

THREE STORIES ABOUT VENUS

1. CLASSIC

VENUS, the ancient Roman goddess of love, was regarded as one of the most authoritative of classical deities. Mother of the Roman people and its Empire, celebrated in religious festivals and revered in magical syncretic cults, she encompassed within her power and responsibilities a powder keg of ostensibly incompatible attributes: love, beauty, desire, sex, lust, fertility, seduction, familial devotion, prosperity and victory. Her image, and conflicted spirit, is still expressed in the present.

Her name in English is consonant with sexual desire, or love, and her *mount of Venus* is a poetic alternative for the *mons pubis*: the soft female tissue defined by the labia majora and pudendal cleft. Yet, her remit is so wide that misunderstandings inevitably arise over any interpretation of what 'love' or 'desire' actually mean and even the aura of her name is fraught with ambiguity: through its association with charms or magic potions used in the worship of her cult, she gave birth to the Latin word *venenum* – venom – and this tender root has evolved in modern romance languages to other meanings, some toxic, others not: ven-erate, ven-erable, ven-ery, ven-ial, ven-ereal.

Hesiod recounts the story of her violent birth as the issue of two men. He writes of how Aphrodite, her Greek forebear and doppelgänger, was born out of ocean foam as blood fell out of the sky into the sea; this was after Saturn, her father, had attacked and castrated Uranus, her grandfather. The brightest point in the heavens, where her ancestors also reside, Venus, like the water out of which she was born, is also able to fill any shape.

The superhuman mother of 22 children, at least, (including chubby, trouble-making Cupid, Hermaphroditus with the sex of both genders, and Priapus with his irrepressible, supersized penis), Venus is both the upholder of virtue *and* the protector of vice, and is therefore honoured by lovers, brides and families as well as by magicians, soldiers, sex workers and sex addicts. In contrast with the straightforward martial force of her godly lovers Vulcan, the metalworker, or Mars, the warrior, her Sphinx-like authority is enforced by seduction, sleight of hand, or sorcery, to assert an unknowable, intractable feminine power.

As an acknowledgement of classical hierarchy, and an expression of both moral and amoral force, her image has been reproduced throughout the history of art, eventually to become a modern icon onto which any reverent may project his, or her, desires or needs. Stripped of ambiguity, her persona was absorbed into Christianity as the Virgin Mary. And her worldly presence is still revered in the paintings of Courbet, Rossetti, Degas, Gauguin, Rops, Stuck, Derain and Picasso. In the age of celebrity and digital reproduction, her presence has become even more pervasive. From fashion photography, to Warhol, to pornography, she stands triumphant, commodified, degraded and fetishised.

2. CHUBBY

Thousands of years before the classical world lay down the foundations for western modern art and culture, chubby, female, 'fertility' figures were being produced across a swathe of Eurasia, from Western Europe to central Siberia. Uncovered from the middle of the nineteenth century, these small figurines were described as 'Venuses' for want of any better word, yet their form could not be any further from the carefully honed proportions of the classical ideal.

Made between 21,000 and 40,000 years ago, carved out of stone, scratched onto mammoth bone, or moulded out of clay, their large pendulous breasts, fleshy hips and buttocks, relatively small heads, stumpy legs and accentuated vaginas were originally thought to express an Upper Palaeolithic ideal of female beauty. Casting aside the 'irrelevant' extremities of heads, arms and legs, they are now regarded as representations of fertility and fruitfulness. Perhaps produced by women, they could also be early forms of self-portrait: in a world without mirrors, they may be 'maps' of the female body seen without reflection, made from above. But, no matter what their original function or means of production may have been, these objects have become established in the visual landscape of the contemporary mind as an unsettling, amputated presence.

