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A Curatorial Thesis Exploring the Representation
of Women Throughout Art History and How Women
Have Reclaimed Their Narrative.

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Fine Art

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history and how women have reclaimed their narrative.

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Abstract

This dissertation presents a feminist curatorial project exploring the representation of women throughout art history and visual culture and how women have reclaimed their narrative through self-representation. Situated in Glasgow Women's Library, the exhibition challenges patriarchal structures that continue to marginalise women artists and shape visual language through the male gaze. Drawing on feminist theory and institutional critique, the project foregrounds women's lived experiences and address's themes of identity, motherhood, and bodily autonomy. Through narrative-led curatorial strategies, the exhibition centres women's voices and artistic agency. Offering a critical intervention for sustained feminine visibility and inclusion within contemporary art discourse.

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Introduction

This curatorial dissertation forms a proportional exhibition centring the portrayal of women through visual language and the reclamation of narrative through female self-representation in painting. The project responds to the historical marginalisation of women within the art world, where visual culture has been dominated by male perspectives that frame women as passive, idealised figures. The exhibition will challenge established patriarchal structures embedded within art history, contemporary institutions, and visual representation.

The exhibition is situated at Glasgow women's library, a venue whose feminist ethos, education and empowerment provide a critically resonant context for this project. Positioning my exhibition within the space allows my works narratives to exist alongside the histories, writings and activist movements present in this library. In doing so this project critiques the systematic barriers restricting female artists and actively encourages a change to dismantle them.

Chapter One examines the gendered power dynamics that dictate our visual culture. Drawing on art history and gender theory, it explores the construction of male gaze, the institutional exclusion of women artists and the ways in which idealised roles have been imposed and reinforced through representation. This chapter informs the exhibition as a necessary intervention to deconstruct the patriarchal values shaping visual language.

Chapter Two focuses on curatorial choices and exhibition design, outlining how the selected works form a cohesive narrative. It examines the utilisation of the traditionally male-dominated white cube gallery format as a site of reclamation. The exhibition prioritises emotional resonance, story telling, and intimacy strategies for challenging visual hierarchies opposed to employing overt methods of protest.

Chapter Three reflects on the aims, influences and mythologies that shaped this curatorial practice, while also addressing the personal involvement I have as the positioning of both curator and artists in this exhibition. Additionally, chapter four explores other sources of influence or inspiration that might not have directly fed into a notable deciding element.

Chapter 1-Curatorial Thesis

This exhibition will bring together several key female artists that have explored themes of gender and power in a state of activism against a male-dominated art world. It aims to create a space and platform for women to reclaim their narratives through representation from a female gaze, juxtaposing the traditional depictions of femininity, women often seen as passive, fragile objects throughout art history. Self-expression and self-representation are key to reclaiming one's own narrative and to represent themselves as a method of empowerment. (Pollock 2003). The exhibition seeks to highlight female voices and talents as they are typically silenced by various aspects of the art world that obstruct women to keep the male artists thriving (Gorrill 2020). My artistic practice and passion are deeply informed by the gender theorists and critical texts studied throughout my time being an artist. Exhibiting in Scotland's art capital, at the Glasgow Women's Library, felt like the ideal context to underline my exhibition. The institutions manifesto closely aligns with my own (state what this is), the opportunity to present my exhibition within a space dedicated to education, empowerment, and feminist discourse, amongst the very writings that inspired my project, feels profoundly fitting.

I seek to understand and address how the relationship between societal politics and art representations are deeply interlinked, particularly in the context of gender dynamics and power, to highlight the necessity for this exhibition to take place. The gender gap stems from a time when women were not encouraged or permitted to make art, while men had the freedom to pursue any creative role (Chadwick, 1990). It is important to acknowledge how the historical imbalance began. Women's early exclusion from the art world was rooted in significant educational barriers, women were barred from attending any life drawing classes up until the 1870s (Myers, 2008), therefore meaning any depictions of the human figure before this point were all created entirely from a male perspective, reinforcing the ideologies of women as passive muses and objects for male interpretation. Reinforcing the notion that men are in the role of control and power, seen as the 'active lookers', and women just the 'looked at' (Mulvey, 1975).

Visual culture plays a crucial role in shaping how we perceive the world, it defines societal standards, constructs gender roles, and reinforces the structures of the

patriarchy. Male gaze, a term introduced by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975), examines how visual narratives are predominantly constructed from a male perspective. Gendered representation in media do not simply reflect reality; they actively shape it. They reproduce stereotypes, reinforce traditional gender hierarchies, and unconsciously sustain patriarchal power. This theory exposes how visual culture positions women as aesthetic surfaces, idealised muses, and an object of reflection for male desires, while men are granted the active power of 'the gaze' (Mulvey, 1975).

'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (Berger, 1972). This ideology that gaze holds power, once we become aware of being observed, we cease to exist as autonomous subjects and instead become objects of another's perception. Our behaviour shifts in an attempt to manipulate others perspectives (Sartre, 1943). For women, this external gaze is a persistent force. Within a patriarchal society, visual language upholds unattainable ideals of femininity and perfection. This continuous conditioning encourages women to measure their worth through male perception. Consequently, women internalise the external gaze, constantly monitoring and reshaping themselves to fit the narrative of 'the looker'. In doing so they devoid themselves of any agency as their identity becomes bound to the expectations of a world that views them rather than allows them to see.

