

“THE HEART WANTS  
WHAT IT WANTS”  
THE ARTIST  
AND HER SUBJECT

*Alison M. Gingeras*

Lévy Gorvy Dayan

JENNA GRIBBON: THE HONEYMOON SHOW!  
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# Lévy Gorvy Dayan

## “THE HEART WANTS WHAT IT WANTS”

### THE ARTIST AND HER SUBJECT

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#### CLASSIC MUSEOGRAPHY

Throughout the modern era, the artist-muse relationship has been as overtly gendered as it has been richly mythologized. At the mere mention of a “great”<sup>1</sup> artist’s name, a female first name springs to mind with near Pavlovian immediacy: Édouard Manet and Victorine, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Lizzie, Pierre Bonnard and Marthe, Édouard Vuillard and Misia, Gustav Klimt and Emilie, Salvador Dalí and Gala, Lucian Freud and Kitty, Caroline, and Celia (to name but a few of his model conquests). Pablo Picasso’s name unleashes a whole roster of familiar appellations: Fernande, Olga, Marie-Thérèse, Dora, Françoise, and Jacqueline. Writer Zadie Smith brilliantly described this well-worn paradigm in her review of Celia Paul’s book *Self-Portrait*: “Accounts of the muse-artist relation were anchored in the idea of male cultural production as a special category, one with particular needs—usually sexual—that the muse had been there to fulfill, perhaps even to the point of exploitation, but without whom we would have missed the opportunity to enjoy this or that beloved cultural artifact. The art wants what the art wants.”<sup>2</sup> We have endlessly borne witness to what *he* wants, but how about what *she* wants? Traditional art historical accounts have all too often been mono-directional, focusing on what artists needed and ostensibly took from their muses, systematically ignoring the substance of exchange between two people. How many of these famous muses were themselves artists or writers, having long been obscured by the shadow of their “significant other”?

Liberation from the misogynous dyad that entitled the male genius to fetishize his (passive) feminine font of inspiration is a more recent phenomenon. Feminist art historians have toiled to restore creative autonomy, and a last name, to a number of these familiar women: for instance, in breaking Dora Maar free from being a prisoner of Picasso’s gaze.<sup>3</sup> Also, this year, for the first time since 1857, drawings, paintings, and poems by Elizabeth Siddal were shown alongside works by her husband, Rossetti, at an exhibition at Tate Britain.

Painter Celia Paul turned to the written word to assert her own artistic becoming and the complexity of her identity beyond her entanglement with Freud. In her book, *Self-Portrait*, she not only shares diaristic recollections of serving as his young lover/model—“I felt his scrutiny intensify. I felt exposed and hated the feeling. I cried throughout these sessions”<sup>4</sup>—but she proposes a counter-model of “musedom,” grounded in the empathy she employs in her own painting practice. Paul wrote, “I



Lucian Freud. *Naked Girl with Egg*, 1980–81  
Oil on canvas, 29½ × 23⅞ inches (74.9 × 60.5 cm)  
British Council, London



Celia Paul in her studio with her self-portrait,  
*Painter and Model*, 2012

couldn't understand the principle of life drawing. It seemed so artificial to me to draw a person one didn't know or have any involvement with . . . I needed to work from someone who mattered to me.”<sup>5</sup> Speaking as a woman who knew what it was like to be seen *and* be consumed, her own work at the easel demanded a different kind of emotional necessity. More than just a memoir, Paul's writing attempts to recast the power structures embedded in the age-old paradigm of the gendered muse, laying new groundwork for a more equitable and reciprocal exchange between artist and model. Paul often painted her mother, and other family members, using her sessions as a form of prayer or spiritual union. When she became her own muse, Paul wrote, “I have it all. I am both artist and sitter. By looking at myself I don't need to stage a drama about power; I am empowered by the very fact that I am representing myself as I am: a painter.”<sup>6</sup> To borrow again the word reappropriated by Smith, the ideologies that underpin classic *museography*<sup>7</sup> are vital and require constant interrogation by the artists who continue to practice it, as well as by those who consume art, old and new. Women artists such as Paul are rare—with both the brush and the pen, she has demonstrated that museography can be a two-way street, an exchange of subjectivities and agencies as opposed to a lopsided power struggle.

