

CHEIM & READ

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"The Female Gaze: Women Look at Women"

CHEIM & READ
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The publication of Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" launched innumerable theoretical discussions and artistic interrogations with its assertion that female characters in films of the 1950s and '60s exist primarily for the scopophilic enjoyment of male viewers. In particular, Mary Ann Doane's "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" posited that the reaction of female viewers to such cultural artifacts is typically either masochistic or narcissistic due to the act of self-identification. Although it seems plausible that the ensuing scholarship has exhausted the gaze as a theoretical device, this exhibition offers a comprehensive exploration of its less considered use: the way it functions between women. Given the heavily misogynist overtones implicit to the gaze posited by such discourse, the images in this survey demonstrate transformation and subversion, and each contributes to an understanding not only of the female gaze as concept but additionally of major themes in art history and feminism from the past century.

Julia Margaret Cameron's vintage photograph *May Prinsep (Head of St. John)*, 1866, for instance, might initially seem connected to Lisa Yuskavage's *Heart*, 1996–97, only in that both depict women. The first image is a portrait of a young female relative of the artist whose direct gaze meets that of the viewer while her hair flows loosely in a gesture that would have been considered suggestive at the time. The latter offers a bright pink background and a curvaceous, nude woman facing the viewer while she masturbates on her knees. Together, the works evoke a sense of continuity in the evolution of cultural attitudes toward gender and sexuality in their portrayal of sensuality without objectification. Although Yuskavage's painting doubtlessly lacks the subtlety of Cameron's earlier picture, each piece eschews the male gaze through an implicit sense of empathy with women.

—Britany Salisbury



View of "The Female Gaze: Women Look at Women," 2009. From left: Joan Semmel, *Flo-Flop*, 1971; Louise Bourgeois, *Couple*, 2004; Lisa Yuskavage, *Heart*, 1996–97; Marina Abramovic, *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, 1975.