

## Taking up Space - a modern reimagining of the nude portrait



When asked to imagine what a nude portrait might look like, the mind will likely conjure images of young and idealised women in staged hyper-sexual poses. This ideal has been solidified throughout history through widespread fetishisation of the female nude, which artists Melanie Potter and Jude Smith have sought to rectify in their collaborative 'Taking Up Space' exhibition. As a result of the narrow gallery space, the audience being in such proximity to the array of multimedia portraits confronts the audience directly with the nudes. Thus the artworks and exhibition space collaborate to command focus on the nakedness of the male and female figures, inviting thought into how the two women utilise nudes to explore gender and the power of the male gaze in art.

Smith's multimedia works direct focus away from female nudes through an exploration of historical male nude portraits that she considers overtly sexual in juxtaposition to how they have been viewed throughout history. In her own words, Smith redirects the audience's "gaze on overlooked male nudes in history," and recontextualizes these classic nudes as an object of female desire. Her screenprints and mixed media paintings expose the overlooked eroticism of male nudes portrayed in Western classical paintings of note, as can be seen through her reimaginings of figures reminiscent of El Greco and Michelangelo.



The glaringly obvious eroticism of historical male nudes that have been overlooked throughout history is brought to further attention by Smith's bold and confrontational colour palette. Such choices and repetition of multiple prints seem to bring forth the classical male figures into the modern hyper-sexual and commercialised world of media we find ourselves in today. In doing so, Smith invites audiences to view these male nudes as objects of sexual desire in comparison to how they have been historically viewed, directly opposing how female nudes are almost immediately seen as such.

Delicate graphite drawings exhibited by Melanie Potter, however, contrast the rich colours utilised by Smith and instead celebrate the intricate beauty of the modern female nude. It is evident upon first viewing Potter's works that she is deeply compassionate towards her female muses, indicated by the time and effort each drawing would have taken. The nudes are not glorified, sexualised or tailored to the male gaze in any way. Potter empowers her female subjects by displaying their real bodies with their humanity that historical nudes of women omitted in favour of fetishisation. The fragility of the nudes also brings to mind the unrecognised and silent contributions women have made to the art world.

Potter further dismantles the fetishisation of historical female nudes through the depiction of body types that are vastly underrepresented in art. Perhaps the most striking piece exhibited, a large-scale drawing of a plus-sized woman gripping and manipulating her stomach, overwhelms the onlooker in terms of its scale. It examines what it means to indeed take up space within a gallery as a plus-sized woman, where such bodies have historically been absent from within art. Such an immense amount of detail confronts and overwhelms the viewer with a perspective into the real bodies of women who aren't posed for the pleasure of the audience.

Exhibitions like these are of vital importance for changing narratives surrounding controversial issues within the contemporary art world. Smith and Potter's approach to such a topic of great debate has effectively suggested new ways of thought and perspectives on the representation of male and female nudes in classical and contemporary art. The ongoing dialogue between the female artists investigates the difference between how both of these genders' nudes are viewed and engages the audience as well. Audiences would no doubt leave the exhibition with a newfound perspective on how male figures have been an exception in the over-sexualisation of the nude in art.