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Seeing Through His Eyes: Reinterpreting
Religious Art to Recover Feminine Individuality
From the Male Gaze.

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Fine Art

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**Seeing Through His Eyes: Reinterpreting Religious Art to Recover Feminine
Individuality from the Male Gaze.**

*“Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on
your knees, it’s all a male fantasy”. -Margaret Atwood*

Fine Art (Hons)

By Jenny MacGregor

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
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Abstract

This dissertation explores the male gaze in religious artwork and its impacts on modern society, particularly in relation to femininity, sexuality, gender, and identity. It investigates how religious imagery influences contemporary views on woman.

Chapter one examines the depictions of The Virgin Mary, analysing both physical and emotional portrayals alongside public perceptions of women today. Comparing male and female capacity to recognise facial expressions, using Zafra's sculpture piece *Our Lady of Consolation* as a place of perspective. This chapter also looks at the origins of the male gaze, drawing from Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

Chapter two investigates themes of sexual and bodily shame within biblical texts and their representation in art, focusing on William Blake's painting *Eve Tempted by the Serpent*. This artwork symbolises the beginnings of shame and its continued feature in modern periods such as purity culture and slut shaming.

The final chapter addresses the ways in which women are reclaiming their femininity and sexuality beyond the male gaze. Highlighting how female artists create spiritual and explorative works centred on female experiences and rejecting the male centric ideals of perfection and sexuality. The creation of feminine spaces in art is essential for independence and development away from objectified patriarchal perspectives.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that the male gaze is a longstanding societal issue, embedded in both biblical and contemporary contexts. While it may be unlikely for it to disappear from society, individuals and artists are creating ways to navigate around it. Asserting their own autonomy, independence and reshaping the pre-existing ideologies of both femininity and religion. This work emphasises the importance of exploring and changing narratives around traditional ideas of holiness, purity, and strength through the lens of gender and art.

Introduction

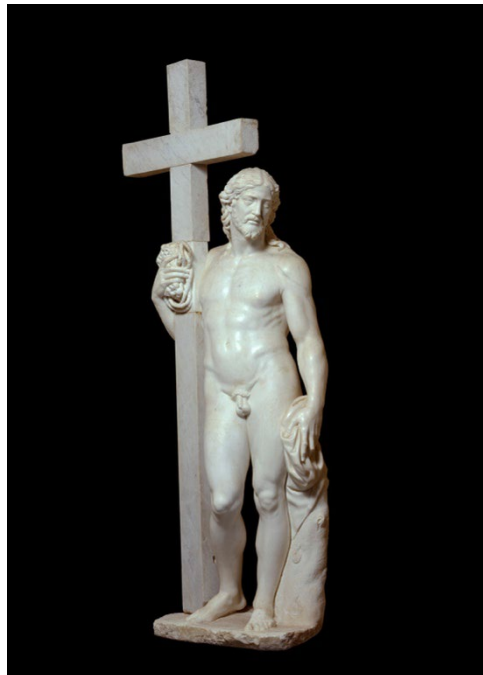
Religion is the world's unanimous language. According to more than 2,700 surveys by Pew Research Centre, as of 2020 2.3 billion people consider themselves Christians, other religions take up 5 billion of the world's population (Hackett, 2025). This study suggests that more than half of the world's population follow religious values, making atheists, or non-religious people as a whole, a minority within the world's population. Throughout history, art has always been tied to religion, and has been used a powerful visual tool to shape identity and gender roles, Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* speaks on sex and its connections to gender within the idea of what is masculine and what is feminine. Connecting societal expectations of gender presentation as a way of identifying gender from a traditional viewpoint and what is expected of each gender and trying to open up this conversation to a broader understanding of gender recognition and perception in society (Butler, 1999, pp.9–11). Ivy Helman, a Jewish scholar and professor connects Butler's writings to religion and identity in her 2015 blog post. Detailing how her own personal connections to the book and how she feels it can be viewed within a religious perspective, connecting religiosity to being another cultural performance within society. Comparing the traditional clothing for women across religions as another marker for gender and religions effects on how women will be perceived (Helman, 2015). Religion and its connection to art is hugely integrated into our society, it varies from grand frescoes within cathedrals, to portraits of religious figures displayed upon church walls. Embedded within all of these works is an underlying theme, the male gaze. The male gaze was originally theorised by Laura Mulvey in her book *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* in 1975. Mulvey created an argument that Hollywood productions are manufactured to satisfy male viewers by portraying women as sexual objects, purely there for desire and objectification (Mulvey, 1975) Voyeurism and scopophilia, the act of getting sexual pleasure from watching others, in a both sexual and non-sexual context is often mentioned when looking into the male gaze and Mulvey's text. René Estes identifies the use of these acts within the male gaze, highlighting the idea that men are active, and women are passive. The Objectification theory also stems from Mulvey's text, that places the female body into a cultural context that affects their lives and mental wellbeing. Sexual objectification happens when the female body is

