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Post-structuralism
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The Gaze as Power

The gaze, or power as defined by Michel Foucault, is a recurrent element in postmodern and contemporary artworks in which the subject object relationship within the body is discussed. The direction of the gaze, gesture of the body and the position of the audience and the artist are some of the indicators of the power within the dichotomous relationships of the subject/object, internal/external, and art/life. Many times the goal of these pieces is to identify the subject and the object, meaning to separate the individual from their physical bodies. This is different from modern artwork because it does not highlight the artist as a truth-seeking sovereign, but rather objectifies, or even damages the artist, especially in self-portraits or artworks in which the artist use their own body.

Some artists have identified the subject object relationship as an internal/external power struggle within an individual. Jean-Jacques Ringuette's series of photographs entitled *Ecce Hominess-Les Offenses Crepusculaires, 1991-1994* [Figure 1-2], depicts several solo black and white portraits of men from the torso up. The backgrounds are plain gray and the photographs are straightforward; there are no illusionary tricks or extreme contrast in the lighting. Most of the men have averted their eyes toward something not on the picture plane, but it is questionable whether or not they are focused on anything. This lack of focus could represent the figure retreating and internalizing themselves. The hands are in contrast, strained and tense. "The attitude of the hands...can also be understood as an expression of an internal or external resistance...the figures reflect upon their own bodies, distancing themselves from them (Herzog 43). The power position is constantly in flux between the gaze and the hands, representing the internal and the external. This series is a self portrait based on Ringuette's experience as a

homosexual man living at the advent of the AIDS epidemic, but the use of several men to depict Ringuette's personal struggle keeps him secured in a power position.

John Currin's paintings of overly-sexualized women with transparent clothing, golden locks and doe eyed expressions are his attempt to distinguish the subject from the object. His paintings are up against a "dour and censorious art establishment which [has]...vilified the "male gaze" (Danto 273)." The remedy the vilified "male gaze" Currin has used his own image as reference for the face of the figure in his paintings like *Sno-Bo* 1999 [Figure 3]. He suggests that this displaces the male gaze upon the female form, so that it comes from the female form, failing to demonstrate a flux in power shifts. In fact, he has not accomplished either of his goals--to rectify the male gaze with society and break barriers between subject and object—because the male gaze, is still the male gaze.

In *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between art and Life* by Arthur C. Danto, the author references a photograph taken by Todd Eberle of Currin with his painting *Sno-bo* and suggests that the a resemblance between the face in the painting and Currin's face is uncanny [Figure 4]. Currin stands in the foreground in which he is flanked by his painting on the left and a mirror on the right. "That does not mean that the painting is a Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman—but his placement between mirror and painting is certainly an allegory of painting as he conceives it (Danto 273)." The author continues to suggest that this photograph posted in *The Times* is "a wonderful study of the [artist] in his studio, rather than a mere demonstration of the photographer's will to power...it is almost a key to reading Currin's pictures, the artist must have had a say in how he was to be shown (Danto 273)." This photograph is actually a better example of artist and artwork in the context of life. The mirror reflects Currin's image and the format of a painting, blurring art and life relationships. However,

the photograph represents the blurring of art and life in general, not specifically within Currin's paintings.

Jenny Saville is a painter from Cambridge English who works almost exclusively with oil paint on large canvases depicting women based to address her own internal and external struggles with body awareness and sexuality. For the most part Saville uses herself as subject matter, or better yet "object matter" because they are not self portraits: "I am not interested in portraits as such. I am not interested in the outward personality." Says Saville in an interview with Suzie Mackenzie in Guardian magazine. "I don't use the anatomy of my face because I like it, not at all. I use it because it brings out something from inside, a neurosis (Mackenzie)."

Saville utilizes openings and areas where flesh touches flesh forming seams that could lead to other openings for example in *Propped*, 1992 [Figure 5] the thighs of the figure are so flooded with fat and flesh that the forms are pressed tightly together like an extension of the genitals, leading toward them like a corridor. The stool (also referenced by the title, *Propped*) seems to be puncturing the figure, violating her while she is placed above eye level, making the focal point the "corridor of flesh". Her legs are wrapped around the stool, weakly trying to balance the massive forms that make up her legs with piles on top of piles of flesh all the way up to the top of the composition where her head is towering over, chin retracted and tilted to the side.