## DEUX AMIES

Men not only wield the brush, they too have served as muses—the role has not always been inherently female or heteronormative. Historically, the male muse has not inhabited the same romanticized spaces as their female counterparts—their first names, when known, do not haunt the popular imagination in the same way as the obsessed-over wives, and female lovers, who have dominated the Western canon. Yet the visual representation of gay musedom, in the modern era, is seen in the work

of Thomas Eakins, Duncan Grant, Francis Bacon, Paul Cadmus, Jared French, Charles Demuth, and David Hockney: they have all focused their (often eroticized) gaze, and brush, on specific men who recurrently populate their canvases. The visual history of same-sex male desire has increasingly achieved greater visibility and acceptance in the late twentieth century, enabled by the political labors of LGBTQ activists and bolstered by the dominance of male artists, in both art history and the art market. As the early modern canon is retroactively queered, individual muses emerge from the clichéd tropes and homosocial genre scenes of bathers, boxers, sailors, bare-shirted workers, and other veiled homoerotic subjects that male artists have used as outlets to visually explore their desires. Radically shifting social mores have allowed these once-hidden histories to complexify the narrow gendering of museography.

Until the opening decades of the twentieth century, the representation of same-sex relationships between women had been virtually invisible. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wrote, “Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.”<sup>8</sup> Originally written as two lectures for the women-only colleges at Cambridge University in 1928, her open acknowledgment of lesbian desire, within a larger essay on the agency and needs of women artists, is often celebrated as a watershed articulation of queer feminism. Yet, in truth, Woolf’s sapphic admission was not a blatant “coming out” moment. Instead, in slyly referencing the censorship of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Woolf attempted to counsel aspiring writers on how to circumvent the censorship of lesbian themes while still engaging in same-sex representation in their work. Woolf was careful to make her comments in a safe space—“Are there no men present? . . . We are all women you assure me?”<sup>9</sup> Emboldened by the single-sex audience, *A Room of One's Own* was delivered in the presence of Woolf’s own muse and partner, Vita Sackville-West, who was the inspiration for her boundary-pushing, gender-bending novel, *Orlando* (also published in 1928).

While not exactly a loud celebration of women artists and their female muses, 1928 stands out as the “high point of sapphic modernism”<sup>10</sup> in the sphere of literature. As well as Woolf’s essay, the year saw the publication of Compton Mackenzie’s *Extraordinary Women*, and novels by Djuna Barnes and Elizabeth Bowen. Throughout the 1920s, many writers frequented the Paris salon of Natalie Clifford Barney, an American expatriate and unapologetic, public lesbian. “The Sapphic center of the Western world,”<sup>11</sup> is how Barney described her weekly meetings on the rue Jacob. For several years, she hosted luminaries such as writers Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude Stein, and Barnes, Sylvia Beach (founder of the Paris bookstore Shakespeare and Company, and publisher for James Joyce), and poet Renée Vivien, among many others. And while the once-taboo subject of lesbian desire began to explicitly appear on the written page in these circles, lesbian lives painted on canvas were relegated to highly coded representations. Artist Romaine Brooks, who was Barney’s lover of three decades, often painted singular portraits of queer women from their circle—sometimes cross-dressing or wearing accessories, such as monocles, that were cryptic signifiers of their sexuality. Brooks’s self-portraits showed her donning masculine suits and hats. Her fashionable androgyny was a legible acknowledgment of her identity amongst her circle, yet she never directly portrayed the intimacy of her female relationships in her paintings. The same was true of other *garçonne*<sup>12</sup> artists of 1920, such as the Surrealist Claude Cahun and British painter Gluck, whose picturing of butchness broke new ground in avant-garde artistic circles.