dehumanised into simply being an object for sex and to be sexualised. (Estes, 2021) When researching the perception of the male gaze I read how Dr Steven Cook highlights that it is necessary to understand that men and women artists view the world from different perspectives, but that it is not limited to their gender, also their societal status, religion, race and other personal factors. Each and every artist has their own individual ideologies and understandings, which translates through their work. Particularly with religious art, interpretation is extremely individual and often personalised to how people see it. Cook writes that it is important to understand that interpretation is not just limited to societal factors, but also lived experiences within their lives, stating that there are just as many Bible analyses as there are people who have read it. (Cook, 2020) This dissertation will also research how the female figure has been a focal point in conversation for centuries, whether that is the sexualisation, critique, or celebration. Women always seem to be at the forefront of a conversation, despite the lack of control and say they have in their own bodies and themselves. Society's standards for women are damaging and uphold unrealistic ideals, and the Bible is not innocent in this conversation. If there is a woman present, there is a critique. Even when she is a saint who carries the reincarnation of God inside her, whilst simultaneously being a virgin. If Mary can be criticised and shamed for her actions, how can an average woman in modern day expect to get off easy? Even when researching non-religious text like Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*, a feminist novel discussing the way in which standards for women negatively impact their lives and wellbeing. Bordo discusses the west's culture around women and explores how women's bodies have become places of discipline, that require regulation. Bordo argues that societies obsession with women's physical image and the way that women are seen is not entirely a personal issue, but a societal one; a way of controlling and creating a commodity out of women (Bordo, 2003), which is apparent throughout several depictions and perceptions of female religious figures both in the Bible and in interpretations. The Bible's strict codes for how women should both dress and be perceived is a large part when discussing the female figures, Ephesians (5:22) states that women should submit to their husbands as they shall do to the Lord, comparing the power dynamic between a man and a woman to that of a higher divine being such as God and his followers. When talking about female figures, it is near impossible to not mention Eve, the first sinful woman written in the Bible. Within the first chapters of Genesis, Adam and Eve have committed the first sin and are now

ashamed of their nudity within The Garden of Eden. Within Genesis (3:17) the pair make their own clothing to cover up their bodies, piecing together leaves to form coverings. Genesis (3:21) states that God made the first the skin on Adam and Eve to be the clothes on their bodies, after committing sin, the makeshift clothing they created was not sufficient to hide their shame, so God fashioned them tunics. (Gandi, 2025) Modesty is a reoccurring theme when looking into how women are perceived in religious settings, the way women both present themselves physically and how they act around others truly characterises how they will be perceived. In the Old Testament, Jezebel is featured. Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab, the ruler of Israel, she interfered with the worship of the Hebrew God, Yahweh, and completely overthrew the rights of the followers, becoming extremely powerful and having prophets executed at a single request. (Salter, 2022) Jezebel's name has become synonymous to evil and sinful actions, with her name being used for World War II missiles and underwear brands. (Gaines, 2019) When looking at women within a Biblical landscape, it is important to see how they are perceived both within religious text and society. How are women perceived in religious settings? How are famous female religious figures seen within the male gaze? These are questions I want to research and answer throughout this dissertation to receive an answer to truly how powerful the male gaze in a religious environment is.

Chapter 1: Women's Speech in the Bible, the Description of Mary, and the Perception of Emotions Between Genders.

For a majority of Christians, the Bible is the words of God, speaking directly to them through the written text or grand historical sculptures such as *The Risen Christ* by Michelangelo, a detailed marble statue adorned with a large cross and a naked figure of Jesus symbolising his humanity and lack of corruption (Michelangelo, 1521), allowing people to feel the power of religion without having to just rely on the religious text.



