

Naked Breasts: Reading the Breast of Canada Calendars

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ABSTRACT

In 2002 the first Breast of Canada calendar was launched amidst declarations of controversy from the mainstream press. The aesthetic images of women's breasts in the context of an educational health publication were considered too controversial. This paper looks at the goals of the calendar's producers to offer a non-commercial, non-sexual representation of women's breasts against the history of representation of women's bodies in Western culture.

RÉSUMÉ

En 2002, le premier calendrier "Breast of Canada" fut lancé au milieu des déclarations de controverses de la presse conventionnelle. Les images esthétiques de seins de femmes dans le contexte d'une publication éducative sur la santé, avait été considérée comme présentant trop de controverse. Cet article étudie aussi les objectifs du réalisateur du calendrier d'offrir une représentation non-commerciale, non-sexuelle de seins de femmes, contre l'histoire de la représentation du corps des femmes dans la société occidentale.

NAKED OR NUDE?

While John Berger certainly cannot be said to have begun the conversation about the representation of women's bodies in art, his 1971 British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television series and subsequent book *Ways of Seeing*, along with emerging feminist theories of spectatorship did popularize a number of ideas previously of concern mainly to art scholars. Included amongst these were Berger's reflections on Kenneth Clarke's distinction between nudity and nakedness in art. Clarke had challenged the apparent assumption that nudity and nakedness were more or less interchangeable terms meaning little more than the simple absence of clothing. The nude, he claimed, was actually an art form centred less on an unclothed subject than on "a way of seeing a painting achieves": the nude is thus a representational convention (Berger 1972, 53). Drawing out the significance of the ideological implications of gendered representation that were submerged in Clarke's distinction, Berger agreed with the distinction but expanded the category of inclusion. In Berger's analysis high art met popular culture over the nude, rather than naked, bodies of women whose images populate everything from the sides of buses to cinema and television screens. Nudity, Berger argued, is so much more than the revelation of flesh; it is to "have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise" (1972, 54). There is no classical idealized revelation of essential selfhood in the absence of clothing here - an idea that might and has accompanied notions of nakedness. On the contrary, Berger's counterintuitive suggestion is that in the representation of women in particular, nudity is itself a kind of adornment, a costuming: "nudity is a form of dress" (1972, 54). It is also, he was not alone in claiming, a form

of dress designed almost exclusively by and for men but worn by women. Clothed as much in the vision and fantasies of the male viewer, the nude woman is a performance in flesh of men's desires. How then, came the obvious question from feminist art critics and scholars, do we make sense of the woman viewer and the woman producer of unclothed images of women? What in particular might be the representational practices of resistance that allow some images of women to be read as naked rather than nude, that allow some images to resist the male gaze as well as patriarchal ideologies of femininity?¹

In 2002, Canadian art "entrepreneur" Sue Richards found herself inadvertently engaged with just these kinds of questions when she produced the first of the Breast of Canada calendars, which contained 12 sepia photographs of what she clearly wanted to be understood as women's "naked" breasts and bodies in various poses and contexts. Richards' awareness of the difficulties of representing women's bodies in a non-objectified, non-sexualized way for a female audience was apparent from the outset and continues to be as her team prepares for the 2006 edition of the calendar. Consider her current "call for submissions" for photographs on her website (www.breastofcanada.com).

We want to see your interpretation of female breast photography...show us what non-commercial, non-sexualized, natural breasts look like to you....We absolutely will not publish photos that are sexual in nature or tone. We are not interested in seeing commercialized depictions of women's breasts. This is a tricky business. You will learn much about our cultural conditioning by participating in this process. We

are looking for artistic, natural breast photos that are tasteful and beautiful. Breast of Canada is pioneering a new way for society to see women's breasts.

Understanding that ways of seeing are gendered in terms of the production and consumption of images of women is apparently central to Richards' project and while her invocation of notions like "the natural" could certainly bear more scrutiny, it is used here largely to counterbalance the notion of commercial, not to affirm the problematic association of women with nature.