*Les deux amies* (The Two Friends) was a popular, yet deliberately ambiguous theme that appeared in a number of works by women artists during the 1920s—it had long been a mainstay of male artists who indulged classic sapphic fantasies (Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Gustave Courbet, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, et al.). Most notably, Tamara de Lempicka took up this trope throughout the decade



Romaine Brooks. *Una, Lady Troubridge*, 1924.  
Oil on canvas, 50 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 30 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (127.3 × 76.5 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC



Tamara de Lempicka. *Les deux amies (Perspective)*, 1923  
Oil on canvas, 51 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 63 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (129.9 × 161.9 cm)  
Musée du Petit Palais, Geneva

in her Art Deco-style, depicting eroticized pairs of female nudes without specific reference to a sustained artist-muse relationship. Similarly, Marie Laurencin (and, in more abstract ways, Marie Vassilieff) would present two female “friends” in varying states of undress, suggestively laying down together, in her post-Cubist, washy visual language. All these examples are landmark assertions of lesbian visibility, even if they relied often upon inference and coded signs of sexuality, stopping short of more unequivocal representations of queer partnerships on the painted canvas.

In parallel with the Parisian-lesbian-zeitgeist, German-Swedish painter Lotte Laserstein developed a singular oeuvre that legibly revealed her lesbian partnership while simultaneously forging a totally different model of musedom, countering heteronormative exploitation and objectification. Working in Berlin from the mid-1920s, until being forced to emigrate in 1937, Laserstein consistently painted her muse, Traute Rose, in a manner that did not hide behind euphemistic tropes. Though she made a number of nude portraits of Rose, Laserstein did not portray her muse as a merely passive object of her desires. Instead, Rose is an active protagonist in these portraits. Many times Laserstein showed herself engaged with Rose, conjuring a different kind of agency between model and artist, breaking from her heterosexual forebearers. In fact, Laserstein pointedly described the works she made with Rose as being coauthored, referring to those specific pictures as “ours” in their postwar correspondence.

Laserstein was among the first generation of German women who were given access to the same art education as men, including life drawing classes. She met Rose in 1924, while receiving a classical education at the prestigious Berlin Academy of Arts. Her magnum opus, *In meinem Atelier* (In My Studio, 1928), acknowledges this exceptional training in her deployment of the loaded tradition of the academic nude. Her composition shows a gloriously nude Rose stretched out in the foreground, her pubis unmistakably at the focus point of the composition. In the background, Laserstein places herself at her easel, oversized palette in hand, working in deep concentration. This painting is a double manifesto. First, Laserstein asserts her legitimacy as an artist by using the well-known trope of the artist holding their palette—a mode of self-representation that was pioneered in the 16th



Lotte Laserstein. *In meinem Atelier (In My Studio)*, 1928. Oil on panel, 18 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 28 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (46 × 73 cm). Private Collection

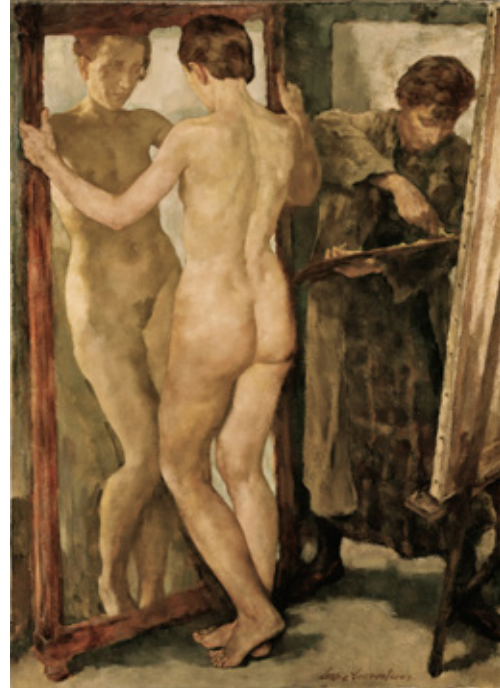
century by the rare women artists, such as Catharina van Hemessen and Sofonisba Anguissola. Second, her double portrait is a public statement on sexual identity: the full-frontal nudity and sensuous rendering of Rose's body leave little doubt about the sexual tension between the two women, especially given the total lack of precedent of woman artists making such luxuriant female nudes. As such, the painting can also be understood as proclaiming the artist's desire for her model and her model's willing incarnation of their intimate bond. Furthermore, echoing her Parisian artist-compatriots, Laserstein flaunts her self-identification by using the visual codes of queer women of the time: masculine, cropped hair, no makeup, and the gender-neutral artist's smock. The painterly virtuosity lavished on the rendering of Rose's recumbent body betrays Laserstein's unabashed appreciation of her corporality, without voyeuristic or exploitative connotations. Rose's posture signals the absolute trust between model and artist. In a letter to Laserstein, some thirty years after the painting was made, Rose acknowledged the commitment and complicity between them. She wrote, "Although the painting shows the model in a relaxed position, the pose was actually very hard to maintain. I held out all the same because I could see that this was going to be a real masterpiece."<sup>13</sup> *In My Studio* is the mother-painting of lesbian-muse visibility and a testament to a shared vision of the aesthetic power of representation.