(Fig 1.1) Michelangelo, *The Risen Christ* (1521) [Marble Sculpture] 205cm (National Gallery)

Does the speeches or religious artwork coming directly from God's teachings make all of the religious ideas and rules apart of the male gaze as God is presented as male throughout all interpretations of the Bible? Not exactly, although a majority of its text is considered a direct word of God, there are many interactions and declarations from women in the Bible. Oral literature is not seen as being as thoughtful as written literature, which are reserved for men only. The Book of Ruth speaks on the mother of kings, but she is only granted one written piece, and this is towards another woman, her mother-in-law. Ruth states, 'wherever you go, I shall go' and this is the extent the character of Ruth is speaking aloud in the

entire Old Testament book of her own name. (Keefe, 2017) Ruth is not the only women with few words within the Bible. The Virgin Mary, categorised by many as the most popular saint, has only four recorded passages throughout all Biblical texts. Mary was described as the so-called perfect woman, holy, modest, small enough to be swept off her feet but tall and strong. She was covered by clean white or blue clothing, not imposing or powerful, but light and graceful. (Antenucci, 2023) This description of a saint, is very similar to that of modern-day women in the public eye who are favoured and praised for their modesty and the obedience in their nature. *The Darling Academy*, a website dedicated to writing about faith and femininity, described Kate Middleton, the Princess of Wales and member of the British royal family, as a personification of the English rose. Whilst also being full of charm and elegance, while remaining conservative (Pettitt, 2016). These compliments and descriptors are not consistent throughout all of female royalty, those who are in the public eye face huge amounts of criticism and are expected to constantly reach almost impossible standards. For example, the retired actress turned Duchess, Meghan Markle was met with immediate scrutiny and quite a drastically different first impression than Middleton. When Markle started dating Prince Harry, a member of the British royal family. The New York Times described her as divorced, in her mid-30's, and unsure of her future before she met the prince in 2016. (Moskin, 2025) Markle had been given a description that was arguably perceived as less than ideal for royalty. Markle had already been married prior, she was an actress involved with scenes of a sexual nature, and ultimately, she was not white. Meghan Markle being mixed race and of African American descent was immediately met with comments from angry royalists who did not feel she met the criteria that they had previously seen for British royalty. Markle in a modern society and under a modern political climate was still met with critique for simply existing, so it is arguable that any woman, from a biblical era or modern period is not capable of reaching or fitting into the required and pushed standards for women, let alone speak out for their defence, as that could ultimately turn to another point of critique on the already growing list. Returning back to the topic of Mary and religion, despite these grand descriptions, Mary is not the main character within the Bible and could even be seen as just the catalyst to the story, miraculously conceiving Jesus whilst remaining holy and pure. The Virgin Mary is one of the most iconic religious symbols within the western art world. A solo image of Mary may indicate a prayer for the people, but if she is sitting on the ground this

signifies her humility and humble nature. When Mary is featured with her son, this is typically seen as a celebration for Jesus and his profound teachings. Fiercely recognisable and typically consistent in her image. (McDonald, 2025) The Madonna's facial expression is one of the most recognisable parts of her image, she is typically featured glancing down with her hands clasped together in prayer or looking up to the sky with a pleading glance in her eyes with her brows filled with anxiety and tension. Spanish artist Francisco Romero Zafra captures the agony and pleading expression within his sculptures. Zafra sculpts realistic and stylised depictions of religious figures, *Our Lady of Consolation* from 2017 captures this example of Mary in a deeply emotional way.



(Fig 1.2) Zafra, *Our Lady of Consolation* (2017) [Clay and Oil Paint] Adeje, Tenerife.

In this sculpture, Mary's face is adorned with tears whilst her hand grasps a piece of white lace fabric, seemingly to wipe her eyes. (Zafra, 2017) This way that Mary is depicted can make her appear vulnerable, which some can argue that she always has been, after all, she is a young girl thrust into the life of motherhood. Emotional recognition could be one of the most powerful, but natural responses human have. Without being able to recognise if someone face reads sad, angry, confused, or happy, we would not be able to communicate the way we do. When looking into the male gaze within art, we must look at how different genders react to different facial expressions, Darwin's 1872 book *The Expressions of Man and Animal* almost always comes into conversation as it kickstarted the research into facial expression recognition. (Darwin, 1872) In a 2005 research report by Barbara Montagne et al, it was found that men typically have worse facial recognition skills than women. The results in some areas are