Thus far, the photographs in each of the three editions of the calendar feature women's breasts and bodies but not their faces and they are accompanied by text relating to different aspects of breast health. Believing that in the current climate of concerns about women's health, and especially about breast cancer, women needed an empowering tool that would educate them about breast health as much as breast disease, Richards commissioned photographer Melanie Gillis to produce "artistic" but not voyeuristic images of "ordinary" women's breasts. Presumably, the absence of faces in this context is an attempt to open the text to a wide range of identifications rather than to facilitate the more historically familiar universalization and objectification of women where subjectivity and individuality are so irrelevant that one woman can stand for all. While this too is a risky project given the history of women's representation, the diversity of images and especially the diversity of body shapes, positions and ages, goes some way towards disrupting the telos of sexual objectification if not the telos of objectification *per se*. Moreover, the calendar's explicit purpose also goes some way towards disrupting any straightforward co-optation of these images by more familiar scopophilic or voyeuristic reading strategies.

The calendar is actually complexly positioned between two discourses that embrace very different approaches to representation: art and medicine. Given that Richards insists that women must be visually and physically familiar with their own breasts - "early detection [of breast cancer] requires a detailed examination of the breasts visually and physically" (Richards in Frketich 2002) - she has clearly eschewed the clinical documentary gaze, with its pretensions to neutrality, truth and objectivity. Indeed, her insistence on aesthetically pleasing, more "artistic" images in the explicit context of a health tool, functions as an important critique of representation in medical and scientific contexts.

Knowing that funding is an ongoing issue in the research into breast cancer, Richards was willing to donate a very significant forty percent of the proceeds of each calendar to one of the best known and largest breast cancer research institutes in Canada, the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation. However, when she approached the Foundation she was told that the images were too

"controversial."² In explaining what was meant by "controversial," Jay Hooper, funds development director of the Foundation, did not refer to experts in the field, nor to medical practitioners; indeed he did not even refer to the Foundation's media team. Instead, he reflected on what his mother might think should she see such images! "If I put that in front of my mother, she might find the photos controversial. She might have been offended" (Richards in Frketich 2002).

Presumably, Hooper's mother, like most of us in Western cultures, has seen hundreds, perhaps thousands of representations of women's breasts, and in any number of contexts, although most of them shaped and constrained by commercial and as such, hetero-normative, mainstream interests.³ For feminist writer of *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf, the age of mechanical reproduction has offered us quantity over diversity when it comes to mass mediated images of women. In fact, Wolf claims, diverse images of women are actually highly censored in our culture (1990, 135). What we see, relentlessly, is the same idealized masculine fantasy of sexualized, pert, round, smooth, and uncomfortably large breasts which seems best to characterize the fantasy worlds of *Playboy Magazine* and Hollywood, rather than the realities of women's bodies.

Against this cultural homogenization of images of women's bodies, Richards' aspiration was and is to create a range of representations that are precisely not this endlessly repetitive, masculine fantasy of breasts in the service of male desire. Remember, one of the key goals of this project is to pioneer a new way for society to see women's breasts. Leaving aside the question of how successful the calendar is at achieving this ambition, it is in defiance of the very kind of cultural censorship that Wolf identifies that the calendar makes its strongest feminist statement as it invites us to consider a range of images of women, which, I would argue, aspire to nakedness rather than nudity.⁴

In an important sense, Hooper's self-revealing invocation of his mother as moral authority takes us back to the question of "ways of seeing," but more explicitly than ever focuses attention on the effect of gender on spectatorship. Regardless of what his mother might see should she ever have the opportunity, through her imagined gaze, what we, the reader's of Hooper's statements "see" is the male gaze, confronted and challenged by at least some of these images. While the *Breast of Canada* calendar seems to offer the very real and apparently shocking possibility that women might actually see themselves in some of Melanie Gillis' images; perhaps, more shocking still, is the possibility that men might see their wives, mothers, lovers and sisters. To a significant extent, this calendar's challenge to idealization is what distinguishes these images from many of the images of women's breasts by which we are daily surrounded.

THE IMAGES

Now on the eve of its fourth edition, it is impossible to consider all the images in the calendars. I have selected five from the inaugural 2002 edition, which I believe illustrate some of the tensions that emerge around images informed by feminist aesthetic aspirations. These images also invite reflections on the limitations and possibilities of gendered spectatorship (see Appendix).

