Assumptions of the Flower as a Sexual Symbol in the Work of Georgia O'Keeffe and Robert Mapplethorpe

Jean DeBiasse

Susquehanna University

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The flower is a subject seen so much in the history of art. Artists have been painting it for hundreds of years. As a beautiful piece of nature that is readily available to them, it makes sense that artists find inspiration in it. The repeated use of the flower as a subject is no issue, as it is more a way for artists to showcase their skills and own personal style. Most artists throughout time could depict the flower in this way, with no issues of a deeper meaning being seen behind it, just painting a flower to be a flower. Most these artists however, are what are considered the traditional artist: a straight, white, male. When so called nontraditional artists use the flower as a subject, they are not able to simply depict a flower to be a flower. Instead of just using the subject to exhibit their skills and style, much more is read into it. In the works of art with the flower as a subject of Georgia O’Keeffe and Robert Mapplethorpe, the flower is seen as having a deeper meaning; being a symbol of sexuality.

History of the Flower

• Throughout the history of art, the flower is seen as a motif, appearing as a subject for countless works of art
• Flower paintings are more about showcasing the skills and personal style of the artist than the subject itself
• Flowers began as a subject that was considered to be most suited for women painters, as they are simple everyday subjects
• Women have been associated with flowers since classical times
  • Virgin Mary with the lily
  • Floral metaphors for women’s genitals, as seen in Manet’s Olympia
  • “Deflowered” as a synonym for a woman losing her virginity
  • Seen today as being feminine

Georgia O’Keeffe

• Georgia O’Keeffe met Alfred Stieglitz in 1916, from then on he had a lasting impact on her work and life in general leading to their eventual marriage
• His ideas that O’Keeffe’s flower paintings have sexual connotations had an influence on how she and her works were perceived
  • The paintings were said to embody womanhood
  • The flowers were seen as directly symbolizing vaginas
• Stieglitz photographed O’Keeffe in front of her paintings in a sexual manner, reinforcing his ideas about the sexuality in her work
• These sexual ideas spread from Steiglitz to his critic friends and then to other critics
• O’Keeffe herself stated consistently throughout her career that she did not intend for her paintings to have any sexuality present

As a woman, O’Keeffe does not fit the norms of what a traditional artist is: a straight, white, male. So, her biography was read into her work, lending to these sexual ideas surrounding her flower paintings.
Robert Mapplethorpe

- During the 1970’s, there was a movement of sexual revolution that Robert Mapplethorpe took part in.
- Mapplethorpe was a part of the homosexual group and a subgroup of this called sadomasochism, which was associated with leather and bondage.
- Mapplethorpe photographed his group in a way that was visually compelling and aesthetically pleasing, despite the controversial erotic subject matter.
- Mapplethorpe wished to document these scenes of his world in a way that focuses on the beauty he sees, not the eroticism.
- Mapplethorpe later shot photos of flowers that were received by critics as having the same sexual qualities as his erotic photos.
- Incorporating many of the same visual elements, Mapplethorpe was hoping for viewers to see the beauty of how both the erotic and flower photos were shot.
- Mapplethorpe wished for the flower photos to change how viewers saw his erotic photos, but most viewers saw the exact opposite.

As an openly homosexual man, Mapplethorpe does not fit the norms of what a traditional artist is: a straight, white, male. So, his biography and past photos were read into his work, lending to these sexual ideas surrounding his flower photos.

References

Lynes, Barbara Verger. “Georgia O’Keeffe and Feminism: A Problem of Position.”