

# Beyond the Representation of the Female Nude

Any representation of the human body is permeated with pre-existing notions and ideals. In this article Louis Laganà discusses about the works and artistic career of Lawrence Buttigieg who is well-known for his female nudes.

When we examine the history of Western art we find a prevalence of images of the female body. For artists, the female nude has always been an important subject since the time of antiquity up to the present post-modernist period. The framed image of a female body, seen in many art galleries around the world, is an icon of the process of Western culture and a symbol of civilization. In recent years, the female nude in art has received a renewed and interesting attention from feminist artists and art historians. Today it is an entirely new theme under discussion that is what is acceptable and unacceptable. Images of the female body produced in art are popular also in recent debates on high culture and pornography. One must also mention the relationship between 'image' and 'reality' and for many contemporary art critics the depiction of the female nude serves as a political statement.

In Malta, throughout the years, most artists sought to explore and study the female nude as part of their artistic, academic development but very few, in recent years, attempted to produce works with images depicting the female nude as a major theme in their repertoire. An artist, who during these last few years focused his work mostly on the female nude, is Lawrence Buttigieg.

The earliest works of Lawrence Buttigieg were mainly studies of the landscape, still life and also portraiture. By profession, Mr. Buttigieg is an architect and during the period 1983-1987 when he was still studying architecture at the University of Malta, he started the course for the diploma in Fine Art at the Government School of Art. He was also awarded a Master of Arts degree in Visual and Performing Arts from the Charles Stuart University, in Australia. One must say that the rigorous study of design and his accurate observations of what surrounded him started to be reflected in his works. His first attempts in figure drawing demonstrated also his in-depth studies and the skill to produce the intricacies of the human form.

Buttigieg had his first personal art exhibition in 1988 at the Auberge de Provence in Valletta. In this exhibition he presented a series of interesting portraits produced either directly from the sitter in the studio or from photographs. Some of his best portraits include Pope John Paul II, Dr. Henry Wismayer, H.E. Professor Guido Demarco, ex-President of Malta, Mr. Chris Falzon, Dr. Ray Bondin, and other distinguished people. In these portraits Mr. Buttigieg succeeded not only to capture the likeness and the person's character but also created an intrinsic, colourful significance of the structure of the composition. Three years later, Mr. Buttigieg exhibited at the Museum of Fine arts, in Valletta, another series of portraits and other works mainly landscapes. He also had two other personal art shows again at the Auberge de Provence in 1994 and in 1999 at the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. In 2003 the artist had another personal exhibition at the ex-Chiesa di Santa Marta, Piazza del Collegio Romano in Rome. Apart from his personal exhibitions held in Malta the artist showed his work in many collective exhibitions in

Malta and in foreign countries. It is worth mentioning two international collective exhibitions, namely, *Aim for Arts* in 2000 and *Painting on the Edge* in 2003, both held at the Galleries of the Federation of Canadian Artists, in Greenville, Vancouver in Canada.

Around the year 2000, Mr. Buttigieg increased his interest to focus and explore the female nude. This interest urged him also to read the works of Lynda Nead, Linda Nochlin, Camille Paglia and other female writers. As I have said, feminist art historians changed the way the western world was looking at the female image. For example, art historian and writer, Professor Griselda Pollock, frequently discussed the idea that ‘the image of women which art history defines as passive, beautiful or erotic is a male construct achieved through the conventions that the primarily male art historians have subscribed to over time and the manner in which art has been described and commented upon by them.’ Mr. Buttigieg feels that the female nude offers more interesting qualities than the clothed figure. He argues that ‘the bareness of the body can be a source of anything between deep pleasure and trauma.’ Unfortunately the representation of the nakedness of the female body in art was and is still being interpreted by many in a controversial manner from as something humiliating or obscene to the idea of a model of ideal beauty.