inconclusive due to the nature of the research, but it was found that out of 40 women and 28 men, that the men were less accurate at reading facial expressions than their female peers. Therefore, suggesting that women are more inclined to be able to process and understand facial expressions better than men. (Montagne, 2005) How does men having worse facial expression recognition relate to the male gaze? The male gaze depicts the world and media to be from a masculine perspective, presenting women at the forefront of their sexual desires and as objects, making their view on the women around them skewed and different to how other women may be perceiving them through actions, conversations, and gestures. The male gaze being so apparent in the world is particularly worrying when we look back to the way men were processing facial expressions. If men cannot accurately read an expression on a woman's face, how can we know that an interaction between a man and a woman is entirely on the same wavelength? (Vanbuskirk, 2022) The male gaze is not a new invention or idea, it may have been researched and brought into conversation for the first time by the previously mentioned 1975 book *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey, but it has existed in society since we have begun creating art and systemic societies. Throughout this dissertation I will further explore the ways in which the male gaze is seen in religious art and environments. Looking into the purity culture within the Bible and how this is perceived by male audiences, and the reclaiming of femininity in religious art and settings, observing how artists change the narrative and take art away from a male gaze centred perspective.

Chapter 2: Purity Culture, Adam and Eve, Shame and Politics.

Purity culture refers to the morality and chastity around sexuality, modesty, and spiritual cleanliness. Within Christianity, baptisms work as a practice for spiritually cleansing body of sin, with a result of purifying and forgiving of all sins. Baptism is considered by some to not be optional, but rather a command from the Lord. (Nyarko, 2024) The Church of England describes this process as a journey to becoming a follower of Jesus, also noting that it can happen at any age for the individual wanting to be baptised. (The Church of England, 2020) Giotto di Bondone's *Baptism of the Lord* is considered one of the first large scale paintings of western baptism. It is thought to be a part of the Medieval aesthetic with its unrealistic colours and perspectives. In this painting, Jesus is shown to be nude and standing in water surrounded by angels and male figures baptising him. The angels have a feminine appearance, covered in white fabric and gentle expressions, this reflects previously to how Mary was when looking at her physical description. The man baptising him, along with the men behind him are draped in colourful fabrics, with one even tilting his head in a concentrated expression on what is happening in front of him. (Bondone, 1305)



(Fig 2.1) Bondone, *Baptism of the Lord* (1305) [Fresco, Pigments, Plaster]] 200 x 185cm
Scrovegni Chapel

This presentation of nudity is different to if a female figure, like Mary for example, were nude. The difference is how men are perceived naked, versus women. One stark difference is the female modesty that is required from society, with women being expected to cover up more than men and this is because of how it is perceived, typically through the male gaze. The naked female body is sexualised whereas the nude male body is almost seen through a comedic lens. Typically, in media, a naked man is comedic and a joke about his lack clothing, but a naked woman in media is usually used in a sexual scene with predatory labels like “barely legal”. (Baxter, 2014) What could be considered one of the most identifiable representations of female nudity in religious art is the representation of Eve, who is typically seen alongside Adam. The 1799 painting *Eve Tempted by the Serpent* by William Blake shows Eve at the centre of the painting beside Adam laying on the floor, while a large serpent or symbol of Satan is wrapping itself around her tempting her to take the apple. (Blake, 1799)



(Fig 2.2) Blake, W (1799) *Eve Tempted by the Serpent* [Tempera on Copper] est. 27.3 x 38.5 cm V&A South Kensington

Eve being portrayed as nude is not the sin she is committing however and is seen with no negative light until she takes the apple from the tree. It is only until after the sin is committed, that the nudity becomes shameful, as now sin is within the world around them. Eve and Adam suddenly becoming insecure of their bodies and craft clothing for themselves to hide this shame. Genesis 3:7 states, “*the eyes of both*

