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The Artists Depicting the Power and Strangeness of Breasts

New generations of women painters are challenging centuries of art history with their nuanced, empathetic renderings of bare-chested bodies.

By Zoë Lescaze
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Women's breasts have been a fixation of Western artists since Western art began. The prehistoric sculptor who carved a hunk of mammoth ivory into the "Venus of Hohle Fels" — the earliest known depiction of a human being, unearthed in Germany in 2008 — gave her proportions fit for the pages of Juggs magazine. Since then, male artists have portrayed breasts as erotic objects, fonts of nourishment and sometimes both at once, as in the case of racy Baroque depictions of the Roman virtue Caritas as a young woman nursing her father. Bare-chested women have represented our brightest political ideals (as in the French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix's 1830 allegorical work "Liberty Leading the People") but also our worst transgressions: In medieval European art, lust often appeared as a woman with snakes biting her breasts, an allusion to their supposedly ruinous seductive power. Indeed, these humble mounds of tissue, as the feminist scholar Marilyn Yalom writes in her 1998 book, "A History of the Breast," have long been the focal points for various desires: "Babies see food. Men see sex. Doctors see disease. Businessmen see dollar signs."

Bare-breasted women have served as allegories for political causes in paintings such as "Liberty Leading the People" (1830) by Eugène Delacroix.

But what do female painters see? It was only in the early 20th century that women began to regularly depict their own nude bodies. In 1906, the German artist Paula Modersohn-Becker, who had recently left her husband to pursue a bohemian life in Paris, scandalized viewers with two portraits of herself wearing little more than a favorite amber necklace. The French model turned painter Suzanne Valadon began to produce nude self-portraits in 1917 and continued to do so as she aged — a radical pursuit then as now. By the end of the century, the American artist Joan Semmel had taken the project of women regarding their own bodies to its logical extension by painting first-person views of herself — incandescent landscapes of pink and ocher flesh in which breasts dominate the foreground — and the British artist Jenny Saville had launched a career depicting, with urgent slashes and stippled patches of oil paint, bulging breasts that flop and sag on bodies that defy mainstream standards of beauty.

Left: the German artist Paula Modersohn-Becker was the first woman known to have painted and exhibited nude self-portraits, including “Self-Portrait on Sixth Wedding Anniversary” (1906). Right: the French model turned artist Suzanne Valadon’s “Autoportrait aux Seins Nus (Topless Self-Portrait)" (1931), currently part of a retrospective exhibition at the Centre Pompidou-Metz. From left: Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen; © Akg-Images

When women paint nude women, it’s often said that they are “reversing” the male gaze that has dominated art history. But the reality is more complex, and the range of perspectives among these artists is broader than this shorthand would suggest. New generations of painters are depicting breasts in unorthodox shapes and colors, adding them to figures who are not necessarily female and challenging other conventions, both social and stylistic. We might think we know what a breast looks like, but even the most basic preconceptions falter in much of their work.

“In some ways there are parallels between my gaze and the male gaze,” says the Brooklyn-based artist Jenna Gribbon, 44, who mostly paints her spouse, the musician Mackenzie Scott. “There is a sexual and romantic component to my depictions of my wife. But the difference is, as a woman, I’m painting her from a deep well of experience of knowing what it is to be seen and regarded and to have my image consumed.” Tall and blond, Scott appears semi-undressed or fully naked in everyday domestic settings — hunched over a laptop on the couch in one canvas, clipping her toenails above the toilet in another — and in more theatrical tableaus involving harsh lights, mirrors, blindfolds and green-screen backdrops. In all these works, Gribbon renders Scott’s nipples in a searing shade of fluorescent pink, a hue so electric, it makes the viewer inescapably aware of themselves as a voyeur and, Gribbon hopes, more empathetic with the person on display.

Jenna Gribbon paints her wife, the musician Mackenzie Scott, with fluorescent pink nipples, infusing domestic scenes such as "Toe Nail Trim" (2021) with a dash of science fiction. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery

Hayv Kahraman, 42, who was born in Baghdad and now lives in Los Angeles, remembers wandering the halls of Florentine museums as a young woman, surrounded by pale painted bodies with small, spherical breasts. “I was so enamored with that aesthetic,” she says. “I still thought Europe was the epitome.” Kahraman spent her adolescent years in Sweden, where she perfected a Stockholm accent and bleached her dark hair blond, and in her 20s, this cultural dissonance unleashed a hybrid avatar in her work: an alluring, almond-eyed woman with a jet black unibrow, white skin and impossibly round breasts. She has rendered the character as an acrobat, whose body contorts without breaking, and with breasts mutating into the mortars Kahraman saw on the streets of Baghdad as a child — a comment on the idea of being “at war with one’s own body.” Breasts become weapons in less literal ways in other works. The woman in “Boob Gold,” an oil painting on wood from 2018, stares defiantly back at us as she tugs open her dress to expose a coin slot, the kind you might find on a donation box, at the center of her chest. The work addresses what Kahraman sees as the exploitative dimensions of humanitarian aid. “Your body becomes a spectacle,” she says. “But on the other side, she’s exuding this power.” Sexual objectification may be an unavoidable condition of being a woman, especially one seen as exotic by the West, but Kahraman suggests it comes with its own forms of strength.