Only one eye is fully showing the second cropped just above the bottom lid. The lids, are only indicated by the swollen flesh surrounding the eyes, forcing them shut one can assume that the eyes are looking down toward the audience because the shadows indicate as such but there are no pupils or whites of the eyes showing, not even a glimmer or reflection within the shadows. The lips are slouching in the same direction that the head is leaning, surrendering to the weight and thickness of the cheek and fat below the chin, creating an unnatural mouth opening.

The partially cropped face is a secondary focal point to the composition, but is very informative to the way that we experience the painting and separate the object from the subject. First of all we are prone to stare at someone in a similar predicament: an obese individual propped on top of a questionably sturdy stool, clenching to balance themselves as the stool sways due to the fact that they are in a position that is exaggeratedly top heavy.

The figure is almost objectified by her own inability to control every flap and fold of her flesh. She is indicating with her hands that she is very uncomfortable and self-conscious. Her fingernails are digging into her thighs and folded across her torso, probably in an attempt to conceal as much as she can, although futile. Her hands are the key to the composition because they supplement what is absent in the eyes, but not enough to subjectify the figure.

The hands are also describing how the figure feels objectified propped on their pedestal-like stool. She is aware that our point of view is directed toward her genitals, she is aware of our gaze, but she is also aware that there is nothing she can do about it. She is almost victim to her own body. It weighs her down, sets limits, and is deteriorating at all times until “eventually we expel ourselves. We rust away. Our own body rejects us (Mackenzie).” There is a very specific “social script”.

Exploring the in between stages of the body to express its fluidity as it slips between subject and object is an interest of Saville’s. Similarly to Michel Foucault who “presented the self simultaneously in terms of radical liberation and of rigid constraint (Siegel 603).” In *Reverse*, 2003 [Figure 6] the figure (again Saville’s image) is suspended between physiological stages, but the direction of the narrative remains ambiguous because the figure could be experiencing death or sexual ecstasy. The brushstrokes and color palette are similar to bruises suggesting that she is an object of foul play or foreplay. The mouth is abstracted: swollen, plump and red like a women’s genitals during menstruation, again sagging toward the bottom of the

composition as did the lips and cheek in *Propped* toward the right side. The positioning emphasizing the unclear narrative, the lips could be moaning with pleasure, pounding like a heart beat and engorged with blood or stiffening with rigamortis. Even the language used to describe these opposing possibilities are both sexual and abject highlighting the duality of the self as a living and dying object.

There is a constant power shift in *Reverse* because the gaze is coming from many different directions. This is different from *Propped* in which the gaze is predominantly coming from the audience whereas in *Reverse* the gaze is coming from the audience, artist, and figure equally and interchangeably. Since Saville used herself in this image without the intention of creating a self-portrait, the reflection is necessary because Saville does not have the ability to physically step away from her body, but the reflection represents the extraction of Saville from her body.

Severance of Saville and her body is not a clean extraction; she sits in the position of subject *and* object, artist *and* audience. The article “Men Are Much Harder: Gendered View of Nude Images” by Beth Eck was based on a study of how heterosexual men and women respond when they are shown images of nudes. The results showed that the women in the study group described images of the female figure with the same social script across the board. When looking at the female figure the women’s “eyes were simultaneously on their own appearances (Eck 697).” Likewise, it is unlikely that Saville is able to refrain from feeling some anxiety when looking at the paintings, especially since the figures in her paintings are based off of her own image.

It is established that the body is as much the subject as the object of its own perception. We are forced to perceive, imagine, think ourselves—in ourselves, by ourselves, with ourselves and through ourselves. Yet only the fact that consciousness and body do work as two, albeit in tandem, causing a distancing of the psychological system from the organic processes of the body, makes possible for us the formulation of thoughts

about the body. There is no escape from this cycle—we are (in) our body (Herzog 7-9).

This puts Saville in the position of object and subject simultaneously. As a result Saville's own gaze is "no longer the artist looking at her subject, but [also] a gaze looking at herself (Mackenzie)."

Jenny Saville loves paint and realizes that paint describes flesh as much as flesh describes paint. She says that "paint is her language, the way that she communicates—and everything else, everything else takes second place (Mackenzie)." The material actually strengthens the conceptual ideas of her paintings—art reflecting life and life reflecting art.

Orlan is an artist that blurs subject and object, art and life, internal and external farther beyond Jean Jacques Ringuette, John Currin, or Jenny Saville's wildest dreams. In 1990, Orlan generated a digital hybrid of iconic images of women in mythology and art to be used in a performance piece called the "Reincarnation of Saint Orlan"; She used Diana, the goddess of the hunt's nose, Europa's mouth, Venus' chin, the temples of from the *Mona Lisa* and Psyche's eyes. Once Orlan was satisfied that the hybridization of these iconic females was a close representation of herself on the inside, Orlan subjected herself to eleven plastic surgeries to have her face altered to look like the digital blueprint [Figure 7-10].

