



Comparative Study

IB Visual Arts SL

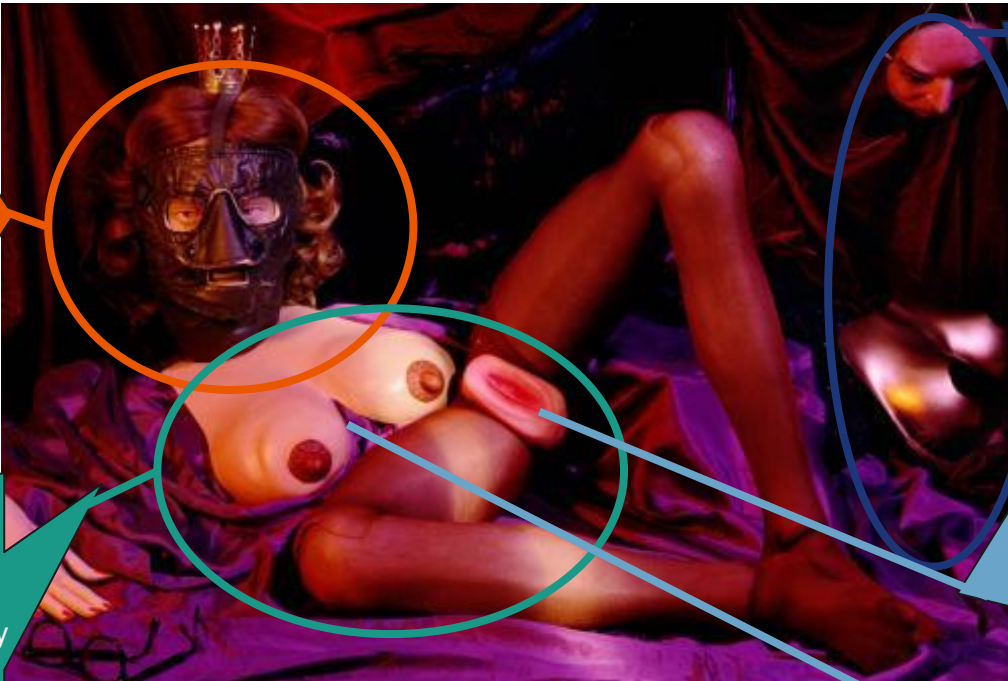


Introduction

My comparative study focuses on three works by late twentieth and early nineteenth-century feminist artists Cindy Sherman, Victoria Lomasko, and Luo Yang. Each of these artists work with portraits that deal with feminine sexuality and empowerment. Sherman, through her sculpture and photography, Lomasko, with her drawings, and Yang with her photography.

All of these artists take part in the “third-wave” of feminism (feminism in the 1990s to the present day). Third-wave feminism is concerned with sexual harassment, reproductive rights, objectification and sexualization, and also stresses globalization, human rights, racism, sexism, and classism. Sherman, Lomasko, and Yang all use portraiture to focus on objectification and sexualization of women in culture and resist stereotypes and oppression despite coming from different continents.

Annotation: Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #264*, 1992



Sherman contrasts the black, heavy, bondage mask and the golden, small, tiara to dichotomize dominance and submission, and overt sexuality and "dainty" purity. The two roles typically assigned to women are contrasted to portray this as the only two ways women can be viewed by the public.

Sherman's use of medical prosthetics in the place of traditionally feminine features (the breasts and vagina) emphasize a sterility. This shows how these body parts have been separated from their function and are sexualized in favor of being recognized and appreciated. The prosthetics are objects, bringing awareness to the objectification of women in media and how their bodies are seen as props.

Sherman's placement of the model in a pornographic pose again emphasizes not only the objectification of women, but subjugation and use of women in media, and how they are seen as vulnerable. The legs and arms are open, displaying a confidence and fearlessness in baring herself. It also forces the viewer to come to terms with their own sexuality and feelings towards sex as an act.