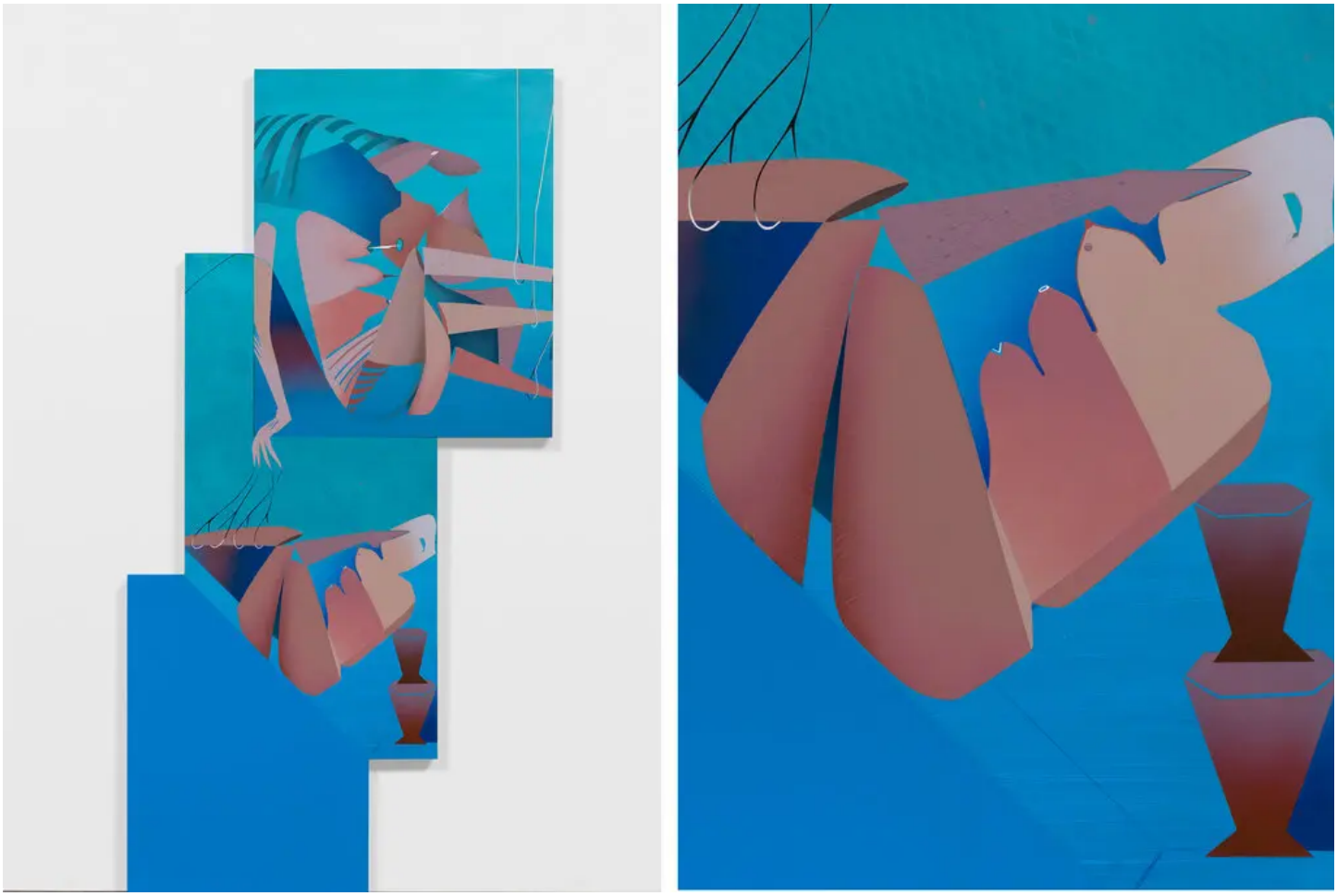
Left: Sarah Slappey, who painted “Cloud Tangle” (2020), has chafed against erotic interpretations of her work. Right: nipple hairs are proudly on display in the work of Larissa De Jesús Negrón, including “Soy Libre Mami” (2023). From left: courtesy of the artist and Sargent's Daughters; courtesy of the artist

Not all artists painting breasts are interested in them as sexual objects, but their erotic associations can be difficult to shake. In 2020, the American artist Sarah Slappey, 39, exhibited a series of surreal canvases in which disembodied arms, creamy lozenges and liquid tendrils collide with petal pink breasts resembling long balloons, complete with puffy areolas and noodle-like, upturned nipples. Some breasts ooze drops of milk that morph into strings of pearls. Slappey, who painted these works after night feeding her nephew with a bottle for several weeks, was thinking about the transformation of nipples after childbirth, and the mingled pleasure and pain of being in a woman’s body (she compares it to a “cupcake full of thumbtacks”). Still, viewers were quick to read the tangles of rosy limbs as erotic. “Maybe in our language we don’t have enough separation between eroticism and sensuality or touch and the body, so people just overlap them too much,” says Slappey. “Or people just like sex.” Frustrated, she took a temporary break from breasts to focus on ankles and hands.

