

a SENSITIVE
touch

Thierry Bonnaffé



Cindy

Introduction to Thierry Bonnaffé's Sensual Art

"I always strive for a well balanced, restful composition, in which the technical aspects get as much attention as the aesthetic ones," states Thierry Bonnaffé, a Belgian artist who works in the tradition of figure painting established during the Renaissance and pursued until Impressionism. In his search for harmony and balance in the representation of feminine beauty and sensuality, Bonnaffé manifests affinities with postromantic art. His charcoal and sanguine sketches combine a rare delicacy and sureness of touch with creativity of vision. Thierry Bonnaffé comes from a multidisciplinary background. He studied architecture in Saint-Lucas in Ghent, Belgium. He received a degree in cinematography as well as studying drawing with R. Delrue. Although he continues to work on architecture and film, Bonnaffé is most passionate about drawing and painting the female figure.

Sketching contours

From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, meaning all the way to the Impressionists, the *École des Beaux Arts* in France privileged the drawing of outlines and contours—a technique inherited from the Renaissance masters—as opposed to focusing upon blocks of color as a way of teaching painting. The implicit assumption behind this hierarchy was that color was found in nature whereas outlining the human form was a more difficult, acquired skill. Whether or not we agree with this claim, Thierry Bonnaffé's 'Cindy' shows how impressive painting can be when an artist captures the essence of both color and form.

Cindy's body is painted with the soft contours inherited from Renaissance techniques. The body is fluid form, revealed through minimal outlines, subtle shading and a sure touch. The shading, however, is not performed through the contrast of specks of color that has become familiar to us since the Impressionists. Instead, it employs the Renaissance techniques of *chiaroscuro* and *sfumato*, the gradual shading that leaves forms just enough to the imagination to render them all the more expressive.

Only a few curved lines reveal that the young woman's troubled emotions belie her repose. To complement the subtlety of form, the color is equally understated. A fire-hot, agitated red—and that's all—bathes her body in a luminous warmth. In the way it conveys the human form and moods so minimalistically—through such lightness of color and touch—this painting is exquisite. As we can see on his website, Bonnaffé's sketches epitomize the beauty of sensuality.

The Beauty of Sensuality

Quite justifiably, we believe that there's a fine line between sensuality and sexuality. We also believe that there's a difference between pornography and art. In fact, these two distinctions often blend together: we tend to regard art as sensual and pornography as more overtly sexual. Warding off the charge of pornography, photography, sculpture and painting often veil the human body, especially the more eroticized female nude, by representing it in aesthetic poses and allegorical situations that evoke thoughts, emotions and dreams, not only carnal desires.

If the boundary between pornography and art is so heatedly debated, however, it's partly because it's drawn by our own subjective reactions. Romantic and postromantic art confront this problem by illustrating palpably the distinction between sensuality and sexuality. Like Romantic art, postromantic art celebrates the beauty of the human body and of sensual images and relations. I invoke the broad concept of beauty (in the abstract) only to limit it to a category that's easier to define and more relevant to postromantic art: the beauty of sensuality. Let me explain why.

Philosophers, from Plato and Plotinus to Shaftesbury and Diderot, despite their overwhelming differences, have described beauty as an underlying harmony that has a pleasing sensory effect. In so doing, aesthetic philosophers confront several problems already anticipated by Socrates in *The Symposium*—Plato's dialogue that deals most directly with subjects of love and beauty. How can we account for changing standards of beauty? What draws us to the beautiful? Is there an underlying notion of beauty that can apply equally well to the magic of a sunset, a pretty woman and a beautiful painting? And if there is, then how can such a general definition serve to explain specific categories of the beautiful, such as the beauty of human beings, of emotions, of architecture or of classical art? Moreover, is it really helpful to define beauty in terms of other difficult concepts, such as harmony, order or agreeability? Doesn't this process lead to an infinite regress of definitions, each unknown defined in terms of yet another unknown, as Socrates had cautioned? Not having found satisfactory answers to these questions, I'm daunted by the difficulties inherent in defining beauty in the abstract. The beauty of sensual images and objects seems to me a more approachable subject as well as one that's more useful to understanding Romantic and postromantic art. So let us ask: what is sensuality? And why does it have the power to move us?

As is customary, I'll begin with a provisional definition. Sensuality is that which titillates the senses without making any specific promises or, much less, delivering. Sensuality leaves our desires, wishes, expectations, emotions, thoughts and impulses in a state of confusion and ambiguity. It provokes what Descartes called a sense of "admiration" or "wonder" that is inseparable from pleasure yet far removed from satisfaction.

Sensuality has little to do with degrees of unveiling, with explicitness. Like sexuality—its foil and companion—it's more of a psychological rather than physical state. Just imagine the following images placed side by side: one featuring a woman who is fully dressed, with bright red lips puckered in a kiss and a come-hither gaze. Her body is clothed, but her (supposed, staged) intent is crystal-clear. The effect is sexual. Now imagine a picture of a woman who is completely nude. Her looks are understated; her demeanor and glance ambiguous. The viewer is not sure what she desires, thinks or feels. Physically she is revealed. Psychologically, however, she remains a mystery, an enticement. The effect is sensual.

These hypothetical examples lead me to supplement my initial description of sensuality. I will now say that sensuality hints at human subjectivity—at implicit desires, needs, dreams and thoughts—in both the viewer and the viewed. Sexual images and imagery—even when the women or men represented are clothed—tend to strip the image of its psychological content, reducing it to a few body parts in the viewed and a few analogous needs in the viewers. By way of contrast, sensuality, even when the women or men represented are nude, veils the body in a psychological richness and depth that touches upon the artistic.