The background of the image features another feminine looking mask and a chrome prosthetic pair of breasts. The uncomfortable and background positioning of the props relates to the viewer as they too partake in the image, but not directly, and adds to the idea of watching and continuing to objectify.

Sherman uses color, lighting, and texture to further emulate a pornographic shoot. By using deep plums, warmer, romantic, lighting, and silk, leather, and chrome, the positioning of the prosthetics feels right, but the skin being replaced by plastic creates a feeling of unsettling in the viewer as sterile crashes with sensual.

Cultural Significance: Cindy Sherman *Untitled #264*, 1992



As an **American**, feminist, photographer in the early 1990s, Sherman was part of the feminist culture that pressed on, calling for true equality, during and after the Conservative backlash during the 1980s. As an artist, her work focused on roles of women, identity, sexuality, and femininity. She challenges the roles society assigns to women in American media, usually criticizing their hypersexualization or the “damsel in distress”. The graphic nature of her work forces the viewer to confront any internalized or ingrained oppression and the continuation of sexism through the consumption of media.

Untitled #264 deals most obviously with sexuality, a taboo topic amongst women in the United States. Women are encouraged to keep their virginity and are called “sluts” or “whores” for any behavior that is deemed too sexual or confident. Women are only allowed to be sexual if they are being objectified at the same time. The image highlights this objectification by using medical prosthetics, and shoves female sexuality in the viewers face in an unsettling manner that forces them to understand that the media’s portrayal of women is wrong.

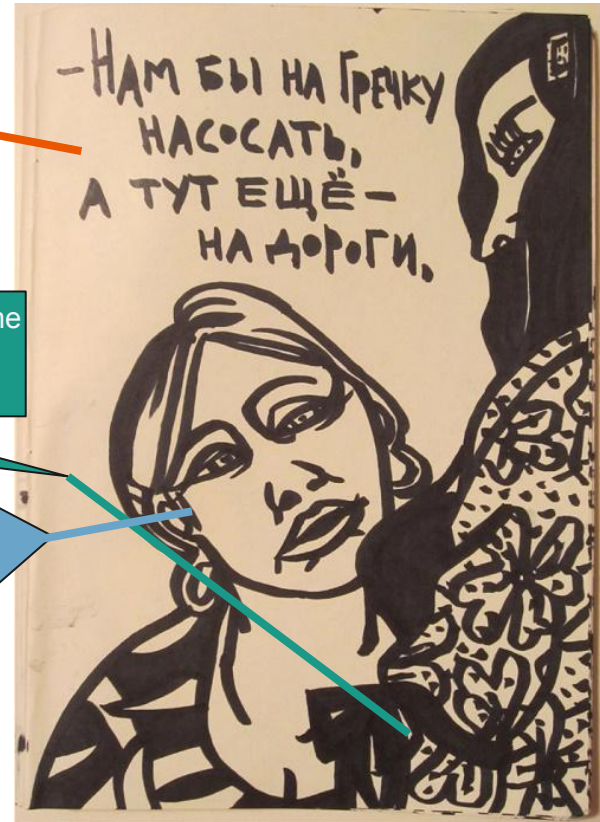
This work is relevant to America even today as women continue to fight for equal treatment and respect with movements such as #TimesUp, #MeToo, and the Women’s March. Women continue to be fearless and fight against oppression and objectification as they protest rape culture and demand to be seen as equals, especially in a political environment that has seen an influx of elected officials who have threatened women’s rights.

Annotation: Victoria Lomasko's *The Girls of Nizhny Novgorod*, 2014

The Russian reads, "We have enough trouble as it is sucking enough cock to keep ourselves supplied with grub, and now they want us to pay for the roads." This is one of the many portraits that Lomasko drew of sex workers from Nizhny Novgorod, a city in Russia. The inclusion of a caption not only provides context and information regarding the lives of these women, but portrays Lomasko's tone of protest in the inclusion of the harsh language.

The black and white portraiture allows the reality and rawness of the picture to come through, even in a caricature, as there is not color to distract. The patterns on the women's clothing add enough interest to the drawing to keep the eye moving.