An additional gender role that women are often pressured to conform to is motherhood. The expectation that women must fulfil their destiny through becoming mothers is an idealised cultural construct designed to restrict women's potential and prevent them from flourishing politically and educationally. The patriarchal system seeks to confine women to its expectations of the 'essential feminine' (Beauvoir, 1949). Through media and social structures, patriarchal standards have long glorified domesticity, promoting the notion that motherhood is innate and a natural fulfilment for women, that their highest value lies in nurturing and caring for men and children. Crucially, post-war media from the 1940s onwards amplified these ideals through glamourised depictions of housework, suggesting that women should aspire to only be devoted wives and mothers (Friedan, 1963). This ideology also permeated art history, where maternal figures were romanticised as symbols of purity and self-sacrifice. The Madonna figure, in particular, embodies the 'essential feminine' chastity, maternity, and passivity,

serving as a model of archaic femininity (Warner, 1976). This domestic, reproductive figure represents what women are expected to be, reducing their identity to their maternal function. Once a woman enters motherhood, her previous subjecthood of who they are is undermined by the caretaker ideal they are forced to embody (Rich, 1976).

Visual culture continues to use imagery to shape women into what men desire, a pattern that has persisted for centuries. Even today, we are still fighting to reclaim female voices with visual representations. Despite the idealisation of motherhood as a universal goal for women, there remain few authentic visual depictions of maternal experience. Society celebrates motherhood as an abstract ideal rather than addressing the lived, complex reality of maternal life and the real maternal body. Artistic and cultural depictions of pregnancy have historically been romanticised and sanitised for the comfort of the male viewer. Film scholar E. Ann Kaplan in *Motherhood and Representation* (1992) examines how mothers in mainstream media are either presented as idealised figures who conform to patriarchal ideals or a monstrous woman who threatens social order and viewed as hysterical for our entertainment. Rarely do we see an authentic, nuanced representation of motherhood, an experience that has been appropriated by men, distorted, and handed back to women in an altered form (Kaplan, 1992).

Arguably, the lack of raw, complex depictions of pregnancy and motherhood can be understood not only as a result of female marginalisation but also a deliberate erasure of a subject that disrupts the male gaze. As Mulvey (1975) argues, visual culture is structured through a male perspective in which women are positioned as objects of desire. Using this framework, it is clear the authentic maternal body resists sexualisation and disrupts the smooth, perfected figures that the male gaze depends on (Mulvey, 1975). Thus, the figure of the mother becomes a visual reinforcement of male cultural order, embodying passivity, purity, and nurture. While the reality of her agency, her labour, her body continues to be fearfully censored.

As a young female artist looking to persevere into this male dominated field, it is critical for me to address the gendered politics that shape the gender inequality we live with but also within the industry and to support the female voices working to dismantle these

archaic depictions of women. The archaic gendered stereotypes found within art history are a consequence of the lack of female control within visual language. The male gaze perpetuates the marginalization of women by limiting authentic female voices and representations from being seen. The patriarchal standards within the art world are being supported by the lack of female voices in the art world. Visual culture shapes our societal standards and beliefs, as Gorrill (2020) argues visual representations are crucial methods that both reflect and reinforce cultural values including, patriarchal beliefs. Therefore, the lack of female artists found within institutionalised spaces highlights the male dominance in shaping cultural narratives. In Nochlin's (1971) radical essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' she addresses the gendered gap within the art world stating:

'The problem dear brothers lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, but in our institution and our education.' (Nochlin, 1971).

Nochlin reframes the idea that galleries and museums reflect greatness and talent but instead that these institutions hold the power to define and determine what constitutes as greatness and historically excluding women from that definition. To combat this woman must be more visible and supported through representation and inclusion in major institutions such as the Met and Tate Modern. This systematic discrimination prevents women from reclaiming their narratives and offering authentic experiences, thereby reinforcing outdated gender ideologies (Nochlin, 1971).

The gender inequality evident in the representation of artists throughout the UK is immense and significantly contributes to the persistence of the male gaze in galleries today. In the peer-reviewed article 'Gendered Obstacles in Contemporary Art: The Art Market, Motherhood and Invisible Ecologies' by Kate McMillan and Lauren England, they reveal a staggering statistic, out of 111 commercial galleries in London in 2016 only 28% showed exhibitions where at least half the artists were women. By 2019, this number had risen slightly to 31%. This data clearly demonstrates the ongoing gender bias within powerful institutions that continue to elevate male voices while women fight for their own narrative after centuries of exclusion. Although the development is modest, it is important to recognise the progress it represents. The feminist and activist movements advocating for equality in the art world are slowly being acknowledged. This encourages

and outlines the importance, now more than ever in 2025, of continuing the noise to bridge the gender gap and create more opportunities for female artists. This ongoing imbalance highlights the need for my exhibition. It is crucial to curate a space dominated by women, without the inclusion of male artists, to showcase a purely female point of view. The exhibition allows women to reclaim and portray their own narratives. A female exhibition, curated by a female artist, in an empowering space, serves as a powerful reminder of the female journey from being seen as a silent, passive muse to being heard and valued.

"Our bodies are basically stolen from us, and my work is about trying to reclaim one's own turf, or one's own vehicle of being here, to own it and to use it to look at how we are here."
(J.A. Isaak, Kiki Smith, 1997, p. 22)

Chapter 2- Curatorial Choices

The works I have chosen for the exhibition are all important pieces created by significant female artist who are creating art in a way to challenge traditional depictions of women. They paint their subjects with agency and purpose bringing subtle levels of empowerment to a typically objectified and marginalised gender. The pieces selected are in order of how they will be displayed, a conscious decision made to help the narrative between each piece and the exhibition as a collective resonate with the viewer. The exhibition moves in almost a linear format of life in the way females experience it, the beginning is exploring themes more of purity, innocence and youth, later exploring the anger, identity and chaos we as women are often scared to share or expose, then later exploring the power we learn to feel within our bodies and through adulthood and experience the confidence that begins to grow for women as they begin to understand their sense of self. Each piece chosen is accompanied in the analysis with a activist quote from female artists to contextually underpin my curatorial choices and expanding on the themes explored through this exhibition.

