

Two Coats of Paint

An award-winning NYC blogazine, primarily about painting

OPINION

Summer rant: The wrong show

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Andrea Éva Győri, Traumatizing An Apple series, 2014. Ink on paper. Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery.

Dedicated to Dr. Ruth (1928–2024)

Contributed by **Laurie Fendrich** / I used my fattest Sharpie to excise the summer group show “Self-Pleasure” at **Thomas Erben Gallery** – a gallery I have long admired – from my list of what to see. Although the mere idea seems to have sprung straight from the *The Onion*, holding forth about an exhibition I’ve not seen, as I’m doing here, will strike some as inappropriate or even unethical. Several years ago, in fact, a prominent New York art magazine editor was duly criticized for reviewing a show he hadn’t seen. But I am not writing a review or describing the art in the show, which may or may not be good. I’m commenting on the show’s jejune premise.

“**Self-Pleasure**” is, the gallery website says, “a thematic exploration that delves into the realm of female self-gratification, offering a multilayered journey through the complexities of pleasure, desire and autonomy.” The artists in the show are female and sexually non-binary and, broadly speaking, make self-portraits in mediums ranging from painting, sculpture, mixed media, and performance art to lens-based art (that is, photography and video). The website also promises works that “brim with female agency and self-determination, while discussing the self in its relation or reaction to a wider social context.”

That last bit brought me up short. Does all art have to lay claim to a “relation or reaction to a wider social context”? Even art about self-pleasuring? Curator **Sabrina Slavin** explains:

It is depleting to think about sex only as something to be consumed, rather than the beginning of us all. By making love, we create life. Through self-love, we create ourselves; like clay spinning on a wheel, being molded with soft force. As women, erotic imagery is not created with our psychic needs in mind, so we create our own imagery. There is joy and healing in singularity, in allowing yourself the space for self-discovery. This is the essence of self-pleasure.



Senga Nengudi, R.S.V.P., Reverie – Stale Mate, 2014. Nylon tights, sand. Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery.

I go along with Slavin’s idea that sex is more than something to be consumed, but the leap from “By making love, we create life” to “Through self-love we create ourselves” is way too solipsistic for me to track. How about the way our social nature contributes to our sense of self? And how exactly does masturbation create “the space for self-discovery”? What’s wrong with women doing it merely to feel physical pleasure? In any case, to expect “healing” through wanking asks the act to deliver a lot more than has ever been asked of it.

At this stage, of course, the subject itself is no big deal. Since the revolution in sexology starting in the 1960s, few Freudians are still standing. Most parents know that any girl who hasn’t been subjected to systematic cultural repression (or mutilation) carries her own little toy between her legs that she plays with all on her own, starting at a very young age, just as little boys play with theirs. The phenomenon was a favorite topic for the perennially chirpy **Dr. Ruth**, and as a friend mentioned to me, it cheerily surfaced in “The Contest,” an iconic sitcom episode in season 4 of *Seinfeld*; it also showed up as a jaunty rock tune in **Joan Osborne’s** “Right Hand Man” – both in the relatively carefree 1990s.



Janice Nowinski, Bather, 2022. Oil on canvas, 6 x 4 in. Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery.