Each time Orlan went under the knife it represented death, the result is her reincarnation and the healing process represents the constant flux in between. This process is a metaphor for Orlan's transcendence, the physical crystallization of her internal self. She makes the subject into the object and the object into the subject simultaneously, but in order to illustrate this it is impertinent that she is conscious and participatory during the surgeries. Orlan receives an anesthesia and is monitored during the procedures, but she is able to give phone interviews and send faxes in order to discuss her transformation.

As a result of the technological advances in medicine Orlan is able to overcome the historical conditions that impose limitations upon the external and allow the internal to emerge in the form of bodily fluid and tissue (Seigle 630). The gaze, or power is situated in the hands of the surgeons and Orlan is the object but this is only the case until Orlan looks the surgeon in the eye and responds to his actions. In Jenny Saville's artwork, the gaze is implied. The object is the painting, but ultimately the power is in the beholder. Orlan is the object; she is the artwork. She subjectifies her body as the object of discussion, but she leads the debate and looks her audience in the eye.

Orlan uses her body as the medium by literally damaging and violating her body with plastic surgery. Orlan, born 1947 in Saint Etienne, France is a performance, video and installation based on her Carnal Art Manifesto. The ideas behind the Carnal Art Manifesto are based on a self portrait realized through technology and rejection of social norms. Orlan is interested in deconstructing feminine stereotypes by subjecting herself to several plastic surgeries in which "she sketches out the idea of an identity exchange of a face that transforms itself through the icons of memory, history and myth, and through their hybridization, she works directly up on the taboos of identity and organizes her own escape from her own body-prison (Miglietti 171)." Many times she refers to herself as "Saint Orlan" to represent the reversal the Christian principle of "the word made flesh to the flesh made word" meaning that she has control of her body and is not trapped by sex, gender, religion or feminine stereotypes. Due to the advent of technology Orlan believes that abiding by nature is no longer necessary.

In two of Orlan's most dramatic surgery installations Orlan had implants placed into her face based on historical ideals and myth. In "Omnipresence" Orlan had forehead implants placed just above her brows to make herself look more like the Leonardo's "Mona Lisa" [Figure 11]. Orlan points out that technology allows us to obtain an idealized image through plastic

surgery, but demonstrates this by using outdated trends resulting in a monstrous image. Orlan subjectifies her own body,

There are several parts to Orlan's installations. The first part is a computer generated sketch of her operation. Then there is the operation itself and the installation of the recording accompanied by with still frames showing the stages of her operation and recovery. Orlan also insists on giving a lecture to her audience while they experience the installation.

Lectures are an integral part of my work; moreover they make it possible for me to reach a larger audience...The discussion that follows after my lectures is crucial, it is a working session for the audience and for me, during which everybody develops their personal views of the world...My body has become a site for public debate. And that is what I wanted (Miglietti 174).

Orlan's body becomes the object of discussion, in the same way that Jenny Saville's paintings are the object of discussion. The only way to make Orlan's work even more successful would be if she was somehow able to duplicate herself and both step away from her body and remain inside it in order to have a discussion with herself.

Deconstructing subject and object with a multidirectional gaze and body language, specifically hand gestures, is both successful and unsuccessful in the work of the artists discussed. Jean Jacques Ringuette's photographs are straightforward and subtle. He has successfully identified an internal, external struggle, but has not exactly punctured the relationship. His photographs are more successful than John Currin's paintings however. Currin claims to be re-presenting the vilified "male gaze", but his concepts are not translated clearly onto his paintings. Currin's attempt at appropriating himself as an artist within a postmodern context may be more successful within the photograph by Todd Eberle because there is true blurring of the art and the life of the artist, in the same way that we glimpse into the lives of actors in magazine spreads.

Jenny Saville in my opinion is most successful at blurring art and life, subject and object as well as internal and external relationships. Orlan's artwork blurs the lines too literally, rather than metaphorically as Saville does. The flux between dichotomies in Orlan's art is more stagnant because it is suspended so far on the life side of the spectrum; somewhat in the same way that Todd Eberle's photograph of John Currin. We see too far into the artists' life, potentially causing the audience to make judgments about their lifestyle instead of responses to their artwork. The ambiguity of Saville's paintings allows us to change our responses to them according to the power position we experience them in. We may speculate specific narratives of Saville as an artist, but by refraining to reveal too much Saville is able to adjust to the flux between dichotomies, both as audience and as artist.