Laserstein made several other double portraits of Rose and herself, each time creating a narrative scene featuring her in the act of painting and interacting with her muse. The carefully composed *Ich und mein Modell* (I and My Model, 1929–30) is a horizontal composition showing Laserstein, paintbrush in hand, with Rose hovering at her shoulder. While the image might be mistaken for a candid snapshot of their shared life, Laserstein has orchestrated an art-historically imbued tableaux of closeness between herself and her muse. Shown in the act of painting, the artist captures her own piercing gaze as her eyes meet ours. This compositional gesture is akin to an actor breaking the fourth wall. It is an art historical device famously utilized by artists such as Judith Leyster,



Lotte Laserstein. *Ich und mein Modell (I and My Model)*, 1929–30  
Oil on canvas, 19½ × 27¾ inches (49.5 × 69.5 cm)  
Private Collection

Lotte Laserstein. *Vor dem Spiegel (At the Mirror)*, 1930–31  
Oil on canvas, 49 × 34⅞ inches (124.5 × 88.7 cm)  
Bute Collection at Mount Stuart, Scotland



Joshua Reynolds, and Courbet. Is the artist looking at herself in a mirror in order to capture a realistic depiction? Or is she engaging the outside observer? Such compositions acknowledge the scopopic triangulation between artist, sitter, and viewer that is part of the alchemy of portraiture and a record of their personal bond. We will never know what Laserstein was painting, because only the corner of her canvas is shown at the edge of the composition, unseeable. Rose looks tenderly over Laserstein's shoulder, her hand affectionately perched on her blouse, her gaze intensely focused on the painting in progress. Rose is wearing lingerie which exposes her bare skin, further amplifying the suggestion of their shared domestic space and an erotic charge between them.

*Vor dem Spiegel (At the Mirror, 1930–31)* is even more radical. Not only does this painting propose a new paradigm for the artist-muse relationship, but it also manifests Laserstein's conflation of painting with erotic desire. Rose dominates the composition, standing nude in front of a full-length mirror, clutching its frame. Laserstein paints Rose's body from behind and shows the front of her body reflected in the mirror. Again, Laserstein presents herself diligently at work, squeezing paint onto her palette, not even looking at her model. The punctum of this double portrait is Rose's grip on the frame. Her facial expression is confident and resolute, as she looks at her own reflection; she is literally gripping her own self-image. In this performative enactment of musedom, it is Rose who is in control—Laserstein has flipped the traditional script. In this reversed power dynamic, Laserstein shows herself standing beside Rose, casting her own gaze downward, focusing intently on the very materials that allowed her to illustrate Rose's empowered stance. It is the artist who is in service of her muse.

Rose was the only model who posed for Laserstein during her years in Berlin. Rose's nickname was Puppy—an endearing reference to their “mutual dependence.”<sup>14</sup> Proof of their close and reciprocal partnership appears in their postwar correspondence. Laserstein was exiled to Sweden after the Nazis decreed that, as a Jew, she could no longer work or exhibit her paintings in public. Writing to Rose, who remained in Germany, Laserstein acknowledged, “You were my impetus and support.”<sup>15</sup>

Both paintings—*I and My Model* and *At the Mirror*—are proclamations of the interdependence between artist and muse. Laserstein inextricably links intimate partnership with creative complicity. It is painful to think how this inspired partnership might have flourished had Laserstein not left Germany in 1937. How many more groundbreaking paintings would have resulted from their radical *pas de deux*? The genocidal menace of the Third Reich separated the couple, forcing them back into the closet in order to survive. The Nazis brutally truncated one of the most powerful manifestations of lesbian visibility in art history and forced a heartbreaking caesura between a formidable artistic and romantic union.

