

Across the Oceans:

For a New Vision of Contemporary Spiritual Erotica in Western Art

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For quite some time, there has been a rather peculiar link in art and aesthetics between the heterogeneous world of mysticism, and that of eroticism. Both have in mind the aim towards the transgression of all limitations, and even that of the worldly itself. Both strike at the heart of two very basic and fundamental human experiences that intertwine at the deepest of metaphysical levels: that of sexuality, and that which we call the realm of the soul. Art has always been the mediating factor between the two, and the only human endeavour that can truly reveal these “limit” experiences (as Bataille called them) in their most vivid of transmissions. Through art and aesthetics, one can express what is really at the heart of all conjecture and meaning into such intimate alcoves of one’s very immortal soul - hence within the spiritual aesthetics of the various world religions, art and the erotic go hand in hand.

However, as I will argue, the more eroticism became decoupled and eventually alienated from spirituality in the modern world, this base-level profanation has degraded the character of artistic erotica in general. Specifically, 'erotica' has now almost become commensurate with a more tasteful avenue of pornographic titillation, not a forceful medium for metaphysical and existential ecstasy that goes beyond the experience of mortal flesh. That is why in this essay, I shall run through the difference between art and pornography, and with the aid of various sources from both the East and the West (especially Bataille, Scruton and Francois Jullien), I shall propose a new aesthetics of spiritual eroticism for Western Civilization that can retain what was once transformative and sublime.

Figuring the Erotic: Know the Decline

Our souls certainly have suffered in the hypersexualized modern era for reasons that go beyond the explication of this essay; therefore there exists a basic tension in any work that proports to elevate the traditional and the metaphysical into the lives of those everyday people seeking meaning once more. This tension is derived from the need to raise that which is worthy

of revival, to convey the utmost importance of retaining that which is positive about the past - the world of tradition - and on the other hand, to lay down ideas and concepts that can define a comportment for contemporary Man, reconciling the challenges presented to us by modernity, and adjusting traditional concepts accordingly.

In works of contemporary erotica, we see a starvation of the spiritual, a profanation that has led into a celebration of the ghastly and the grotesque. Now, these things are warranted as topics of artistic exploration, and there are powerful ideas behind contemporary erotica, so this essay does not wish to cast aspersions. However, eroticism decoupled from the spiritual is still at a loss in terms of its power of transgression and ecstatic connectivity with the numinous. To truly know what is at stake, we must first address what the possible difference is between artistic erotica, and what is merely pornographic, we shall also examine a brief history of contemporary erotica that illustrates the difference between eroticism and what merely gives momentary and ersatz satiation to libidinal drives.

One could come up with a poetic heuristic that differentiates between what is “tasteful” erotic art and what is merely pornographic. One analogy could be the ideation, the sense with which a piece of sexually charged media fills you. If a work merely gives you sexual stimuli, then it is (more or less) pornographic, but if a piece of art evokes in you a deep desire that goes beyond the mere physical (or what Bataille called the “genital¹”) acts of sexual union, than this work is charged with the power of eroticism. A good definition of erotica versus porn is provided here:

“Admittedly, the erotic might end up having the same effect [as pornography]. Still, the ideal behind erotica is to transcend its literally provocative subject - to add a third dimension, if you will. In aspiring to celebrate the varieties of sexual bliss, and the universal desire for carnal union (which, deep within, just might carry hints of the divine), the eroticist seeks to portray a vision of both human pulchritude and the potential ecstasy that humans - through sexually joining - can share. One that won't grow old, or become stale over time (as pornographic images

¹ Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism, Death And Sensuality*. (San Francisco: City lights Books, 1957, 1986): 230.

generally do). Also, with pornography, it's basically “sex for sale.” Artists pursue eroticism, I think, as they pursue beauty.”²

Pornography is that which merely satiates the basic drives in a consumerist fashion, not aiming for transcendence, and furthermore, it is that which enslaves rather than frees the soul. Sexual obsession and carnal vice as a form of self-made bondage - “slaver of the soul” in other words - have been central to the writers of almost every wisdom tradition upon the earth, and especially important to the writings of St. Paul³. The article in *Psychology Today* further states the distinction:

“What in general separates the erotic from the pornographic is an attitude toward sex and human sexuality that can be inferred from looking (dare I use the word “objectively”) at the finished product. If the subjects are portrayed in a manner that focuses on their inner and outer radiance, their fleshy vitality, and the work itself seems to manifest a passionate and powerful affirmation of life and the pleasures of this world, then I think we're talking erotic. If, however, the subjects seem reduced to so many body parts, if any beauty appears subordinate to the overriding purpose of arousal, if the sex depicted seems depersonalized, controlling, non-mutual, and devoid of fun or play (but rather seems about “getting down to business” and “getting off”) - and if the sex acts pictured contain not a hint of human caring or emotional connectedness to them [then we are dealing with the pornographic].”⁴

Keep this distinction in mind for later in this essay: the distinction between mere worldly flesh, and “radiance”, energy, *qi*, or the power of the dharmic-soul body that catalyzes a loss of mortal subjectivity in the exposure to eroticism and the act of sexual union. The object of erotic desire in pornography and the more lurid forms of pornographic art are merely reduced to objects of satiation, not embodied persons or spirits that are capable of mutual ritualistic union and worship of carnality. Scruton says as much in *Modern Culture*, stating that tasteful erotica is the object of imagined desire, the ideal shape of beauty and divinity, not merely a surrogate image of

² Seltzer, Leon. F. “What Distinguishes Erotica from Pornography? Gazing or leering? The erotic versus pornographic”. *Psychology Today*. (Apr 06, 2011). <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201104/what-distinguishes-erotica-pornography>

³ Here is a pertinent clip of a Lecture from E. Michael Jones discussing his book “Libido Dominandi”, from a NobodyTM edit. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWM4bJNpch0&t=407s>

⁴ Seltzer, “Psychology Today”.

lust - a fantastic and embodied desire in the realm of art, not merely a fetishized conduit. Artistic imaginary images are “informed” by reality, but then are embellished, beautified and brought to a state of interacting and determinative intensities, not merely an image of the consumable actual found in pornography⁵.

What is a *fetish* but mistaking a symbol of the real with the real itself, and not in an ideal or archetypal way. It is pure onanism - a lust-desire for the bodily - and to fetishize, in the root word, is to place a talisman or “token” upon reality⁶. Scruton, in seeming agreement with Bataille, further makes this genital / eroticism distinction, stating that the sexual surrogate is impersonal, machinic in its production, and there is a certain profanation and impersonal pliability to the mass-produced pornographic image that is absent from genuine artistic works of erotica. Sexual union is stripped of love and sentiment, it is merely the genital act of copulation and libidinal excitement that takes over as the focus of production⁷. Bataille’s concept of eroticism is intimately wed with his idea of the “accursed share” economy, those moments of mystical ecstasy where energy, intensities and channels of flows or “life-energy” is measured not in standing-reserve but in expenditure. The erotic is not simply sexual fulfillment but a furthering of mortal limits, aiming at life beyond death - in a word, immortality itself⁸.

The eroticism of Bataille hinges upon the distinction between what he called “discontinuous” and “continuous” being. Discontinuous being is the everydayness of existence, a kind of Sartrean “bad faith” where one is atomized, pressured by the limits of our being, a “Homo-Economicus”, operating on a utilitarian and rational basis. Discontinuous being calculates and stores energy between the realm of subjects and objects, distinct forms, whilst “continuous” being is a more primal state of energetic flows, unions, and dissolutions of boundaries within a free choice. It is not a more primal state, but rather a state of deeply human striving towards never-ending heights of ecstasy, fulfillment, and temporary suspensions of singular individual being⁹. This is very close to the idea of a “plane of immanance” in Deleuzian philosophy, where a being sloughs off stability and modular sedimentation to take on newer lines

⁵ Scruton, Roger. *Modern Culture*. (New York, London: Continuum Books, 1998, 2005): 58-59.

⁶ Zero HP lovecraft: <https://twitter.com/Ox49fa98/status/1111279223136608261>

⁷ Scruton, “Modern Culture”, 63.

⁸ Bataille, “Eroticism”, 249.

