



Peg Zeglin Brand, an artist and associate professor at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, works on *Paula Gauguin's Spirit of the Nude Posing*, a painting based on Paul Gauguin's *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (1892) that appears in Brand's ongoing *Picture Yourself Here* exhibit.

Re-visioning beauty

by Susan Moke

Now more than ever, beauty surrounds us. We are connected to global media via hand-held devices, 24/7, inundating us with images of compelling environments, faces, and bodies that alternately inspire, transport, sadden, and seduce.

Philosophers have long been in the business of defining beauty and the emotions it provokes. Plato believed in a universal form of beauty that was ideal and unchanging. Aristotle considered beauty—along with truth, goodness, and unity—one of the four eternal verities that should govern human behavior. Thomas Aquinas saw beauty in the manifestation of real-world objects characterized by perfection, proportion, and clarity, qualities that summon serenity and calm desire. Immanuel Kant acknowledged the pleasure that fine art imparts and separated its beauty from moral goodness.

Peg Zeglin Brand is an associate professor in the Department of Philosophy at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (and wife of the recently deceased Myles Brand, IU's 16th president). As a working artist, Brand is concerned with creating beauty. As a philosopher, she works to forge new definitions of beauty. As a feminist, she focuses on representations of the body—especially the female body—and their political implications. In each and all of these roles, she sees no easy answers to

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the question, “What does beauty mean in the 21st century?”

Prompted perhaps by our increasingly pervasive media culture, a greater number of scholars, artists, and art critics are engaging this question more vigorously than ever before. A decade ago, when she edited a collection of essays titled *Beauty Matters* (Indiana University Press, 2000), Brand found only two main texts to cite in her introduction: *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* by Dave Hickey (1993) and *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics* by Bill Beckley and David Shapiro (1998). In her introduction to a second volume, *Beauty Revisited* (forthcoming from IU Press), Brand lists an explosion of publications on the topic, including Umberto Eco's *History of Beauty* (2004) and Linda Nochlin's *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye* (2006). The *Beauty Revisited* collection, which is international in scope, includes 20 essays focusing on revising the concept of beauty, on standards of beauty, on the female body in performance, and on the impact of the state on representations of women.

SUBJECT AND SUBJECTIVITY

Brand observes that the history of art has been the history

of white, European, upper- and middle-class art, produced primarily by male artists. In *Beauty Matters*, she quotes the Guerrilla Girls—a feminist activist group—who pose the question, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Metropolitan Museum?”

In 1989, the Guerilla Girls compared the number of nude males to nude females in the artworks on display at the Met. They determined that while fewer than 5 percent of the artists in the museum's Modern Art section were women, 85 percent of the nudes depicted were female.

Has the situation improved? Brand believes it has. She attributes part of this improvement to the international context in which women artists now live and work. Social networks enable artists to gain audiences. Brand points out that “contemporary art is ... intimately tied to—and expressive of—the world outside the narrow confines of the mainstream ‘art world’ of high-profit New York and London galleries, museums, and auction houses. Political art is being made by numerous but lesser known artists who are often involved in local and international issues, and not surprisingly, in artistic and political activism.”

BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE PAST

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complex and nuanced aesthetic that is equal to our current era. The first is to employ what can be salvaged from traditional definitions of beauty, even though Western culture enshrines the bloom of youth with perfection, whiteness, and femininity. The second is to focus on inclusivity and interdisciplinarity. Brand believes philosophers have not fully acknowledged art historians and cultural critics who find issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality vital to contemporary discussions of beauty. Such political and ethical issues undercut simplistic assumptions about the nature and impact of aesthetic pleasure.

Two recurrent themes, both rooted in 18th-century aesthetic theory, run through Brand's work. First is the concept of disinterestedness, the requirement that the producer of fine art and its viewer distance themselves from the object under view, even if that object is, say, a flawless female body. The second concept Brand and other feminists incorporate into their work is the condition that artistic representations of beauty must move the viewer by inspiring pleasure and other uplifting emotions.

