

FATAL ATTRACTION

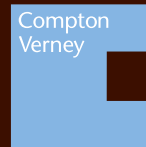
Diana and Actaeon
The Forbidden Gaze



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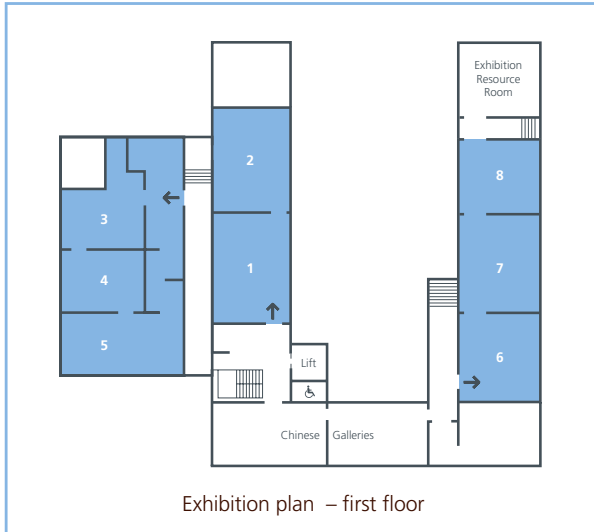
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FATAL ATTRACTION

Diana and Actaeon
The Forbidden Gaze



Exhibition tours

Fri 27 March, Fri 24 April and Fri 29 May at 2.30pm

A 45 minute tour of Fatal Attraction. Places are limited so please sign up on arrival. Tour included in admission price.

The exhibition contains work with sexual imagery.

“TO GAZE IMPLIES MORE
THAN TO LOOK AT – IT
SIGNIFIES A PSYCHOLOGICAL
RELATIONSHIP OF POWER,
IN WHICH THE ONE WHO
GAZES IS SUPERIOR TO THE
OBJECT OF THE GAZE”

This exhibition begins with the story of Diana and Actaeon and their fatal encounter. The first section of the exhibition presents works relating directly to the mythological tale, from a maiolica dish to the photographic re-constructions of Robert Mapplethorpe and Karen Knorr. Presenting both historical and contemporary works of art, the exhibition shows how the depiction of the naked body has persisted as a genre of the European fine art tradition from the Renaissance to the present day. The naked body or nude has been regarded as an ultimate representation of beauty, but hidden in our response to the subject are the social and cultural influences involved in seeing – and with this, possible feelings of embarrassment, fascination, guilt and pleasure.

The concept of ‘the gaze’ originated in film theory and criticism (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey, 1975), but is equally relevant to our understanding of the history of art. The gaze can be defined as a mode of looking driven by desire.

Mulvey's original essay describes the gaze as belonging specifically to a male spectator who gains erotic pleasure in transforming what he sees into a fantasy object or through a controlling, voyeuristic vision.

The Goddess Diana

The figure of Diana first emerges in classical mythology in the form of Artemis, the Greek goddess of the chase and forests – like her twin brother Apollo she was also the deity of sudden death. The Roman religion turned Artemis into the ancient Italic Diana, retaining her associations with nature and the hunt she would occupy the mountains, forests and streams where she would bathe with her nymphs. Imposing a strict law of chastity on her companions, Diana also became the protector of women and of virginity.

Diana and Actaeon – The Forbidden Gaze

Mythology relates the tale of Actaeon, a skilled and dedicated hunter who, when out hunting with his hounds, happens to approach Diana bathing in a

stream with her companions. Actaeon is transfixed by Diana's nakedness and beauty; Diana is momentarily passive and vulnerable in his gaze and seeks revenge for his intrusion on her privacy. Diana transforms Actaeon into a stag and sets his own dogs on him, tearing him to pieces. His death prevents her public humiliation and the possibility of his boasting of the encounter.