The woman in focus is shown with Crow's feet and wrinkles around the mouth, emphasizing her age and fatigue. In her report about her experience with the "girls", Lomasko describes how the women in the offices (rented apartments where the women perform sexual acts), vary in size, shape, and age. She writes that there are "quite young women sporting T-shirts with logos, ponytails, and almost no makeup. There are tipsy fortysomething and even fiftysomething "dames" (*damy*) in corsets or velvet dresses with plunging necklines. Some women wear robes with nothing underneath, a cigarette perpetually dangling from their lips" (Lomasko, 2014). Including her age in the sketch emphasizes the ageless nature of sexualization, displaying how women, young and old, face the judgments of society.



"We have trouble as it is sucking enough cock to keep ourselves supplied with grub, and now they want us to pay for the roads."

The women are drawn with minimal background, revealing the limited time Lomasko had to draw, but also drawing the attention of the viewer to only them: emphasizing who they are as women instead of sex workers. She is drawing who they are as people, not objects.

Cultural Significance: Victoria Lomasko *The Girls of Nizhny Novgorod*



"We have trouble as it is sucking enough cock to keep ourselves supplied with grub, and now they want us to pay for the roads."

As third wave feminism starts to make strides in **Russia** currently, it still has not made strong impacts due to government control of the media and the strict nationalist policy prevalent within the country. In response to tight media control, many feminist artists and protesters have taken to graffiti and have put together exhibitions voicing their criticisms (bbc.com). One vocal artist has been Victoria Lomasko, as she draws to document protests, rallies, and courts. In *The Girls of Nizhny Novgorod*, she reveals the life of sex workers and how they are women doing jobs just like other women in Russia. She attempts to normalize the women in her portrayal, and creates a humorous tone that relates the viewer to the individuals that star in her work, effectively initiating a lack of judgment towards these women. Victoria Lomasko asked the girls themselves if they wanted their profession legalized, and some of those who had been to Europe said they liked the way that prostitution is regarded "as a normal paid service" in some countries (Lomasko, 2014).

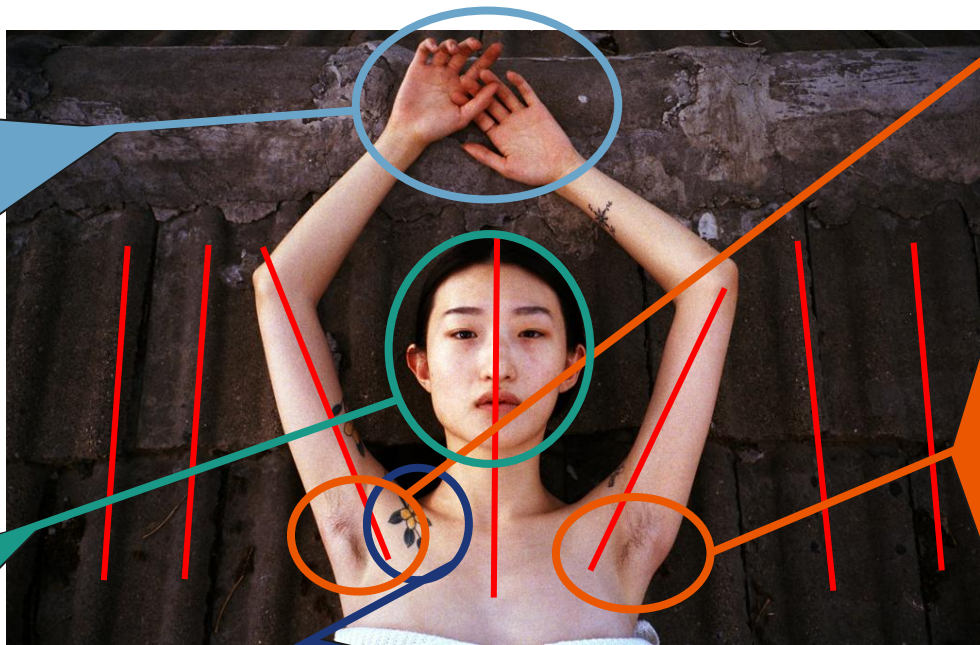
At first glance, the piece looks like a simple, somewhat abstract portrait, but upon further inspection, Victoria's documentation reveals her beliefs in Russian women and how sex workers should not be degraded due to their profession or their sexuality. In an intensely patriarchal society, one with a "legacy of centuries of patriarchal rule in society when the head of the household made decisions for everyone", Lomasko's powerful portrayal of women owning their sexuality and their bodies strikes back (Feifer, 2010).