Figure 1- Digital birds eye view of gallery space

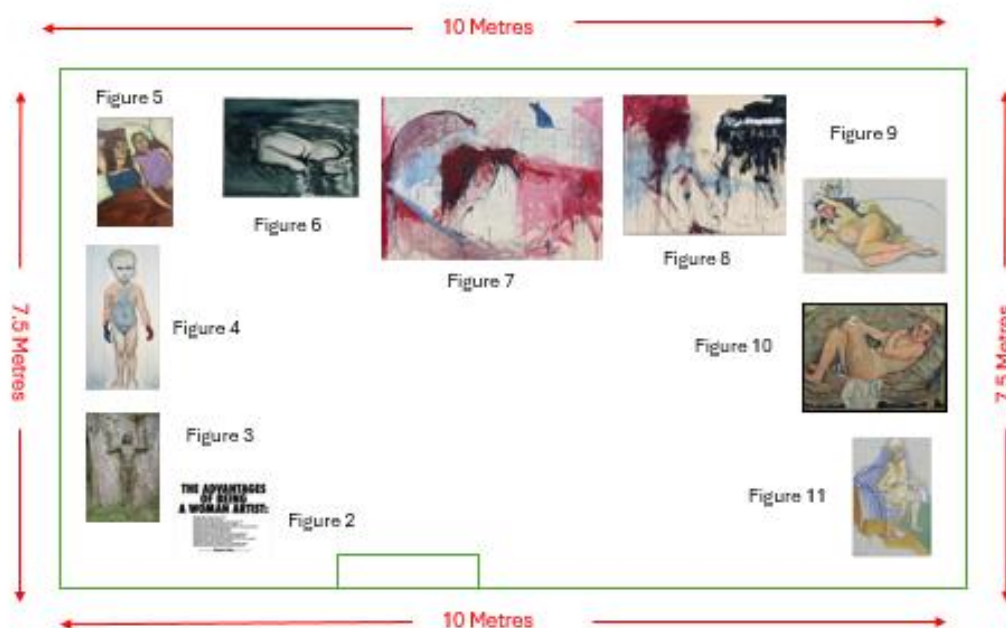




Figure 2
Guerilla Girls
'The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist' 1988
Offset Lithograph in Black on Wove Paper
43.2 x 56 cm

The Guerilla Girls 'The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist' is a humorous yet powerful poster, has a sense of informality from previously being plastered and stapled across SoHo in a state of activism. It plays with irony and satire to expose the inequalities faced by women in the art world. While its humour makes it accessible, the work carries a serious and urgent message about systemic gender bias. The poster originally began as a comparison list of the supposed 'advantages' of being a female artist oppose to those of male artists, the irony of each of these points coming off a reflection of male's advantages highlights the absurdity of the gendered structures that define artistic success. By addressing the broader cultural and political influences that shape the art world, the piece challenges the stereotype that long positioned female artists as outsiders. For me, this poster stands as one of the Guerrilla Girls' most successful works. The way it speaks directly to women, creating a sense of solidarity in a shared experience and shockingly isolates the man. Through humour and collective recognition, it builds a community of resistance and consequently becomes the perfect opening piece for my exhibition, immediately confronting the core gendered issues that contextually underpin the events message.

'There are good artists that have children. Of course there are. They are called men' (Emin, 2014)



Figure 3
Ana Mendieta
'Tree of life' 1976
Colour photograph, lifetime print
25.5 x 20.5 cm

Through themes of decay and renewal, birth and death, Mendieta places her body in direct connection with the earth, merging herself with nature as if becoming one with the tree. Her work feels ritualistic, stripping the female body back to its origins in mother nature. She aligns her womanhood with the regenerative forces of the natural world, presenting the female body as a source of life and continuity. Mendieta celebrates these life-giving forces as sites of empowerment, moving beyond modern narratives of objectification toward a spiritual and embodied form of reverence.

'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (Beauvoir, 1949)



Figure 4
Marlene Dumas
'The painter' 1994
Oil on canvas
200.7 x 99.7 cm

This painting displays a child stood bare and alone. There's a sense of vulnerability and darkness being confronted with the child in this pale, blank background. There's a juxtaposition between the innocence and playful notion of her hands being smeared with paint, yet a sense of power and agency as the child holds the viewer's gaze, reversing this typical imagery of subjects being observed passively. The contextualisation within the title 'The Painter' shows the child as an artist, depicting a creator no longer a model. It's a radical objectification of female passivity and repositioning of power as this child holds so much agency. There's a lot of psychological tension within this piece, the way it plays with the viewer confronting them with the typical biases and visual language of representing women we often see throughout paintings. There's power within the confrontation of the unease this piece causes the viewer, forces them to question why they are uncomfortable, why this subject is presented in such a different manner to what they are used to. Morally probing the viewer on what a 'nude' should be.

"Historically painting was seen as female, but the males were the painters, and the females the models. Now the female takes the main role. She paints herself. The model becomes the artist. She created herself. She is not there to please you. She pleases herself. The question is not 'Who is she', but 'Who are you?' (Dumas 2015)



Figure 5
Amelie Thomas- Richardson
Untitled 2025
Oil and Acrylic on canvas
70 x 100 cm

This artwork draws inspiration from feminist painters such as Alice Neel and Hope Gangloff, with a focus on displaying soul and character over visual perfection. The painting centres femineity in not through overt expression or external gaze but as a domestic familiar experience. The composition holds a sense of intimacy, two figures laying side by side occupying the same cherished space. Their physical proximity signals trust and familiarity, deeply rooted in companionship. This closeness represents an everyday form of intimacy that defines many young female friendships. The bed becomes a symbol for the private world of vulnerability the gently bring the viewers into. Through the lens of femininity, the figures resist idealisation. The abstraction and slightly distorted depictions reject anatomical perfection, instead symbolising freedom, and empowerment. The women are unapologetic in their forms; holding postures of self-possession, unconcerned with being observed or displayed for outward consumption. The painting can also be read as symbolic of youthful innocent within girlhood, reflecting a sense of naivety before women begin to encounter the constraints of a male dominated society. The work offers an empowering moment of softness, connection, and unguarded existence.