To probe a little further the nature of sensuality, let us consider another illustration. I'll borrow my second example from Pedro Almodovar's 'Talk to Her' (*Hable con ella*), one of my favorite movies. The story focuses upon the obsessive love and desire of Benigno, a male nurse, for a young and beautiful ballerina named Alicia. Upon meeting her, Benigno is entirely captivated by the young woman. Yet he doesn't get the opportunity to know Alicia and neither do we, the viewers. Almost as soon as they meet, she's hit by a car when crossing the street and lapses into a coma. Consequently all viewers see of Alicia after the accident is her body, her purely physical beauty. Conversely, as Benigno takes care of his beloved, talks to her and treats her as a human being capable of understanding and responding to him, we become intimately familiar with his personality. We come to understand his loneliness, his obsessive love, his uncontrollable urges, his unwavering devotion.

In coming to multidimensional life for Benigno, however, Alicia also comes to life before our eyes. Almodovar has the immense talent of bringing out psychological richness and intensity in sensual depictions of physical beauty. Through Benigno's loving gaze, care and compassion, we see more in Alicia than a beautiful body even though that's exactly what she has been reduced to as a result of the car accident. Sensual art and photography can perform the same magical operation as this movie. They give birth to a soul, to a living personality, in representing sometimes nothing more than the body, its movements and expressions. Which is why our own responses to these images tend to be more complex than physical desire. Sensual photography, literature and art

call for the viewer's or reader's participation in imagining another person, another life. They're not just stimulating; they're also creative.

Philosophers have long been fascinated by the way in which sensuality rivets the attention and excites the mind. Although René Descartes is best known for being the father of rationalism, he's also one of the most sensitive readers of sensuality and emotion. His reflections on the subject were prompted by his discussions with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia and Queen Christina of Sweden, both of whom were cultivated, sensitive women who found that Cartesian rationalism could not explain the better part of human behavior. Why do we fall in love? Why do we desire? Why do we feel emotion? Why do we respond to beauty? To address these important questions, Descartes wrote *The Passions of the Soul* (1649).

That which touches our senses, thoughts and feelings, the philosopher explains, ignites the response of admiration or marvel. Admiration is not a *coup de foudre*, or the feeling of falling in love on the spot. It is, in Descartes' own words, "a sudden surprise of the soul which manifests itself in considering with special attention objects which seem rare and extraordinary." (*The Passions of the Soul*, 116) To catch our attention, these objects or subjects have to either be or appear to be rare and special. Alicia may have been an ordinary girl, but in Almodovar's movie, despite being deprived of the capacity to think, feel and speak, she appeared tragically unique in her predicament, sympathetic, moving.

Sensual images or scenarios—especially when artistic—have the power to transform what may be ordinary into something—or someone—quite extraordinary. In turn, as Descartes elaborates, our appreciation of sensual beauty has calmer, more thoughtful manifestations than stimulating our visceral drives and emotions: "And this passion has something special about it since we don't notice that it's accompanied by any transformation of the heart or the blood as we do with the other passions." (116) Which is not to say that this more psychological form of passion is less powerful. On the contrary, as Descartes explains: "Which doesn't prevent it from having a lot of force, caused by surprise or marvel, which is to say, the sudden and unforeseen reception of an impression which changes the movements of the soul." (117)

For Descartes, passion is the opposite of action. An action is something one does through an act of will. By way of contrast, a passion is what happens to someone more or less involuntarily. Not all passions, however, overwhelm the senses and unleash complex sensations, thoughts and feelings. In fact, the kind of passions that provoke such unsettling, exciting movements—that attract our admiration—are quite rare. So how do sensual representations motivate, to use Descartes' expression, the movements of the soul? By triggering complex forms of identification in us, the readers or viewers.

By taking a two-dimensional image on a screen or series of words on a page and creating the contours of other human beings with rare powers to captivate the attention and inspire the imagination. Sensual photography, creative writing, cinema and art reflect back into our eyes not so much another human being as our own complexity. The philosopher and mystic Simone Weil has said that when a very pretty woman looks in the mirror, she doesn't realize there's more to her than external beauty. Whereas when an unattractive woman looks in the mirror, she knows there's more to her than what she sees. In sensual Romantic and postromantic art and literature, it's apparent that beautiful and sensual images conceal much more than meets the eye. This is precisely what we see when we gaze at Thierry Bonnaffé's sensual art.

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Moscovici was born in Bucharest, Romania. At the age of 12, she immigrated with her family to the United States where she has gone on to obtain a B.A. from Princeton University and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Brown University.

In 2002, she co-founded with Mexican sculptor Leonardo Pereznieta the international aesthetic movement called "Postromanticism", devoted to celebrating beauty, passion and sensuality in contemporary art. She wrote a book on Romanticism and its postromantic survival called *Romanticism and Postromanticism*, (Lexington Books, 2007) and taught philosophy, literature and arts and ideas at Boston University and at the University of Michigan.

Most recently, she published a nonfiction book on psychopathic seduction, called *Dangerous Liaisons* (Hamilton Books, 2011) and a psychological thriller called *The Seducer* (2012), which tells the story of a woman lured by a dangerous psychopathic predator.



Je vois toute la vérité et non pas seulement celle de la surface. J'accentue les lignes qui expriment le mieux l'état spirituel que j'interprète.

Auguste Rodin