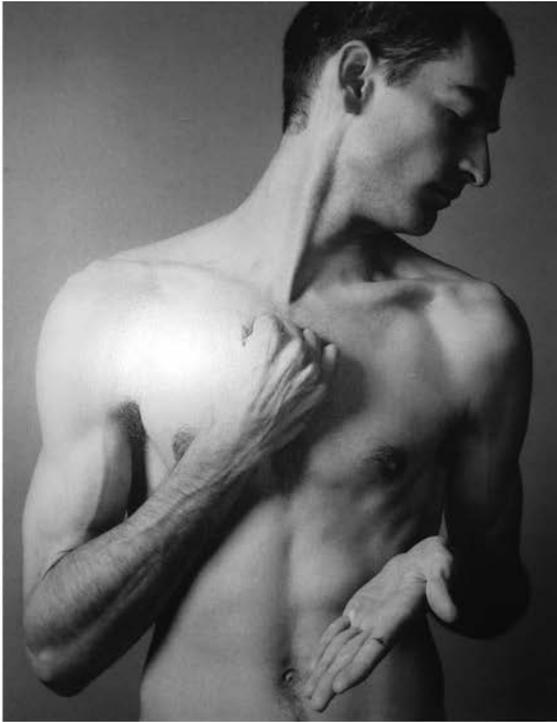


Figure 1
Jean Jacques Ringuette, *Ecce Hominess-Les Offenses Crepusculaires*, 1991-1994, Photograph

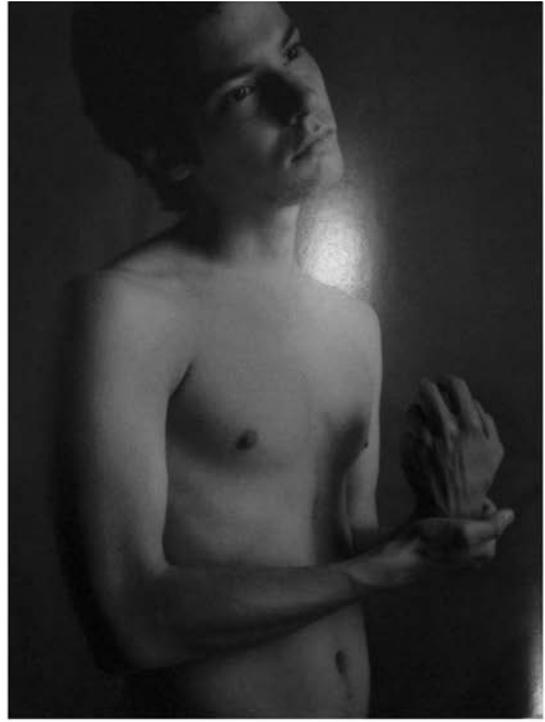


Figure 2



Figure 3
John Currin, *Sno-Bo*, 1999, Oil on Canvas



Figure 4
Todd Eberle, John Currin as seen in
The Times, Photograph



Figure 5
Jenny Saville, Propped, 1992, Oil on
Canvas



Figure 6
Jenny Saville, Reverse, 2003, Oil on Canvas



Figure 7 and 8
Orlan, Reincarnation of St. Orlan, 1990 During surgical procedures.



Figure 9
Orlan, Rencarnation of St. Orlan, 1990 Conducting interviews.



Figure 10 and 11
Orlan, Rencarnation of St. Orlan, 1990 Stages of healing and final transformation.

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The gaze, or power as defined by Michel Foucault, is a recurrent element in postmodern and contemporary artworks in which the subject object relationship within the body is discussed.

power indicators

- The gaze-direct, indirect, in focus, out of focus, existent, non-existent
- Hand gestures/body language
- Position of the audience and the artist

dichotomies

- Subject/Object
- Internal/External
- Art/Life

what is a dichotomy?

- To divide into two.
- Opposites that exist because of one another.
 - On and Off
 - Left and Right

Foucault

- Suggests that the object exists because of the subject and vice versa.
- The position of power is fluid and simultaneous.
- Power is knowledge.

Postmodern

- Goal of these pieces is to identify the subject and the object.
- This is different from modern artwork because it does not highlight the artist as a truth-seeking sovereign, but rather objectifies, or even damages the artist, especially in self-portraits or artworks in which the artist use their own body.