Generally, I think that the images of the female nude in Mr. Buttigieg’s paintings are a kind of a metaphor for beauty but that at the same time they can also serve to have a different meaning for the viewers. I argue also that the artist’s works are the expression of an archetypal image of innocence and that they also express sexuality and a reflection of

our current state. During these last few years the artist hired and worked on more than one model. This is what he relates about his work: “Through my work I empathize with these persons and express feelings directly linked to their particular beauty; their health; their emotional well-being; and their likes and dislikes in general terms.” Mr. Buttigieg imbues his figures with grace and charm but gives them also something more. He condenses the meaning of the body by seeking its essential lines, therefore the charm will be less apparent at first glance but eventually emerge from the final image which has a broader meaning, one more fully human.

Mr. Buttigieg has a great admiration for the works, especially the nudes of the famous, French painter Pierre Bonard (early twentieth century) and the more contemporary British artist, Euan Uglow. In fact, a good example of one of Mr. Buttigieg’s works is, *Nude XIX*, which shows a pose reminiscent of Uglow’s painting of a nude girl called ‘*The Diagonal*’. In this composition, Mr. Buttigieg depicted the nude model sitting straight on the edge of a chair with lifted arms behind her head, forming a perfect diagonal from one corner to another and used as the main focal point the pubic bone. I think that when an artist sees an object or a figure, he sees it symbolically but he also sees it visually and formally. In three particular paintings the artist used the images of animals accompanying the nude female figure. In one painting we find the image of a lizard and in the other two that of a cat. In the first work, Mr. Buttigieg wanted to create a greater impact on the viewers and make them focus more on the picture plane. I think also that the use of the image of the lizard complements symbolically the composition of the painting because the posture also suggests the same meaning. In dream symbolism lizards promote

dreaming. On the other hand the symbol of the cat in the other paintings, signify sexuality. Generally, cats symbolize all instinctual and emotional actions. Cats are thought to be feminine and intuitive. In *Nude with Cat II* for example, the artist not only made good use of his skills in perspective and foreshortening but also he managed to produce the effect of a silent dialogue between the model and the animal. The bright light coming from the back also provides a suggestive result. Perhaps the pivotal work of this series is the other nude with a cat where the model has a totally different posture. The model is here depicted in a kneeling position with the cat placed on the lower left corner of the rectangular composition. The nude conveys an unabashed sensuality and has an enveloping purity. The erotic aspect of the composition is heightened by the posture. The outline of the figure is clearly defined and firm against the misty dark blue background which suggests her integrity.

The act of generating life is particularly significant in two other works showing nudes of pregnant women. Lawrence Buttigieg will be showing these paintings in his forthcoming exhibition which will be inaugurated on the 16 June 2007. The use of delicate lines and the shape of the figures not only represent pregnant women but also make the space vibrate and reinforce the integrity of the compositions, which gain in symbolic power. Of course these are poignant works. In fact the artist pointed out: ‘The emotive power of my paintings is directly related to the complex nature of the female body and the spirit within.’ I argue that Mr. Buttigieg is not only interested in expressing the beauty of the female body but also that of the spirit within. The great French sculptor August Rodin, the progenitor of modern sculpture, once stated: ‘The body always expresses the spirit

whose envelope it is. And for him who can see, the nude offers the richest meaning.’ Mr. Buttigieg continues to reaffirm: ‘With regard to my work, it is a sort amniotic fluid which ‘seals’ the woman, in her nudity, from the outside world. In my paintings the subject is usually absorbed in her own intimacy or engrossed in her own thoughts.’ So here we have to look at the artist’s images from the point of view of the subject and to believe that the subject is not as frail as we have previously thought. Perhaps the vulnerability of the female nudes by Mr. Buttigieg is not disempowering but in actual fact an overwhelming proof of their resistance.

Today we notice that the representation of the female nude body in contemporary art practices, like installation art, is featured in the midst of other symbolic objects. It does not simply remain the nude woman that incites sexual desire and a penetrating male gaze but has a greater meaning beyond the representation. The female nude that is meant to suggest the ‘image’ conjures up distinct cultural references. It is interesting to note, and one may perhaps forecast, that the future representation of the female nude by Lawrence Buttigieg will eventually evolve in a way that will give us a clearer vision of subtle dealings with actual human situations and more pleasing shapes and symbols.

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