Chubbiness had its place in the classical ideal but hardly to this extent and only as an expression of wellbeing, fertility and plenty within a recognisable world. The rubicund ideal of blossoming womanhood that permeates the seventeenth century canvases of Peter Paul Rubens responds to the fashion and material philosophy of his day, rather in the same way that, now, the slim body images of Kate Moss and other models suggest a confined authoritarianism that seems to fear engagement with procreation and life. The lissom, willowy gazelles we admire on contemporary, western catwalks almost seem to come from another world, yet their blank expressions and bodily attributes are not those of aliens but of children brutally transposed into adulthood.

In reality, people are of all sizes and, recently, increasingly large numbers have had to struggle with obesity, whatever their sex, assuming the extreme form of a Palaeolithic Venus. Those who made them would never have aspired to this shape because they were a *visual metaphor* for fertility. Bereft of symbolism, many seriously overweight people today are victims of poverty, pushed further into this trap by the unscrupulous marketing of cheap, fattening, unhealthy food. Others have medical disorders that require constant supervision and medication. Many suffer from both conditions.

Although an obvious danger to health, the moral horror of obesity is difficult to understand. Its symbolism has become conflicted with reality: when a primeval representation of 'plenty and fruitfulness' is translated into flesh and bone, such malformation implies immobility and perhaps early death. Yet, as we look around and 'chubbiness' expands in front of our eyes, its significance takes on other dimensions: it may evoke the safety of the womb, the warm flesh of an all-encompassing mother, the smell of milk, the passive innocence of babyhood. Not surprisingly, in pornography too, it maintains a significant, surprising and disruptive presence.

3. MAGIC

In the eight banners and three groups of figurines shown in this exhibition, Aurora Reinhard has, with characteristic precision, forensically exposed the Venusian iconology of the human body. On a superficial level, these works seem to parody the stereotypical catalogue of male sexual desire but, delving deeper, they are obviously more complicated as both infantile and female desires are projected here too. The position of power – who is viewing the work, what they see and the control of the artist over this - seems to shift seismically as her autopsy reaches its climax.

Away from the classical beauty of Botticelli, the emptiness of Warhol, or the self-absorption of Cindy Sherman, Reinhard, like Goya in *Los disparates* (1815-1823), invokes Venus's magic to conjure follies, spectres, nightmares and monsters.

There is a deathly aspect in these flat, two-metre high works, representations of the artist-warrior-goddess in which prosthetic devices, including masks and super-sized breasts, cover her body like armour, so that it is not clear where flesh begins and ends. As well as being a detailed meditation on popular male clichés of 'sexiness', these works imply that women, too, may not be inured to such images and could even find them empowering or attractive. By making the quintessentially female goddess Venus a laconic point of reference, she dissects, mixes and reveals essences of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' by overlaying extreme projections of both onto her own body.

Prompted by the absurdity of their imagined ambition as well as by the kaleidoscopic banality of their 'porno' poses, these works, in the final analysis, appear both humorous and sad, their deistic origins outsourced from reproductions in millions of pin-ups and porno magazines. Given numbers rather than names, Reinhard's images of bewigged, mostly half-naked, archetypes have to speak for themselves: the bloodily vampiric schoolgirl, the submissive sado-masochist, the pouting pole-dancer, the pert flasher, the coy office lady, the shameless hermaphrodite, the smouldering, predatory cougar, the lubricious wet-tee-shirt girl and so on. But, in spite of their flatness, these banners radiate a numinous psychic and sculptural monumentality that results not only from their large size but also from the magic of cultural tradition and actual desire embedded in their imagery.

Reinhard's small figurines are social rather than archetypical. Four of them, entitled *The Artist and Model*, ironically depict herself in different 'classical' poses, including a female version of Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker* (1884). Two other, similarly light-hearted, works complete this set: the first *The Impeccable Team*, based on Félicien Rops's watercolour, pastel and subsequent etching *Pornocrates* or *The Lady with the Pig* (1878), shows her naked and blindfolded following, or driving, a man on all fours on a leash. In *The Artist and Curator*, the boot, so to speak, is firmly on the other foot. Here, a dressed male figure drives the squatting artist forward, gagged and bound.

The Venusian spell of control, desire, submission and love is complete.

David Elliott: Curator