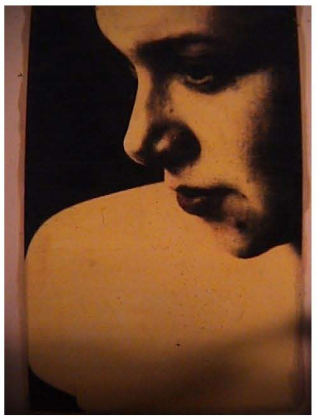


PICTURING the EROTIC

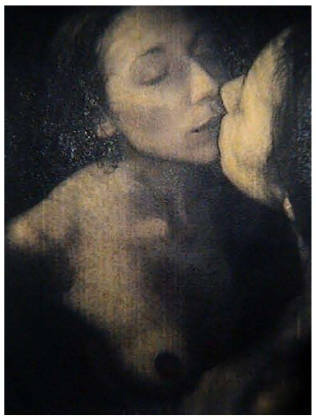
Alison MacLeod

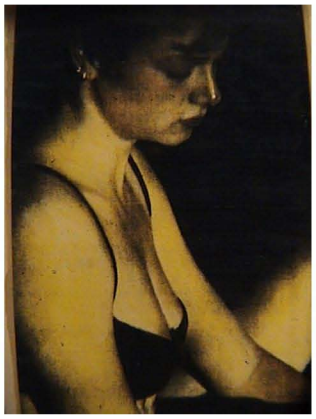
I'm sitting in an aisle seat, buckling myself in for an. internal flight, Halifax to Ottawa. The man next to me - late thirties, balding, chinos, polo shirt - has the window seat. At some point, we make a tacit agreement not to speak. Yet our nearness, as always in such situations, makes for a funny kind of intimacy. I reach under the seat for my book and notice he's removed his shoes. His socks are mismatched. At take-off, I see him clench his right hand until the plane levels out. Minutes later, as he spills complementary peanuts into his hand, I glimpse the half-moon marks his fingernails have cut into his palm. I start to read. He pulls out a magazine and turns to a particular page. No text. Just a picture. Minutes pass. He doesn't turn the page. Curiosity gets the better of me. I look past his shoulder. He's staring at a full-breasted, glossy-lipped woman, naked but for a gauzy veil she holds in front of herself. I squirm. 'm stuck in a confined space with a man who is reading (not the operative word) a porn magazine.

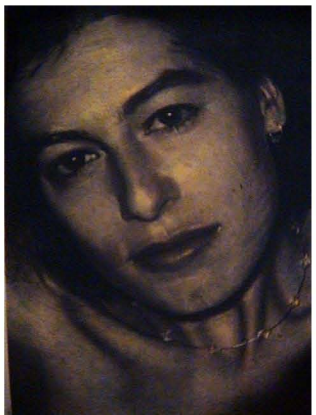
I move through a range of feelings. Squeamishness. Embarrassment. Anger. At one point, I consider asking the flight attendant, in clearly audible terms, if I can be moved because the man seated next to me is reading a porn magazine. I refrain. I tell myself it's not a big deal. It's his business.

After twenty minutes, no exaggeration, he still hasn't turned the page. Despite myself, I'm starting to feel victimized. I'm reminded that a woman's body is, still, in our culture today, something which is up for grabs - to the extent, anyway, that an ordinary Joe Blow on an Air Canada flight feels it's an object he can linger over, not unlike a bottle of whisky in a duty-free magazine. Female sexuality is still so often equated with pornography that the all too familiar connection between the two becomes, even more insidiously, an elision of meaning. *Porne*, as American critic Andrea Dworkin reminds us, is the Greek word for the lowest class of prostitute (a category which is itself, of course, a creation of a patriarchy), and the pornography tradition, she argues, is one in which the female body has become synonymous with 'dirt'.

I remember my recent surprise at finding a few dirty magazines, the standard fare, in a friend's drawer, under the sweater I'd been trying to find. I opened them and looked, thinking wryly that I'd tease him about them; that I might even be amused. I wasn't. I expected nudes -- a kind of childish emphasis on women's figures, not unlike those Marilyn Monroe bodies adolescent boys sketch in the air to signify 'female'. Instead, on page after page, I saw each woman made into an awaiting hole. The image was conjured partly by her positions; partly by the fact that the pubic hair had generally been shaved. I could only think how strangely startled all those pudendae looked.







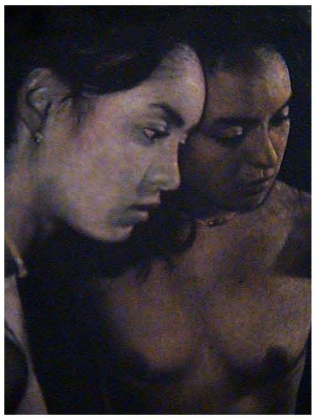
The Greeks, generally seen as the first exponents of naturalism in western culture, nevertheless saw fit to 'erase' women's pubic hair because hair was a visual metaphor for passion -- and passion, an active force, was a male right. Pornography, of course, is necessarily less subtle than classical statuary. Here, in bold colour, real women are graphically displayed as passive receptacles, or living holes. Shocking words. The reality is yet more shocking. I didn't realize that mainstream representation could do that to what was, also, my body.