⁹ Minguy, Thomas. “Erotic Exuberance: Bataille’s Notion Of Eroticism”. *PhænEx*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (spring/summer 2017): 35-36.

of flight and channels of energetic intensities that intersect with others. Discontinuous being is within the realm of finitude, and creates the possibility of ontological stability, whereas continuous being is the fading of selfhood, and pure chaos or discord¹⁰. A pertinent quote elaborates this distinction:

*“The fact that this unique being, in its given beauty and uniqueness is a unique manifestation of life makes even more explicit the aspect of chance and absurdity that rules our existences: it makes explicit the constant movement of energies around the Earth that are chaotic and non-logical. The uniqueness of the lover shows that it is impossible to possess such a being, because the life of such a unique person is an ephemeral manifestation in an energetic life. And this life will kill her. When Bataille talks about this ‘torn’ aspect of limited beings, he means that our discontinuous life always comes with the sense of a continuity that we strive to escape: we tear ourselves out of the continuous existence. In eroticism, what happens is that we seek the place where we were torn apart, and we connect through these open wounds. ‘When love denies limited existences, it gives them in return an infinity of emptiness. It limits them to waiting for what they are not.’ Erotic love is the negation of limits, the transgression of seriousness and the openness to the emptiness of what lies beyond our limits: the emptiness of a meaningless chaos of energies”.*¹¹

Eroticism is the transgression and violence done to the self in order to move beyond the self, to transcend mere flesh and become an energetic form of being, in a word, what the Tantric Hindus called the “Dharma-body”. In eroticism is a vulnerability, a breakdown of seriousness and an openness of limitations. Its connections to mysticism are apparent in this death-transcending and limitless state of being in flux¹². As Bataille points out, in the various religious traditions around the world, even in Christianity, is an indifference and violence done to the body, a state of systematic transition from mere sensuality towards divinity and spirituality, which is paradoxically entangled with a kind of obscenity¹³. The distinction and similarities between the two are as follows:

¹⁰ Ibid, 37.

¹¹ Ibid, 44.

¹² Ibid, 45.

¹³ Bataille, “Eroticism”, 247-249.

“Religion coincides with the dream of a pure rational principle that orders the world. What eroticism and sacredness have in common is not the belief in salvation or in the immortality of the soul, but the experience of the continuity of the world as a manifestation of violent and exuberant energies - ‘For everything that lives is Holy’ (Blake 45). This is the vision that is associated with mysticism, and as such mysticism and eroticism share a similar structure: in the vision of objects that are part of the discontinuous existence, the mystic and the erotic person see a gate towards continuous existence.”¹⁴

Here we can further see the lacuna widening between artistic eroticism and mere pornography, for porn is more attuned to the machinations of discontinuous being and its need to quantify pleasure, separate individuals, and objectify relations between and among the sexes. Continuous being is the striving of the mystical and the erotic, it is not alienating or detached from the energy of spirit, but is a divine alienation from the bodily, the utilitarian, and instrumental reason itself.

The Fall into the Pornographic

Let us examine a brief and non-exhaustive history between the blurring of the lines between erotica and pornography in the modern world using some examples. To begin, let us look at some key distinctions using two of the greatest expressionists of the last few centuries, rather, the difference between them in their artistic styles: The works of Gustav Klimt, and his protégé Egon Schiele.

Arthur Danto, one of the foremost contemporary art critics, writes about the relation and eventual artistic separation between Klimt and Schiele, both being titans of eroticism and forerunners of German Expressionism. Klimt is described in the vein of a more “decretive” approach to sensual erotica, often evoking religious themes. Take, for example, his later-period opus *Death and Life* which depicts various stages of existence. There are lovers surrounded by a womb of foliage, happy sleeping and dreaming faces of beautiful mothers and their children, strong and upright men protecting the grouping of warm bodies touched by crimson and orange

¹⁴ Minguy, “Erotic Exuberance”, 47-48.

hues, while death, adorned with religious symbols, stalks them from the outside¹⁵.

