

UNIVERSITY OF ART AND DESIGN CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF FINE ARTS

ABSTRACT

EROTICISM IN THE 20th CENTURY'S PAINTING

PhD STUDENT:

IOAN POPDAN

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATOR:

PhD PROF. IOAN SBÂRCIU

CLUJ-NAPOCA

2014

Content:

Introduction.....	4
I. The eros paradigms within the European culture.....	7
1.1. Plato and the eros mythology.....	8
1.2. The romantic love.....	12
1.3. Freud and the “scientific” analysis of the eroticism.....	15
1.4. Contemporary perspectives on the eros.....	20
II. Eros and transgression. The feminine nude’s issues.....	25
2.1. The beginnings: Eduard Manet, <i>Olympia</i>	26
2.2. The subversive project. The use of pornography in order to question the canon of art.....	30
2.3. The revisionist project. Attempts to reinterpret the nude.....	34
2.4. The satirical project. The social critic through the nude’s interpretation.....	41
III. Eros and primitivism. The bi-dimensional rediscovery and the symbolism in painting.....	58
3.1. Gauguin and the exotic Tahiti, a different perspective.....	61
3.2. The African masks and the erotic painting of the first half of the 20 th century.....	65
3.2.1. The African masks and the historic perspective.....	65
3.2.2. The African masks and the binocular vision.....	67
3.3. Primitivism within the contemporary painting.....	71
3.3.1. The tantric painting and the sexual revolution of the 60’s.....	71
3.3.2. Primitivism within the painting at the end of the 20 th century.....	75
IV. Irrational eroticism. The appeal to interiority.....	95
4.1. Eroticism, identity and introspection within the painting at the beginning of the 20 th century.....	97
4.1.1 The Viennese modernism and the search for the woman’s “true nature”.....	97
4.1.2 The mysteries of the mechanical eros.....	102
4.2. The surreal eroticism.....	105
4.2.1. The erotic experience and the psychic automatism.....	105
4.2.2. The paranoid – critical method’s eroticism.....	108
4.2.3. The oneiric eroticism and the „Olympia model”.....	110
4.3. The expressionist – abstract eroticism: Willem de Kooning – the “rebel”.....	113
V. The eros’ agony and the death of painting. The serial image’s instauration.....	131
5.1. The pictorial image and the photographic technique.....	134

5.2 The pictorial image with an erotic character and the multiplication techniques of the serial image.....	136
5.2.1 The impersonal nude and the collage like composition.....	137
5.2.2. The masculine nude and the serial image.....	139
5.2.3. The domestic nude and the serial image.....	140
5.2.4. The nude as wrapping and the serial image.....	141
5.3. The photorealistic pictorial image.....	142
VI. Vertigo. A pictorial excursus on the erotic symbolism.....	155
6.1. Brief clarifications on title.....	158
6.2. The visual issue.....	158
6.3. Symbolic aspects.....	160
6.4. The project's reason.....	162
Conclusion.....	179
Bibliography.....	182
List of illustrations.....	186

Abstract

The main topic of the present work is the research of the pictorial works with an erotic character belonging to the 20th century's art. The work proposes to answer few questions, such as: How was the erotic complex of the 20th century perceived by the painting? Which is the relation between the already established paradigms of the eroticism and that specific complex represented on a pictorial level? How is that period's painting, and especially the erotic one, defined compared with the tradition of the history of painting? The answers are formulated by establishing and defining the main visual issues which coagulate inevitably different visions of eroticism and by determining the socio-cultural causalities which contributed to the occurrence and development of those artistic preoccupations.

The work's structure is built on six chapters, an introduction and conclusions. If the 1st chapter proposes to circumscribe the history of the important Western cultural paradigms which contributed to the shaping of the conception on eroticism and on its functioning mechanisms, the next 4 chapters underline four visual issues looking, from different angle, at the manner in which the erotic dimension is presented throughout the 20th century. As a counterpoint, the 6th chapter proposes a personal visual research project and, implicitly, the own answer and vision regarding the raised questions in mapping the erotic "landscape" previously analyzed.