## THE HEART WANTS WHAT IT WANTS

Jenna Gribbon met Mackenzie Scott some eighty years after Laserstein was compelled to leave her muse behind. If any couple has taken up the mantle of Laserstein and Rose, in the twenty-first century, it is Gribbon and Scott. Since their first meeting in 2017, Gribbon's painting practice has taken a profound shift: portraits of Scott, and vignettes of their shared life together, have become her primary subject. And like Laserstein, Gribbon has placed the conceptualization of the artist-muse relationship at the center of her practice, forging a complicit and reciprocal creative partnership that has extended the paradigm pioneered by Laserstein and Rose in the late 1920s and '30s. Political gains through legislation and in the courts, supporting equal rights, as well as the ripple effects of the social movement for LGBTQ acceptance, have paved the way for more queer visibility in contemporary art. Gribbon is one of many lesbian or queer-identified women artists working today, but she remains singular in her dual preoccupations. With her wife as her principal, sustained subject, Gribbon simultaneously interrogates the act of looking as a parallel, urgent subject at the core of her practice.

There are two primary modes of representation in Gribbon's figurative work: candid genre scenes featuring a seemingly unposed Scott, with occasional cameo appearances by Gribbon's young son Silas, or obviously theatrical setups in which Scott is deliberately performing or artificially posed. In both types of representation, Gribbon works from photographs: "My photos are sort of sketches. I use photography not just to capture the fleeting moments that interest me, but as a reflection of the way that photographic language has completely infiltrated the way we process experience and interact with our memories."<sup>16</sup> This aspect of her practice harks back to the late nineteenth century when the newly invented "photographic eye" dramatically impacted the way painters saw their subjects: catalyzing the introduction of unusual framing, and cropping, in the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist compositional lexicon. And like her forebears, Gribbon uses *alla prima* painting techniques so as to have the speed to capture intimate moments with wet-on-wet pigments. A queered strand of DNA from the Nabi painters could also be said to shape how Gribbon selects images for paintings. Intimate, quotidian scenes within domestic spaces were explored by artists, such as Édouard Vuillard and Maurice Denis, who painted cropped compositions of their wives in the bathtub, mending socks, or caring for their children. Gribbon recalls their signature *intimiste* approach and pushes the erotic potential of such prosaic activities. The kitchen and the bedroom, and the living room couch, become charged sites in which Gribbon can record unscripted moments with Scott who is often portrayed topless, or nude, while emptying the dishwasher, frying an egg, or moving about their house. Snapshots are translated into lush brushstrokes of oil paint, elevating these domestic settings and placing them in dialogue with centuries of human image-making. By immortalizing mundane moments from the lives of two women who desire one another, Gribbon has broached terrain which, until now, has been virtually unexplored in the history of painting, bringing Laserstein's legacy forward into the age of marriage equality.



*Me looking at her looking at me* (2018), *Watching me swim* (2018), *Watching me paint* (2019), *Regarding me regarding you and me* (2020), *Watching her give/gives me pleasure* (2020)—All these paintings can trace their origins to Laserstein and Rose's watershed work, *At the Mirror*, in which the agency of the muse is equal to, if not greater than, the artist's own. As Gribbon's titles suggest, the gaze itself is as much her signature subject as the people she paints. The act of looking—the consensual, two-way scopophilia between artist and muse—and creating agency for the person being watched (and portrayed) are leitmotifs that run throughout Gribbon's oeuvre. Allusions to ways of looking—mirrors, blindfolds, spotlights—are tropes that pepper her recent works. Likewise, Gribbon and Scott have dramatized the act of looking in photoshoots that foreground the accoutrements of film or stage productions: green screen backdrops, large photography lights, primary-colored velvet curtains, and Vaudeville-style spotlights. By painting these devices and props that vision and help create illusion, Gribbon is able to allegorize the act of looking. She stages, for the viewer, how the viewer's eye and mind should consume her chosen subject, while giving a nod to Scott's own creative practice as an accomplished musician and habituée of the stage.

