Sarah Hardacre

Words by TOVA BACH

Feminist movements have reshaped society since the ’60s and ’70s, carrying bold, utopian promises of gender liberation. Yet, as Sarah Hardacre reminds us, the work is far from finished. From her studio in a former cotton mill in Mossley, just outside Manchester, she reclaims the female body from male objectification, sourcing imagery from what she deliberately calls “gentlemen’s magazines” of the era. Collage and screen printing become her political tools. By setting these intimate, unapologetic figures against the stark weight of brutalist architecture, she creates a striking tension between softness and hardness, intimacy and scale. The result is a visual language that not only subverts the male gaze but also exposes the double standards that still surround female nudity.

Photographer RYOHEI HASHIMOTO
Fashion Editor KIAN KIASALEH
Photography Assistant TAKEHIRO YASUMOTO

Jacket ACNE STUDIOS
Pants DENZIL PATRICK
Shoes SIMONE ROCHA
Earrings HUISHAN ZHANG
Necklace *Talent’s own*

TOVA BACH. Your practice centers around collage and screen printing — two tactile, layered techniques with deep roots in both political art and pop culture. What originally drew you to these mediums, and how have they evolved within your hands over time? Is there something about the act of cutting, layering, and reassembling that resonates with your way of seeing the world?

SARAH HARDACRE. After I graduated from university, I started working with collage. I think there was just something about its completely accessible format. There's also something about the tactile nature of it for me: it's about having the physical materials, the physical papers, using a scalpel or a cutting mat, tracing, cutting things out, layering things up. My practice is still very true to what it was when I first started.

T.B. Much of your work draws on vintage erotic imagery, particularly from the 1960s and '70s, reworking visuals often taken from men's magazines. What inspired you to explore this specific archive of the female body as an artistic material? Is it about critique, reclamation, or memory — or perhaps a tension between all three?

S.H. The magazines and the images that I work with are from the same era and the same time that the architecture was being built. It's like marrying things from a similar time. The images of these women were published before digital photography and before Photoshop. Here, the bodies are natural. They almost look like the women next door. I've developed a preference for *Penthouse* magazine, founded by Bob Guccione. Its aesthetic and the way the women were presented were quite progressive, with radical female journalists writing for them.

T.B. You seem to operate at the intersection of artist, archivist, and historian. There's an almost archaeological care in how you gather, sort, and repurpose your source material. Where do you find these fragments of the past—physically, digitally, emotionally—and could you walk us through your creative process from discovery to composition?

S.H. I think that came out of investigating and starting to work with an archive at Salford Museum and the Salford Local History Library, which was the first free public library in the UK. Now I find materials everywhere. It's very physical: in the archives, in the back shops, trawling antique markets and second-hand stores like the Back Street magazine shops in Manchester. Then, throughout COVID and the lockdown, things had to go online through eBay, and I was looking specifically for magazines like *Penthouse*. The selection in my series of archives is a huge part of it. I might pick one architectural image or a few, and then it's about finding images that match. My process involves working specifically with a place and getting to know it. Then, when the two elements of the magazines and the archival photographs come together, I add an element of color, including background tones.

T.B. A striking aspect of your work is the way you place the female body in visual tension with brutalist architecture—hard concrete forms against soft, stylized femininity. What does this juxtaposition suggest for you? In what ways do these buildings stand as monuments to a world designed by and for men, and how does the reintroduction of feminine bodies disrupt or reframe those spaces?

S.H. For me, there's something very clinical and harsh about the functionality and form of modernist and brutalist architecture, which is becoming popular again today. There's also something very masculine about the phallic-like tower blocks rising out of the estates— a man-made world in the post-World War two era, when the country was being reconstructed. By placing these women into these environments, they introduce femininity and natural forms into spaces where utopian ideals were once embedded within modernist estates and structures. Subsequent political planning and neglect meant these estates quickly fell into disrepair, becoming synonymous with anti-social behaviour, criminality, and poverty. The women bring a sense of glamour back to that grit, acting as matriarchal forces and reintroducing care into places long abandoned.

T.B. Your use of pornographic imagery, particularly drawn from mid-century men's publications, brings into question the legacy of the male gaze in visual culture. What is your intention in reintroducing these images into a contemporary artistic space? Is your work attempting to subvert, recontextualize, or even reanimate these depictions in a way that challenges their original function?

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S.H. In the magazines, they are the subject of the male gaze, objectified. By removing them from those magazines and placing herself over these images, the power is given to the model. In some way, these naked or semi-naked women are brazen and unapologetic. Instead of being controlled by the space, they dominate the skyline. By doing that, I'm asking people to look at them differently— to see them as part of a broader conversation about representation, power, and desire.