Annotation: Luo Yang's *GIRLS*, Xie Yue, 2015

Luo Yang uses vertical lines to create a sense of vulnerability and rawness. The vertical lines of her pose and having her palms open opens her chest and face up to the viewer, giving them sight to her heart and eyes. By allowing the viewer to see the model in a bare state, the viewer comes to an understanding with the model that this is who she is and accepts her.

The minimal makeup, with the rusty color around the eyes and on the lips, adds to the vulnerable confidence that the model displays. A bare face, with imperfections and uneven tone, aided by the marks of subtle, strong red, create a powerful feeling that moves the viewer.

The contrast between her pale skin and the dark, dirty ridges create a difference in texture that highlights her traditionally feminine features (purity, softness, vulnerability). She is also wearing a white towel, relating her to an angel. However her skin is also painted with tattoos, identifying her as a rebel against traditional values.



The woman in the image has armpit hair, a trait contrary to beauty standards. By posing confidently and showing her armpit hair, she is redefining femininity from being “hairless” to being whatever she decides it to be. This trait competes with the model’s expression, revealing the viewer’s own apprehension to armpit hair as the viewer continues to look and focus on it. This leads to the realization that it should not matter what the subject decides to do with her body and her hair.

Cultural Significance: Luo Yang's *GIRLS*, Xie Yue, 2015

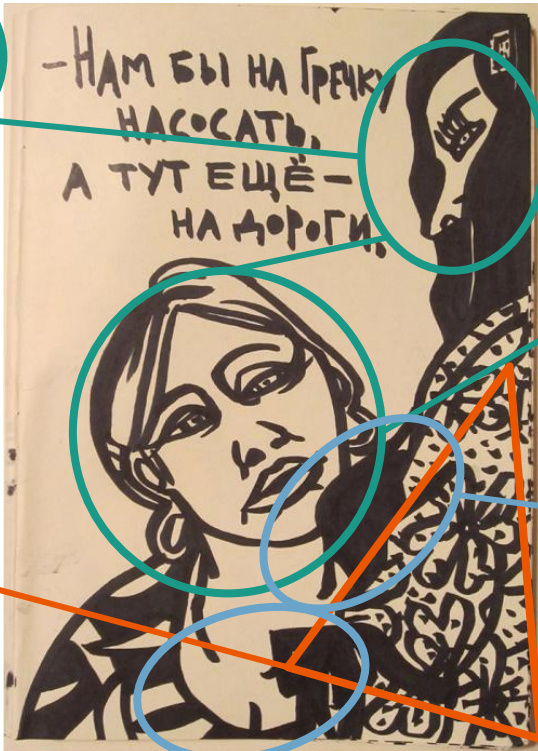
As a female, **Chinese**, photographer- Luo Yang stands out. Unafraid to share her art and unveil a subculture that “defies imposed expectations and stereotypes”, Yang not only photographs but embodies the “bad-assed and self-aware, yet insecure, vulnerable and torn” girls around her (Photography In Berlin, 2018). Living in China, she faces sexism from birth- with the child gender bias within the country. After Mao’s one-child policy following the great famine in China, male babies were favored and parents would hide, abandon, or even kill their daughters to try for a son. While the one-child policy is no longer, the repercussions are still visible, though less damaging, as China tries to bounce back with about “100 girls to every 117 boys” (Hilton, 2018). The ideology surrounding the ban, a systematic gender bias favoring men, is still prevalent within the country, despite government attempts to address surface level issues like the abortion of female babies. Chinese women continue to face a prevalence of sexual harassment on public transport and in the workplace, remain unable to cite domestic violence as a reason for divorce, and find difficulty in owning property due to the practice of primogeniture (property being given to the eldest son) being common in rural areas and women being paid less than men in urban settings and so they are ‘priced out’ of having their own property (Hilton, 2018).

