

P O R N O G R A P H Y   A S   A   D E C O R A T I V E  
A R T :   J O Y C E   K O Z L O F F ' S  
P A T T E R N S   O F   D E S I R E

B Y   L I N D A   N O C H L I N

IN ONE OF JOYCE KOZLOFF'S exuberant decorative inventions (pl. 2), two separate pairs of exotic lovers enjoy their amorous pursuits amid the rich entanglements of vines and flowers decorating a Renaissance vestment. The maharaja from Nepal in the top image carries a dagger and hatchet in his belt (weapons are a common feature of the erotic iconography of some cultures); the bottom pair engage in sexual yoga, the artifice of their poses matching that of the conventionalized floral backdrop against which they are placed. In another painting (pl. 23), frolicking putti from black Pompeian frescos are interspersed with scenes derived from a medieval bath-and-bordello miniature (cleanliness was definitely *not* associated with godliness back then), an image borrowed from a present-day gay pornographer, an eighteenth-century Indian lovemaking scene, and a Reginald Marsh lithograph of Parisian prostitutes dancing more or less naked in a brothel. These descriptions provide some sense of the range and inventiveness of the series of watercolors in which the artist engages the erotic with the ornamental.

By recasting pornography as a form of decorative art, Kozloff has been transgressive on several counts: first of all, in the realm of subject matter, a realm in which outspoken representation of the sexual act has always, in Western art at any rate, served to signify the presence of the transgressive. Secondly, she has been subversive on the level of formal practice, treating the copulating bodies that punctuate the aggressively patterned fields of the picture plane as simply another decorative element, no more significant than the stylized borders or highly ornamental backgrounds against which their provocative forms languish, twist, or nestle. The fact that the artist happens to be a woman and a feminist raises still other disturbing issues. How can her strong belief in women's subjecthood and their right of self-determination be reconciled with a form of representation that, by definition, objectifies women's bodies and transforms them into passive vehicles of masculine specular pleasure? How, to put it bluntly, can a feminist engage with porn?

I have, of course, been speaking as though pornography were a simple, unitary concept, a preexisting, fixed entity, easy to define and thus to regulate and contain. And yet, although almost everyone seems to know just what pornography is and to have a very certain opinion about it, about its viewers, and about whether or not it should be generally available, there are widely divergent views about the values inscribed in the pornographic representation, and more specifically, its effects and effectiveness vis-à-vis its readers or viewers.

Susan Sontag, on the one hand, in her now classic article “The Pornographic Imagination” of 1967, devoted to the literary variety, defends pornography as a specific attainment of the imagination in which the “full” human being, male or female, has no place. “What pornographic literature does,” asserts Sontag, “is precisely to drive a wedge between one’s existence as a full human being and one’s existence as a sexual being. . . . Normally we don’t experience . . . our sexual fulfillment as distinct from or opposed to our personal fulfillment. But perhaps in part they are distinct, whether we like it or not. Insofar as strong sexual feeling does involve an obsessive degree of attention, it encompasses experiences in which a person can feel he is losing his ‘self’ ” (*Styles of Radical Will* [New York, 1981], pp. 58–59). Going further to specify the characteristics of the literary pornographic imagination, Sontag lays emphasis on energy and absolutism: “The books generally called pornographic are those whose primary, exclusive, and overriding preoccupation is with the depiction of sexual ‘intentions’ and ‘activities.’ . . . The universe proposed by the pornographic imagination is a total universe. It has the power to ingest and metamorphose and translate all concerns that are fed into it, reducing everything into the one negotiable currency of the erotic imperative” (*ibid.*, p. 66).

Monique Wittig, the contemporary French feminist, on the other hand, conceptualizes pornography not merely as a construction of the imagination but as a form of discourse, which is at the same time a “performative act.” Says Wittig: “The pornographic discourse is part of the strategies of violence which are exercised upon [women]: it humiliates, it degrades, it is a crime against our ‘humanity.’ As a harassing tactic it has another function, that of a warning. . . . [The] experts in semiotics . . . reproach us for confusing, when we demonstrate against pornography, the discourses with the reality. They do not see that this discourse *is* reality for us, one of the facets of the reality of our oppression. They believe that we are mistaken in our level of analysis.”\*

Neither Sontag’s nor Wittig’s specifications of the pornographic quite do justice to Kozloff’s take on erotica. For it is precisely as a genre that she approaches pornographic imagery, a genre that, for all its differences and specificities of style, iconography, and cultural contextualization, cuts across barriers of nationality, time, and geography, to concentrate on a narrow if intense range of human experiences. The representation of sexual intercourse, in all its varieties and permutations, is what the pornography appropriated by Kozloff focuses on: intercourse, foreplay, aftermath, and preliminary stimulation. There is not a “soft” image in the lot: this is hard-core stuff.