T.B. In today's cultural landscape, artists like Charli XCX or Sabrina Carpenter have adopted hypersexualized aesthetics as a form of empowerment. Do you believe that the sexualisation of the body can be feminist? How do you personally understand the notion of the "female gaze" in contrast to traditional male-centric perspectives?

S.H. These images definitely reclaim the female body from the male gaze. They are unembarrassed about their nakedness. And why not? It's

Coat LOEWE
Cardigan and pants FERRAGAMO
Earrings *Stylist's own*

The Utterly Effortless Guide to Getting It, 2020.
Signed, titled and dated. Paper collage. 42.3 x 27.5cm.
Courtesy of Paul Stolper Gallery, 2025 © Sarah Hardacre

Arms Open to Welcome the Sun, 2012.
3 colour on 410 gsm Somerset. 70 x 70 cm.
Courtesy of Paul Stolper Gallery, 2025 © Sarah Hardacre

A Stunning Evocation, 2020.
Signed, titled and dated. Paper collage. 25.6 x 41.8cm.
Courtesy of Paul Stolper Gallery, 2025 © Sarah Hardacre

I Sort of Sang My Way Around the World, 2020.
Signed, titled and dated. Paper collage. 29.5 x 29.7 cm.
Courtesy of Paul Stolper Gallery, 2025 © Sarah Hardacre

“I think it’s political in the sense that collage is an immediate, accessible medium. Within all my work, it’s there to say something about social and political justice, to spark debate, to open up conversation.” (Sarah Hardacre)

just a body. It’s definitely a feminist issue:these are our bodies. I admit that I didn’t think much about the female gaze. For me, it’s primarily about recognizing that women have their own desires. We’ve never had the space to talk about what our desires might be. I desire the courage of these models.

T.B. Your work often navigates themes of sexuality, shame, and objectification, territories still fraught with taboo. What is your relationship with sexuality in your artistic practice? Are you seeking to destigmatize desire, or to unearth the contradictions in how it has historically been portrayed?

S.H. When I look back at these magazines, these images are not pornographic to me. They’re beautiful female bodies, photographed quite artistically. Now, within a couple of clicks, you have access to some of the most hardcore, graphic pornographic imagery, in which women aren’t treated particularly well, and there are certain expectations placed on their bodies. I suppose I’m saying, “Well, let’s have a discussion”, because in 2025, it’s still taboo. People still get cagey about talking about sexuality and nakedness.

T.B. You frequently return to the aesthetics of the 1960s and ’70s — a time that promised liberation but also preserved many gendered constraints. Why focus on this era in particular? What visual or ideological codes from that time still linger in contemporary culture, and why do they remain so resonant for you?

S.H. I think it’s the utopian dreams of the time — both in architecture and in sexual liberation. The country had been bombed during the war, and there was a passion and energy for building, for almost scrubbing the site clean and starting again. We were founding the NHS, the welfare state. These were left-wing socialist ideals with huge hopes for the future. But 56 years later, utopia has not been achieved. I feel like it has died in my eyes. A lot of the estates and architecture have been hugely neglected over the years. Tower blocks fell down, and they got a bad name. Things for women have progressed. We have more equality, and the gender debate has completely changed, but we still have a long way to go.

T.B. In that context, could collage itself be considered a political tool — a way of reclaiming and reworking a sexist visual culture? By literally deconstructing and reassembling these feminine figures, are you giving them back a kind of agency within the historically male-dominated narrative?

S.H. Collage has that history, going all the way back to Hannah Höch, the Dadaists, and then punk in the ’70s, when people were making zines and homemade cassette and album covers. I think it’s political in the sense that collage is an immediate, accessible medium. Within all my work, it’s there to say something about social and political justice, to spark debate, to open up conversation. It must try to change something or invite dialogue. My works are also an investigation of myself — my own sexuality and my relationship with the world, and where I sit within these environments.

T.B. Looking more broadly, who are the artists (past or present) who have influenced your practice? Are there particular women or feminist creators whose work has shaped how you approach your own themes of power, gender, and aesthetics?

S.H. That would be Peter Blake and Jane Crowther. She was hugely helpful and influential in my practice—supporting me and making certain things possible. Penny Slinger made a body of work in 1977 called *An Exorcism* — it’s a phenomenal book! Gee Vaucher is another female artist who really inspires me with her aesthetics and her political artwork for the punk band Crass. I can’t deny the influence of Linder Sterling either. Although when I first started, I actually wasn’t aware of her work. Then someone pointed out to me that there were so many similarities within our work. I was like “This is amazing work!”