Which brings me back to our man on the plane. When he finally closes the magazine and tucks it away in the seat-pocket, I see, to my surprise, that it's a copy of one of the new and popular men's magazines. For a split second, I think, oh well, that's all right then; I'm being uptight. Then I think again. Little wonder the porn mag industry is up in arms about the burgeoning men's magazine market. It's stealing the tried-and true porn formula (female body = body to do things to or upon = dirt) and it's making that formula more accessible still. The evidence is now, literally, within arm's reach on any popular news rack.

The tradition of great art, pre-photographic era, of course, colluded in the objectification of the female body, even if, thankfully, it could not and cannot, in my view, only be reduced to the fact of that collusion. The famous Venus de Milos, sculpted between 300 and 100 BC, is an image both sensual and arresting. Her gaze is of the faraway variety; her face, a classical ideal; her body emerges, hips tilting, from the usual slippage of drapery. (How many times can drapery fall off?) Yet perhaps her lasting fame has as much to do with the fragmented form by which we know her. When she was found on the Greek island of Milos in 1820, her arms were already gone. She was about to be melted down for limestone. It's been suggested that her lack of arms actually fetishizes her torso, in the way that the bondage of limbs also does. She is, in any case, immediately helpless.

At that time, he was midway through a new series based exclusively on the female form, dangerous terrain, I suspected, especially for an established fifty -something artist working with young female models. I wasn't wrong. After showing work in progress, Allan was roundly accused of sexual exploitation by a group of art students, both male and female. Some female artists and curators had also been critical. As a new acquaintance, I found Allan very open about his work and the criticism it had generated. I admired his willingness to risk the critical attacks anyone could have seen coming, himself included, for he has a tough if sensitive intelligence. Even so, I remained aware of the potential we all have for blind spots.

I visited his studio. I looked at subject after subject, painting after painting. Some were nude; some, lightly clad. 'Everything begins with the skin,' Modigliani once said, and here, cheeks, foreheads, inner arms and thighs emerged, incandescent from charcoal, paint



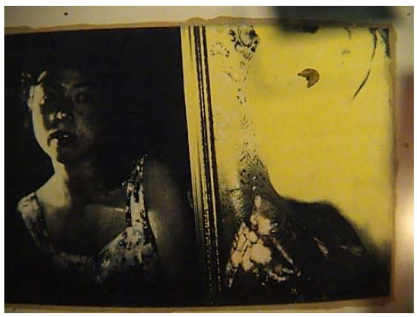
and wax. Some paintings depicted complete figures. Many were studies of detail, arguably 'fragmentations' of the subject: a face, a profile, a view of shoulder, neck and cheek. Aesthetic form, in the hands of MacKay, like any mature artist, is a powerful magic. It creates a sense of tension (between parts, forms, emotions, ideas) and also releases us from that tension, like a good story. Or good sex.

But here was something else, something less definable. True, a sense of a female ideal (questionable, of course) preoccupied the work, but if Allen's subjects were idealized (and they were), they were not conventionalized. Beauty here was both specific and myriad. This is not to say that a pretty face or a beautiful body tastefully rendered necessarily absolves an artist from allegations of exploitation. Such a rendition only returns us to Titian's lovely but supine Venus of Urbino, a painting commissioned, incidentally, to instruct a new, young Renaissance wife in her twin roles of domestic and sexual servitude. So what might absolve an artist of the sin of sexual mastery, especially when the work clearly is intimate and when the woman/subject is inevitably made object? Do we only have recourse to Olympia's defiant stare? Is anger our only legitimate means of redemption? Does not the punitive force of anger, rehearsed over and over again, finally reduce female sexuality to a public source of guilt (not so much better than pornography's reduction of it to 'dirt')?

As I looked at the series, from woman to woman, I was unaccountably moved. By what I'm not sure. Allan explained that the sessions with each model were collaborative. The model chose her positions, her state of dress or undress, and the degree to which she would adopt 'personae' or remain uncompromisingly herself. In the process, work that was clearly the stuff of transformation emerged. It was something more than the sum of Allan's technical skills and the model's body. It was something with a kinetic life of its own created, I'd suggest, by an understanding, on the part of both artist and model of the force of longing - an understanding that had little to do with the feelings of one for the other. Longing makes us desirous and potentially exploitative or exploited, yes. But it also leaves us, ultimately, open to touch - or, to being touched by something that is, at once, outside Ourselves and of ourselves.

When I asked Allan what he was trying to do in the series, he said, 'I suppose it's the wooing of womanhood.' Out of context, it could seem like an oily and dubious statement of intent. Standing in his studio, with the work in sheaves like a loose testimony between us, I thought it remarkably honest.

In the end, I sat for Allan, shoulder straps slipping away like all that Greek drapery in eons gone by. Admittedly, I felt half unsettled by the process, like something under a lens - which for a time I iterally was, for Allan starts work with a camera. But I was neither hoodwinked nor seduced.



Nor am I a so-called 'man's women' who happily colludes in male power structures while refusing to admit there is such a thing. I am someone who was grateful to be moved by eros, and glad to be subject to it. Neither art nor artists, or their subjects, should be kept behind poor Olympia's railing with the two policeman on permanent guard, whatever the saving ideology.

And how, you say, can we always know art and artists from pornography and pornographers? By the capacity of art to surprise us; to take us beyond sensation and into feeling; to interest us in our innate connection with other bodies; to remind us of that common sense of touch which makes us all human in the end - an interest which sexual parts alone cannot arouse; a knowledge which they cannot, of themselves, engender.