Review-of-theory report:

***Reviewing* Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art,**

by Helen McDonald, report by Rudy Fleminger

The book is Helen McDonald's *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art.* In this book, McDonald tries, and succeeds, in positing that depictions and connotations of the female nude (if that term is even appropriate) underwent great change in the last thirty years. She shows how the longstanding concept of the "idealized nude", while only slowly evolving, if at all,from the early goth ic and renaissance days to the modern era, underwent great upheavals and total reversals after postmodernism and feminism took over. As psychoanalysis, feminism, and deconstruction began applying prying criticism to the place of the artistic nude, it both enriched and complicated that imagery, and allowed contemporary artists to ply these theories in order to introduce ambiguity, and, as such, expand the context of the artistic nude to entirely new messages. McDonald's book draws greatly on the art-history and culture of her native Australia, but much of this can be applied and paralleled in the United States, or any country of Western lineage.

The rapid evolution of the nude cannot be charted without looking at history, and at the place of the nude before its rapid post-modern evolution. A discussion of the nude in art history, especially regarding these modern-and-before eras, will invariably bring up the classic "nude versus naked" delineations. This classic dichotomy, introduced by Kenneth Clark in his *A Study of Ideal Art* (1956), has greatly influenced both the history of art and artistic interpretation, as well as contemporary questions of decency and American censorship. Clark distinguishes between the nude, art that represents the ideal

body, and the naked, which represents a particular body. *(McDonald, 7)* Although many feminists and postmodern artists later shredded this "high art/low art" discernment in both art and critique, this framework was a solid basis for much pre-contemporary (and some contemporary) art creation, and it can be correctly applied to explain, critique, and theorize on much modern and pre-modern nude art.

According to many theorists, the psychological "position" of the imaged ideal nude was not that of being a narrative person or object herself, but being a simple "stand in" with which the viewer of the artwork would use the narcissistically place themselves into the image. This creates a narrative link, which is even deeper than the viewer/picture relationship. This link is best illustrated by works which capitalize and narrate this two-sided relationship, in order to bring it to the viewer's attention. A good example is Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits The Side Of My Face)* (1981). By calling attention to the viewer's "gaze hitting the side of her face", Kruger makes the viewer realize the interaction going on between the image and the viewer.

In the 1980s, in the earlier years of feminist and postmodern art, the female nude in art had largely vanished from the cultural landscape. Ideological pressures from inside the feminist art and critical worlds, as well as a popular and governmental pressures toward art censorship (this was the time of the Meese Commission and attacks on the NEA) made the unclothed body, especially female, a touchy and difficult subject. The subject was not dead, however. As the 1980s rolled into the 1990s, sex and nudity started to make its way back into the culture, both in popular culture, with Madonna's explicit performances, and in the art world, with "bad girl" artists starting to explore sexuality in art.

Some critics took offense to racial divisions between the "idealized", narrative nude, and the sexual, scandalous nude, and the uneven censorship based on racial qualities. These less-than-intentional ambiguities set the stage for other questions and criticisms that were to come. For example, this letter to *The Age*, Melbourne's daily newspaper:

> "How come *The Age* review of a film about black deaths in custody, *Black River*, was accompanied by a photograph of bare-breasted black women, while the review of a film about bare-breasted white women, *Sirens*, was accompanied by a photograph of fully clothed white women?"
> *(McDonald, 33)*

Although this was not the definitive critique of these practices, it does show one critical duality in thinking, which many artists expanded upon in the 1990s. Blacks and aboriginals, like the idealized goddesses of the classical period, were encountered in art and photography, and seen as akin to classical nudes. Historical photos showed aboriginals being measured and studied in blank, clinical settings. Artistic renditions of aboriginals often showed them nude from the waist up, simply going about their business. The vision of the aboriginal was that of either a "native" or a "subject", and both of these viewpoints made the subjects' nudity either "noble", or simply unimportant. Artists like Linda Sproul, in her *Difficult to Light: The White Woman* (critiqued later in this paper), noticed this dichotomy, and used her art to contrast the blank, sexless, and "acceptable"

nudity of aboriginal depictions with the similar, but much more risqué depictions of "sex stars" of popular culture. *(McDonald, 70)*

Another blurring division that added to the growing ambiguity involved mutual blurring of the borders between advertising and high "erotic" art. With eroticism and sex becoming more mainstream and acceptable in the 1990s, now artistic nudes and erotic figures were finding their way into fashion advertisements. With the popular culture emulating and appropriating the artistic culture, as well as the art's use of more popular methods of art creation and dissemination, "the media" became both a major object of criticism, and (more importantly) a major arena for innovation, experimentation, and the spread of change. Now, even some national clothiers and businesses were adopting high-art, and often more controversial, images. This brought another fundamental ambiguity to erotic imagery: Am I being sold?