The March 2002 image of a woman holding an apple in front of her left breast is largely conventional. Invoking the longstanding associations of women's bodies with nature, fecundity and the exotic, this photograph seems to reference Paul Gauguin's Tahitian women holding plates of fruit.⁵ While the image itself is generally one of flawlessness, ripeness and youth, the position of the apple's core as directly parallel to, yet an inversion of, the left nipple is an intriguing and suggestive counterpoint to the image of feminine perfection that otherwise dominates this genre. To the extent that this photograph challenges Western art conventions at all, I would argue that it does so incidentally and by virtue of the overall context of the calendar, which foregrounds woman as subject rather than object.

In the spirit of feminist concerns with affirming women's control of their own bodies, the first page of the calendar announces in large, bold print, that it is "Time to take your breasts into your own hands." This affirmation of embodied female agency functions significantly to displace the more familiar voyeurism of the passive woman as object of the male gaze, at the same time as it unquestionably references women as the primary audience for these images.⁶ This calendar explicitly addresses and invites the female gaze. Furthermore, the opening statement also frames the viewing experience of the whole calendar, shaping and constraining the chain of signifiers that follow, both textual and visual. The viewer of these images, who is presumptively, although not necessarily female, is explicitly called to action rather than arousal.

While Richards is clear about wanting to displace the associations of breasts with sexual objectification, each edition of the calendar has invited a certain celebration of maternal associations. Images of breasts and babies in various contexts abound and their seemingly uncritical inclusion raises certain questions. If the calendar is indeed attempting to break with conventional ways of seeing women's bodies, why trade on one of the oldest visual conventions in Western art, and especially one - the Madonna and child - that has signified an implicit moral condemnation of women's autonomous sexual subjectivity? Given the hetero-normative associations attached to maternal imagery, this seems a risky proposition. On the other hand, I will argue later that one of the maternal images in particular does indeed challenge these very conventions, thus rendering problematic any simple ascription of normativity even to the maternal imagery.

More obviously challenging than orthodox maternal imagery, I would argue, is the photograph of the curvaceous, perhaps middle aged woman (September 2002) whose hands are gently crossed, palms up, beneath her breasts. Like the previous image, this one is also more conventional in formal terms, showing as it does an older woman, with larger, more pendulous breasts who stands passively before the viewer's gaze. Where this image breaks with traditional representations of older women is in its refusal to yield to an easy reading of ridicule or tragedy that typically attends such images. The implicit tragedy of more stereotypical images is, of course, that older women are no longer sexually desirable by men; they are past their "use by" date in a culture that commodifies women's sexuality by making sex and desirability the exclusive domain of youth.

Key to the possibility of reading this image differently, however, is the lighting. The top of the breasts are gently highlighted while the nipples are softly shadowed, but the lighting arc reaches its greatest intensity on the upraised palms beneath the breasts. The gesture of openness in the relaxed fingers and open hands, together with the more fulsome shape of the woman's torso, and indeed the fact that the image is primarily of a torso, offers the photograph a kind of sacred aura, evoking something of the goddess figurines of antiquity. While goddess images are themselves complex and potentially problematic in their affirmation primarily of women's reproductive capacities, for many contemporary feminists engaged in challenging mainstream spiritual and religious traditions, goddess imagery permits a strategic reclamation and appropriation of the feminine. Goddess discourses often affirm in women much of what has been regulated and condemned particularly in patriarchal religious traditions like Christianity: women's sexuality, autonomy and power, embodied subjectivity, and wisdom.