‘The object of art is not to reproduce reality but to create a reality of the same intensity’
(Giacometti, n.d.)



Figure 6
Marlene Dumas
Losing (Her meaning) 1988
Oil on canvas
50 x 70 cm

The paint bleeds, allowing the body to merge with the surrounding water. As the water begins to engulf the figure, she gradually loses clarity, her defining features slipping out of focus and retreating from view. The image becomes reminiscent of a loss of agency and control, reflecting how identity is shaped and constrained through the lens of the male gaze. As these idealised expectations become impossible to fulfil, the figure blurs, caught in a state of quite grief for her own identity and authority. In this moment of erasure, she attempts to hide seeking safety, now beginning to put her sole validation in the way she is perceived.

‘The Victorian woman became her ovaries, as todays woman has become her “beauty”’
(Wolf, 1990)



Figure 7
Tracey Emin
The End of Love, 2024
Acrylic on canvas
204.5 x 281.8 cm

This work presents an abstract depiction of love, loss, grief, and survival. These experiences are not romanticised, not hidden away; instead, she approaches with unflinching and unapologetic honesty. Each brush stroke carries emotional weight, forming a visual language built up from fragmentation, shifting emotions and raw expression. Visceral, impulsive marks build the scene reinforcing the instability and emotion of the moment. The bed similar to **Figure 5** and Emin's earlier work becomes a site of memory and vulnerability. Through abstraction it suggests the imprint of a body, holding both absence and presence at once, as grieving memory fills the void of the empty space.

'Hysteria has been a language for women whose voices were otherwise silenced'
(Showalter, 1985)



Figure 8
Tracey Emin
You Held my Face, 2018
Acrylic on canvas
152,1 x 183 cm

Emin foregrounds intimacy as a feminist act she is unflinching in sharing her most vulnerable, emotional moments, this emotional depth is a reclamation in itself from centuries of women's emotions being dismissed as excessive and sentimental, Emin works exclusively from her emotions, she doesn't pre plan her paintings, they are not for aesthetic ideals they are an expression of her, a repositioning of her vulnerability using it as a site of agency rather than weakness.

Her loose, unfinished lines resist technical polish. She becomes physically connected to her canvas through painting with gestural touch and movement. The absence of definition particularly in the form heightens the emotional depth, the viewer is left surrounded by a dynamic interplay of paint, shape, lines and even blurred text leaving no choice but to feel and embody Emin's emotional connection to the piece rather than simply observing a form at a surface level.

'Shame infuses women's most intimate experiences... women, distracted by what their bodies smell, feel, and look like, become unable to think about their own pleasure' (Wolf, 1990)



Figure 9
Alice Neel
'Pregnant Woman' 1971
Oil on Canvas
101.6 × 152.4 cm

This piece evokes a palpable sense of unease, challenging the traditional, idealised portrayals of pregnancy that dominate visual culture. Pregnancy is often depicting as a joyful celebration, yet Neels subject appears tense and unnerved. The distant figure of a man hovering behind her can be read as a metaphor for the overwhelming nature of the pregnancy experience. It toys with this idea of isolation and companionship. The women's exaggerated distorted form conveys physical and emotional strain. Her body appears heavy and burdened, uncomfortable and in pain. The bold colour palette heightens this impression of fatigue through her intense dark shadows, and sunken eyes. Despite the vulnerability of this piece there is an undeniable strength. The bold blue outlines lend her figure strength; her bold gaze asserts her presence through the unease surrounding her. Her direct gaze confronting the viewer, is as if she is trying to communicate her inner truth to the viewer, breaking through the trend of romanticised depictions.

In this painting, Neel offers an honest human perspective that foreground female complexities and taboos that have previously been censored. This piece was radically transgressive for its time.

'People out of false modesty, or being sissies, never showed it, but it's a basic fact of life... something the primitives did, but modern painters have shield away from because women were always done as sex objects. A pregnant woman has a claim staked out; she is not for sale.' (Neel, 2015)

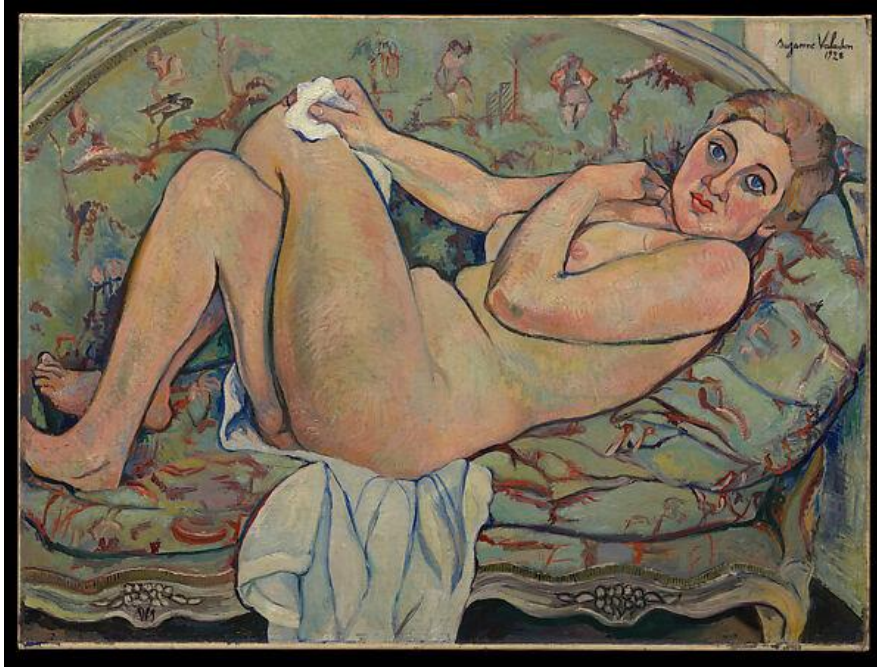


Figure 10
Suzanne Valadon
'Reclining Nude' 1928
Oil on Canvas
60 × 80.5 cm

Valadon, previously a muse has experienced the stripping of authority and identity the male gaze impacts on her, she has been in that vulnerable scene of posing for the 'looker' of the male gaze as they distort her body into an idealised form. Valadon moved through this reclaiming her power through being the first female to depict a male nude and through female emancipation she unapologetically depicts nudes through the female gaze breaking all traditional conventions with her unposed, uncensored women unapologetically locking eyes with the viewer. The paintings expressionist style is bold and direct resisting an idealist smooth bodily representation. Instead producing a radical reinterpretation of female agency.