Gribbon's ongoing interrogation of seeing and depicting, painting and desire, and the porous borders between public and private realms is brought to light in *The Honeymoon Show!* At first, one might think the exhibition consists of two distinct bodies of work—one that takes up snapshots of a tropical honeymoon and a second group of staged portraits. Despite her past use of both types of representation, this ensemble is not just about the contrasting scenes of the seemingly spontaneous, relaxed closeness of a newly-married couple with the intentional artifice of performed intimacy. Instead, *The Honeymoon Show!* presents one conceptual project through this dialectical relationship, resulting in a radical revision of musedom through a painted spectacle of her post-nuptial life.

Painting from photographs taken during the couple's honeymoon in Thailand last winter, Gribbon shows Scott at play in a tropical landscape, capturing the dappled sunlight and lush jungle flora that set the scene for their romantic, beach getaway. Scott is nude, seen from behind, standing knee-deep in the sea. Her fair skin and long, blonde hair contrast with the saturated blues and interlaced banyan trees in the background. Visual puns animate other scenes: one features a larger-than-life Scott looking out at the viewer from the mouth of a cave-cum-vagina, and another shows a seated, pensive Scott with her fingers suggestively wedged into a coconut shell. Aware of the voyeuristic fantasies that such honeymoon images can stir up in the average viewer, and the loaded, gendered history of the gaze, Gribbon seizes upon these sexually suggestive moments with a knowing provocation, underscoring how these images are constructed consensually from total complicity between an artist and her muse. The audacious scale of Gribbon's Honeymoon paintings magnifies the overt queerness of these paintings. Transforming these seemingly intimate snapshots of Scott into larger-than-life figures in paint, she creates a public icon of lesbian desire. This suite of pictures concludes with a full-length nude of Scott, shown in profile and appearing to be encased within the glass shower in their hotel room. With the rumpled bedsheets lusciously evoked by Gribbon's skilled hand, the composition is framed by burgundy-red drapery on the windows, hinting at possible artifice in these ostensibly unposed, documentary compositions, previewing the dialectical construction that unfolds in the corresponding theatrical works.

The *Show!* part of Gribbon's ensemble is comprised of theatrically-posed portraits of Scott. Based on a series of staged photographs, shot against velvet curtains, three monumental works are close-ups of Scott's face, enacting various emotive states. Intensified by the primary colors of each backdrop, the artifice of her facial expressions—pouting, with eyes looking upward; the corners of her mouth turned down, eyes bulging in mock disgust; scratching her nose, looking downward with insouciance—is pure pantomime. Scott performs for Gribbon, with the red/yellow/blue backdrop reinforcing the

constructed performativity of this staged “show” as well as functioning as a painter’s color wheel joke. One of the largest theatrical canvases reveals a naked Scott, seated in a chair, with the couple’s rambunctious young dog jumping onto her lap. Titled *The Magician’s Assistant* (2023), it is ambiguous as to who is assisting whom in this artist-muse-animal trio.

Whether candid or staged, all the paintings in *The Honeymoon Show!* are constructed in such a way that both the *depicter* and the *depicted* are active agents. Discussing these new works, Gribbon explains, “I’m painting subjecthood and what it feels like to be looked at as a woman who knows how it feels to be regarded. The work is made with a lot of empathy for the subject. The purpose of using Mackenzie, over and over, is to familiarize the viewer with her, so she becomes not just ‘the subject,’ but herself. The more we come to know her the more we can feel for her in her various pictorial predicaments. I think it’s important to see visual evidence of women’s desires. We don’t have enough examples of feminine desire and even fewer examples of what it looks like for a woman to desire another woman.”<sup>17</sup>

