous stomachs forward and grabbing at their distended
rolls of fat in a definite invitation of revulsion. Saville further disturbs the wholeness of the figure in her markmaking, creating fissures and strange fragmentations in the flesh through brush stroke. And Saville’s colors, while affecting and self-aware, frequently serve only to reference the abject. Through associations with transgressive body fluids—red blood, creamy yellow pus—or, with tinges of icy blues and sallow greens, sickness and death, Saville limits her colors’ phenomenal potential through the blockages of horror and repulsion. Discussing her own work, Saville explicates the abject: “We live in a time where that type of body is abhorrent…. [it] represents excess, lack of control, going beyond the boundary of what’s socially acceptable.”

Thus Saville’s female nude figures both reinforce abjection as an effective method for dislodging the possessive power of the male gaze, and expose its limitations. In painting figures concerned absolutely with the elicitation of disgust, Saville avoids the tacit plea for male validation lurking behind so many feminist works in which the overweight, disfigured, disabled, or otherwise ‘non-ideal’ female body is accompanied by signifiers of traditional beauty which indicate its desire to be accepted into the cultural

---

ideal. Yet in doing so she relegates her figures to the fringes, forcing them to use their bodies as a threat and disallowing us to move past their fleshy forms.

Saville writes about the body in her painting, “I don’t want to illustrate. I want it to be what it is.” And her bodies are undoubtedly ‘real’ in a physical and painterly sense. But female bodies are not synonymous with women. Her figures may not be aesthetic illustrations, but they are in some ways ideological caricatures. It is telling that Saville often works from forensic science books and gathers inspiration from observations of surgery: her figures are in a sense bodies without a mind, a soul, emotion or agency. Artist and writer Alison Rowley in a particularly scathing analysis of Saville’s early work criticizes in particular the artist’s “highly unpleasurable” excess of oil paint, taking issue with her attempt to “simulate” flesh in a literal, physical sense. As tactile flesh places supreme value on the sense of touch in the viewer’s phenomenological relationship with the painting, reinforcing the idea that the body is more important than the person is problematic. Saville’s color re-engages this body as something ‘real’, but maintains reliance on the abject and makes no effort to return empathetic humanity.

South-African born artist Marlene Dumas’s figures, on the other hand, seem barely made up of flesh at all—swept together with thin, wet paint, their edges bleeding and their features sketched with wash and line. In stark opposition of the strategies employed by Jenny Saville, Dumas’ bodies are more descriptive representations than physical forms. The insubstantiality of her nudes allows them to provoke a different type of commentary that deviates from pure abjection and more strongly involves direct response to dominating narratives of pornography and objectification.

Dumas’s figures derive from a wide assortment of secondary source images, which often provide the motivation and context for their creation. One of her most common sources is pornography, the use of which dictates a clear dialogue with not only

---

75 Saville in Schama, 127.
77 Rowley takes further issue with Saville’s “simulation” of the abject itself, engaging specifically in a comparison between Saville’s Branded and Jo Spence’s much earlier Exiled to argue that Saville has without integrity appropriated a piece that involved an actual physical intervention to the artists’ body (Abramovic’s Lips of Thomas is another useful comparison here).
historical, but contemporary objectifications of the female nude body. By basing her paintings on hypersexual bodies intended explicitly for male pleasure, Dumas necessarily invokes the very elements that Saville ignores—her subjects’ emotional and psychological interior—to disassociate them from objectification. She achieves this through specific body language and facial expression, both of which are emphasized through her gestural brushwork and her chromatic strategies. Dumas often paints a highly colored ground which then informs the tint of her figure, appearing almost as a reflective light that tints their skin completely. In this way her color reads as a reference to atmosphere or an emotive, psychological space that the figure is either projecting or absorbing. In other cases, Dumas’ monochromatic figures stand against a neutral backdrop, their self-contained but non-natural color coupling with their pose and expression to suggest a certain mood or identity. Following a major retrospective of the
artist’s work at the Museum of Modern Art in 2008, exhibition curator Connie Butler commented, "I think in Marlene's case, her interest is in the gymnastic quality of those bodies in the coldness of pornography. I think she restores a kind of vulnerability and humanity to those subjects."\(^78\)

The re-attribution of intelligence, personality, and individual identity into the body of the female nude provides an important method of reclamation in Dumas’s figures. Yet this method must be annotated in several ways. The first is the continued presence of abjection. Dumas’s paintings are often described as dark or haunting, an impression at times gleaned from their subject matter—corpses have at times played heavily into her work—but in the case of many of her female nudes results only from her formal and aesthetic choices. Through her subdued palette of blues, grays, wan yellows and cold maroons, Dumas also conjures associations of illness and injury not unsimilar to those of Saville. The ambiguity of her figures’ forms causes them to become grotesque and at times only liminally human, further inciting feelings of discomfort or disgust.