While Klimt was known for expressing a thirst for a beatific vision of erotic transcendence, Schiele on the other hand was a purveyor of the most crushing social realism, and frequently attacked for his gritty depictions of deviant, outsider, and condemned sexuality. Often depicting prostitutes, gaunt and flesh-wrought women that have a supreme honesty and subtle grace to them; figures of the underclass, the marginalized whose appearances often graced the various lewd porno-cards traded around German art circles at this time. As Danto points out:

*“There is nevertheless something operatic about Klimt’s lovers, as if they were figures in a myth. Like Tristan and Isolde they are caught up in the sweep of passion as the music swells around them. Sex is somehow meant to be transfigurative, a way of transcending the sweaty realities of the flesh depicted. Schiele’s figures, by contrast, are raw, hairy and bony, their young bodies marked by erotic zones like maps of where to touch each other. Sex is what they live for, the essence of their lives. It is an end in itself, not a means for transfiguration. They can’t keep their hands to themselves when they are together, and they can’t keep their hands off themselves when they are alone. Masturbation is their default state.”*¹⁶

Both being influenced by Freudian psychoanalytic theory in Vienna at the time, we can see nonetheless the divergent nature between how Klimt and Schiele chose to depict the same subject in this example: the classic iconography of the mother and child. Klimt’s “mother and child” form a section of the famed work *Three Ages of Woman* (1905), a painting that aims primarily to reveal a striving for immortality present in eroticism through the life-cycle of the archetypal woman. The mother and girl-child are together in each other’s arms dreaming - a more pleasant view of the unconscious life. This is a work of eroticism, but the prettied and sensual variety that was popular a century before, indicative of Klimt’s attention to both academic European art and his influences from Japanese ink painting¹⁷. There is clearly something “beyond” the careful figurative depiction of these images; the women are painted as glowing embodiments of divine beauty.

¹⁵<https://gioscontentcorner.wordpress.com/2018/12/19/modern-art-madness-week-day-2-memento-mori-modern-anti-modernism-in-klimts-death-and-life/>

¹⁶ Danto, Arthur. C. “Live Flesh”. *The Nation*. Jan, 4, 2006. <https://www.thenation.com/article/live-flesh/>

¹⁷ <http://www.gustavklimt.net/mother-and-child/>

With Schiele's *Mother and Child* (1910)¹⁸, we see an almost Oedipal image of youthful sexuality. The mother is a seductress, with saucy hips swaying, peering over her tightly grasped shoulders as if to invite the male gaze from behind her with one strangely repellent, yet invitingly seductive eye. This is where we can see the tinge of anguish and suffering in Schiele's subjects; their flesh is sickly cream-colored, their tight and venial muscles swirling on their skinny frames - the child clutching his mother's waist with his head buried in her ribs like a lover's vice, while the mother almost gives off an air of casual indifference. This is erotic art striving for realism by moving *away* from transcendence, and as Danto admits, Schiele's erotic realism paved the way for what is now typical in our contemporary world - the blurred lines between the erotic and the pornographic, as implied by the popularity of ever-more lurid and transgressive erotic material¹⁹.

Late-modern and contemporary erotica (for instance, Danto makes the connection between Schiele and LGBT bondage photographer Robert Mapplethorpe), is purely a socio-cultural and materialist form of transgression. It appears, at least from my perspective as an artist and writer, that modern erotica is caught between two poles of profanation: on the one hand, we have a very hyper-politicized and materially transgressive form of eroticism, obsessions with representation of the physical body - a concoction of Critical Theory that, while warranted and dealing with valid and important issues in Western art, seem to be purposefully alienating or at the very least, not entirely concerned with any kind of spiritual transcendence.

With a casual glance at contemporary erotic artists, we can note how much stress is placed upon the modern secular beatitudes of diversity, inclusivity, feminism, etc. in a purposeful attempt to subvert the male gaze. For example, the painter Kristen Liu-Wong²⁰ depicts masturbatory images of abstract spaces of intimacy, filled with neon vapor-wave graphics and detailed illustrations of multiracial and polysexual bodies engaging in self-pleasure, glitziness, murder, and shocking acts of limit-sexuality. In fact, a lot of contemporary erotic art features the sexual act itself, divorced of suggestion and concealment, but rather an overt display of sexuality from polyvocal perspectives not traditionally seen in Western erotic art²¹. This is not

¹⁸ <https://www.art.com/products/p12491224-sa-i1678814/egon-schiele-mother-and-child-1910.htm>

¹⁹ Danto, "Live Flesh".