In a paradoxical sense, however, the series does not belong in the category of pornography at all. The juxtapositions that Kozloff establishes between the sexually charged images and their totally non-illusionistic settings

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\*“The Straight Mind,” *Feminist Issues*, no. 1 (Summer, 1980), p. 106. I am drawing here on Tania Modleski’s suggestive reading of Wittig’s analysis in terms of J. L. Austin’s notion of the “performative” statement, in “Some Functions of Feminist Criticism, or the Scandal of the Mute Body,” *October* 49 (Summer, 1989), pp. 3–24, especially p. 18.

cancel out that compelling realism so often associated with pornographic visual representation in our culture, especially since the advent of photography, that supreme medium for the mass distribution of porn almost since the time of its invention. This ready-made realism, cheap, democratic, seductively illusionistic, called forth a strong reaction. As early as the second half of the nineteenth century, a major artist like Edgar Degas, in his series of Brothel monotypes, by juxtaposing realistic representations of sexually explicit poses and incidents—splayed legs, pubic hair, drooping breasts, vulgar gestures, copulating couples, etc.—with the emphatic marks of the graphic medium—odd angles of vision, splashes or splotches of ink, scratched and striated surfaces, fingerprints and bare white paper—called into question the “performative” aspect of visually produced porn: its transparent appeal to masculine desire. To put it another way, Degas was already setting up a distinction between two kinds of pleasure: the pleasure of viewing a naturalistically depicted erotic scene and the pleasure of experiencing the nuances of an inventively manipulated aesthetic surface.

Yet Kozloff’s project raises a further issue with respect to the pornographic intention. Should a Kozloff watercolor be taken as “pornography” in the strict sense of the term, or is the artist using erotic images appropriated from a variety of national traditions to create a quite different genre, in which the sexual charge must of necessity fizzle, discharge, or misfire because of its inappropriate or contradictory new context? This aspect of Kozloff’s work seems aimed particularly at the woman viewer, traditionally excluded from or ambiguously positioned in relation to conventional erotic imagery, which is designed with the male heterosexual in mind. Perhaps the female viewer would do best to relate to Kozloff’s constructions in terms of oscillation, a situation in which the viewer’s position moves back and forth between engagement and critique, between identification and distancing. The making strange, the defamiliarization of the familiar vocabulary of visual arousal certainly plays an important role in Kozloff’s construction of the erotic/decorative image.

Again, it is the female viewer who takes most pleasure in the transgressive possibilities these works offer in both their demystification of the sacrosanct wickedness of the pornographic image, and, at the same time, their free play with the sacred texts of all cultures: their disrespectful but often affectionate playing around with the cultural patrimony—*patrimony* to be taken in the literal sense of “that which is inherited from the father.”

What does it mean to the feminine, more specifically the feminist, viewer of these images that, for example, the space provided for the coupling of stylized Egyptian figures is a page from *The Book of Kells* (pl. 9), a surface inscribing with obsessive decorative energy a sacred Christian text and resanctified by the aesthetic authority conferred on it by more recent, art-historical canonization? Kozloff doubly desanctifies this page by means of the dual visual scandals of sexual representation and artistic appropriation. Both the Koran (pl. 14) and a Hebrew scroll of the Book of Esther (pl. 22) serve the same sort of function; in the case of the former, juxtaposed with a

Japanese, a Greek, and a Beardsley image of fantastically exaggerated phallic prowess, as well as a Persian representation of an elegant, turbaned man having sex with an ecstatic donkey; in the case of the latter, embellished with Chinese and French scenes of prostitution. That texts so closely linked with sexual prohibition and repression should serve literally as a stage for the performance of the rituals of sexual arousal and satisfaction at this historical moment, the moment of an ominous turning toward censorship of sexual expression in the arts and elsewhere, constitutes “performative discourse” indeed. More accurately, in the present climate of mounting repression, such representations constitute a political discourse of the most intrepid and challenging sort.