In the most basic sense, Dumas’ application of paint to the canvas achieves a level of de-objectification in of itself. If the traditional female nude is sexually inviting in its suggestion of the real—a likeness to the ideal womanly body whose symbolic status as an object of desire nonetheless depends on a certain degree of physical believability—then by nature of their complete lack of tactility and non-natural coloration Dumas’ figures inherently remove themselves this narrative. We might interpret Dumas’ paintings as achieving the complementary inverse of Saville by reclaiming the female nude as a feeling, thinking woman, but not as a corporeal, tactile body. Dumas’s women, however, are still at times pin holed by their own semi-grotesque appearance.

So how might an artist reconcile and unite these two aspects, if one seems to negate the other? Furthermore, how might an artist achieve reclamation without shades of abjection? In considering these questions I will look finally to American painter Joan Semmel, who attempts reclamation of her rendered, believable bodies through her nude figures’ ownership of their own sexuality and exclusionary frames of looking. Semmel’s self-identification as an artist in specific engagement with the socio-historical problem of

\(^78\) In Andrew Goldstein, “Marlene Dumas Retrospective Stays Just This Side of Pornography.” *New York Magazine Vulture Pages*, December 2008.
the female nude is also unique among the three artists. Although partially a condition of her identity as an older artist whose work evolved during the first-wave feminism of the 1960s, issues surrounding objectification are a conscious aspect of her painting process: she has written, “My intention has been to subvert the tradition of the passive female nude.”

After departing from Abstract Expressionism in the late 1960s, Semmel began her exploration of the female nude by painting sex itself. In her First and Second Erotic Series (1970-73), Semmel paints couples in graphic sexual positions, using as her source material photographs of consensual couples in the act that she herself takes. Semmel couches her intent in these paintings in distinctly theoretical terms:

…to find an erotic language to which women could respond, one which did not reiterate the male power positions and prevalent fetishization in conventional

---

pornography and art...whereby a woman could express her own desires, whatever they might be, without shame or sentimentality.\textsuperscript{80}

In comparison to the repulsing abjection present in Saville and Dumas’ work, Semmel’s unabashedly inviting eroticism seems at first an unlikely strategy. Yet by entering the male figure into the painting, Semmel is able to control the sex act proposed by the traditional female nude and dictate an interaction in which she maintains power equal to her male partner. Her frame is cropped in to disengage any specific narrative or setting that could hint towards literal pornography. As objectification is largely a pseudo-sexual act, addressing sex itself is an effective strategy for empowering the female figure. The artist elucidates her purpose by adopting elements of slight abstraction that subtly remove the painted scenes from photo-realist images. One major aspect of this is color: her figures are each painted a different saturated hue, suggesting individual but equal energies and enforcing a focus on the figures as representative of interpersonal power relationships rather than merely physical forms engaged in a carnal act.

Semmel finds an alternate method of reclamation in her ‘Self-Images’ series, which began directly after her Erotic Series and have continued throughout her career. Rejecting completely the assistance of a mirror or a camera—those apparati which allow an artist to capture her own body (and, at times, the body of her partner) in its entirety, but also simulate the viewpoint of someone else—Semmel paints her body from her perspective of looking down. This radical reframing—a simple re-orientation which unifies artist, viewer, and subject—completely disables traditional masculine spectatorship, as Semmel’s point of view could only ever be hers and hers alone.

Yet strangely, Semmel largely abandons saturated color when painting her body solo. Color perhaps is not ‘necessary’ because these depictions of the body already reject the objectifying male gaze and assert the subject’s conscious agency through their perspectival framing. Semmel’s self-images so directly and effectively challenge objectification that perhaps the involvement of color, and thus emotion or atmosphere, would complicate their purpose. They achieve the goal stated by the artist—to subvert the tradition of the passive female nude.

\textsuperscript{80} Joan Semmel to the author, Meyer, 127.
By involving color as an additional formal element as she does in the coupled images, however, Semmel could reveal more of these figures’ interior lives. The few self-images that are painted with saturated color—such as the self-image *Out of Darkness*—are a powerful testament to this. This work, like most of those by Semmel, gives us little additional information in terms of setting or body language that might help us to understand what this woman is thinking or feeling and how, or why, she is interacting with color. Yet in viewing a saturated figure we develop an empathy for the subject through our phenomenological involvement with the color in and around her, our conscious questioning of her relationship to the color, and finally our identification with and connection to the figure herself through our mutual sensorial, psychological, and emotional chromatic experience.