In the face of sexism, China has seen a resurgence of feminism within its social media platforms. On the site Weibo, a campaign launched that had women showing their unshaved armpits “to highlight issues of beauty standards and women’s rights” and show how they are in control of their bodies (Hilton, 2018). *Xie Yue* is a professional exhibition of this protest, proving that the woman’s body is in her control. The vulnerability of the image should not be mistaken for submission, as that would be fitting into the stereotype of Asian women that *Xie Yue* is rebelling against and disproving.



China remains a patriarchal society, with its future determined by the patriarchal government. Despite a rush of the feminist wave, “China’s political and social roots must be addressed before serious progress can be made” (Hilton, 2018).

Comparison of *Untitled #264* and *The Girls of Nizhny Novgorod*



"We have trouble as it is sucking enough cock to keep ourselves supplied with grub, and now they want us to pay for the roads."

Lomasko's quick drawings in black and white contrast the vibrant colors in Sherman's photo. The varying choices in color have the same effect, an impactful demonstration of how women's bodies are used by others and easily exchanged with money.

Both images use two female heads, one partially obscured and one fully facing forward yet looking away. The inclusion of the face in *Nizhny* serves to personalize the women, while the obstruction and masking of the face objectifies in *Untitled*.

Breasts are seen in both pieces; more images associated with femininity and sexuality contribute to the reclamation of female sexuality.

The inclusion of robes or looser fitting fabric in both pieces heightens the sensuality and sex of the pieces.

Both pieces deal with sex work: pornography and prostitution, however Sherman uses sex work to illustrate a point of objectification in media, while Lomasko depicts sex work in its true form, to destigmatize it. Sherman and Lomasko both aim to undermine stereotypes and systematic oppression through their depictions of sex work.

Comparison of *Untitled #264* and *GIRLS*, Xie Yue



The pieces contrast in color choice: Sherman chooses to include bright and garish colors to enhance the impact of the image, while Yang prefers to stick to natural tones with greater contrast to make her impact.

Contrast comes in the subject matter as well, as Sherman works with a prosthetic pornstar, while Yang focuses on a real, Chinese woman. Despite different mediums, both images evoke a feeling of simultaneous strength and weakness.

Both are portraits that create a sense of bareness and confidence by posing openly, limbs in a rhombus shape.

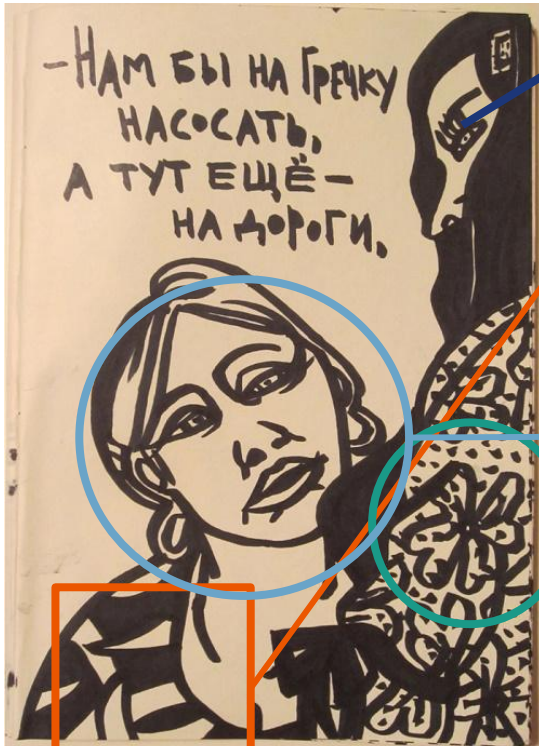
Both images include a face looking straight at the camera with a neutral expression, asserting ownership of their sexuality while simultaneously submitting their identity to be judged.