were opened, and they knew they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths". (Piper, 2008) Shame has been established, and we know that we must cover ourselves as there is sin within the world, so how does this translate to the modern world and the male gaze within it? Elisabeth Mercier wrote an article exploring the forms in which sexual shaming, noted as 'slut-shaming' within the article, forms in the lives of women and girls through interviews taken from 18 participants in Canada and France. Mercier notes that the male gaze is a key element in the daily occurrence of slut-shaming, as it creates internalised feelings of bodily shame. This research analysis also investigates that even small or passive comments also take an internalised effect on the lives of women every day. The key points that come up when looking at sexual or bodily shame is low self-esteem, discomfort, and become hyper aware of how you are presenting yourself. Mercier states that class or race can change the amount or level at which shame occurs, but ultimately no woman is exempt from the double standards of sexuality in men and women. The terms "good girl, bad girl" and "Madonna Whore" are also mentioned within the article, these are terms that are typically used by men to describe the nature or behaviour of women depending on their sexuality or purity, these names or any similar in tone can be used as a place of control for men. Narrowing women and their behaviour down to degrading name calling to shame them in their personal lives and behaviours. (Mercier, 2024) Female centred shame exists within the Bible just as much as it does in our modern society, in fact it can be argued that a lot of what can be considered shameful or impure today stems from the preachings of the Bible's contents. One crucial point in this ideology is the concept of wedlock and its relevance in society. Within the story of the Bible, Mary becomes pregnant and informs Gabriel of her news. Though Mary is a virgin and thought to be only 13-14 at this time in the scripture so how does a young girl deal with the implications of being pregnant within these circumstances? Marriage was considered to be extremely precious within this period of shame around pregnancy and wedlock. In the midst of her processing the news, Gabriel informs Mary she is holding the Messiah and after this news was broken to Mary's relatives, the news was welcomed and celebrated, which could be thought as a surprising response as this was so far out of what is considered to be acceptable of its time, but this is the son of God after all. If the response of the news was different, if it received an opposite reaction, then Mary's life would have been changed forever. Forced to a life of seclusion and secrecy, no one could know she

had a baby outside of marriage. (Edwards, 2014) The 15th century depiction of Mary pregnant with Jesus by Piero della Francesca shows Mary standing at the centre of the fresco, her hand on her hip supporting her prominent stomach and her eyes looking down to the floor. Surrounding her are two angels holding open two curtain panels that are adorned with pomegranates, a symbol of blessing and fertility. (Francesca, 1460)



(Fig 2.3) Francesca, d.P. (1460) *Madonna del Parto* [Detached Fresco, Lapis Lazuli] Monterchi, Italy

A modern depiction of religious art and pregnancy is an experimental piece by Michelle Arnold Paine, this piece shows the pregnant figure in a dimly lit room, standing in front of a mirror and looking at her heavily pregnant body. *Image Dei* is described by Paine to be a take on the image of God, and the woman looking at her reflection is an artistic metaphor for the creation of women in God's image. Using the light reflecting in the mirror as a way of symbolising the glory of God between the woman and her child. (Paine, A.M.) When I initially saw this piece, I did not think it was a rendition of a religious scene. The tones and colours within the piece are dark, shadowed, and the woman's face holds no expression. Which is a stark contrast to the depictions of Mary that feature emotion, colour and clear symbolism throughout. This modern piece holds a different feeling to the depictions of a pregnant Mary. It can be argued that it being a modern piece really plays into this, it holds entirely different imagery to

how Mary is shown, and this is not totally out of the ordinary. The modern world is different now, but in many ways it is not. The painting by Paine is a metaphorical piece, and this really becomes true in its perception. Without the description of religious metaphors and descriptions of God within the light, this painting appears sad and dark, arguably it could be a rendition of a woman contemplating her fate and the new life that is coming her way. A conversational piece on the modern political health climate and that to some people, pregnancy out of wedlock and the shame around it, really is a current and active issue that is being faced. (Monteiro, 2019).



(Fig 2.4) Paine, A.M. (2023) *Image Dei* [Oil on Canvas] 22" x 16"
USA

Religion and politics can go hand in hand when discussing the male gaze and femininity, Catholicism for example enforces traditional gender roles. Placing men at the leadership role, being seen as more suited for public political stances. While women are placed in the home, told to be the domestic caregiver role. Though it is shown that sometimes the male gaze and its placing of gender roles is less likely in Protestant European countries, as there is less of a hierarchy within its traditions, and ultimately there is more women within power and participating in politics. Maciej Górecki's study on the gender impacts on voting and political power suggests that the chances of women winning are not consistent. The study suggests that traditional religious gender expectations are variable to each election, local elections have shown a negative impacts from religiosity compared to national elections. (European University Institute, 2024). If the male gaze is relevant to politics and religion, then it is arguably

relevant in all aspects of life. Religion's power within voting, roles within the home, and even conversations within society can suggest its huge place within the world, and this is not without the control of the male gaze and its repercussions. Within this chapter, I have analysed research and discussed the ways in which the male gaze has made its way into discussions of purity, baptisms and Christian traditions, gender specific shame around nudity, sexuality and pregnancy. After the discussions on these prevalent topics, it led to the discovery of the male gaze and male centric ideas on politics, the ultimate control of opinion and control of rights within day-to-day life. The findings within this section are frightening to see how prevalent the male opinion and male idea are put first in almost any discussion, whether it is in a religious environment or not.

