

Does the way male body hair was painted in Sylvia Sleigh's painting "The Turkish Bath" (1973) have any significance for the way the male nude has been painted since the creation of her work?

(1999 words)



Image 1: "The Turkish Bath" by Sylvia Sleigh (1973)

Image Source <https://arts.uchicago.edu/blogs/smart/sylvia-sleigh-lawrence-alloway-and-turkish-bath>

My relationship to the identities that I perform as a gay brown man are core to my current painting practice and I used the Parallel Project part of this course to paint my developing thoughts about the male nude and how it relates to ideas of masculinity.

As part of my research for the Parallel Project I found Sleigh's painting "The Turkish Bath" (1973) (Image 1) and was struck by the 'queerness' ("strange, unusual, or not expected" (Cambridge Dictionary)) of the image. The men are depicted with a

gentleness and vulnerability that is very different from what I am used to seeing in depictions of the male nude outside of queer art.

One of the most striking features of the painting for me is the depiction of male body hair and I decided to explore the meaning of the male body hair in this painting and to use male body hair as a proxy to consider the way that masculinity has been, and is still being, 'performed' in paintings of the male nude.

For this essay I have limited my enquiry to the visual representation of the male nude in European and North American art only.



Image 2: Self-portrait (2019)

In 2019, as part of the first part of my Practice in Painting course, I attempted a self-portrait which exposed my bare chest (Image 2). At the time I felt some anxiety about showing the skin below my neck and adding the chest hair felt like I was transgressing an invisible line of what should and should not be shown. Overall, I felt the portrait successfully showed an aspect of my masculinity but despite seeing many paintings

of the male nude since I made this work, there have been very few that include body hair.

“The Turkish Bath” by Sleigh was painted in 1973 and the men are people with a connection to Sleigh. Her husband is the man reclining in the front of the painting and his posture and his gaze is intimate and open. The title of the work references the work of Ingres whose work is an imagined view into a Turkish bath full of nude female bathers.

The gaze in art can be defined as “why we look, how we interpret what we see, and the power assumed by the viewer” (DeCrescente, 2013, p. 10). Sleigh’s work “casts a female gaze onto the male body” (Kain, 2015) and the title, in referring to Ingres, is making us aware of this switch to a female gaze looking at male bodies.

All the men have evidence of body hair, some obviously shaped or trimmed, and the pattern of body hair helps convey a sense of personality or individuality. In the 2000s the term “manscaping” was coined (Miller, 2018, p. 641). It has been theorised that in Ancient Greece, body hair not managed “against contemporary customs” suggested “something dirty and polluting that interrupts social order”. Hairlessness also “indicated something specifically feminine which must therefore be avoided” (Miller, 2019, p. 646) and therefore both extremes can be considered to be ‘bad’.

In Sleigh’s work, the body hair gives us an indication that they are aware that their nakedness will be seen by others. They are likely to have sculpted their hair in keeping with the fashion and trends of body hair of the time. In this way the paintings need to be considered as works of its time, and if Sleigh had been painting a similar painting now, perhaps all the men would indeed be hairless.

It has been argued that the “Western canon of art reinforces patriarchal standards of culture by defining what is acceptable, knowable and visible as art” and that Sleigh’s work “confronts the cultural definitions of gender” (DeCrescente, 2013, p. 3). Whilst I

agree with this point, I think that the work is also constrained by ideas of the gender binary and that this constraint is evident in the way the scene has been composed.

The men look slightly strange in their relation to each other. They appear to be unaware of each other's bodies and instead direct their gaze to the artist or away from each other only. The two men in the centre of the image have a thin line of light separating their arms but look like they could be in different paintings despite sitting so close to each other. Although the painting shows a vulnerability in the men, their vulnerability appears to be in relation to their relationship to Sleigh's eyes and not in relation to each other.

There is an idea that historically male artists may "fear implied homosexual overtones" (page 26, McCarthy, 1992) and hence avoid making work that suggests intimacy between them and other men. In theory, this anxiety could also explain the reluctance of galleries displaying more work that celebrates the female gaze or the gaze of men who are attracted to men.

In an article called "These Gay Figure Artists Are Reimagining the Male Gaze" (Sargent, 2018) Sargent discusses the contradiction of the male nude being "one of the oldest artistic fixations" which when it becomes erotic only "occupies a liminal space in art".

Looking at the range of artists listed by the article, it could be argued that many of them are not actually reimagining the male gaze, but by depicting the bodies of heavily muscled, largely smooth bodied men, they are simply reinterpreting the concept of the ideal male body that has been echoing through Western art since antiquity. A hypermasculine ideal which celebrates an idea of strength or power as demonstrated by large muscles and an absence of body fat.

The artist Louis Fratino is listed in this article as an artist who wants to challenge the hypersexualised depictions of other gay figure artists by "drawing vivid, cartoonlike nudes of himself and his partner... sharing private intimate moments" (Sargent, 2018).