“Never bring me a woman who seeks charm or prettiness—I will disappoint her immediately.” (Valadon, quoted in Flot, 2019)



Figure 11
Alice Neel
Self-Portrait 1980
Oil on canvas
144.8 x 109.2 cm

This work is a radical and unflinching act of representation. Neel sits nude, confronting the viewer without hesitation, emphasising her ageing body but not with shame, but with authority, agency, and value. The tension between vulnerability and unwavering strength is central to the painting. It directly challenges vanity and the long tradition of idealised female nudes throughout art history, openly mocking the male gaze as Neel holds the power through her steady, unapologetic expression.

Through her expressionist style, Neel exaggerates her form; bold line work and deep contours give her ageing body a commanding presence, challenging cultural expectations that typically equate beauty and worth with youth. Echoing themes present in one of the first pieces of the exhibition (figure 4), Neel holds a brush in her hand, reinforcing her role the maker of the image rather than a passive muse. She asserts herself as the author of the gaze, reclaiming creative and representational power.

‘All women live in sexual objectification the way fish swim in water’ (Mackinnon, 1989)

Exhibition model (scale 1:25)



Figure 12- Aerial view of Gallery – 1:25 Scale model of the Glasgow Women's Library.



Figure 13 – View of Gallery

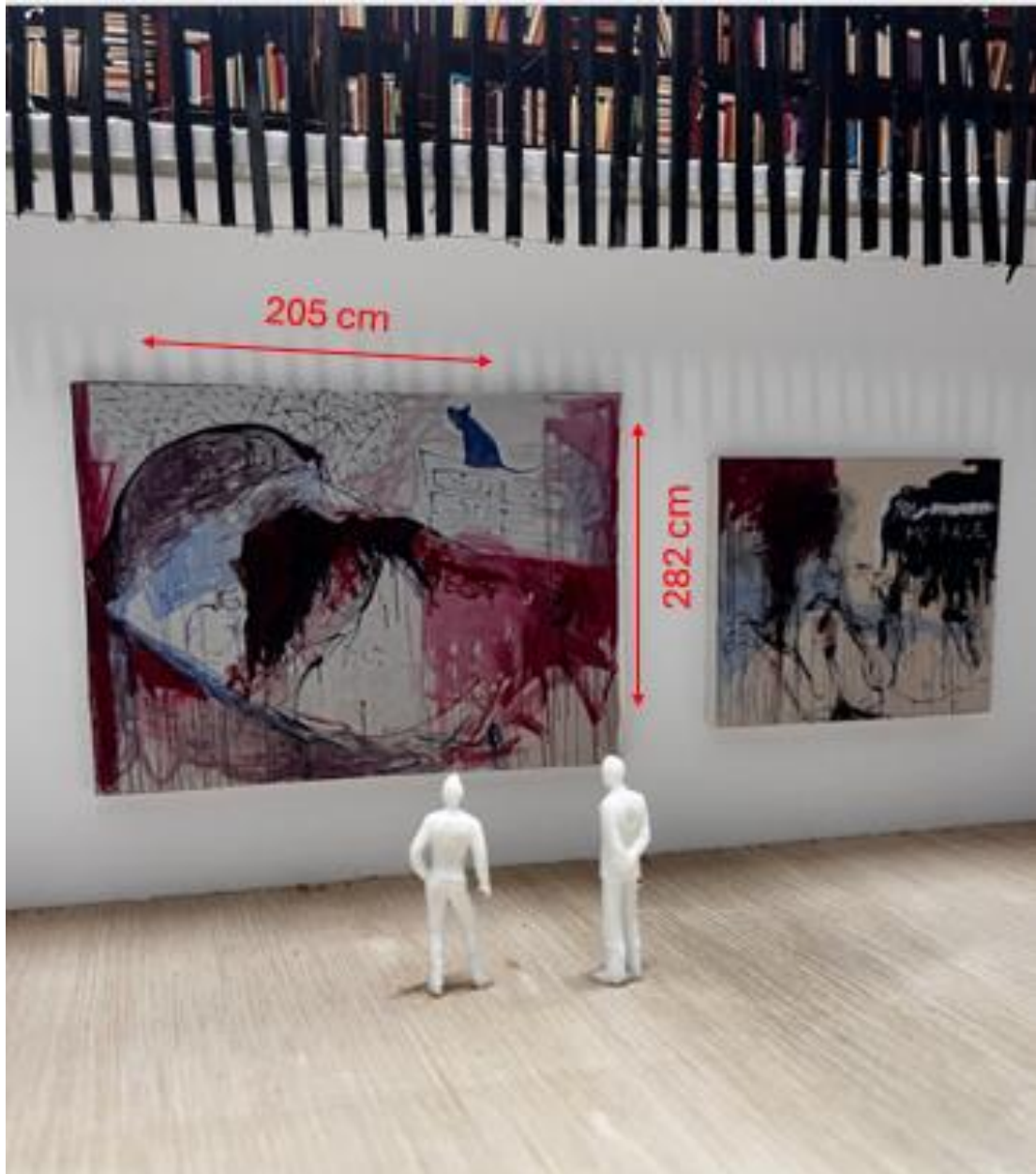


Figure 14- Close viewpoint of The End of Love, 2024 (Figure 7) and You Held my Face, 2018 (Figure 8) – Paintings to scale

The large scale of Tracey Emin's work is impactful in this gallery space, hung side by side they engulf the viewer into this visceral world of abstract feminine emotion.