If the traditional representation of women as passive objects of the male gaze remains one of the primary reference points for much feminist image analysis, then the photograph of three women with paddles (June 2002) significantly breaks with those traditions both formally and ideologically. Where breasts are not only the subject but also the focal point of many of the images in the calendar, this is less the case here. Again, the lighting is significant. It does much to draw the gaze away from the naked bodies of the women. Indeed, I would argue, the lighting is instrumental in allowing them to be read as naked rather than nude as it draws the gaze towards the site of activity, which, as with the previous image, is the hands. In this respect, neither the nakedness nor the breasts of the women is the subject of the image; rather, their action is. The photograph seems to have caught the women in a collective, shared activity, signified by the trajectory of the paddles. Instead of the more stereotypical representation of women as solitary and isolated we have here a glimpse of women working in co-operative community in an activity more typically associated with men. There is an

appropriation of masculine associations such as physical strength, power, action, movement, co-operation and intention attendant on this image. Western art has embraced the representation of women's shared activities when they are in the service of traditional patriarchal ideologies - bathing, courting, serving, working in fields, preparing food and tending children - but this image presents a challenge to precisely this kind of masculine ideology. The women are acting not passively, awaiting the spectator's pleasures, and they are directing the action. The position of the paddles, which are asymmetrical to each other and diagonally traverse the image, contribute an imperfect choreography which seems to reference the "real" rather than the performed, adding still further to the power of the image to displace the conventions of the nude.

Notwithstanding this more positive and affirming reading of the image, given the calendar's focus on women as subjects and its ideological commitment to confronting normalized ways of seeing and representing women, it is interesting to note that the unity of the women in the rowing image, the only one to show women cooperating in a single activity, is at least potentially disrupted by the symbolic presence of a man. The woman at the back of this photograph wears a wedding ring on her left hand, which is clearly visible around the paddle. While it is no longer possible in Canada to simply assume that the ring implies a heterosexual union, it remains, at this time, the most likely assumption viewers make and it raises the very important question of the calendar's engagement with representations of women's sexuality, especially in light of Richards' concerns that the images not be "sexualized."

Against this potential reference to hetero-normativity, I would argue that there are two images in particular which invite queer readings and in so doing, open the calendar as a whole to a more complex and diverse representation of women *per se*. The first is the image of a heavily pregnant, naked woman who faces the camera with her arms gently surrounding her belly (April 2002). Behind her is another, presumably naked, person whose hands cup each of her breasts. But with only the hands to indicate sex, this image seems to subtly broach the question of sexual orientation despite the fact that pregnancy in and of itself appears to reference heterosexuality. Had the hands been obviously male, the image would conform to hetero-normative stereotypes but this is not the case. The hands are hairless, the fingers relatively fine, the nails short and the veins clearly visible. Nothing conclusively declares the sex of the owner of the hands. They are neither obviously male nor female and the image is decidedly ambiguous in its presentation of sexuality. At the very least, it can be said to be open to a queer reading if not directly referencing lesbianism.

The second and more explicitly counter-normative image is the close-up of two breasts facing each other, as if the women are embracing (October 2002). The obvious intimacy of the gesture, a naked

body-to-body embrace between two women who look like they are of similar age is unquestionably evocative of lesbian sexuality. Indeed, while it remains subtle, this is one of the most explicitly sexual images in the calendar, which raises the question of whether and how it might conform to Richards' goal of offering a new way of seeing women.

In many respects the novelty of this image lies in the extent to which it is sexual but not pornographic, and thus not a familiar image in Western visual cultures. As a staple of heterosexual pornography the pseudo-lesbian sex scene inevitably foregrounds the silicone enhanced breasts of young, nubile, typically white women who have little genuine interest in each other, for they perform for the male spectator. Unfortunately, until recently, pornography was also virtually the exclusive domain of representation of same-sex relations between women; hence, if only by contrast, this image lends itself to a very different reading. As with all the other images in the calendar, the explicit context directs much of the meaning, but further to that are the specific qualities of the images themselves. In this one, the atmosphere of erotic intimacy between the two women contrasts with the kind of bodily display that is typical of the conventions of pornography and the nude.