Feminist philosophers, whom Brand is careful to note are still very much in the minority, have pointed out that where depictions of the female body are concerned, the pleasure incited is

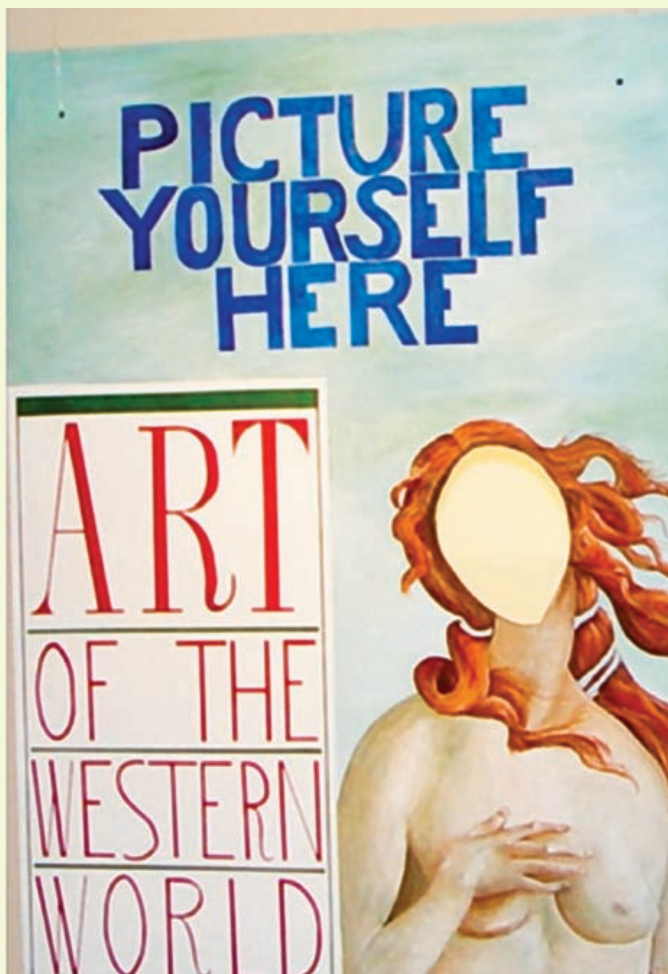


Photo by Peg Zeglin Brand

Picture Yourself Here

Peg Brand's ongoing project *Picture Yourself Here* consists of a series of visual parodies of famous paintings by artists such as Willem de Kooning, Sandro Botticelli, and Paul Gauguin — artists routinely revered as “masters” whose depictions of women have been critiqued as exploited objects of “the male gaze.” Brand's large-scale interactive works invite viewers to imagine how it feels to be a “sitter” or model for the artists by posing in the paintings.

[LEFT AND ABOVE] *Picture Yourself Here: Sandra Botticelli's Venus Surfing (On a Seashell)*, oil on foam board, 36" x 47" x 1", 2005, based on Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, after 1482

[RIGHT] *Paula Gauguin's Spirit of the Nude Posing*, oil on foam board, 60" x 84" x 1", 2006, based on Paul Gauguin's *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892

exploitative male pleasure, which contradicts claims of disinterestedness. In her earlier essay collection, Brand writes “men have a long-established tradition of appreciating beauty in nature, art, and women that is chronicled in the histories of art, philosophy, and literature. More recently, however, such men have been accused of enjoying much too heartily the privileged ‘male gaze,’ a look, some feminists claim, that objectifies, belittles, and silences the women on display.”

In the 1970s, film theorist Laura Mulvey introduced a theory positing that “the male gaze” reflects a dominance of male over female, clothed over naked, active artist over passive subject. This concept of the “scopophilic gaze”— a psychiatric term that refers to sexual pleasure obtained by looking at nude bodies and erotic photographs—became a staple of feminist analyses. In recent decades, however, the concept has been challenged in light of the abundance of both female and male body images in popular culture, the growing research on perception by cognitive scientists, and the development of competing theories of feminine pleasure.