Figure 15 – Close viewpoint of Tree of Life, 1976 (Figure 3), The Painter, 1994 (Figure 4) and Untitled, 2025 (Figure 5) – All paintings to scale



Figure 16 – View of Gallery

Chapter 3- Curatorial Aims and Influences.

In preparation for my exhibition, I have explored a wide range of books, essays, and previous exhibitions to inform curatorial methods and decision-making. This research has helped shape the strategic planning of my exhibition, allowing ideas to emerge from factual data, critical statistics, and the work of influential theorists. These sources have collectively helped ensure that the exhibition has the greatest possible impact and best chance of achieving success.

This exhibition is not merely an aesthetic event, it is a curatorial intervention centring women's narratives and artistic agency. The project seeks to move beyond traditional exhibition practice by not only showcasing art but actively contributing to the reshaping of discourses surrounding gender, power, and representation within the contemporary art world.

This exhibition will be situated in Glasgow, widely regarded as the art capital of Scotland. The city's recognised for its growing cultural economy, documented by several institutions and art policy reports identifying Glasgow as one of the UK's leading cultural and creative cities (Scottish Tourism Alliance, 2019). Its status is reinforced by achieving Art Fund Museum of the Year in 2023 and the launch of the city's new culture strategy in 2024 (Glasgow Life, 2024). Glasgow's role in hosting various major international festivals each year, many dedicated to contemporary art, highlights the city's sustained engagement with critical artistic dialogue and its ability to attract dynamic, socially engaged audiences. Significant institutions such as Gallery of Modern Art and Glasgow Art Prize illustrate the city's credibility and capacity to support and sustain key exhibitions.

More specifically, Glasgow Women's Library provides a uniquely resonant venue for the conceptual aims of this project. The library holds critical significant collections that provide documentation of women's histories, marginalised movements, magazines, archives, and cultural artefacts that materially expand and challenge narratives that typically dominate mainstream art institutions. (Glasgow Women's Library, n.d.). By exhibiting within this feminist library space, the paintings become embedded within a wider context of activism and feminist work. The spatial choice aligns with the

exhibitions ideological commitment to women reclaiming authority through their visual practices, ensuring the project is not isolated from broader histories but interwoven with them. Within the library, I chose to exhibit in a 'white cube' gallery space. This decision carries deliberate symbolic weight, reinforcing reclamation aim of the exhibition. Historically the white cube has been recognised as a male-dominated institutional environment (Pollock, 1988). As an elevated and prestigious form of displaying artwork, it confers value, demands attention, and signals artistic importance (O'Doherty, 1986). Its global recognisability, described by Obrist (2014) as a universal language, makes it a powerful format for maximising the exhibitions reach and legitimacy. Using this space to foreground women painters challenges the genders exclusions historically embedded within it.

Reillys *Curatorial Activism* argues that curators should strategically employ institutional spaces to correct systematic omissions in art history, including the persistent underrepresentation of women (Reilly, 2018). Subverting the traditionally male-dominated white cube space by filling it with women's narratives becomes an act of reclamation. Additionally, in the peer reviewed article 'Taking the measure of sexism: facts, figures, and fixes' Reilly highlights how the white-cube exhibition format often reinforces curatorial and institutional biases shaped by historical gender norms (Reilly, 2015) While female led exhibitions pushing against canonised exclusions are becoming more common, the lasting inclusion of female artists within permanent institutional collections remains disproportionately low (Hopkins 2022). This is because when women are attempting to face these barriers and exhibit within independent or marginalised spaces, they are frequently treated as an anomaly, thus positioned outside mainstream artistic discourse. For this reason, reclaiming institutional white cube environments is essential in resisting the segregation and undervaluation of women's work. The exhibition is not intended as an overt activist protest but as a chance for a normalised, legitimate celebration of women's artistic excellence and a sharing of their complex, uncensored stories. It aims to integrate rather than separate women artists from the core of contemporary art conversations.

Deciding the timing of the exhibition is a critical element for success; by optimising audience engagement and aligning the exhibitions political intent with wider cultural

moments can increase its reach and impact. Opening on International Women's Day would leverage symbolic significance of a global moment dedicated to gender equality. This enhances visibility, attracts media attention responsive to feminist issues and situates exhibition within a wider cultural and political dialogue. Aligning the exhibition with this internationally recognised day deepens its resonance and reinforces its commitment to elevating women's voices in the arts.

Conversely, launching during Glasgow's summer festivals presents a strategic opportunity to integrate the exhibition into established cultural crowds. The city experiences a growing number of visitors through these hosted events, with reports showing that tourist expenditure in 2024 more than doubled compared to 2022 (Walker, 2025). Exhibiting during Glasgow International, the city's Contemporary Art Festival, aligns the project with vital critical discourse and attracts audiences, critics and collectors who may otherwise overlook a conventional launch (Glasgow International, n.d.). Being part of these festival networks situates the exhibition within broader programmatic conversations surrounding contemporary art, thereby extending its visibility.

Additionally, it's important to recognise the power of a sustained exhibition. Launching on International Women Day (9th of March) and maintaining a presence throughout the summer festivals (21st of June) would combine political immediacy with sustained cultural engagement. Meaningful Institutional change cannot occur through isolated events; instead, it requires continuous public interaction and long-term strategic visibility. As Reilly (2018) notes, curatorial activism is most effective when sustained over time. Expanding the exhibition across key cultural moments increase its potential impact that ensures the project contributes actively to ongoing conversations around gender equity in the arts.

