

Linda Nochlin lectures on women's art

Women may add new dimension to eroticism

By BRENDA WEEKS

Works by women artists not only tell us a lot about the period in which the artwork was made and the role women played in that society, but may give us a "new insight into eroticism and sexuality" quite distinct from the male-dominated concept of sexuality, Linda Nochlin, told a group of students, faculty and staffers, Tuesday.

Nochlin, an expert on Corbet and the realist school of art, was at York as guest speaker in the Gerstein Lectures series.

"The fact that an artist is a woman, is one of many elements in

her art," said Nochlin, "although, the precise nature of the feminine role is not clear" and much depends on the individual artist involved.

Nochlin used slides of works of art to illustrate how these works give us insights on women's role in the society of the artist.

TIMOROUS WORK

A comparison was drawn between a rather timorous work representing an old English ballad by Elizabeth Rossetti Siddal, a woman who posed for many pre-Raphaelite painters, and was suffocated by the female identity. This is contrast to the bold, enormous painting, Horse Fair, by Rose

Bonneheure which is an illustration of energy, freedom and power in both humans and animals.

"Bonneheure was raised in a community where men and women were equals," said Nochlin, "and so she was able to re-interpret the female identity. These two women, both of the 19th century," said Nochlin, "belong to the art contexts of their respective nations and periods."

In reference to Victorian women genre painters, Nochlin chose to show a small-scale work, rich in visual colour, by Sophie Anderson, called, No Walk Today. It showed a figure looking out of a window, an overdressed child in a curtained sanctuary, with a subtle overtone of melancholy.

"Anderson has maintained the stereotype ideas of the Victorian lady," said Nochlin, in reference to the painting. Yet, in Mary Osborne's Nameless and Friendless, "we see the plight of a woman artist showing her sketches to a skeptical shopkeeper, and the concrete disappointment is registered on her face. Osborne was committed to depicting women's predicaments," she explained.

"Her canvasses are meant to be read rather than looked at."

Nochlin then showed a Renoir depicting a mother and her two daughters, which would by most, be considered more 'feminine' than the painting, The Bath, by Mary Cassat.

"Cassat has moved away from the sentimental stereotypes of mothers and children," she showed. "Everything in her representation of the mother and child is carefully observed, and it is not pretty".

The painting, Betty and Baby, by Alice Neil, was compared to another Renoir, Motherhood, from almost a hundred years before Neil's atypical presentation of motherhood.

SUBVERSIVE IMAGE

"The mother in Neil's painting looks anxious and questioning," Nochlin pointed out. "She is tense and weary, and the baby cross-eyed and uncomfortable. This is a subversive image of motherhood, not possible until the second half of the twentieth century."

In speaking of the changing and variable treatment of the nude, Nochlin turned to the self-portrait

done in 1906, by Paula Becker.

"What Becker has shown in doing a self-portrait, and naked at that," said Nochlin, "is akin to primal innocence, while the image of the self is shown in a timeless exotic paradise."

Nochlin pointed out contributions from two women artists, whose subjects were modern and technological. "Natalie Gancharova was a costume designer and set designer as well as an artist" said Nochlin "and she applied her materials to dress and household accoutrements as well". Sonia Delaunayturk was another who adapted avant garde innovations to new feminine purposes.

"They both had relationships with important male artists," Nochlin added.

Vaginal imagery was the theme of Open Clamshell and Black Iris, by Georgia O'Keefe, where the female sexual organ is immediately called to mind.

"We can see the powerful close-up scale metamorphosis of the natural form," Nochlin said of these works.

"The direction that women artists will take, Nochlin said "depends on the ability of conscious feminism to express identity and pride. How many directions this will take, we have yet to see," she concluded.

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