The Diana and Actaeon myth was a source of inspiration for many artists in the Renaissance, and is derived from the Roman poet Ovid and his stories from the book *Metamorphoses*. After Ovid's re-writing and adaptation of the story, the theme often recurred in images as part of the revival of antiquity, from Renaissance to Classicism. Artists in the twentieth century also dealt with the psychological aspects of the theme.

ROOM 1

Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*

One of the most famous and vivid depictions of the myth is seen in Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* (represented in the exhibition by the printed curtain), which was painted towards the end of his life in 1556 – 59.

Titian's painting is an undisguised erotic scene, created to provide pleasure for his young patron, King Philip II of Spain. Behind the depiction of a mythological story is the presentation of the naked female body reflecting both the desires of the client and the artist's intentions. In Titian's painting, we experience the intrusion on Diana's nakedness through the filter of Actaeon's vision: his action, his embarrassment, his excitement and his crime. It is Actaeon's 'point-of-view' that grants us permission to look, and at the same time protects us from the return of Diana's stare and ultimately death.

John Berger's highly influential book and television series *Ways of Seeing* has questioned the complex relationship between artist, patrons and the spectator in the creation of images. Berger points out the historical changes in the spectator's identification with the figure of the protagonist, and the absence and recognition of the spectator's self-awareness.

Within all the various narrative possibilities, Titian's version is probably the most complex: the still-armed Actaeon sees the naked Diana, who has also laid down her weapon; and yet he, the hunter, becomes the hunted. Still entirely unchanged, he indicates with his left hand to a type of memorial with a stag's head. Suddenly he seems to realise the fate he is to suffer. This stag's head is itself a death mask and hunting trophy, and can be interpreted as a premature cenotaph for Actaeon.

ROOM 2

In the many different representations of the Diana and Actaeon myth, a central scene often stands for the entire story. Sometimes several scenes are presented in a single composition, unfolding as a narrative in a way more commonly associated with film. Some show Diana and her bathing companions before her discovery, with Actaeon approaching from the distance. Others show the moment when the women discover Actaeon (as in the paintings by Titian and Charles-Joseph Natoire: the moment when glances are exchanged); the dramatic moment when Actaeon is sprayed with water by Diana and he begins to transform from a man whose antlers are starting to grow into a stag without any human features (Mignon); or a representation of the observer and of the fleeing stag being chased by his hounds or already caught by them (De Troy).

In the magnificent maiolica dish (Italian, Siena, 1490 – 1500) we are shown Diana and her nymphs bathing, with Actaeon to the left, partially transformed into a stag. Over the scene is an inscription:

PEL AQVA CHE MI GITASTI ADOSO CON TUO
MANI FACTO SO CERVIO E MORTO MANO CANI
“By the water which thou hast cast upon me with
thy hands I am made a stag and killed by the hand
of my hounds.”

Around the border is another scene from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, with images of the battle between the Satyrs and Centaurs.

In the superb painting *Diana and Actaeon* by Paolo Veronese (1528 – 1588) we see Actaeon’s transformation beginning in the foreground and in the distance the end of the story is shown.

ROOM 3

Pierre Klossowski's strangely beautiful large-scale drawings re-cast the Diana and Actaeon myth into the present. Klossowski (1905 – 2001) introduces his wife Roberte (who was always his model and his actress) as Diana, wearing fashion accessories that appear frozen in time. Klossowski's images appear poised between an antiquated visual language of Italian frescos with contemporary pantomime performance. In one of the drawings, Klossowski depicts Diana and Actaeon meeting in the Swiss mountains, with the Matterhorn in the background.

In Robert Mapplethorpe's *Statue Series* the partially transformed Actaeon is attacked by his hounds. Mapplethorpe's photograph records the late-baroque marble sculpture in the monumental Diana Fountain in the park of the Palazzo Reale in Caserta.