²⁰ https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/3dynkb/nsfw-what-does-erotic-art-look-like-in-2017

²¹ <https://www.glamour.com/gallery/9-women-instagrammers-making-ridiculously-sexy-erotic-art>

altogether negative, and some of it is quite positive, but the politics behind such works is a contention for a different essay entirely.

The other pole of contemporary erotic alienation is simply crass wish-fulfillment and diving headlong into the male gaze and infantile commercialism. Such is the case of Jack Vettriano's sultry and print-worthy kitsch eroticism, one of the most prolific and profitable living artists today. Dubbed "the Thomas Kinkadee of erotica", Vettriano is known mostly for his 1992 classic *The Singing Butler*, featuring two lovers dancing on a beach with a butler and a maid after a rainstorm. Vettriano freely admits to the marketable nature of his work, often depicting overtly idealised women and scenes from the 50s and 60s, celebrities, warm and soft lighting, and all-together very safe, Boomer-friendly depictions of passion²². Whilst not blatantly genital and shocking, this level of kitsch erotica is "pornographic" in the sense of its easily exploitable and commercial aesthetic; it is a cheap and sentimentalist romance designed to line the halls of dental offices and hotel rooms, a Rockwell-erotica, as if Hopper painted candy-coated pastiches of human beings instead of his very real and depressive figures. After considering these examples, one cannot help but ruminate: there must be a way to reconcile these concerns with modernity, and a recapitulation of an artistic eroticism that is not altogether vulgar, one that has transcendence as its primary focus and ascesis.

For a New Eroticism, East and West

There are a plethora of discourses related to nudity and the nature of erotica in art, ranging from the usual topics that occupy Critical Theory, such as the marginalization of certain bodies and socio-economic classes, the "male gaze", the globalization and commercialization of pornographic erotica, the exoticism present in so many Western artists of the erotic (chief among them being the erotic primitivism and cultural appropriations of Gauguin and Picasso). There certainly are a lot of issues that are legitimately of concern, but politics are only tangentially related to the path that eroticism could potentially take in order to revive its verve.

We have now entered a period of the grotesque, the pornographic, the exploitative on another level, for only now have the exploitations and objectifications of sexuality taken on a more "inclusive" and "diverse" scope. Whilst one form of domination is truncated and an affront

²² <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2012/07/jack-vettriano-singing-butler-art>

to current sensibilities, more subtle discourses of domination take hold, such is the reality with the total profanation of all things related to art and sexuality. As Scruton notes: “*Every avenue to the spirit is sentimentalised, less it should appear to make demands on us. And a cold-hearted cynicism begins to take hold of human speech. Art itself turns against the vestiges of culture, and morbid fantasies occupy the foreground of thought.*”²³ Thus, we live in the age of great cynicism that pervades aesthetics and sexuality, be it as merely a means of sexual escapism, or the expression of perverse fantasies that only serve to alienate, rather than uplift the human soul.

Perhaps a new eroticism in the Western world can borrow certain concepts from both its own canon, and from other cultures (whilst avoiding the reification and appropriation of such cultures), in a spirit of respect and admiration. Of course, our understanding of erotica must be fundamentally transformed if it is to survive the metaphysical sickness of the culture industry, the trendiness of the politicized grotesque, the mass global marketing forces of pornography, etc. One should keep this in mind whilst we examine a place where there is little to no history of artistic eroticism and nudity, but a spiritual eroticism of an entirely different kind: in Chinese art and spiritual aesthetics, overt nudity is quite the anathema to good taste.

In his seminal book *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*, Francois Jullien, the foremost philosophically trained sinologist of France, compares the very different attitudes on the relation between art, spirituality and the nude body in both Western and Eastern aesthetics. *The Impossible Nude's* thesis is crafted around Chinese art and Chinese philosophic-aesthetic understandings of the body as a source of interplaying energy, revealing, concealing, as inexhaustible as the Tao itself, and therefore the “Full Presence” of nude art in the West is too limited, atomizing and cut off from vitality for Chinese artistic sensibilities²⁴. Understanding this reorients our entire understanding of the body in art as not a unique object among other objects, but as a dynamic source of vibrancy, a network of pathways and intensities of energy, rather than a stultified and calculable whole.

