

Art of the Erotic

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The most erotic part of this sumptuous new volume devoted to erotic art is probably sliding one's finger down the gossamer-thin plastic outer and into the Lucio Fontana slit that gashes the hardback front cover in two. So, what's new in this recently-published book and what differentiates it from the myriad other titles? Well, sadly, very little. It's the same formulaic stuff; old chestnuts warmed up, arranged chronologically from Greco-Roman at one end and Anish Kapoor's highly polished vulva at the other. What's new, Pussy? We have all seen the Athenian red figures and Pompeiian mosaics before; in fact we have seen many of the artists, if not their images, before. One also wonders how the editors at Phaidon made their choice. William Kentridge is not known for his erotic work, and indeed, the piece included is a barely perceptible image of a copulating couple on watermarked cotton. Opposite is Tracey Emin's embroidered picture of a girl fingering herself called *Dark Hole*. The somewhat fatuous caption reads, 'a black void suggesting that the entry to her soul lies elsewhere . . . it is about a woman trying to love herself, as well as others'. In it, Emin asks what it means to be a woman and a lone sexual entity.' Certainly, when she was made Professor of Drawing at the Royal Academy Schools in 2011, the words of Tom Lehrer came to mind. 'I gave up writing satirical verse when Henry Kissinger won the Nobel Peace Prize.'

The feminist painter Joan Semmel has certainly painted more highly-charged erotic images than the one depicted, *Touch*, but it is a large-scale voluptuous couple using natural skin tones on the bodies, while most of her others employ bright oranges, pale yellows and greens, and bright blue-greens for the figures. Another 'fleshy' painter, Jenny Saville, is represented by a bored, unengaged couple on a bed entitled *Odalisque*, with echoes of previous lovemaking on the bed behind them. Clare Hempton is known for explicit and highly-colourful close-ups of cocks and cunts, but the impressionistic strokes of *Boy with Tats, Turkey, 26 June 2013* render the image a blur of masturbatory fantasy; she gets her subjects, we are told, from chat webcam sites and paints them in a hurry while they are tossing off. There have to be dozens of paintings by John Currin that are more sexy than *The Conservatory*, not because of their explicitness, but because of their erotic

content, still featuring his hyper-real, bulbous models that could have stepped out of a Lucas Cranach painting from the sixteenth century. So this gets down to the question of what, or in this case, who, defines what is erotic. Eric Fischl is a consummate erotic artist, from his early promiscuous and voyeuristic *Bad Boy* (1981), which is featured, and *Birthday Boy* two years later, to his stunning beach paintings from the early 2000s. That is eroticism on a stick, with brass knobs on. In complete contrast, what on earth is Jackson Pollock's *Woman* from 1933 doing in this book? It is not in the slightest way erotic and is badly-painted.

The inclusion of Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* from 1974 must surely have been done as a bet. It comprises a photograph of a fully-clothed man facing a white wall with a set of instructions on pink paper pinned alongside. You're 'aving a larf., Brucey. Happily, there are some erotic gems amongst the dross, like François Boucher's *Mlle. O'Murphy*, called in this case, *Reclining Girl*, a deeply sexy life study of the underage mistress of Louis XV, lying on her front with her bottom splayed out. Titian's alluring *Venus of Urbino* is included, but not Giorgioni's *Sleeping Venus*, which is an oversight. However, both Artemesia Gentileschi's *Venus and Cupid* and Nicholas Poussin's *Jupiter and Antiope* display a seductive sense of abandonment, while Bronzino's classic *Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, is at the very epicentre of lust; the allegorical conundrums of this handsome painting the compilers of the captions have tried and failed to unravel. Rowan Pelling has written a scholarly introduction, which attempts to distinguish between what is erotic and what is just plain lustful. At sixty quid, one wonders what the reader will get from this book, other than a few glimpses of genuine beauty, like George Grosz and Fragonard, mixed in with some dull and puzzling Mughal art from Persia and elsewhere, and delicate *chunhua* depictions of love-making from China and *shunga* from Japan. Definitely not a book to be read with one hand.