Candaules, Gyges and Nyssia

Candaules, King of Lydia was proud of his wife's beauty, and arranged for his general Gyges to secretly view her as she undressed in the royal chamber. Gyges viewed the naked body of Nyssia from behind a curtain, but accidentally made his presence known. As in the story of Diana and Actaeon, the female figure is a victim of the male gaze and humiliated by the event; yet, ultimately she takes revenge.

Nyssia demands that Gyges has to choose between killing her disrespectful husband or himself be killed. In the painting by Egdon van der Neer, the moment of discovery of Gyges hiding behind the curtains of the bed chamber is shown, but there is no drama and no contact with the viewer. Almost 200 years later, William Etty portrays the story more dramatically – Etty is far more suggestive of the violent consequences of Candaules flaunting his wife – and uses the story to create an erotic study of voyeurism and vengeance.

ROOM 4

Veiling and Unveiling

In Delacroix's painting *The Duke of Orleans Unveiling his Lover to the Duke of Burgundy*, the painter refers to an episode from the *Histoire des Ducs de Bourgogne* by Barante, which was republished in 1824. This story, according to Günter Metken, "reports how Duke Louis d'Orleans (1372 – 1407) took the wife of his butler, Aubert le Flamenc, as his lover and doubly deceives her husband by showing his mistress naked and only hiding her face so that he does not recognise her." It is assumed that Delacroix painted the scene according to the extensive description of the event in *Les vies des dames galantes* by Brantôme, where it is stated that the duke holds the bedclothes in front of his mistress's features.

In Cranach's *Venus and Cupid* the artist produces a subtly erotic image lightly veiled under a mythological

scene. Drapery is employed to make the form more mysterious and also emphasise the lines of the body. Cranach (1472 – 1553) often distinguishes between the gender of his figures with colouration: the male figures are reddish-brown with blood coursing through their veins, and the female white and pure. John Currin's painting *The Dane* depicts a more overt sexual encounter. As with Klossowski, Currin's paintings appear slightly archaic with references to artists of the past like Watteau, Boucher, Fragonard and Cranach. His pastiche of art history is employed to create a distance to the subject and his source material.

Bathsheba, Susanna and Musidora – The Bathers

'In European art from the Renaissance onwards women were depicted as being aware of being seen by a spectator.
Men act and women appear. Men look at women.
Women watch themselves being looked at.'

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972

The story of Susanna and the Elders was a popular theme in European painting, and offered artists another excuse to paint the naked female body. Two elderly judges become obsessed by Susanna and spy on her as she takes a bath; they threaten to accuse her of adultery if she refuses to sleep with them; Susanna defends her chastity; but the accusations against her almost cause her death, until the prophet Daniel questions the Elders' motives.

This story is adapted in William Etty's *Musidora: The Bather*, 1846. The painter refers to the poem *The Seasons* (1730), by James Thomson: Etty places us in the position of Damon, a character from the poem who stumbles upon Musidora as she bathes in a stream. The scene was a well-established pretext for painting the female nude, and the poem was celebrated in England as a contemporary adaptation of the Diana and Actaeon or Susanna stories.

The Artist's Gaze

When Picasso was 86 years old he began a series of etchings referred to as the '347 Series'. The etchings define a major theme of his later years: that of the artist as voyeur. It is in this role that the artist introduces himself as an old man in the studio, gazing at the young model. The depiction of the female body in art history and the media is often associated with voyeurism.

In Fiona Banner's work, her performance and action focuses on the act of viewing and the role of the artist and spectator. Banner shows the process of looking through language, as she attempts to describe the naked body.

ROOM 6

Marina Abramović's video projection *Balkan Erotic Epic*, 2005, references Balkan folk culture and its use of the erotic to work in harmony with nature. Obscene objects and male and female genitals have an important symbolic function in the fertility and agricultural rites of Balkan peasants, which attempt to align cosmic forces and communicate with the gods.