No matter what mode of representation Gribbon chooses to portray her subject, it could be said that her work fully embodies Emily Dickinson’s famous line: “The Heart wants what it wants.”<sup>18</sup> There is much debate about the original intent behind these words, addressed to Mary Bowles in a letter from 1862. Bowles was one of several intimate friends that scholars suspect may have been Dickinson’s lover or at the least her romantic crush. It feels appropriate to reclaim this phrase and apply it to a queer, female artist whose practice is rooted in representations of her muse, not only because of the conjecture about Dickinson’s lesbianism. “The Heart wants what it wants” (or “the art wants what the art wants,” to recall Smith’s deconstruction of museology) has provided a perfect alibi for uncontrollable or inappropriate desires. “Monster” male artists, like Picasso or Woody Allen, could crib from the great poet to justify exploitative relationships, dubious representations, and other types of amorous transgression.<sup>19</sup> Their muses could be objectified, their motives unquestioned, because of the implication in Dickinson’s prose that love and desire lack logic. Gribbon’s oeuvre revolts against this paradigm and restores a more complex ethic that is actually embedded in Dickinson’s words. Her paintings demonstrate how a muse can also be a full-fledged subject, as opposed to a one-dimensional object of desire, and that looking as well as depicting can be an ethical, equitable exchange, and that desire or love can be conjured reciprocally without recourse to objectification, an ethos similarly articulated in Paul’s *Self-Portrait*. Gribbon’s heart (and art) wants her wife, Scott, while it also wants equity, shared vision, and compassion—“The Heart wants what it wants—or else it does not care.”<sup>20</sup>

1. Linda Nochlin's essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971), single-handedly launched the discipline of feminist art history by enumerating, for the first time, the multiple systemic reasons why it was "institutionally made impossible for women to achieve artistic 'excellence.'" She underscored how the very construct of greatness is rife with gender bias. Nochlin shone a light on the impact of generations of exclusively male tastemakers, and gatekeepers, who solely dictated which artists were acknowledged, sold, and collected, let alone anointed as "great." She meticulously deconstructed the biases inherent in her titular question while underscoring the centuries worth of misogyny intrinsic to received ideas around the myth of genius. Hence the very historical construct of "greatness" must be understood as profoundly gendered, and this explains my need to deploy scare quotes around the term in this essay.
2. Zadie Smith, "The Muse at Her Easel: Celia Paul's 'Self-Portrait,'" *The New York Review of Books* (November 21, 2019): [www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/11/21/muse-easel-celia-paul-lucian-freud](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/11/21/muse-easel-celia-paul-lucian-freud).
3. See Alicia Dujovne-Ortiz, *Dora Maar: Prisonnière du regard* (Paris: Grasset, 2003).
4. Celia Paul, *Self-Portrait* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), 97.
5. Paul, 21.
6. Paul, 2.
7. See Smith, "The word museography properly refers to the systematic description of objects in museums, but it might also do for the culture and ideology surrounding that dusty old figure of legend, the artist's "muse."
8. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 86.
9. Woolf, 86.
10. Susan S. Lanser, "1928: Sapphic Modernity and the Sexuality of History," *Modernism/modernity* 1, no. 3 (October 25, 2016): [www.modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/1928-sapphic-modernity-and-sexuality-history](http://www.modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/1928-sapphic-modernity-and-sexuality-history).
11. Jane Alison and Coralie Malissard, *Modern Couples: Art, Intimacy and the Avant-Garde* (London: Prestel, 2019), 66.
12. "Garçonne" is a neologism, coined in the 1920s, which feminizes the French word for boy. The term was used to describe the emergence of gender-bending style, and it empowered behaviors not traditionally ascribed to women. In Weimar Germany, the garçonne was also called the "New Woman."
13. Anna-Carola Krause, *Lotte Laserstein: Meine einzige Wirklichkeit / My Only Reality* (Dresden: Philo Fine Arts, 2003), 92.
14. Krause, 106.
15. Krause, 106.
16. Unpublished conversation with the author, October 10, 2023.
17. Unpublished conversation with the author, October 10, 2023.
18. Emily Dickinson, letter to Mary Bowles, Spring 1862: [www.archive.emilydickinson.org/correspondence/mbowles/l262.html](http://www.archive.emilydickinson.org/correspondence/mbowles/l262.html).
19. "'The heart wants what it wants.' / It was one of those phrases that never left your head once you'd heard it; we all immediately memorized it whether we wanted to or not. It's monstrous disregard for anything but the self. It's proud irrationality. Woody goes on: 'There's no logic to those things. You meet someone and you fall in love and that's that.'" Claire Dederer, *Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023), 31. Previously published as "What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?" *The Paris Review* (November 20, 2017): [www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/11/20/art-monstrous-men](http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/11/20/art-monstrous-men).
20. Dickinson.

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