Jullien points out that in the West, as in the East, the body in erotic art becomes a venue of access to the heights of intimacy, and the longing of the spirit. However, in the West, the

²³ Scruton, “Modern Culture”, 67.

²⁴ Jullien, Francois. *The Impossible Nude, Chinese Art And Western Aesthetics*. (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2000): 59.

female nude is the objective platonic form of beauty, correctly proportionate, and depicted in detail down to the fleshy sinews and muscle structures - fully present, and fully rendered²⁵. In Chinese spiritual aesthetics however, the body is an organic whole with its surroundings, it is just as formless and inexhaustible, often rendered as the landscape is, with sparseness, sketching-suggestion and translucency of ink layers, swaying in and out of the painting with the dilution of tones and semi-tones - the nude is thus never separated from the haecceities and interplay of intensities and vitality between Heaven and Earth²⁶.

A new eroticism in art should move beyond objectification, late-capitalist consumerism and exploitation, whilst keeping both the positive aspects of Eastern and Western aesthetic forms. A few important lessons are to be learned from Chinese Taoist aesthetics: predicating worth on the *inexhaustible* over *Full Presence*, and that of the *revealing / concealment* relationship present in transcendent forms of eroticism, the relation between the interiority and exteriority of the world and self - thus creating what Jullien refers to as the “*inexhaustible image*” in reference to the Tao Te Ching’s verse on the “great image” being formless²⁷. We are speaking in this sense not in a dialectical and reified fashion, but as an interplay of forces that creates increasing levels of intensities and relational interlinkages within the communion of continuous being. A bold comparison would be between the “impossible nude” of Chinese aesthetics and Bataille’s chief example of sacred eroticism, Bernini’s statue of St. Theresa’s spiritual ecstasy.

St. Theresa is depicted in Bernini’s work as being pierced with a sharp and hot spear from an angel, the throes of ecstasy written upon her face, an unearthly bliss made bodily that many mystics, as Bataille points out, undergo during such peak experiences²⁸. What catches Bataille’s attention about one of the most famous examples of sacred erotic art is the phrase used by St. Theresa: “*I die because I cannot die.*” The woman’s erotic involvement is swept up in the union with a Divine other - “Le Petite Mort” - a temporary suspension of discontinuous life in the utter abandonment and violence done to the physical body in the act of bliss. Furthermore, what is depicted in the statue is an act of intense eroticism in *concealment*, as St. Theresa’s clothes, those

²⁵ Ibid, 23, 30.

²⁶ Ibid, 34, 60-61.

²⁷ Ibid, 79-80.

²⁸ Bataille, “Eroticism”, 224

perfectly carved and smoothed out folds and creases, melt into her, quivering with the spiritualized erotic body. Here a saint wishes to die, but in doing so to truly live, to move beyond death, to live while dying in the highest form of artistic and spiritual eroticism, her body in a languishing pose, and in this act, she conquers the little death²⁹. The erotic image is free of overt nudity or even sexual suggestion, as in Chinese figurative painting, the body is treated, as Jullien notes, with deliberative abstraction, almost alien-like vague and indiscreet figures, kept out of the focal point of the painting, and often submerged in nature. In Chinese aesthetics, this is what Jullien calls the characteristic of “*Pregnance*”, to fill an image with imperceptibility, becomings, and the potentiality / possibility of the infinite by not sticking to the rigidity of realism and materialistic forms³⁰.

To move towards a new eroticism in the West, we must integrate global aesthetics whilst keeping regionalist considerations in mind; empty appropriations of trends and bastardizations from other cultures should be avoided for a variety of reasons. However, as the above comparison shows, there are venerable seeds in Western art as well that honor this quality of the imperceptible, the suggested, the concealing-revealing act within an aesthetic of spiritualized eroticism. A new artistic eroticism must not anachronistically bring about past iterations and trends “whole-cloth”, but must learn from the past, mine it of significance, and bring these values and concepts up to date with the modern reality. Let us use our current *geist* of post-modern appropriations to slip traditional art, aesthetics and notions of the divine-erotic through the back door of our diseased and id-driven western culture. There are already trends within outsider art that could potentially bring about such fusions of potentiality. Take for instance, the growth of what is now called “visionary art”, using traditional and digital mediums of expression.