In a sense, then, color is a parallel to the abject, but one that does not reference disgust or horror. The horror-disgust that abjection elicits in the viewer is a powerful tool—if the viewer no longer desires possession of this female body, the body has
resisted traditional objectification. Yet at a more basic level, invoking the abject in the female body disrupts its status as a complete “object,” removing the figure from the “symbolic order” that would otherwise signify a nude female body as a receptacle for male pleasure. Color, Kristeva argues in her critical essay “Giotto’s Joy,” does the same. As one’s relationship with color is pre-linguistic, and thus color is a primal experience formed before one’s separation of self and other, color lies in same space of “subject-object indeterminacy” as the abject.\(^81\) Thus while endless words may be written about color, and our experience with color is informed by not only socio-cultural, but linguistic factors, color itself resists specific definition and thus unifying symbolism. Kristeva writes,

> By destroying unique normative meaning…pictorial color does not erase meaning; it maintains it through multiplication and shows that it is engendered as the meaning of a singular being.\(^82\)

Let’s return to the nude figure. If this figure is, as an object, coded as a certain socially and historically-defined symbol, then painting the figure with unbridled and unrepresentative color disturbs the reading of this figure as a symbolic, universal ‘female nude’—that is, a passive sexual object—by multiplying and diversifying the possible meanings of the figure through the viewer’s relationship to the color with which it is painted. As color is “engendered as the meaning of a singular being,” our individual experiences with color are realized through our own bodies. Or, as neuroscientists Oliver Sacks and Robert Wasserman put it, “Color is…admixed inseparably with all our visual memories, images, desires, expectations, until it becomes an integral part of ourselves, or our life world.”\(^83\) Again, color lies between us and the world, the subject and the object, because it is only contains the meaning that we ascribe to it. And thus within painting, Kristeva extrapolates, “Color…is a compact and plurifunctional element, not conforming

---

\(^81\) Although, in painting, we must also acknowledge that color is also a formal “object” in the sense that the viewer sees it.


\(^83\) Oliver Sacks and Robert Wasserman, “The Case of the Colorblind Painter,” *New York Review of Books*, November 1987 in Riley, 319-320. The use of the term “life world” is particularly notable here as an appropriation of the phenomenological “lifeworld” and will be expanded upon.
to the localization-identification-placement of phenomena and/or their (or any) ultimate meaning…This painting, then, reaches completion within the viewer.”84 Color is us and we are color, and if the figure we are viewing is a physical manifestation of the same color that we have embodied, then our relationship to her is necessarily empathetic.

And it is this precise empathy—the intersubjectivity that is central to phenomenological experience—that forges the strongest connection between color and the figure, providing a strong possibility for the reclamation of the female nude. The traditional relationship between the viewer and the female nude is one in which the viewer is the immutable empowered subject and the painted figure is the permanent objectified object. The newer feminist-dictated relationship relegates the painted figure to the abject, retaining the viewer as the absolute subject but disabling the viewer’s ability to interact with the figure as the complementary object. However, phenomenal color provides opportunity for a phenomenological relationship between the viewer and the painted figure, in which the viewer sees the figure as another subject herself through the recognition of her parallel experience with color as an object. Ultimately, this empathy for the female nude, and the resulting relationship of intersubjectivity, translates to the acknowledgement of the painted figure as a representation of a living, feeling, thinking, whole person: the return of humanity to the female nude.

84 Kristeva in “Giotto’s Joy,” 231.
Conclusion: Chromophilia

My painted installation, entitled *Chromophilia*, thus proposes a reclamation of my own body as a female nude figure, but also as an expression of my emotions, my thoughts, my perceptions: me. I intend to achieve this in several ways:

1. Reclaim color in an associative and cultural sense, as femininity, sexuality, and flesh. Rather than subduing it or synthesizing it, embrace color’s associative feminine, sexual, and physical power. Return color to the painted body as a statement that this color, and this body, will not be controlled and neither color nor the female body should be censored.

2. Re-engage in emotive and sensorial color by utilizing the ways in which our perception of color—although distinctly influenced by socio-historical and linguistic factors—involves very real psychical effects and feelings. By painting the figure and her environment with saturated color, transcend corporality by claiming the figure as a multifaceted person with varying psychological and emotional states.

