

Dear, Aphro[die]te

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Abstract

Complexity encompasses the entirety of social life, which inspired me to utilise artistic forms, specifically sculpture, as a way to explore these ideas. The piece that I created (Figure 1), entitled *Dear, Aphro[die]te*, is an attempt to unmask our own ignorance surrounding different kinds of privilege, focusing on the enduring nature of gender inequality and the rights of women. This is not a subject that one can fully understand or solve while holding a singular perspective, and so to inspire more analytical thought on this subject, I created a modern tale describing the demise of Aphrodite. In this sense, the complex issue of gender inequality can be experienced in a way that one may not have felt before, allowing for the exploration of different perspectives and patterns of thought, observing the subject with new eyes and creating innovative ways to address gender inequities.

Introduction

Aphrodite was once the Ancient Greek goddess of beauty, pleasure, desire, love, and sexuality. She was once an immortal being, holding great power in both her looks and her ability to make others fall in love. However, due to Aphrodite's persistent meddling in the affairs of mortals, she was banished by Zeus to live among them as a test of her identity. Now facing the reality of death, Aphrodite looked towards the mortals for help as to save her from this detrimental confrontation, and to reclaim a grip on her status. She soon found that she was no match for the values, pressures, and expectations of this new world she was trapped in. Even though Aphrodite had already lost grip of her true potential, she became further isolated and suppressed, stripping her of any remaining fragment that once made up her essence. She was not valuable. She was not important. She was not to be heard. She was worthless. She was unknown. She was broken.

I created a sculpture (Figure 1) to exhibit the ultimate ending of this modern tale of Aphrodite when she became situated in contemporary society.



Figure 1: Dana Royle, *Dear, Aphro[die]te*. 2018. Mixed media.

Source: Photograph by Dana Royle.

I created this sculpture as a visual critique of modern society, in terms of the complex nature of gender inequality and the experiences of women in everyday life. It features two of the main aspects of the story of Aphrodite. First is the moment of Aphrodite's banishment by Zeus to live among mortals, where she is completely stripped of the foundations of her identity, leaving her vulnerable and searching for help. Second is her ultimate and unremarkable demise in the corrupt world she finds herself trapped in. To illustrate this, this paper begins by discussing how the individual aspects of sculpture are representative of Aphrodite's experience in modern society. I then go into the wider issue of gender inequality and its complex and enduring nature through all aspects of life. Finally, I explore how art can be utilised as a medium to address and ultimately solve complex problems such as that of gender inequality. I arrive at the conclusion that it is through the expression of complex problems in art, pertaining to *Dear, Aphro[die]te*, that different perspectives can be explored, observing the subject from a new perspective and forming innovative ways to address complex issues.

The face of Aphrodite was purposefully designed to gaze back at the viewer who is gazing at her, as to be one that confronts their beholder, establishing the power and authority of the audience over the artwork, and more specifically over Aphrodite (Olin, 1996). She looks outwards to the audience for help, with her last desperate hope, as she is left powerless and at the mercy of the audience. Even though all the power is given to the audience to try and make a change, they are incapable of anything other than feeling confronted by their own sense of superiority.

The blandness in detailing and colour of Aphrodite's face is further representative of her loss of identity and soul, allowing the audience to gaze at her dehumanised face guilt-free, as she cannot see what the audience sees. She cannot see that the audience has failed her, and watched her demise. This gaze of the audience itself illustrates the public's part to play in the unavoidable future of Aphrodite, represented by the graveyard scene on top of Aphrodite's head. The audience in this sense is the graveyard worker, bringing Aphrodite's life to a close, with their thoughts only within themselves, ready to move on and take no real notice or responsibility for what has happened.

The sculpture pushes gender representations to an extreme and takes a note from feminist art by examining the female identity through a personalised narrative (Fineberg, 1995). The aim is to bring to the forefront the suppressed perspective of the female within the patriarchal society that we have today, exposing these experiences to the audience for their consideration and awareness. In this sense, it serves as an evocative form of social protest, challenging the institutionalised value systems and social constructions of what it means to be a woman (Broude & Garrard, 1994). The conventional image and representation of women is one that is completely passive in nature; to be seen but not heard (Fineberg, 1995). She should exist only as an object of possession for masculine gaze, fantasies and desires (Olin, 1995). She must appear beautiful without trying, her looks being set to an unattainable standard, with any attempt to try and meet this ideal being futile (Brand, 1998).

It is these concepts that this sculpture aims to represent; the repression and subjugation of any kind of female empowerment. It works to challenge and deconstruct these preestablished conventions of womanhood and femininity, for just as Aphrodite lost her true identity as the goddess of love and ultimately became isolated, women are weakened by the internalised demands of a male-dominated society (Nochlin, 1989). It illustrates how women are tied to these implications of the patriarchy, confronting its audience with the reality of the world we live in, and serving as a forewarning of society's mistreatment of women, aiming to encourage and reinforce the need for change in the existing ignorant culture.

This discourse on the value of women is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the complex nature of gender inequality to which *Dear, Aphro[die]te* speaks. The simple difference in one chromosome leads to women having a one in three chance of experiencing sexual or domestic violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) and to be paid on average 15 per cent less than their male counterparts (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). More widely, the UN Department of Public Information (2011: 1) further reported that in the world, 'women aged 15–44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war and malaria'. Even within the art sphere itself, a space inherently labelled as feminine, these gender boundaries can be seen, with women's voices discouraged and underrepresented. For example, in a book published in 1962 titled *History of Art*, the authors failed to name a single female artist nor were any female artists' works exhibited (Broude & Garrard, 1994). This underrepresentation of women expresses the idea of the 'inability of human beings with wombs rather than penises to create anything significant' (Nochlin, 1989: 146). This makes it clear that the question of gender inequality cannot simply be limited to or explained by

the relative benevolence or ill-will of individual men, nor the self-confidence or abjectness of individual women, but rather on the very nature of our institutional structures themselves and the view of reality which they impose on the human beings who are part of them. (Nochlin, 1989: 152)

It is through the use of art as a medium to address and explore the complex subject of gender inequality that new, innovative ways of awareness can be created (Kelly, 1996). Just like complexity itself, the format and presentation of art is subjective and hard to define, allowing differing meanings, interpretations, experiences, knowledges and understandings to be ascribed to a single artistic piece (Broude & Garrard, 1994). By subjecting complex issues to this format, it is possible to obtain the attention of the multidisciplinary perspectives which are required to address the issue, start a conversation, and further begin to work together towards a solution. Art has the unique ability to yield multiple, and often conflicting, perspectives, forcing these ideas to be triangulated together, making the audience look further for the solutions to complex problems, toward our inner selves, predispositions, and institutional structures (Brand, 1998). Art can also act as a lens of one's culture, institutions and education, allowing the artist to create a piece that serves as an effective and evocative form of social protest.

It is through the visualisation in art pertaining to *Dear, Aphro[die]te* that it is possible to question what has been accepted as the ‘normal’, and to challenge the systems that are currently in place. This may transform cultures in widespread and meaningful ways (Nochlin, 1989). For just as complex problems require complex solutions, finding them also needs complex representations and complex understandings. Therefore, art can and should be utilised as a medium to explore possible solutions to complex issues through its aim of representation. Not only will this make ideas and concepts more accessible, allowing complex issues to be communicated more widely, but it will create a combined understanding in its complex nature. By expressing complex issues through art, it is possible to inspire deeper thought and evaluation about change, improvement, and progress, serving as developments towards the avant-garde movement (literally translated as ‘to the forefront’).

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