The 1st chapter, *The eros paradigms within the European culture* proposes to point out some of the determining stages for the constitution of what we may consider the Western eroticism. The existence of a certain specificity of the European eroticism, of its own brand, is given by the contribution of thinkers which – from Plato to Freud – left their mark on the European spirituality, and also by the constitution of certain fundamental myths about love, such as the romantic love myth.

Within the subchapter *Plato and the eros' mythology* we analyze the most influential tradition of love within the Western world's context; such is the Platonism, presented in a series of dialogues, especially in the *Banquet*, whose explicit subject is love's nature, more precisely the *eros'* nature. Here, we mainly point out two positions within the *Banquet*, Aristophanes', respectively Socrates' positions. Through Socrates, who, in turn calls for Diotima, Plato places love at the sexual desire's opposite side. According to Plato, far from being an extension of love, physical desire forbids the fulfilling of love, distracts us from the

true meaning of the eros, which is impersonal and non-passionate: the love of Beauty, Truth and Good.

In the subchapter entitled *The romantic love* we analyze a paradigm of the eros which became a key element for the Western art, the myth of the impossible love between a man and a woman, whose essence is suffering and which fails inevitably. But no matter how inevitable sufferance might be, love is permanently reinforced and preserved dir to passion. Passion becomes the force which surpasses every obstacle that occur and whose purpose is no other than to intensify the feelings, to transform pain into passion, to promise the happiness which will never fulfill. Eventually, this happiness may be possible after death.

The subchapter *Freud and the “scientific” analysis of the eroticism* speaks about breaking a taboo surrounding this subject. Freud was the one to call for a real challenge regarding the philosophical ideal of a transcendental and universal love, being also the one to place love on the dissection table, transforming it in a more or less scientific research and debate subject. Talking about libido and sexuality, Freud’s theory has provoked the spirits at the beginning of the 20th century.

The last subchapter *Contemporary perspectives on the eros* points out the main trends of thought relating to this universe since the beginning of the 20th century’s 1st half until today, from Georges Bataille to Michel Foucault. As a conclusion we can say that the approaches regarding this topic are extremely diverse, that everything belonging to the body, sexuality, eroticism constitutes a hot topic for the contemporary philosophy, not being secondary subjects as they were before within the traditional philosophy.

Throughout the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th chapters, the works’ analyze starts with the definition of eroticism through the duality interdiction – transgression. We highlight here an emphatic and constant preoccupation for the transgressive type artistic act. This is due to the dynamic context of the socio-cultural changes which happened the past century, a historic reality preoccupied by the gradual erosion of the interdiction and by the instauration, step by step, of the transgression’s regime. Compared to the reality’s turmoil, the artists reacted differently; the attitudes may be identified as being part of two fundamental tendencies: one of adjusting the world’s order and the other of escaping from the troubled contingent reality.

The 2nd chapter entitled *Eros and transgression. The feminine nude’s issues* approaches the ways in which the Western painting embraced the issues of the feminine nude. Passing through the tradition of the modern nude painting, which starts with Manet’s *Olympia*, we highlight here the extremely divers ways through which the 20th century’s painting creatively answered the challenges of a such important artistic genre, but which

seemed definitely condemned after the attacks coming from the interwar avant-garde. Therefore, the 2nd chapter speaks about the artists' involvement in the critics of a basic canon of the Occidental painting, preserved due to a hardened bourgeois mentality and which, in the above mentioned painters, had to be changed.

The beginnings: Eduard Manet, Olympia is the 1st subchapter of the thesis' 2nd part and it presents the importance this work has within the context of the critics brought to the feminine nude's canon within the Occidental painting. According to Anthony Julius, the critics done with the help of *Olympia* opens the way towards two ways, two distinct artistic projects of accessing the nude, such as the subversive project and the revisionist one. We would add to these two new projects another one that is the satirical one. As a consequence, throughout the next 3 subchapters entitled *The subversive project. The use of pornography in order to question the canon of art*, *The revisionist project. Attempts to reinterpret the nude*, *The satirical project. The social critic through the nude's interpretation* we analyze three different forms of processing the feminine nude in painting.