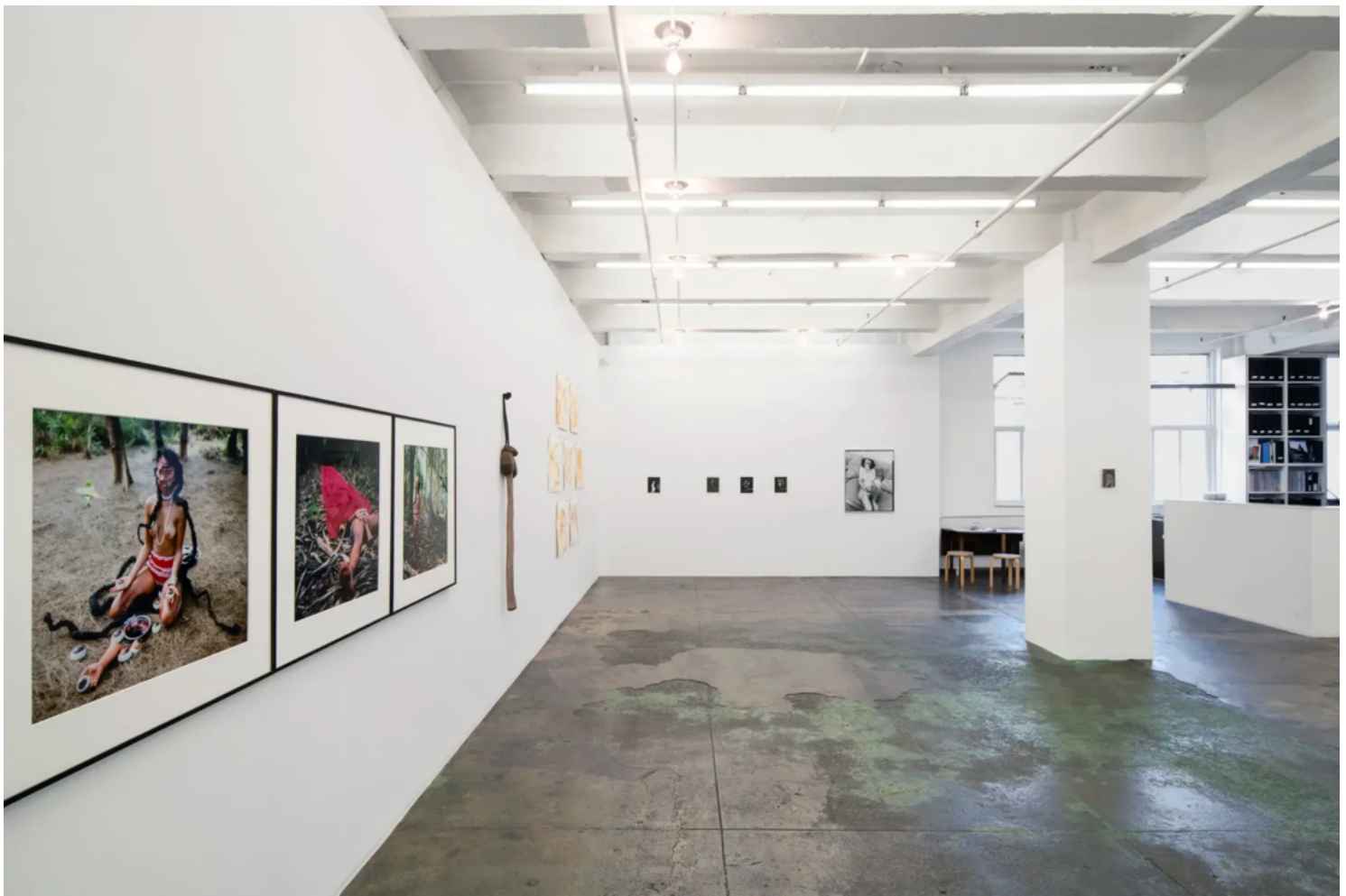


Kinke Kooi, Be Precise, 2014. Acrylic paint, graphite, colored pencil, conté crayon on paper, 18 x 24 in. Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery.



Justine Kurland, Masturbating on Marc's Couch 23 Days After Breaking Up, 2015. Gelatin silver print, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery.

What a show about female self-pleasure warrants is social and historical context, which this one woefully ignores. It's now been more than half a century since the publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the seminal book on female bodies and sexuality (including self-pleasuring) that radically changed the discourse about women and their bodies, especially in the art world. Is our cultural memory really so short? Any exhibition purporting to be a "thematic exploration" of female masturbation could at least have mentioned the trailblazers of the sixties and seventies, when many women artists made the focus of their art exactly this activity. The list includes the Austrian artist Valie Export (now 84), as well as the porn performer turned artist Annie Sprinkle and Hannah Wilke. Some rootedness is required for "Self-Pleasure" to do more than just fill the walls.



Thomas Erben Gallery: “Self-Pleasure”, curated by Sabrina Slavin, 2024, Installation View. Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery.

“Self-Pleasure,” curated by Sabrina Slavin, Thomas Erben Gallery, 526 West 26th Street, New York, NY. Through July 26, 2024.

Artists in the exhibition: *Tofo Bardi, Nicole Eisenman, Chitra Ganesh, Andrea Éva Győri, Justine Kurland, Kinke Kooi, Jacky Marshall, Shala Miller, Anne Minich, Senga Nengudi, Janice Nowinski, Adrian Piper, Carla Williams, Jin Young Lee with Colin Sakamoto and Thomas Raggio.*

About the author: **Laurie Fendrich** is professor emerita of fine arts at Hofstra University and a Guggenheim-award-winning painter who writes both art criticism and fiction. She is a member of the organization American Abstract Artists and is represented by Louis Stern Fine Arts in Los Angeles.