Consider Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863), which depicts a reclining nude wearing small articles of clothing—a bracelet, an orchid in her hair, a ribbon around her neck—that make her seem more naked. Manet's model—the painter Victoria Meurent—stares back at the viewer, which was considered scandalous in the 1860s, suggesting that she has been given some agency by the painter. Brand hesitates to agree.

In fact, Manet's *Olympia* is one of the paintings Brand calls into question in her ongoing project “Picture Yourself Here.”

(The exhibit recently appeared at the Cultural Arts Gallery in the new IUPUI Campus Center.) The exhibit consists of large parodies of famous paintings that feature women, with the faces cut out. Exhibit visitors are invited to place their own faces in the paintings. Intended as a feminist (and humorous) challenge to the traditional canon of the “masters,” Brand says the project invites viewers “to imagine how it feels to be a ‘sitter’” for one of the male artist masterpieces.

As Simone de Beauvoir observed in *The Second Sex* (1949) and more recent writers such as Naomi Wolf have pointed out, women have been complicit in their own oppression by participating in the “beauty myth,” which further complicates the challenge for women artists who seek to create beauty and represent the female form as an empowering act. Feminist artists have a history of using their bodies to undermine stereotypes about the role of beauty in providing artistic pleasure.

Photographs included in the 2007 “Global Feminisms” exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum provide a case in point. The exhibit, which included works by 90 artists from nearly 50 countries, exemplified the various ways feminism has evolved across the globe. In a series of images titled “Static Drift,” Kenyan artist Ingrid Mwangi represents world regions on her own bare torso to document her dislocation from Kenya to Germany, which is her mother's homeland. Announcing her immigrant status and the need to renegotiate her identity, she uses her body and variations in her skin color to portray both the nation she has left and the one she has adopted, while simultaneously commenting on the fact that belonging is a vis-



Photo by Peg Zeglin Brand

ceral experience. Noting that this subject/artist's body is not on view for the pleasure of the male viewer, Brand sees Mwangi's work as embodying feminist identity and artistic agency. For her, the difference between Meurent as *Olympia* and Mwangi's self-portrait "hinges on the attribution of agency."

TOWARD A NEW FEMINIST AESTHETIC

Yet basic questions remain about our preconceived notions of art and beauty. Brand writes that in our transnational media culture, "ingrained images of Twin Towers and the tortures at Abu Grahb have launched us into a new era of representation, artistic production, and aesthetics."

This transnational perspective certainly has an impact on depictions of the female body. A photograph in the *New York Times* on July 12, 2008, shows a veiled Iraqi woman standing against a clear blue sky surveying the rubble of her bombed family home. The image is hauntingly beautiful. Equally beautiful is the artistic representation in a video produced three years earlier by artist Lida Abdul that portrays an Afghan woman returning home to the whitened ruins of her former house. What happiness and pleasure can such images inspire, though both are, indeed, beautiful?

Brand asks, "How is our perception of beauty informed by our knowledge of the title, 'White House,' particularly once we know that Abdul spends the full five minutes of the video whitewashing (with a brush and a bucket of paint) the ruins under the rubric of a term ambiguous in meaning, vacillating, as it does, between the name of the residence of the U.S President

who ordered the bombing of the Taliban and the resulting white rubble that underlies the action of the artist who whitewashes, i.e., 'hides the truth about something' or 'covers up.'"

Such questions are potent and difficult to answer, but Brand is interested in pointing her readers—and the viewers of her work and that of other feminist artists—toward a more extensive, deeper understanding of beauty. While noting that "the past cannot and should not be ignored," she goes on to say that "in aesthetics and the philosophy of art, revered pronouncements on beauty by standard-bearers like Plato, Burke, Hume, and Kant inevitably serve as a backdrop to approaches one might take in assessing representations of war, abuse, the environment, cultural identity, or even fashion and popular cultural icons that saturate our visual fields."

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