Chapter 3: Reclaiming Femininity and Independence from the Male Gaze

Through the course of this dissertation, we have discussed and researched the effects, feelings, and results of the male gaze and hyper masculine ideologies within art and society. Looking deep into response and reaction with how men perceive feelings and emotion and how this relates to artwork, finding and analysing religious artwork or metaphorical work and how this can be interpreted into a modern religious society, as the first point of research was how much of a large-scale idea and belief system religion truly is. In the first section of this dissertation, it was learnt that more than half of the world's population follows religious beliefs in their lives. That first point of research can truly shape how the rest of the writing can be interpreted, as religion is arguably such an overwhelmingly huge part of society, if religion's fundamental beliefs and preachings is so widespread, then it is arguable that it is truly ingrained into our society and how we respond to topics such as gender, purity culture, shame, and ultimately the male gaze. In a research report by the Pew Research Center on the gender gap within religion, it is argued that women are universally more religious than men, and that it is likely due to biological reasons including higher testosterone levels in men and genetic differences compared to women. PWC also states that the difference in religious commitment is a popular and ongoing debate between scholars, contributing to the debate, the research center took survey data and information from 6 different religious groups i.e. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and those who do not affiliate with religion. For the purpose of this dissertation and its research, I am looking mainly at the Christian data taken from this survey. The results from the study showed that Christian women are more religious than Christian men (Mitchell, 2016), which is astonishing when considering the lack of roles women actually have within the church. In a 7-1 vote between the Vatican commission, it was decided that women were not to serve as deacons and thus maintaining the all-male clergy. (McElwee, 2025) In a world that is arguably ran on the minds of men, and their ideas and power, it is important that women find spaces and ideas outside of the male gaze and its hold within society. From this point, this dissertation has solely focused on the negatives and the consequences women are facing in a world surrounded by religious ideology and male centric views. Sarah Stankorb speaks on the runaway women from the patriarchal and traditional expectations of wives that still exist within modern society. Stankorb

writes the different ways in which these women, labelled tradwives, escape this lifestyle and find independence outside of their often-religious families and marriages through online live video broadcasts and chat rooms from other women who had faced a similar fate and are sharing how they cope, or how they left. Detailing stories of different women, how they married young to promising soon-to-be pastors and had children while they themselves had not yet even reached a legal drinking age as this is what was expected and prayed for by the families. (Stankorb, 2025) Korean artist Joyce Lee paints women with a powerful and sexual nature, while maintaining a huge amount of contrasting imagery with its religious themes throughout. *Keep Calm and Get Ready to Pray* is a 2023 painting by Lee, that personally connects her to her childhood where she went to church regularly, and praying was part of her routine. This painting showcases a fictional woman as the nun, but Lee experimented with the ideas that her mind may be similar to hers. Preparing herself for spiritual tasks by enjoying a small chocolate to give herself energy, finding comfort and support in this small task. This imagery of the nun is particularly interesting when you look deeper into the details on her face and hands. This fictional nun, who has devoted her life to obedience and prayer for the Lord has small scars where she used to have visible facial piercings and a tattoo of a cross on her finger, symbolising that underneath the religious order, she really is just a woman who made her own choices for her body. The independence and freedom remain for this woman, one piercing remains in her mouth, slipping past where she speaks her prayers. (Lee, 2023)



(Fig 3.1) Lee (2023) *Keep Calm and Get Ready to Pray*. [Watercolour, acrylic paint, coloured pencils] 11.7" x 16.5" Seoul, South Korea.