Jean-Jacques Ringuette

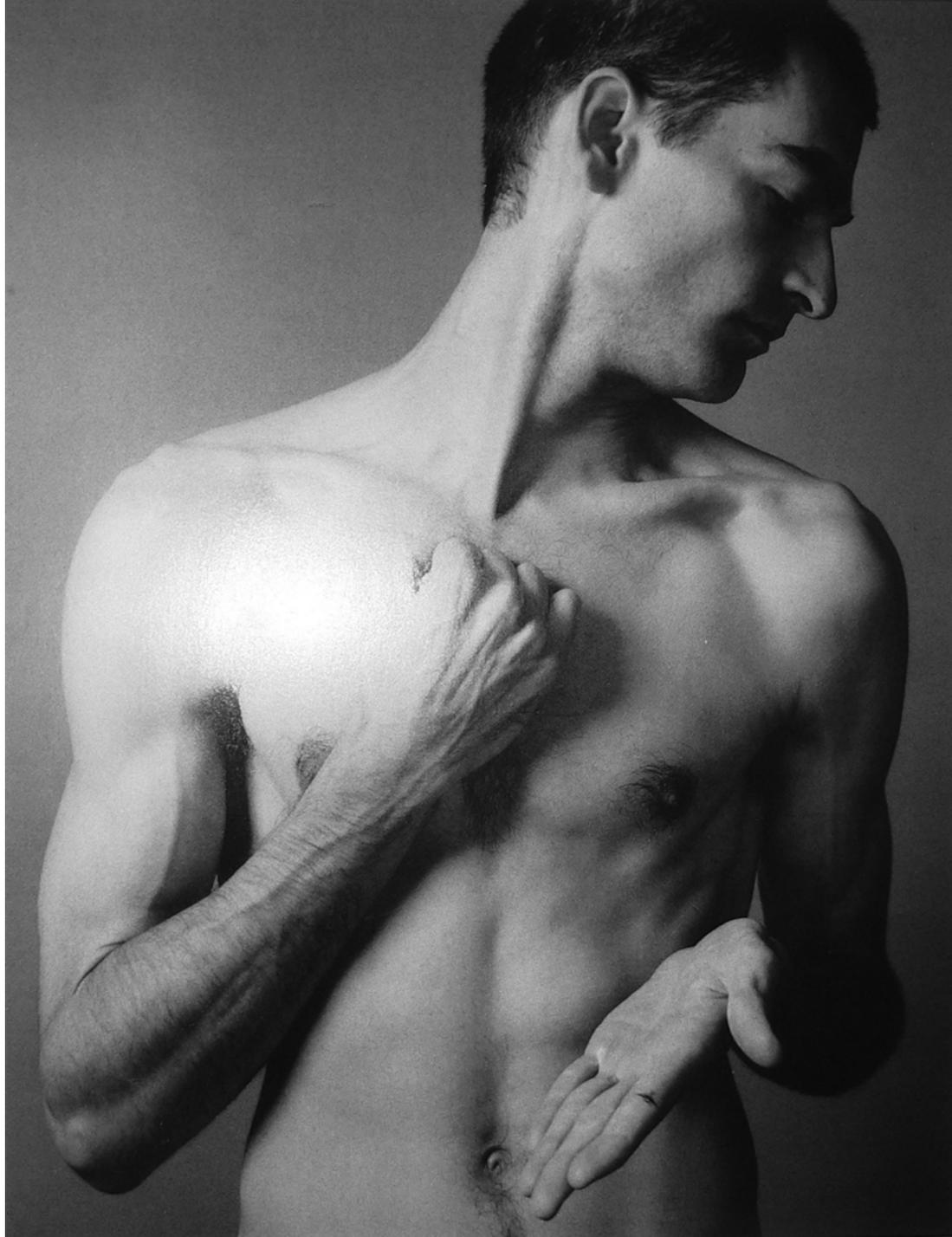
- Identifies an internal/external struggle
- Indicated by the gaze (internal) and the stiff hand gestures (external)