The main similarity between these two pieces is their thematic composition. Both shut down standards and expectations of women by highlighting themes of sexuality, vulnerability, and confidence.

Another difference is in texture. Silk, plastic, metal, and leather from Sherman's scene contrast the earthy cement, skin, and hair that star in Yang's photo.



Comparison of *GIRLS*, *Xie Yue* and *The Girls of Nizhny Novgorod*

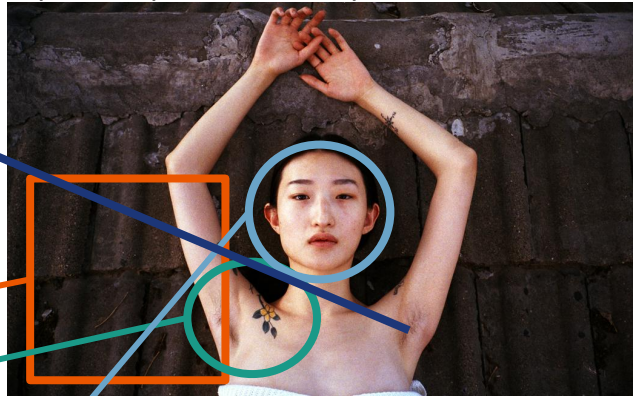


Lomasko emphasizes traditionally feminine features, seen in her dramatic sketching of eyelashes, earrings, long hair, lips and breasts. This contrasts Yang's focus on the masculinity of her subject, including the hairy armpits, covering and cropping the breasts, and the blending in of the hair with the background not emphasizing it.

Both artworks use geometric shapes, lines and patterns to add motion and balance to the piece.

Floral motif in both pieces contributes to sense of femininity associated with each, and how it is defined by each woman, despite their different contexts.

Despite being in different mediums, the same neutral tones are carried throughout each piece, adding an air of simplistic impact to each depiction.



Portraiture and forward facing face included in both, however Lomasko creates more of an irritated feeling through the tilted head, while Yang's straight and upright posing radiates quiet confidence.

These two pieces deal with female sexuality and standards for women in two different ways. Besides both being portraiture, *Nizhny* owns sexuality and sex service as a fact of life, whereas *Xie Yue* owns the body outside of sexuality. *Nizhny's* dismissal of society's judgements for sex workers relates to *Xie Yue's* depiction of Chinese counterculture in that they both refuse to be defined by their relationship to sex.

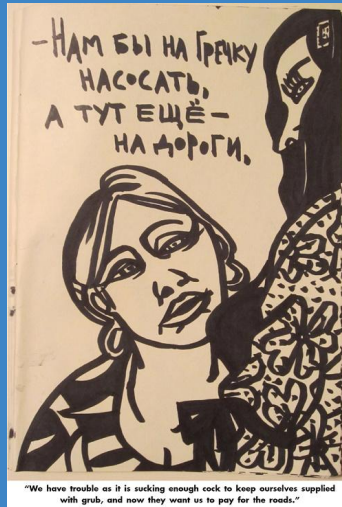
"We have trouble as it is sucking enough cock to keep ourselves supplied with grub and now they want us to pay for the roads."

Conclusion

Feminist artists Cindy Sherman, Victoria Lomasko, and Luo Yang all address the objectification, sexuality, and femininity of women in the late 20th century through use of portraiture. The women each resist the various forms of oppression they face within their culture, using posing, color, lighting, and texture to communicate a tone of protest. The women focus on sexual reclamation and ownership of the female body in a visual rebellion of oppression. The cultures surrounding each woman motivate the various foci of their work; the portrayal of women as objects for sexual stimulation in media in the United States, the stigma surrounding sex work in Russia, and the stereotype of submission in China. The art from these women continues to expose inequality and inspire change, especially as these issues gain more awareness from movements like #MeToo, #TimesUp, and the Women's March.



Untitled #264



The Girls of Nizhny Novgorod



GIRLS, Xie Yue