Joyce Lee's painting is an example of a woman maintaining her freedom while still being in a religious environment, but an example of an artwork separate from the themes of the male gaze in religion, and rather the male gaze as an entire theory, is Heloise O'Keeffe's portrayals of the female figure. O'Keeffe strays from the male gaze, destroying the idea that the female figure must be sexualised and almost voyeuristic. Creating work that is redefining how women's bodies are perceived and creating spaces for celebration outside of the male centric ideas or standards of beauty. (O'Keeffe, H. 2024) *Pencil Study of a Seated Woman* is a 2021 piece by O'Keeffe. Taken from her love of life drawing, it celebrates the female figure, as opposed to objectifying it. This drawing is strong and powerful, and it conveys this without even having to see the female figures face. It is the opposite to the male gaze, it is a woman from the perspective of a woman, and the result of this is a celebratory piece of the female body that explores themes of intimacy and identity. (O'Keeffe, 2021)



(Fig 3.2) O'keeffe, H. (2021) *Pencil Study of a Seated Woman*. [Pencil on paper] 52 x 40.5cm
London, England.

Researching the art and artists working to reclaim their femininity and identity is extremely powerful for this subject, the control of women within society and religious spaces has arguably been proven to be an extremely relevant subject. When looking into the control and arguably rather firm grasp that the male gaze has garnered around the world, that has an overwhelmingly large religious population that was seen in the research, it is hard to not associate the two together. The text and imagery produced from the Bible and its interpretations are debatably products of the male gaze and therefore its likely there is a deep underlying misogyny within the depictions. Through the art works that have been researched, we have seen Jesus as a strong figure, who does not experience shame within his life as he is shown to be stronger than any impulses, stronger than any desires of the flesh. Whereas his mother, Mary, is famously depicted to be crying or with her eyes fixed to the sky in a desperate search of answers about her son's fate. Within the research, it was discovered how Mary is described; holy, modest, strong, and just small enough. When looking at modern media as a point of reference for how the perfect woman is described within the ever-present male gaze ideology, the descriptions are not far from what is expected today. Margaret Atwood describes the male gaze and its control of women's physical and emotional description in her book *The Robber Bride*. "*Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it.*" (Atwood, 1993) Atwood encapsulates the hold of the male gaze perfectly, describing that no matter if a woman is standing tall and strong, or submissive and small, she is ultimately a part of a male fantasy. Upon reading the description of both Mary and Atwood's take on the male fantasy, it seems the descriptions line up. Mary is strong, but she is also small and capable of being simply swept off her feet. Women continue to push the gaze and fantasies of men away through their powerful and sometimes deeply personal artwork. Artists like Heloise O'Keeffe draw women in descriptions that are often far from the detailed fantasies of men, creating a new light to shine on the female figure outside of just sexuality. An artist who deviates from the objectively classical depictions of the female figure is Loie Hollowell, who creates both digital and physical interpretations of the female body and sexuality from a spiritual light. Hollowell's work is about her body and being a person inside of a female body. Using colour palettes that create a sense of the body and anatomy, to create contemporary and abstract depictions of the self, while also straying

from the fleshy and muted tones of what may be typically expected by pushing the colours and experimenting with what is truly possible with colour. Hollowell describes the process of creating her spiritual work as giving birth to her images, even considering them to be her babies which is ultimately a rather distinctly female experience (Hollowell, 2022). *Two Centimetres Dilated*, a 2023 mixed media piece by Hollowell explores the process of childbirth and its effects on the female body in an abstract and bold way. Creating an artistic spectacle of the body and of an otherwise typically taboo subject.



(Fig 3.3) Hollowell, L. (2023) *Two Centimetres Dilated* [Oil, acrylic medium, aqua and epoxy resin on linen over panel] 45” x 52.5” x 8” The Anderson at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts,

It can be believed that within in many faith communities or spaces within the world where religious beliefs are widespread, women are beginning to take back their authority over their bodies, their sexuality and individuality. Creating artwork and spaces for conversations that celebrates their identities, in both spiritual and personal contexts. Instead of accepting or submitting to the male gaze and its consequences within religion and religious interpretations, women are redefining what it means to be a follower of religion, and what it means to be a woman in society in general. Through creating

environments that welcome and support openness, security, and confidence in their voices and bodies, women are able to create powerful individual interpretations of what it means to be both religious and to be certain in their sexual and personal identities at the same time. Destroying the separation and divide between sensuality and spirituality. It is conceivable that through these arguably hard, brave, and selfless acts of freedom, women are carving out new spaces and possibilities of conversations that can lead to real change within a male dominated religion and world. Creating spaces filled with individuality and power, while remaining unapologetically themselves through their faith and their understanding of the potential strength and freedom that can come from these acts. Producing a separation from the male gaze and its intensity within all aspects of society.