Within the 3rd chapter entitled *Eros and primitivism. The bi-dimensional rediscovery and the symbolism in painting*, we approach the issues of eroticism within the context of the fascination the Occidental painting begins to manifest towards the non-European art's "primitivism". The shock of discovering, especially, the African art attracted a new approach of the eroticism, an approach centered on other values than the ones belonging to an inevitably rationalized European tradition. From now on, the magic, the symbolic, the irrational will become essential marks of the eroticism's approach in the light of the "exotic". In other terms, the 3rd chapter presents the painters' escape to archaic universes, unaltered by the crisis of an Occidental culture, exhausted from the exacerbation of the mind's spirit.

The subchapter entitled *Gauguin and the exotic Tahiti, a different perspective* points out the first notable escape of the modern painting from the Occidental culture's area. The next subchapter - *The African masks and the erotic painting of the first half of the 20th century* – shows the way this start has been continued by the fauvists and cubists, most of all by Matisse and Picasso.

The subchapter called *Primitivism within the contemporary painting* analyzes the way in which the movement of sexual liberation from the 60's is reflected in the painting, but it also shows few forms of processing the primitive art within the painting at the end of the 20th century. As a conclusion we can affirm that the eroticism of the Occidental painting can be understood through the visual issues characterized by the preoccupation for the bi-dimensional and symbolism; we believe that these elements are tightly connected with

fascination for the primitive art in general and, especially, for the African art. This feature runs through the erotic painting since the late nineteenth century until today, within the history of modern and contemporary art.

The 4th chapter entitled *Irrational eroticism. The appeal to interiority* speaks about another type of escape from the classical painting's tradition: the escape to the inner self. From different reasons, after the year 1900, a significant part of the art's world turns its back to the social, political and even daily realities. This reality ended up being perceived as unsatisfactory and even threatening for the modern human being's mental and emotional health. Escaping to the creative inner self gave birth to a specific approach of the eroticism which constituted the basis of certain works of art of major importance in the field. Therefore, the 4th chapter identifies the art's escape to the dream world, as well as the interest for introspection, self-knowledge, the processing of trauma and of the most profound phobias.

Within the chapter called *Eroticism, identity and introspection within the painting at the beginning of the 20th century* we analyze two extremely important moments for the future development of this tendency, such as the Viennese painting and its exponents Klimt and Schiele, as well as Marcel Duchamp's painting. If the Viennese painting is influenced by Freud's research in the field of psychoanalysis, even before the surrealists appearance, but also by the "decadent" atmosphere of the former imperial capital, Duchamp's painting is inspired by the Dadaists and futurists and breaths the air of Bergson's philosophy.

The surreal eroticism, the 2nd subchapter of this section of the thesis, presents, on one hand, the way artists as Masson or Miró follow in their works what Breton called the surrealist method of the psychic automatism, and, on the other hand, Dali's manner to answer the necessity of the psychic self analyzing by the means of the paranoid-critical method. This subchapter's 3rd part aims other three ways of investigating the dream within Rousseau, Chagall and Khalo's paintings.

The last subchapter - *The expressionist – abstract eroticism: Willem de Kooning – the "rebel"* – aims to circumscribe the wave within the context of the preoccupations for the refusal of the exteriority and of the preoccupations for searching the limits of investigation characteristic for the pictorial language, but it also aims the personal relation Willem de Kooning has with this project thought and conceptualized by Clement Greenberg.

The 5th chapter entitled *The eros' agony and the death of painting. The serial image's instauration* pursues the ways through which a part of the 20th century's art world is trying to manage the modern world's *status quo* by assuming it. This assumption is developed on different levels, from accepting the modern world's reality to its critic. Therefore, the 5th

chapter presents the painting's preoccupation for defining its limits within the context of a reality characterized by the instauration of the serial image, reproducible and manipulator.

Within the subchapter called *The pictorial image and the photographic technique* we underline the relations between the movement sequencing represented by the means' of photography and their use within painting. In Duchamp's case the sense of this approach is subversive; he wants to emphasize the pictorial articulation's limits regarding the representation of one of the most important characteristics of the modern era that is dynamism, movement and speed.