But Kozloff’s project involves more than mere blasphemy. I find it satisfying that she refuses to rely on just one set of strategies, that the goals of her sensual satire are multiform. In *Revolutionary Textiles* (pl. 12), for example, it is a Soviet fabric pattern, up-to-date in the extreme, that provides the decorative foil, sandwiched between human figures drawn from Greek vase painting and Japanese prints. The erotic elements in both cases are stylized and conventionalized but in very different ways, as indeed are the representational elements—airplanes and factories—in the Soviet textile. How does the viewer react to this unexpected conjunction of the sexual and the decorative? Does she or he have to eradicate one reading in order to experience the other? Or does the kind of perceptual oscillation to which I have already made reference take place, a psycho-visual vibration in which response to shape, color, and contour, on the one hand, and to sexual arousal, on the other, displace each other in rapid succession? And how would one go about distinguishing between the decorative intentions of the Soviet fabric designer and those of the ancient Greek vase painters, who, after all, were also practicing decorative artists as well as being skilled, and inventive, pornographers? Issues of abstraction versus representation; high art versus low, or mass-produced, art; and cultural ownership and appropriation all are addressed here but without resort to the sensory—and sensual—deprivation characterizing more theoretical expositions of such trendy dilemmas.

The *Patterns of Desire* series is, on some level, always about pleasure, that most desirable and elusive of experiences. In these images, three kinds of pleasure are at issue, perpetually figuring and refiguring themselves in a variety of ways: the pleasure of the artist, the viewer, and the figures represented in the images. The pleasure of those figures is a given of the pornographic imagination, despite, or perhaps because of, the generally deadpan expressions of the enactors of the pornographic scenario in almost all kinds of visual porn. In a way, this lack of specific expression is a token of the intensity of the experience itself, which is represented as engaging the body in isolation without self-consciousness or ambivalence. The expressionlessness of most of the participants in these erotic games indicates unequivocally to the viewer that what we are looking at and being aroused by are fleshly, not spiritual, exercises.

The pleasure of the artist has to do with both the sexual and the decorative aspects of the production. “I wanted to swing back and forth between architecture, the decorative arts, popular culture, and landscape, between flat and deep space,” Kozloff declares, “I chose only sources that I love. After all, the series was to be about pleasure.”

For the viewer, pleasure may arise from a variety of factors. The unexpectedness of the juxtapositions is one potent source: elephants humping above, people in elephantine positions below (in *Khajuraho Dijonnaise*, pl. 25); Giulio Romano’s illustrations for Pietro Aretino’s sonnets and 1930s Hollywood movie stills (in *Classical Stations*, pl. 16); an expressionist set from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and expressionless copulators from a Chinese pillow book (in *Alan’s Bedroom*, pl. 1). Sometimes the sheer plenitude of the image provides plenty of visual satisfaction. This seems to be the case in *Xtatic Night Blooms—or Rosebud* (pl. 26), in which there are an incredible number of erotic objects and a dazzlingly intricate setting enmeshing them, and the eighteenth-century English chintz field of action is as sensuous and charged with energy as the tumbling, straddling, clutching figures that adorn it. Richness of color, texture, and pattern adds to the sensual enjoyment of the pictorial texts throughout the series; so does a certain, deliberate denial of richness from time to time—a pleasurable respite from the demands of decoration—provided by works like *Big Boys: Palladio, Veronese, Picasso et al* (pl. 15), with its classically austere Palladian enfilade, and the bizarre architectonic symmetry of *Lequeu’s Legions* (pl. 3).

In conclusion, I must admit that Kozloff’s watercolors settle none of the controversies raging about the pornographic object—or the pornographic imagination. On the contrary, they tend to unsettle any previous notions that the viewer may have entertained, especially about the inevitable seriousness of the erotic experience. Sex, in many of its manifestations, is bizarre or seems so when looked at from outside; at times it is outright funny. It is especially funny when it takes place in the wrong setting—and almost all of Kozloff’s settings are “wrong” from the point of view of spatial, temporal, and visual logic. It is, in a way, just this wrongness that makes them so right. Masturbation in the monastery; the maharaja fucking in the Mackintosh-MacDonald tearoom; George Grosz jerking off in an Utamaro landscape. This is a *déréglement des sens*, perhaps, a liberation of the erotic fantasy from the bonds of time and place, a free flight into a crazy, untrammled garden of earthly delights. Yet at the same time, the *Patterns of Desire* series draws our attention to the logic, the persistent mechanics, as it were, of erotic production, and by doing so, reveals the limitations of the genre with its endless repetitions, its all too systematic repleteness. By tearing the erotic out of its expected contexts and providing other, less expected and more visually competitive sites for the representation of the explicitly sexual, Kozloff foregrounds both the achievements and the inevitable lacks of the pornographic imagination.