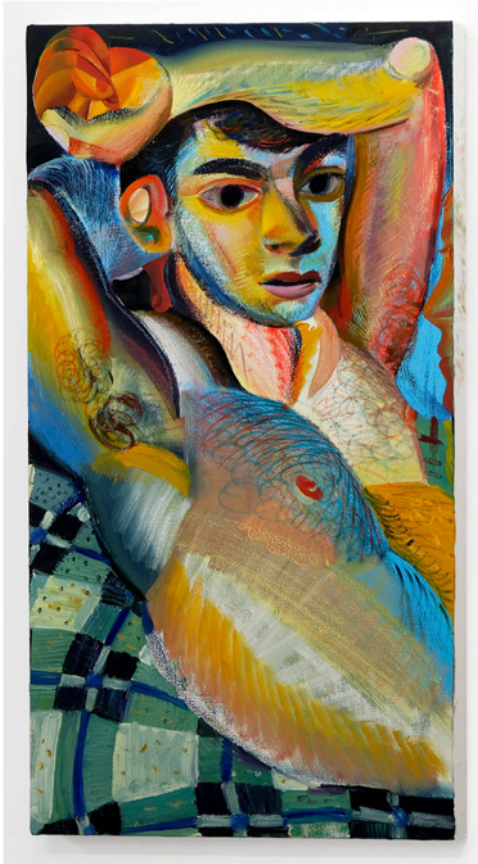


Image 3: "Two figures" (2018)

Image Source: <https://www.sikkemajenkinsco.com/louis-fratino>

His work "Two figures" (2018) (Image 3) uses dynamic marks, colours and pattern which refer to primitivism and cubism but challenge the viewer through the direct sexuality of the pose, title and obscured view of the face entering the frame from the right.

Again, I would argue that what may look radical in this image is mitigated by the slim and muscular nature of the body shown here and to meaningfully deviate from classical ideals of the masculine body, more unusual bodies need to be considered.



Image 4: "Torso" (2011)

Image Source: https://whitecube.com/artists/artist/ellen_altfest/

The work of Ellen Altfest adds an interesting dimension to this discussion. Altfest has made a series of hyperreal paintings depicting aspects of the normal male body. In her work "Torso" (2011) (image 4) Altfest has carefully and accurately recreated the torso of an 'average' and not 'ideal' man. We know this is a man by the distribution of the hair and the shape of the chest and although this image may look 'sexual' by virtue of its nakedness, it describes a reality of being a man much more accurately than the men in "The Turkish Bath" does for me.

On her website she states that she wants to "...to upend the traditional hierarchy of painting by making the subject secondary to the composition that would support it' (White Cube). There is something dehumanising about choosing not to paint the face, but in this dehumanising of an individual she allows our humanity to interact with what we are seeing and crucially to relate to what we are seeing in a more personal way. We must reconstruct the remainder of the image by imagining what we might if we were able to zoom out of the painting.



Image 5: "Reclining Nude" (2006)

Image Source: https://whitecube.com/artists/artist/ellen_altfest/

In her earlier work "Reclining Nude" (2006) (Image 5) there are echoes Sleigh's "The Turkish Bath". It is a candid but sensitive depiction of male nudity that directs the viewer to the skin, hair, sexuality and most interestingly the interior world (through the closed eyes) of the man in the painting. There is an idea that manscaping is about a "fear of the wilderness" (Miller, 2018, p. 647) in us and for me the body hair in this painting does suggest a kind of wildness which is absent in hairless depictions of the male nude.

Conclusions

When I started my enquiry into this topic, I expected to find a range of artwork that depicted the male nude with normal distributions of body hair. I have been surprised at the paucity of images outside of 'erotic art' made largely for gay men and am also surprised at the lack of discussion on the topic in the literature.

Ideas about male body hair have changed over time and in the 1970s a hairy physique was “emblematic of a man’s masculinity and virility” (Filiault, 2013). The fact that “The Turkish Baths” was painted during this era suggests that the body hair is simply a snapshot of the sexuality of that era.

Practice around male body hair management is complex (Filiault, 2013) but this complexity is little shown in depictions of the male nude. It has been argued that the male chest is a space “onto which ideas and ideals of masculinity can be seen to be transcribed” (Miller, 2019) and so the hairless male nude may tell us something about the way that masculinity continues to be codified by painting.

Ideas about gender are constantly shifting but although some consider masculinity to be in crisis “dominance for masculinity is always maintained” and “gender stereotypes are adhered to” (Miller, 2019). “The Turkish Baths” is important in its documentation of the female gaze of its painter but it sits as an anomaly in the depictions of the male nude that have been celebrated over the last 50 years.

The work of gay men has often drawn from ideas of mainstream masculinities, and it could be argued that much of gay erotica reaffirms rather than subverts traditional masculine tropes.

There is an idea that the body is “a cultural medium, whose changing forms and meanings reflect historical conflict and change and on which the politics of gender are inscribed with particular clarity” (Miller, 2019). One of the complicating factors in this discussion is that in general the Western canon of male nudes is a body of work where white skin dominates. For those whose heritage means that their bodies produce more hair, their hairiness can magnify their ‘otherness’ when compared to the dominant depictions that draw on this Western canon for inspiration.

My interest in uncovering ideas about masculinity are partly due to my complicated relationship to my own sense of gender. I am aware that the world usually requires me

to perform a certain kind of masculinity to streamline my movement through public spaces. If I look like a man, but wanted to 'behave like a woman', the world will become harder to navigate and the queerness of my actions could potentially make the world hostile towards me.

As I have become more comfortable with my understanding of the performative element of gender roles, I have wondered what masculinity means for heterosexual men and have been disappointed to see a lack of curiosity about this in work produced by heterosexual men. The side-lining of women and queer artists may also explain why there is a general lack of diversity in describing the nuance of gender roles more generally.

I am halfway through my Creative Arts degree and my complimentary pathway is Illustration. I want to take my exploration of masculinity as demonstrated through body hair into the next part of my course to see if I can develop a language that describes the diversity inherent in performing gender roles that also takes race, ethnicity, and heritage into consideration.

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