The foremost popularizer of such New Age aesthetics is Alex Grey, with his characteristic melting-pot of figurative realism, Eastern symbology, and anatomical clarity. There is a commitment to realism, high realism, but one that is imbued with the depictions of the sacred, rather than just rendering reality (i.e. photo-realism) complete on canvas. Unlike the modern art world that scoffs at religiosity in art, painters like Grey make the connections

²⁹ Nast, Heidi. J, and Pile, Steve. *Places Through The Body*. (London, New York: Routledge, 1998): 285-288.

³⁰ Jullien, ‘The Impossible Nude’, 80-81.

between sexuality, eroticism, art and the sacred. This is “outsider” art because it defies classification and academic pseudo-sophistication of other, more lurid and profane styles of erotica which serve to degrade the sexual act, rather than affirm its higher purpose³¹.

Such works as *Pregnancy* (1988), and *Kiss of the Muse* (2013) are hyper-real depictions of anatomically accurate beings wrapped in the divine energies of love, neither modern, nor post-modern, instead resembling and honoring pre-modern schools of art and forgotten forms of mysticism, but never fully integrated into any exiting style or art movement. There are issues of course with these perennialist appropriations and New-Ageism in art, but these are stepping stones towards a reinvigoration of the spiritual in aesthetic eroticism. Even in the realm of contemporary art, there are hints of some works with the same philosophic, spiritual and erotic potentiality.

For example, the painter of “divergent” bodies - that is, otherized and purposely disproportioned bodies - is Jenny Saville. Neither conforming to the chic minimalism and post-modern conceptualism of the “Young British Artists” with whom she is associated, her nudes are neither genital or pornographic. They are works imbued with the politics of representation of course, but executed with artistic skill and candour. One work, entitled *One Out of Two (Symposium)* (2016), is a confrontational mass of bodies in chiaroscuro, converging with one another, wrapped in a chaotic energy of erotic ecstasy represented by red swirls around them. Her work of course defies conventional beauty standards, but here the female body is plastic, a channel or polymorphic avenue for thoughts and emotions, rather than just mounds of well-painted flesh³².

The title of the work is of course in reference to the Platonic middle work *The Symposium*, in which Socrates contemplates with other thinkers the meaning of love. Here Socrates does not give a direct answer but defers his answer by telling about a meeting he had with the wise woman Diotima, who gives an answer that Eros, divine love is within us, enabling us to love good and beautiful things. Beauty and love are not end-points in themselves, but exist

³¹ Zap, Jonathan. “A spiraling Eye-Encrusted Overview of the Art of Alex Grey”, *Reality Sandwich*. March, 2013. http://realitysandwich.com/169799/overview_art_alex_grey_part_1/

³² <http://georginacoburnarts.co.uk/category/one-out-of-two-symposium/>

to guide us towards higher things such as wisdom and the good. Diotima then says love is a kind of pregnancy, linked with immortality (since it is the only immortality mortals can have). It is a love and beauty which is at the highest when loving wisdom, being impregnated with the potentiality of thought, ordering cities, families and the harmony of nature - thus love is a kind of longing, or what Diotima describes as a “poverty” that longs for immortality³³.

Like the “Pregnance” of Chinese figurative art, the erotic is imbued with a longing for the immortal in concealing and revealing, the exchanges of energetic forces, such as those chaotic movements of bodies striving for connection (and therefore divinity) in Saville’s painting. A new eroticism transgresses the mere physical body, moving along lines of deterritorialized poly-vocality of forces³⁴, lovers becoming indistinguishable and imperceptible with one another in the work of art, blending together emotions, spirit, and the bliss of divine ecstasy. There are seeds of potentiality for an inexhaustible new form of spiritual eroticism in the East and West. Diotima reference the archetypal concept of the “sea of beauty”, an analogy denoting the nirvanic state, *kenosis* in Eastern Orthodoxy, a total submerging with the reality of spirit via beauty, the good, the infinite. A new eroticism must aim for this subversive and transgressive union with the infinite.

³³ Plato, Ed. Rouse, W.H.D. *The Great Dialogues Of Plato: The Symposium*”. (New York: Signet Classics, Penguin, 2008): 110-113, 206b-210b.

³⁴ <http://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/8599/a-five-point-guide-to-jenny-saville>