The exhibition is strategically planned to guide the viewer through the space in a linear narrative. The arrangement of work is aimed to reflect a cyclical understanding of life, inviting viewers into a space of reflection and empathy, encouraging them to engage with the complexities of the feminine experience. By immersing the viewer in a chronological journey, the exhibition allows time to be felt, enabling deeper emotional engagement with the unfolding life stories depicted. The act of storytelling operates as a

central curatorial strategy, amplifying the impact of the women artists' narratives and experiences. Through the reproduction of significant life stages, events, and memories the exhibition encourages a heightened sense of resonance, inviting the viewers to almost inherit the experiences themselves thus developing a deeper emotional understanding (Ding, 2022).

This exhibition progresses through both shared life experiences and more personal, complex aspects of femininity through symbolic imagery. It explores birth in both a literal and spiritual, as a moment of discovery and rebirth of identity, before moving through sense as well as in a spiritual form of discovery and rebirth of identity, through to the rupture of childhood naivety into the transition into womanhood. The moment of growing awareness of patriarchal and misogynistic expectations imposed on women, the way modern beauty standards begin to constraint one's autonomy. Naomi Wolf encompasses this f breaking of childhood naivety and the moment of entering womanhood and beginning to understand the patriarch and misogynistic expectation imposed on you how the modern beauty standards constrain woman's freedom the second they gain awareness of societal judgement Naomi Wolf I feel encompasses this idea of societal bondage that functions as a mechanism of restraint:

'Young women today feel vulnerable to judgment; if a harsh sentence is passed (or even suspected or projected), it is not her reputation that suffers so much as the stability of her moral universe. They did not have long to explore the sexual revolution and make it their own. Before the old chains had grown cold, while young women were still rubbing the circulation back into their ankles and taking tentative steps forward, the beauty industries levied a heavy toll on further investigations, and beauty pornography offered them designer bondage.' (Wolf, 1990)

The narrative then continues through the uncensored and intense experience of pregnancy, alongside the pressured ideals of motherhood imposed by male-dominated ideologies. Finally moving toward a sense of acceptance and empowerment, through not only maturity but through acts of resistance against years of social conditioning and silencing of woman's voices. This culminates in the act of reclamation over the body, an appreciation for the power and lived experience rather than idealisation or sexualisation. The exhibition concludes with Alice Neels 'self-portrait' (1980) (**Figure 11**) depicting the artists nude body at the age of 80, having never publishing a self-portrait throughout her career the work offers a profoundly powerful moment, a final assertion

of autonomy and empowerment, reinforcing the exhibitions overarching narrative of reclaiming the feminine body and experience on one's own terms.

Furthermore, I examined Tate modern's Civil Partnership: Exploring Queer and Feminist Curating conference, which investigates curatorial strategies from an activist standpoint and considers how relationships between curators and institutions can function when challenging exclusionary systems (Tate, 2022). It is crucial that these conversations take place within major institutions and that, once access is gained, curators continue to push critical thinking rather than conform to existing frameworks. This is particularly important given that structural inequalities are embedded within cultural institutions themselves, museums play a significant role in sustaining and reinforcing gender imbalances (Gorrill, 2022). The conference highlights the broader challenge of hosting activist exhibitions within established museums, discussing that representation alone is insufficient. Simply adding feminist artists to existing institutional structures risks reinforcing the very hierarchies such initiatives seek to dismantle. Speakers emphasised that traditional art institutions often lack practices of care, recognition, and collaboration (Tate, 2022). In response that for activist curating to succeed there needs to be proposed policies of care that prioritise long term relationships, shared authorship, and ethical accountability, positioning curatorial labour as a collective authority rather than dictated. This approach requires awareness that meaningful change operates on a larger scale, it cannot be achieved through a single curator's use of a temporary influence or a one-off diverse exhibition; dismantling the patriarchal structures that have been built up over centuries requires sustained institutional critique. Similarly, Gorrill (2020) argues that challenging the art canon involves a lot more than just finding female artists, it requires redefining how value, greatness and recognition have historically been shaped in the first place.

The conference confronts Tate's own institutional power and its claim of general neutrality through the repeated unresolved question '*How radical can you be from inside a major museum like Tate?*'(Tate, 2022) the question exposes the structural paradox that comes from institutional or corporate power attempting forms of activism. Claims of neutrality are inherently political, as they obscure underlying power structure, delegitimise political powers, and reduce activism to personal opinion, ultimately

silencing marginalised voices. The discussion also addresses co-optation within industries, where radical practices are stripped of agency and reframed as cultural diversity rather than political intervention. This is due to a larger force of governance and funding, which produce forms of soft censorship designed to avoid conflict with sponsors or fundings while maintaining the appearance of ideological balance. It is essential to recognise these factors; ultimately major gallery institutions control what is visible and accessible within the contemporary art world. Understanding their role in filtering political voices is key in developing strategies that can work within these systems to begin to dismantle this barrier and ensure women's narrative begin to be heard.

Chapter 4- Other sources

Throughout the development of this project there was a wide range of sources including exhibitions, articles and books that heightened my passion for the project and reinforce its importance. These sources also influenced both the technical and aesthetic aspects of the work, alongside the contributions of brilliant feminist creatives who have helped cultivated this exhibition. One source looked at gendered politics from a scope outside of contemporary art, reminding me the broader reality of gender differences embedded within all aspects of our society. Despite the focus of women's narratives within the contemporary world, at the core of this exhibition it is about addressing and breaking these restricting narratives attempting to restrain females' brilliance and instead highlight the need and necessity for the brilliant minds of female artists around us.

Global feminism (2007), curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin was highly influential both as an exhibition and a curatorial practice. Reilly and Nochlin are two of my most inspirational feminist theorists, the exhibition dedicated to contemporary feminist art deeply informed my thinking. *Global Feminism* explored diverse female narratives and explored issues of race, gender, sexuality, and cultural identity through a thematic framework that allowed perspectives to resonate across a wide range of contexts.