By the 1990s, feminism had branched out and changed significantly from the less permissive "anti-censorship" feminism that drove the 1980s. The 1990s brought in aggressive sexual feminism that was promotional of sex and sexual experimentation. With feminists taking a more aggressive, un-"feminine" viewpoint in sex, politics, and life, gender lines also began to converge, and the stage toward the later "post-gender" movement was being set.

With contemporary feminism pushing further and further into traditionally "male" attributes, the conventions of the specific genders were breaking down. Many artists reflected this, making performance pieces as multiple genders, or visual art such as anonymous, gender neutral photography.

Transcending even this movement in ambiguity was the post-human movement of the late 1990s. This was a world where androgyny had become more and more commonplace, and identity was becoming more and more pliable. Add the explosive technology boom, and the instability of gender was now extended to instability in people's very identity as humans. On one end of the spectrum, prosthetics and cybernetics foretold an enhanced human body, transcended and extended from the simple flesh identity. On the other end, networks, telecommunications, and the digital avatar made the human mind the only limiter of ability and identity in virtual space. Humanity itself had become ambiguous. Art explored these possibilities, with cybernetic modification, digital art, and the creation of digital worlds as artwork.

Critical Application: Linda Sproul,* Difficult To Light: The White Woman Variation #2 *(1996)

When confronted with the selection of a work of art which exemplified the growing existence and utilization of ambiguity in postmodern art, one series of works stood out to me as clearly indicative, yet possessing of enough critical depth to serve as a perfect example. Linda Sproul, an artist from McDonald's native Australia, was mentioned a number of times throughout the book. I am fully in agreement that Sproul's work, especially her *Difficult To Light: The White Woman Variation #2* series, gives perfect demonstration of McDonald's position.

The first two plates *(see Plates, three pages ahead)* are two selections of a larger series in which Sproul imitates famous pin-ups and sexually scandalous celebrities. In the first image, on the left, she is depicted as superstar pin-up

Marilyn Monroe in her famous *Playboy* nude photo, and the second image has her in the pose of Christine Keeler, who was involved in a sensationalized multi-government sex scandal in the 1950s.

These two pictures alone read through-and-throughout with ambiguity. The poses Sproul strikes are painstakingly exact replicas of the original photos, but have completely different connotations. To say that the replicas are "painstaking" does not just describe the process of the photos, but the actual visual reading of the photos. With Sproul's Marilyn Monroe imitation, she is not spread seductively on the drapery, but seems arduously contorted. Her expression is intensely blank and businesslike, as if she were merely demonstrating the poses, without feeling or care. *(McDonald, 124-25)*

This can be read a number of ways, as a parody of the objectified nude female, or as re-grounding the stratospheric ideal woman, but the intention and subject become much clearer — the ambiguity collapses into understanding — when the viewer comes upon the last two images.

The last two images are, as the others are, take-offs on photography of the past. These, however are from a more historical source. The last two images are representations of a series of anthropological photos of an Australian aboriginal *(see Plates, Second Page, three pages ahead)*. The original photographs, *'Ellen'* (1870) *(see Additional Plates, four pages ahead)*, consist of an unknown aboriginal woman, supposedly named "Ellen", staring blankly into the camera, while being measured and recorded by colonial scholars.

Now, a number of readings of the other photographs come into play. The title, “Hard to Light”, refers to a common complaint of photographers trying to adjust their cameras to the darker skin of the aboriginal natives*(M cDonald, 129)*. The series speaks of Australia’s racial divisions of the past, as well as the concerns of the *Age* reader mentioned earlier in this report. Sproul highlights the double-standard of this “historical” female nude by turning the tables on the standard. She presents her white self, with the same clinical detachment and “historical innocence” as the aboriginals photographed by researchers, but places herself in the more conventional nude position, that of the sexually-charged photographic model. In doing so, and using elements of all these female-nude standards, she drags these assumptions and standards into the light of mismatching ambiguity for our examination.