T.B. Your work carries a strong retro visual identity, drawing on the graphic languages of advertising, fashion, and mid-century design. Are

Coat, blazer, tie and shoes HUISHAN ZHANG
Shirt SIMONE ROCHA
Pants TOTEME
Earrings *Stylist’s own*

Jacket, shirt and skirt SIMONE ROCHA
Shoes PUMA
Jewelry *Stylist's own*

Sublime Heat, 2012.
Signed, titled and dated. 3 colour hand pulled photo silk screen print on Somerset Tub Sized Satin 410 gsm with Swarovski Crystal detail. 70 x 100 cm.
Courtesy of Paul Stolper Gallery, 2025 © Sarah Hardacre

these commercial worlds part of your visual imagination? How do they inspire or interact with the messages in your work?

S.H. I would say the images of naked women are probably only one-eighth of the magazines, the rest are other articles. Today, you can walk down the street and see an advert for a perfume where the women are almost as naked and eroticized as in a '60s *Penthouse* photo shoot. For me, there's no real difference between that and an advert for Yves Saint Laurent's *Black Opium*. In the exhibition *Women on View* in Berlin, it was a surprise for me to see my work presented alongside images eroticizing luxury and consumerism from fashion and advertising, and their aesthetics of desire.

T.B. Beyond questions of gender, your practice feels deeply rooted in place and class. You seem to engage with the working-class heritage of Northern England, is this a background you consciously carry into your art? How does it shape the way you see and represent the world?

S.H. It has been a discovery and an investigation of my own working-class background, deeply connected to the place I was born in a town called Rawtenstall. My family comes from the north of Manchester. My grandad worked in a factory and my grandma was a shop floor union worker in Blackburn. She had a huge influence on me.

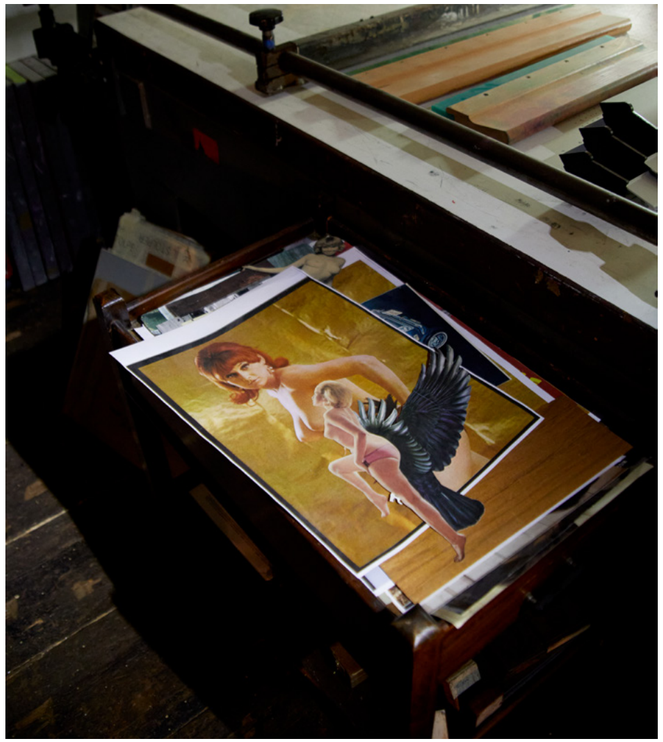
T.B. Looking ahead, what themes or directions are currently exciting you in your practice? Are there new formats, collaborations, or subjects you're beginning to explore?

S.H. Within my personal practice, I really want to start working with ceramics. It may bea way to make some of my collages three-dimensional and more like tableaux. I'd like to explore ceramics as a way of investigating the domestic world, because of the stereotype that women belong to an inner, gentle, domestic sphere.

T.B. One last question, What does "culture" mean to you today? In a time of visual overload and digital noise, what role do you think artists play in shaping, critiquing, or preserving culture?

S.H. I think culture now is about becoming smaller. People are connecting more directly within their communities—tuning out of mass media and hysteria, finding personal pockets of connection, going inside themselves, finding their own internal world — spiritual, peaceful — connecting on a smaller scale. It feels like radical kindness. Talking about culture online is huge. I had an Instagram account deleted after posting a collage. Now I have to self-censor, such as pixelating nipples. I remember having to adapt for an artist residency a couple of years ago because the person hosting it became really anxious about the content of my work and not being able to post it on social media. I found myself self-censoring as a way to kind of like please and pacify that situation. ●

“And why not? It’s just a body. It’s definitely a feminist issue: these are our bodies. I admit that I didn’t think much about the female gaze.



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Coat DIOR
Pants RAY CHU
Bag *Mini Kite* DENZILPATRICK
Ring *Stylist’s own*