3. Through the viewer’s simultaneous experience with both color and the figure, and their understanding of the figure’s own experience with the same color, establish a phenomenological relationship between the viewer and the figure. The mirroring of the viewer and figure’s phenomenological color experience emphasizes the more immediate empathetic motivators presented by the figure—her body language and facial expression. Through empathy, the female nude thus moves past objectification and objection and claims her place as a complete subject in her own life world.\(^{85}\)

---

\(^{85}\) An appropriation of lifeworld—in Husserlian phenomenology, “...a given subject's lifeworld consists of the beliefs against which his everyday attitude towards himself, the objective world and others receive their ultimate justification,” Beyer. Furthermore, can be expanded to refer to a group of subjects, in which “their common lifeworld, or ‘homeworld,’ can be looked upon, by first approximation, as the system of senses or meanings constituting their common language.” Within the context of my project, in both senses the lifeworld (which, for the purposes of our contemporary context, I will broaden to a less-Husserlian “life world”) is the figure’s colored environment and the painted environment surrounding the viewer.
Ultimately, these figures are really meta-figures. They are both and icon and indices, the records of my phenomenological experience with the color inside and around them that was once inside and around me. I began with general ideas about emotions I wanted to express and the colors that I felt would complement and intensify them. Yet in order to really feel the color, I used a set of hot lights and gels to project color into a confined space, reflecting on the emotional, somatic, and psychological effect of the color on myself while I was within it. I then made a painted interpretation of these colored environments and translated my internal mood responses into the body language and positions of the figures. Thus each figure emanates her color into the ambiguous space around her to create her own emotional and psychological life world, but also represents a response to her colored environment: a perceiver of the color around her. The figures explicate the way in which color broaches the boundary between ourselves and the ‘other’ by permeating the body, only realized in our own phenomenological response to it.

They are the human participants suggested in Rothko’s work and physically present within Turrell’s—subjects themselves, previous viewers who have been captured in paint as mimeses of their relationships with the same colors to which the current viewer finds him or herself relating. Furthermore, because our color experiences are partially constructed by our culture, histories, and language, viewers situated within the same Euro-American discourse as me and my figures (in the current context of my work’s circulation, the majority) will most likely have phenomenological experiences with these colors that maintain some similarities to the experience that I had and my figures are having: calm blues and purples, the confrontational red, an ambiguous and haunting blue-green.

The specific formal aspects of my figures and their environments (or, me and my life world) contribute to this phenomenological relationship. The figures themselves are slightly larger than life-size in order to simulate one-to-one relationships when viewed from several feet away. Their representations as full bodies are essential for this reason: a face or cropped figure wouldn’t interact with the viewer in the same reflective manner. In order to emphasize the blurring of self/color and subject/object boundary, their forms in
places literally dissolves in places into the colored space around them, or inherit the drips and splatters of the surrounding paint. These elements further remove them from the purely iconographic purpose of physical representation and problematize any readings of their bodies as only tactile flesh.

The figureless colored space available through these colored panels also further complicates a strict subject-object dichotomy. Viewers may have experiences with color as the sole phenomenon if they engage with a part of the piece that does not contain the figure and thus form a phenomenological relationship and affective state to the color free of other influencing content. Upon reaching the figure, however, the viewer is confronted with another subject’s embodied emotion that represents her own experience of this color. The viewer as a subject is now interacting with the object/phenomena of color, the object/phenomena of the figure, and the object/phenomena of the figure as a subject both interacting with color as her own object/phenomena—a color whose phenomenological properties are not necessarily the same, but may be very similar to the viewer’s own—and simultaneously presenting this color in her own body.

There is a symbolic duplicity in the colored space surrounding the figures and lying between them. In this sense the color is indeed in one sense a physical environment in which these figures sit and we as viewers enter visually. Yet this atmospheric color and in fact this entire installation space can be interpreted as entirely internal, an almost synesthiesic translation of interior psychology and emotion to shade and hue. The three-dimensional hexagonal arrangement of the canvases also serves multiple purposes. It necessary forces the viewer-participant to circumambulate and thus physically engage with the piece rather than simply stand motionless in front of it and “look.” The viewer’s movement from one color/figure panel to the next emphasizes the temporal nature of each color/figure combination, and these color/figures as ephemeral and constantly shifting psychological states or moods. They are not a group of distinct entities or simultaneously existing beings, and thus they can never be seen all at once.

Color is both the barrier and the bond, switch and stop. It divides the figures but also connects them. It is movement and change, the space within and between, transience and continuity. But color is never passive. Color is never still, never dull, never captured or contained. And as color themselves, neither are my figures. They are moments in the
most basic story of human life—the story of how we feel and think. They’re me. And I can only be seen through the chromatic complex of my own cerebral and emotional subjectivity.
Chromophilia. Six-sided installation of oil with acrylic on canvas, 78” x variable widths. 2012-2013
Chromophilia: Cadmium (figure)
Chromophilia: Phthalo (figure)
Chromophilia: Ultramarine (figure)
Bibliography