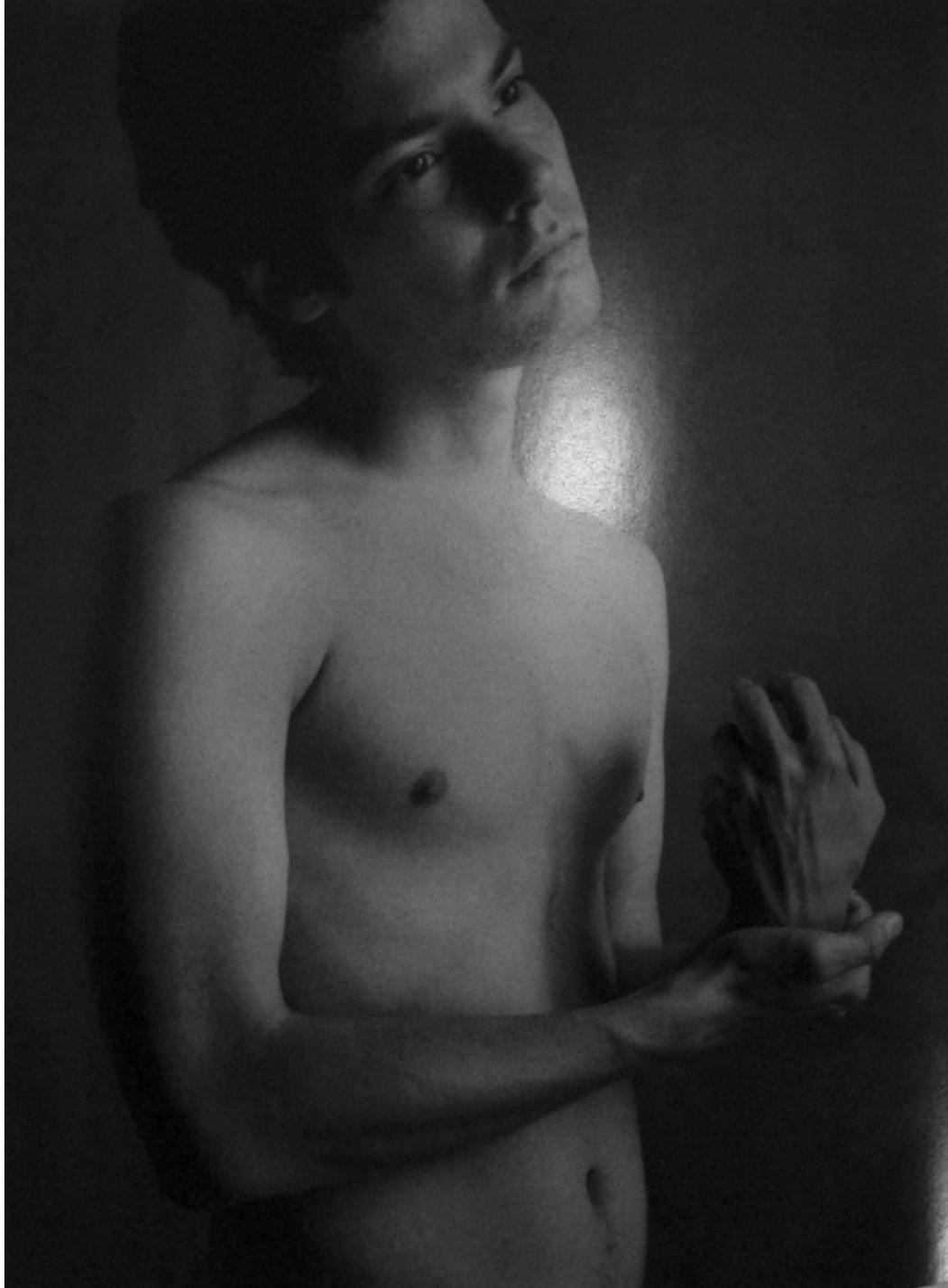
Jean Jacques Ringuette

Ecce Hominess-Les Offenses

Crepusculaires

1991-1994





John Currin

“John Currin’s paintings...have aroused the ire of a dour and censorious art establishment, which had...vilified the “male gaze” ...”

John Currin

Sno-Bo

1999



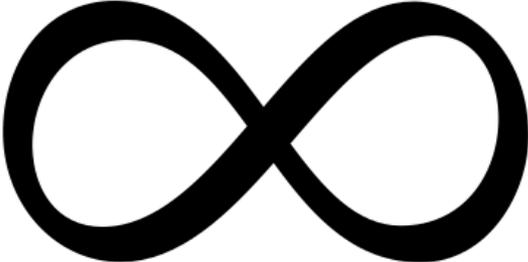




Too distanced?

Jenny Saville

- Uses her own image for reference, but says they are not self portraits.

- Paint  Flesh

Jenny Saville

Propped

1992



Jenny Saville

Reverse

2003



Orlan

Reincarnation of St. Orlan

1990