Conclusion

To conclude, this dissertation set out to research and examine how the male gaze has shaped interpretations of religious artwork and its effects on societal expectations of women today. Thorough investigation was put into how religious artwork has worked alongside the interpretations of the Bible and how this influences society's understanding of gender, sexuality, and identity. Throughout the course of investigation and research, there were several supporting imagery and biblical texts found and cited within this dissertation that can point towards the prevalence of the male gaze within this subject, the data found suggests that the male gaze does have a major part in this discussion of both religious artwork and societal expectations, and that they all go hand in hand together; influencing the modern societal recognitions of shame, sexuality, and feminism. It is strongly implied through the research that the male gaze, and the understanding of it, is not a modern concept. The male gaze is likely to be a deeply embedded part of our society, and it has been for centuries. It is understood that the term 'male gaze' was originally thought of by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 book *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema*, (Mulvey, 1975) but this is far from its conception. Throughout the research and analysis carried out on female biblical figures, particularly Mary who served as a focus and example in several areas of this dissertation, it became clear that she is consistently portrayed as an idealised woman who was celebrated for her perceived perfection, despite her youth and consequential struggles she faced throughout her life. (Antenucci, 2023) It can be noted that the male gaze centres around the perceived idea of what is good about a woman, while ignoring the real mental and physical struggles that are a result of this or are attached to this. (Edwards, 2014) Therefore, it can be identified that our modern understandings or perceptions of what is perfect about a woman, is censored to fit a male gaze standard, even without the intention of this outcome. One of the central findings of this research and analysis is that the male gaze and its expectations are not narrowed down to just what is physically represented to us, like the artwork or writing attached to the Bible, but also the influences on society from these perspectives and how it ultimately effects women. This can be established by the research and investigation into how women are generally perceived within power roles and as leaders within churches or religious spaces. (European University Institute, 2024), (McElwee, 2025) It can be argued

that women have repeatedly been positioned as objects of holiness and purity while simultaneously experiencing sexualisation, objectification, and an expectation of morality. As a consequence of this, it can be strongly debated that women are expected of higher, more controlled, and regulated standards within society due to the effects of the tireless and documented male ideology and gaze.

This dissertation's fundamental goal was to also emphasise that the male gaze's influence in perception and society with religious art as a forefront, is neither absolute nor irreversible. Through the sources analysed within the context of religious art, it has been evident that there are alternative ways of seeing and exploring art. These ways of alternatively viewing and creating art and its reflections on society include placing an emphasis on female individuality, independence, and attaching personal experiences or emotions to the work. This can be demonstrated by some of the artists referenced within this dissertation, Loie Hollowell's exploration of her body and femininity through her spiritual work, which creates a new light on the topic of physicality and sensuality within a spiritual context. (Hollowell, 2022) Through the information found during the research on the independence and connection to femininity in religious art spaces is another well-established example of creating a personal relationship to religion and how it can be established for positive reasons and an independence of feelings and perception is Joyce Lee's explorative and sensual work. The results found from Lee's work are examples of work that highlight the importance of individual perception, feminine sexuality, and independence from what is traditionally expected from religious artwork or religious themes. (Lee, 2023) Between these examples of artists and their explorative themes within their work, it can be argued that despite the societal and religious understandings of how the male gaze is a prevalent part of thinking, female artists are creating a new direction for religious and spiritual art. Forming spaces that curate independence and freedom from the male gaze, while still remaining true and faithful to their beliefs.

It has been shown that the analysis of the male gaze within religious art offers crucial insights and perspectives into the relationships between visual cultures, gender-based discussions of power, and the perceptions of the sacred and holy. The overall research and analysis reveal how religious art has historically worked as both a mirror and a tool for patriarchal control, arguably working as a key reason

for how women's possibilities are shaped in religious spaces and society. While at the same time, highlighting the possibility and potential for resistance, re-establishment, and renewal of what is already understood for woman in society, both historically and modern day. The evidence found in the investigation shows societies reevaluation of the understanding of femininity and the sacred. Ultimately, this dissertation has been a point of research and reflection on the way society looks at religious art and creating an opportunity to reflect on how we understand the divine but also a deeper understanding of femininity and each other.

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