The subchapter - *The pictorial image with an erotic character and the multiplication techniques of the serial image* aims to analyze the instauration of the serial image and the way this fact determined the future evolution of the pictorial expression. The study is made on 4 directions as follows: *The impersonal nude and the collage like composition*, *The masculine nude and the serial image*, *The domestic nude and the serial image*, *The nude as wrapping and the serial image*. The 4 analyses distinguish the art works presenting the erotic dimension's dissolution from the perspective of the passion's death under the direct influence of the capitalist world's mechanism which tend to confiscate the sexual liberation, to transform it into something mercantile and even turn it into porn.

The last subchapter - *The photorealistic pictorial image* – presents the works of some contemporary painters which use the photographic image in the sense of the hyper realistic pictorial representation. This involves the subject's unprecedented, extreme overbid. The reality doesn't have to be interpreted but taken as it is and reproduced.

As a conclusion, the two constant elements, the appetite for transgression and the involvement, respectively, the escape to or from the eventful reality are defining for the understanding of the 20th century's painting's eroticism. Starting with these premises, the pictorial project called *Vertigo*, analyzed throughout the 6th chapter, answers in a personal manner to the transgressive valence of the contemporary culture and, implicitly, by the formulated answer, affirms the adhesion towards one of the two fundamental tendencies of relating to the idea of eroticism. If, escaping is presented in the 3rd and 4th chapter and involvement in the 2nd and 5th, in the 6th chapter, the project *Vertigo* adopts the attitude of escaping from the transgressive type tendencies.

Developed over 4 subchapters - *Brief clarifications on the title*, *The visual issue*, *Symbolic aspects* and *The project's reason* – the chapter entitled *Vertigo. A pictorial excursus on the erotic symbolism* analyzes the personal visual research project's structure and significance.

From its structure's point of view the project proposes a number of 7 paintings made based on the centered composition's principles. These are variations on the same theme, obsessively retaking the topic of the circle, centre and margins. Watched as an ensemble, the paintings propose a rhythmical dynamic, a pulsation, by the centre's dilatation or reduction. The tension is stressed by the contrast of the figurative element, realistically represented, with the abstract one, belonging to the "crude" pictorial material. The pictorial material designates the circle's limits and it is organized by the minimal representation of the concentric circles' reverberation's linearity. The figurative element, a drapery in the shape of a spiral veil is inserted all around the circle. The compositions' central core does not consist of a representation; it designates an empty space whose existence is determined by the limit's presence and expression.

From the significance's point of view, *Vertigo* identifies its refuge in the multifaceted universe of the erotic symbolism and with its help it eludes the concrete figurative representation affirming the necessity for the formulation of an interdiction. The obstruction of the direct access towards the nude corporality by reaffirming the symbol's importance as a form of annulling the long series of transgressions which led nowadays to the presence of sexuality trenchantly displayed in public. The motivation of the interest for the symbol, developed as an interdiction within this context, consists in the attempt of re-discussing the erotic mechanism seen as a tension between interdiction and transgression. The interdiction, constantly and rapaciously dissolved by the repeated transgressions developed over the past century, ended up posing a question mark regarding the idea of transgression and the very idea of eroticism. It is not by accident that, according to a series of contemporary thinkers, eroticism suffers today from agony because of the death of passion; it is often confounded with pornography and often confiscated by the mercantile mechanisms of the consumption society. Therefore, the series called *Vertigo* bets on the creative function of the erotic dimension and not on its direct exposure, on the viewer's capacity to lecture, by his own means, a type of image which is not offered for consumption, but desires to provoke and create special feelings. In other terms, the series of paintings tends towards the idea of an open work, an approach which proposes a content having a multidirectional message and where the viewer has an active role of hermeneutic involvement which completes the message and closes the work.

Seen as an ensemble, the present work, with the help of the pictorial image, attempts to circumscribe the erotic dimension assumed and affirmed by the 20th century's culture, a

sketching of the relation with the historic paradigms but also the formulation of a personal visual answer as a dialogue with the researched parameters throughout the thesis.