Shot in profile, the attention of the women is on each other, and the viewer is excluded. Does this then condemn the viewer to adopting the voyeuristic male gaze that characterized Mulvey's claims about spectatorship? While this is certainly possible, I would contend that there are a number of elements which resist the adoption of this assumption. Beginning with the extreme proximity of the shot, the distance typically necessary to effect the voyeur's objectifying gaze seems to be obviated. Moreover, the close-up highlights the flaws of the ordinary rather than the perfection of the ideal. The sagging of the upper breast and the stretch marks imply the women are older. Finally, the nipples and aureole are relaxed rather than erect, lending still further to the softness of the image and contrasting it quite dramatically with the more familiar hyper-aroused sexuality of pornographic representations of same-sex desire. It seems clear that Richards has in part achieved her goal with this image and that remains the case regardless of the flaws inherent in the implicit ideologies of the image itself. It does offer a new way of seeing women, not only in its break with the conventions of nudity but in its presentation of a same-sex relation that resists the hetero-normative codes of sexual objectification.

CONCLUSION

Questions of representational practices, as noted earlier, are as significant to the sciences and medicine as they are to the arts, and feminist scholars have long noted the central place of woman as object within medical discourses. In aspiring to offer supposedly "objective" images that do not arouse desire, medico-scientific representational strategies have favoured a documentary

approach to their subject. The underlying belief in this approach is that by eschewing the accoutrements of beauty - makeup, lighting, colour - the truth can be exposed in the absence of desire, and hence the body can be revealed as naked and not nude. Against such pretensions, the Breast of Canada calendars undermine the illusion of neutrality or objectivity that has been afforded to documentary or medical photography by offering their readers an explicitly medical context - breast cancer/breast health - that has been reconfigured by feminist aspirations and feminist aesthetic strategies which affirm women as the subjects of and in their bodies in both health and illness. Gillis' images are beautiful and unapologetically "ordinary."

While I would not argue that all the images in the Breast of Canada calendars wholly subvert the representational strategies of the status quo which favour the representation of women as objects, as nude, it is not going too far to argue that it is this very issue which this work explicitly interrogates. In aspiring to offer a new way of seeing women, Richards' and Gillis' faceless breasted women are, in a very meaningful sense, the naked subjects of these images and it is their lives and their humanity to which we bear witness when we dare to look and see differently.

ENDNOTES

1. There is now a very large body of feminist literature dealing with questions of gendered spectatorship and the gendered production of images. In the thirty or so years since Berger's essay feminist art scholars like Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin, Janet Wolff, Rosemary Betterton and Helen McDonald, to name only a few, have both built upon and critiqued Berger's ideas. Questions have been raised about gendered spectatorship, many of them deriving from the 1970s work of film theorist, Laura Mulvey who asserted the primacy of the male gaze even when the viewer is female. More recent feminist scholarship (see for example, Pollock 1988; King 1992; McDonald 2001; Betterton 2002) has rejected Mulvey's universalization of visual culture and there has been a growing interest in the conditions and meanings of female spectatorship. This paper is significantly positioned within this context.
2. A number of national and local newspapers carried the story of Richards' calendar in 2002 and Jay Hooper was repeatedly quoted as saying the Foundation's refusal to accept donations derived as much from his concern about the likely financial success of the calendar as it did its controversial nature. Given that the Foundation was to receive 40% of the proceeds of sales and it was not asked to invest any money, it seems like a "no lose" situation for them. All the more does this imply that the images themselves were of concern.
3. It is worth noting that while breasts appear to be everywhere in popular culture, nipples certainly are not. The issues in particular surrounding the varying significations of nipples versus breasts are too complex to pursue in detail here but are no less significant for that.
4. Feminist art criticism is now replete with similar analyses of both the representation of women by women artists and the reception of women by female spectators. Rosemary Betterton's reflections on the work of Suzanne Valadon provides a classic example of such an analysis, as does Helen McDonald's important article "Re-visioning the Female Nude." In reality, though, these are only two examples in what is now a very significant field of feminist scholarship.
5. I would like to acknowledge the comments of the anonymous *Atlantis* readers of an earlier draft of the paper for many of the details of this particular analysis.
6. Laura Mulvey's famous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) continues to be the benchmark of analyses of women as passive objects of the male gaze, although, as noted, her ideas have since been challenged and revised by many feminist art and film theorists.

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APPENDIX

All images are from the 2002 Breast of Canada calendar - www.breastofcanada.com. Photos by Melanie Gillis. Used with permission.



March 2002



April 2002



June 2002



September 2002



October 2002