The *Sheela-na-Gig* is the name given to the quasi-erotic stone carvings of a female figure usually found on Norman churches. Whilst often interpreted as pagan idols, the carvings are more common in Ireland than anywhere else. This *Sheela-na-Gig* by an unknown maker is dated from around the 1400s, and was found at Caherelly Castle, Co. Limerick, Ireland. The head and part of the legs are missing, although obviously spread apart, and there is an opening indicating the vulva. Unusually for a *Sheela-na-Gig*, the breasts and navel

are well defined, and the vulva is not as grotesquely exaggerated as on similar figures. One theory regarding their role was that they acted as a warning against sexual activity, the figures' overt gesture and display repelling erotic thoughts rather than attracting them.

Nancy Spero's use of the *Sheela-na-Gig* figure is part of her larger project of reclaiming mythic and archetypal women from many cultures and historical periods

'What I'm trying to say then, in a lyrical and positive way, is that these women ...are empowered and that they are sexual. These women are protagonists and they are subjects I'm doing this in my language and it is not primarily for the male gaze.'

Nancy Spero

ROOM 8

In the final room we encounter the work of contemporary artists Marlene Dumas and Thomas Ruff.

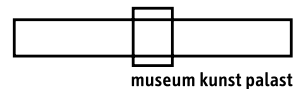
In the work of Marlene Dumas (b. 1953 in Cape Town, South Africa) the relations between art and eroticism and art and female beauty have been a constant theme. Her images are often taken from polaroids of friends or from magazines. Thomas Ruff (b. 1958) is best known for his large scale close-up portraits but he is also interested in new technologies and the power to manipulate opinion through imagery. In the series *nudes* Ruff downloads images from the internet, manipulating scale and distorting and blurring the subject to a point where it becomes subservient to formal and aesthetic values. In the process the image takes on a painterly quality distancing it from its original source.

When the image is focussed towards the gaze of the viewer, it summons a voyeuristic action where the viewer becomes implicated and actively involved – and, as Laura Mulvey points out, ‘caught in the moral ambiguity of looking.’

Balthasar Burkhard’s black and white photographic image *The Origin of the World* pays homage to Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* of 1866, in which a woman is presented naked, close-up, alone. Courbet’s painting remains startling in its directness, so much so that it was first unveiled to the public one hundred years after it was made.

The exhibition was conceived and first shown at the museum kunst palast, Düsseldorf 2008.

This version of the exhibition has been organised by museum kunst palast, Düsseldorf with Compton Verney.



EVENTS

Diana and Actaeon Film Evening

Thurs 16 April, 7.30pm

Tour our Fatal Attraction exhibition with our curator, who will introduce a screening of *A Short Film About Love* (1988, cert.15, 90 mins). This Kieslowski classic picks up on the themes in our exhibition as a young man spies on an older woman from his apartment.

**Tickets £13, concs £9.50, includes gallery admission.
Members £5. Pre-booking essential.**

Lecture:

The Myth of Diana and Actaeon in Antiquity

Sat 18 April, 1pm

Dr Zahra Newby, Senior Lecturer in Classics at Warwick University, explores the changing meanings of the Diana and Actaeon myth in the ancient world, tracing its representation in art from Greek temple sculpture to the Roman villa.

**Tickets £13, concs £9.50, includes gallery admission.
Members £5.**

Concert:

Diana and Actaeon: Les Amours Baroques

Fri 15 May, 7.30pm

Join soprano Emily Van Evera and the London Baroque for a special concert including Boismortier's *Diana and Actaeon* as well as music by Purcell, Jenkins and Couperin.

Tickets £15, concs £11.50.

Lecture:

Titian's Diana and Actaeon in the art of Renaissance Italy

Sun 24 May, 1pm

Professor Peter Humfrey of the University of St Andrews, author of numerous works on Titian, Bellini and Italian art, discusses the importance of the Diana and Actaeon myth to the artists of the Renaissance.

**Tickets £13, concs £9.50, includes gallery admission.
Members £5.**