Through the curatorial statements in the *Global Feminism* catalogue, it becomes evident that the exhibition had an activist approach through symbolic and critical methods. The curators aimed to embrace feminine experiences through a culturally diverse lens, enabling multiple voices from diverse cultures to coexist within a shared space, even when this coexistence proved uncomfortable. The exhibition celebrated female artistic voices on a global scale. This project encourages questions about whether feminism should be understood as a shared collective movement or as each unique individual's struggle. It urges reflection on the scale of curatorial ambition and how curatorial aims can often exceed the practical realities of exhibition-making. *Global Feminism* attempts to bring together a wide range of narratives and bridge gaps within feminist discourse, its institutional limits risk flattening the complexity of the critical issues sought to address.

Despite these challenges, *Global Feminism* remains a landmark exhibition that sparked feminist curatorial discourse on a larger scale. It faced the challenges of representation within elite institutions and encouraged making these issues of activism visible within these spaces, bringing feminism into a larger political context.

With reference to this, I engaged with the exhibition critique 'Then We Think to Ourselves, What a Genderful World' by Aron Bakos and Hannah Foste. This review critiques institutional contradiction, highlighting how museums rooted in deep colonial histories attempting to tell inclusive narratives without adequately addressing its own legacies. As a result, the exhibition's aim falls flat. Similar to *Global Feminism*, the exhibition sought to globally address gender diversity, however by applying Western frameworks to non-Western contexts, it prevents gender concepts to be celebrated and understood on their own terms. This critique signifies the importance of more self-critical curatorial practice. As an artist based in the United Kingdom, I am conscious that the context in this curatorial thesis that I am critiquing is shaped by the Western art canon, historically centred around white, European cisgender male artists. Colonial power structures within art institutions have long reinforced heteronormative aesthetics. It is therefore crucial to acknowledge the gaps in representation within my proposed curatorial practice, while also reflecting on systematic barriers and complexities involved in bringing together diverse cultures narratives. Without careful consideration, exhibitions risk misrepresenting these narratives by placing them within inappropriate institutional, cultural, or contextual frameworks, ultimately creating separation opposed to unity.

For this particular curatorial exhibition, it was important to acknowledge that I am approaching the project from a Westernised perspective, primarily focused on gender-based inequalities. I cannot speak on behalf of other identities or marginalised groups whose experiences I have not lived. As such, the exhibition is grounded in my own positionality and lived experience. However, the investigation opens for potential future exploration beyond the scope of this dissertation. Further research could examine how curatorial practice might empower a range of marginalised voices without reproducing

hierarchies, instead fostering equitable dynamics in which individual narratives can co-exist and be celebrated. This is something I could be interested in developing later.

During a discussion around the theme of my dissertation I was recommended this book. They described it as a 'cult feminist classic' that I would find fascinating. *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus (1997) is refreshingly raw, honest, and confessional; a radical protest against the marginalisation of female artists and the ideals of femininity shaped by men. It is remarkable to see a woman use her own shame as creative material, to unapologetically expose her most intimate experiences thus challenging the male-dominated hierarchy that governs the creative industry. Kraus is able to dissect issues of gender imbalance with political sharpness and humour out wit. She explores power dynamics not only within relationships but also within the broader cultural and institutional systems that sustain inequality. Her writing deeply resonates with my own practice, exploring many gendered themes I often engage with. For example, the archaic notion that women exist as objects of desire, as muses for the intellectual man to observe. Kraus completely juxtaposes these patriarchal standards by writing unapologetically from within female desire, reclaiming it as a space of artistic authority rather than shame. The novel itself functions as an activist piece of artwork, she transforms emotions often ladled as negative: shame obsession, vulnerability into acts of protest against narrow ideals of femininity in art. Through her diary entries and letters, she asserts herself not as a passive muse or an artist's lover, but as an artist, a human being, and a subject all at once. There's immense power in her unflinching vulnerability, and the complexities she exposes ultimately become the source of her agency and creative.

Womenhouse (1972) by feminist Art Program led by Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro, and Carole Schneemann, was a groundbreaking and confrontational exhibition that challenged traditional views of women's roles within both domestic space and society. Using installation, performance, and soft sculpture the artists transform an abandoned Hollywood mansion into a radical feminist environment. Each room addressing distinct

aspects of female identity and lived experience, turning the house itself into a narrative structure. This approach of spatial storytelling I find deeply compelling. Developed in the 1970s Womenhouse was radical for its time in providing women with a platform for unfiltered self-expression and authentic representation of the female body.

Womenhouse was particularly pioneering at a time of no technological context, the opportunity of giving women greater agency over their own voice and representation was unlike anything else. The impact this exhibition had on feminist art and discourse continue to resonate and be developed in today's contemporary art world.

Conclusion

This dissertation examined a feminist curatorial project centres on the portrayal of women through visual language and the reclamation of female artists self representation. The exhibition formed as both a critical and practical intervention into the ongoing marginalisation of women, challenging the patriarchal visual traditions that have long positioned women as passive muses and objects for their ideologies.

Chapter One established the theoretical foundations of the exhibition. The chapter exposes how visual culture reflects and continues to sustain gendered power structures, using gender theory, aspects of the male gaze, institutional bias and idealised, outdated constructions are analysed and used to highlight the importance of a female led curatorial response.

Chapter Two reflected on the curatorial choices that shaped the exhibition, establishing a narrative structure of story telling to connect with the viewer, and encouraging deeper resonating understanding. The exhibition allowed the paintings to assert political force through intimacy, vulnerability, and agency opposed to intense complaint.

Chapter Three considered the aims influences and methodologies that structured the curatorial process. Addressing a variety of theory work to support the impact of my exhibition. Chapter Four shows a range of background sources that have otherwise impacted my thoughts or ideas throughout this process but not fed directly into a curatorial decision.

Overall, this dissertation demonstrates how sustained visibility, and institutional engagement can begin to challenge embedded gender biases and contribute meaningfully to contemporary feminist discourse within the arts. This dissertation declares visual language is not only a reflection of patriarchal standards but also can cycle into a cause, and until we begin to dismantle the male gaze the barriers segregating female voices will prevail.

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