In oil paintings such as “Figure and Monstera” (2022), Somaya Critchlow imbues her subjects with a sense of interiority and unapologetic sensuality.
© Somaya Critchlow. Courtesy of the artist, private collection, London, and Maximillian William, London. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates

The British artist Somaya Critchlow, 30, who depicts Black women with big hair and pneumatic breasts in compact oil paintings saturated with warm earth tones and jewel-hued shadows, has similarly expressed exasperation with one-note readings of her work. “People try to position my work as being sex-positive or political or whatever — and it’s not, it’s just investigative,” she told The Guardian. Her subjects might lie back luxuriously or bend forward, squeezing their breasts together, like pinup girls, but they also tend to exude a strong sense of interiority — mingled states of ambivalence, mischief and desire that make them whole human beings. Endowing them with exaggerated breasts is a provocation to the viewer to move past the obvious. “I’m just going to blow this up as big and silly as I can,” she told one journalist, and still “make it a serious painting. And what can you say to me about that?”

Larissa De Jesús Negrón, 28, renders breasts more realistically than some of her peers, using airbrushed acrylic and soft pastels to create subtle gradients of color, but they also speak, in her work, to the ways in which selves can transform. Raised in a devout Christian family in Puerto Rico with what she describes as “really harsh rules revolving around being modest and not showing too much skin,” she began painting naked women as a teenage rebellion. Soon it became a form of therapy. “I was able to process a lot of self-hate and shame that I felt around my body, and nudity in particular,” she says. Now based in Queens, De Jesús Negrón portrays herself, in all-consuming bouts of worry, spells of serene self-acceptance and ambiguous moods somewhere in between, flaunting the nipple hairs her mother once told her to pluck. In “Soy Libre Mami ” (2023), a close-up view of a single breast in shades of green and mauve, the curlicue strands form cursive letters spelling the first two words of the title. Translation: “I’m free.”



According to the artist Maryam Hoseini, breasts are "a place of transformation" in many of her works, including "Hello-Goodbye Bad Dreams" (2020), above left. At right, a detail of the painting. Courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai. Photo: Lance Brewer

Queer painters, perhaps because they understand better than most that body parts aren't always reliable indications of identity, are creating some of the most original images of breasts, ones that topple assumptions and rigid categories. The New York-based Iranian artist Maryam Hoseini, 34, depicts breasts without necessarily depicting women. Some of the headless figures in her paintings — bodies composed of flat, interlocking shapes inhabiting science fiction landscapes and fragmented rooms rendered in vivid shades of violet, teal and acidic blue — have three or more. Others have needle-sharp nipples or geometric voids instead. "For me, breasts are a place of transformation," says Hoseini, whose desire to imagine alternative, futuristic worlds in art reflects, among other things, her experiences with restrictive laws dictating gender expression and sexuality in Iran. "I use them in a way to subvert this power structure, as a place to empower my figures."

Christina Quarles, whose work “They’ll Cut Us Down Again” (2020) is pictured here, observes that factors beyond sex and gender, including age and weight, can determine the presence or absence of breasts. © Christina Quarles. Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen

The 38-year-old Los Angeles-based painter Christina Quarles, whose riotously unpredictable figures embrace, merge and collide in kaleidoscopic environments of gestural shapes and patterns, is always amused when critics call her characters women just because they have what look like breasts. “Sometimes, gender is the last thing in the world that’s indicated by a breast,” says the artist, who regularly attends life drawing classes and references a range of different models with each figure she paints. A woman whose fair skin belies her multiracial heritage, Quarles is acutely aware that physical features can be misleading. “Boobs are an interesting marker of gender because they interact with age and weight so much,” she says. “I think, regardless of your gender identity, it’s a part of your body that does shift over time.” Her figures have breasts that dangle low, point skyward or sink into what might be rolls of flesh or stacks of ribs.

When Quarles was pursuing her M.F.A. at Yale University, a teacher once told her, “The boobs in your paintings are like the eyes: the windows to the soul.” She remembers thinking this “was kind

of a weird thing to say," but that it "may be true in some ways." Depictions of breasts — objects of both obsessive fascination and strict social control — have long provided insight into the mores and politics of their time. But in the work of these painters, breasts also communicate something more personal; not simply metaphors for larger ideas, they give form to individual experiences. They are weird, unruly and sometimes playful. If this work conjures something universal, it's the constant flux of flesh — the bizarre phenomenon of being in a body that is changing by the second.