

THE SPACES OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN THE VISUAL ARTS: BOHOL, DUMAGUETE AND PALAWAN*

By Flaudette May V. Datuin**

Abstract:

The primary objective of this study was to touch base with artists outside Manila, through interviews, documentation and analysis of their works. Originally titled "Locality and Sexuality," this study attempted to explore how visual artists negotiate the theme of sexuality and reproductive health in their works. However, what emerged from my actual encounter with artists and their works in the field is not the direct connection between sexuality and locality, *per se* but the connection between the spaces of masculinity and femininity, on the one hand, and the specific *positions* and experiences that emerge out of the artists' sexuality as women and men, on the other.

While the artists of this study may not be consciously working from their gendered positions as men and women, their works encode within themselves the spaces of femininity and masculinity, which are both the condition and effect of their representations. Such spaces regulate not only their lives and works, but also their contexts as women and men of different classes, social standing and status.

Drawing from the theoretical resources of semiotics and feminist materialism, this study goes beyond the objective of documenting artistic practices in the periphery (*vis-à-vis* the Manila art world). Its more important project is to articulate possible theoretical models for interpreting works and re-telling histories, not only in the paternal disciplines like art history, but also in feminist theory and practice.

*Excerpts from the monograph of the same title.

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Framework

Setting Definitions and Assumptions:

A. Space

In this study, space can be grasped through the following intersecting dimensions (Pollock 1992a):

1. **Locations**, such as dining rooms, drawing rooms, bedrooms, balconies/verandas, the sea, the land, park, theater, etcetera.
2. **Spatial order** within works, which includes composition, delineation of space, perspective, viewing position, experiential and phenomenological space.
3. **Social spaces**, from which the representation is made and its reciprocal positionalities between viewer/spectator and artist/producer.

Through these dimensions, the analysis of works depends, not only on **what** locations and themes the artists choose to represent, but also on **how** they organize space in their works (location and spatial order). This space is *phenomenological*, and not configured for sight alone but by means of visual codes that refer to other senses, and our bodies' relation to other bodies and objects in a lived world. It is *experiential* because it is ideologically and historically constructed, lived at both psychic and social levels, and vulnerable as well to "purely contingent, subjective inflections." (Pollock 1992a)

This space is also *social* because it extends beyond the work and its pictorial space, and overlaps with the spaces of the represented. It determines, to a certain extent, the viewing point of the spectator at the point of consumption. This point of view, while inflected with the subjective view, is neither exclusively personal nor entirely abstract, but ideological and historical. According to the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock (1992a), it

is the art historian's job to recreate this point of view since it cannot ensure its recognition outside its historical moment.

Taking the cue from Pollock, this study aims to demonstrate how the social spaces of femininity and masculinity the artists occupy as women and men shape and determine both how and what they produce as artists.

B. Masculinity and Femininity

By "masculinity" and "femininity," I am not referring to essences supposedly inherent in all women and men, but to a *position*, formed by a set of socially constructed characteristics, meanings and behaviors that give rise to concrete conditions and experiences, which are culturally and historically specific.

This means that, as I examine the artists' artistic histories and practices, I do not take their representational maneuvers as something that is "natural" but something that is positional. As Pollock states, these representations are "the product of a *lived* sense of social locatedness, mobility, and visibility, in the social relations of *seeing and being seen*. Shaped within the sexual politics of looking they demarcate a particular social organization of the gaze which itself works back to secure a particular social ordering of sexual difference." (Pollock 1992a, 129, my emphasis) The spaces of femininity and masculinity are both the condition and effect of the artists' representations. Such spaces regulate their lives and relations, not only emerging from their positions as women and men (gender), but also their contexts as women and men of different classes, social standing and status.

In this context, I define femininity and masculinity as a position, with the following characteristics:

1. It is *differential* and *relational*, where femininity is defined negatively (as Other) in an asymmetrical structure, where the positive term is masculine (the One).

2. It is *lived* on a daily basis by social agents, who are context-generated, and context-generating,
3. It is *inter-subjective*, in the sense that social agents do not exist in a vacuum, but move and relate to other bodies in the structure.

My representation and analysis of works in this study emanates from my own feminist position and my own space of femininity, which is also highly nuanced and inflected by my specific, contingent and historically specific contexts as an academic, middle-class, maternal and Filipino woman. As I write, interpret and retell the lives and practices of the artists in this study, I do so out of a location and context, which spans a range of social practices, conventions and discourses that limit – but also engender – our conditions as people – women as well as men.

Representation in the Visual Arts

Representation in the visual arts refers to a process of transforming lived realities into certain forms through the specific resources of a range of two-dimensional and three-dimensional expressions in the so-called “fine arts,” particularly painting, sculpture, fiber art, graphic art, installation, performance art and other museum- and gallery-based arts. Representation is a process of managing perceptions and experiences creatively, through artists’ personal resources and individual, even idiosyncratic, ways of mobilizing the specialized and at times highly codified strategies of the visual arts. These strategies may be distinct and specific to art, but they nonetheless articulate social and ideological practices, which enable historical agents to attain coherence and make sense of their existence. (Pollock 1988)

The concept of representation challenges the dominant critical and art historical conception of works as direct reflections of artists’ experiences, or mimesis. As Linda Nochlin asserts, art is

“neither a sob story or confidential whisper (1971, 149),” but a process of giving form to “reality,” through the specific resources of art. Art, on the other hand, is understood as a material and ideological practice, with its own set of temporally defined conventions, schemata, and systems of notation, which artists internalize either through formal training, apprenticeship, or individual experimentation.

Put another way, the artists’ works discussed here are mediated versions of reality, and not direct reflections of themselves, their “expressions,” and their realities, as they would insist in my conversations with them. Although they are definitely gifted with skilled hands and artistic vision, their works are as much a result, not only of their artistic agency, but also the complex mediations of their artistic constructs and largely unconscious theoretical frames.

The process of painting, sculpture, engraving, etching, and in my case, writing, is therefore not only a matter of “originality” or personal style or “expression,” but also a matter of disciplinary and social conventions. The image is always interpreted, defined and appreciated within the historical conditions and the power structures of origin and reception.

It is from this semiotic and feminist materialist frame, that my reading of the works in this study was conducted out of a keen awareness of the intimate connection between power, gender and vision. This awareness does not simply involve posing the question “What is being looked at?” or “What is its meaning?” and proceeding to answer it by using sight, as if it is disembodied, genderless, “objective.” Meaning does not exist in a social vacuum, or in a *laissez-faire* marketplace of ideas, of and from which we all equally partake. Instead, it is a field of contest and struggle, inscribed in asymmetrical and shifting power relations and uneven modes and histories of exchange, traversed along the wounds of unequal races, genders and classes.

This tradition's legacy is evident in the nudes of Jonathan Benitez, who despite his claim that he painted his female friends in the nude so that he can hold on to their memory, nonetheless drew them as types rather than persons. In his painting of his pregnant wife, *Lea*, for instance, the overall scheme and significance of the painting is more closely aligned with the formalist conventions and stereotypical concerns surrounding the nude, by the male masters. To my seeing and feeling I/eye, these conventions form the visual universe, from which Benitez draws his resources.

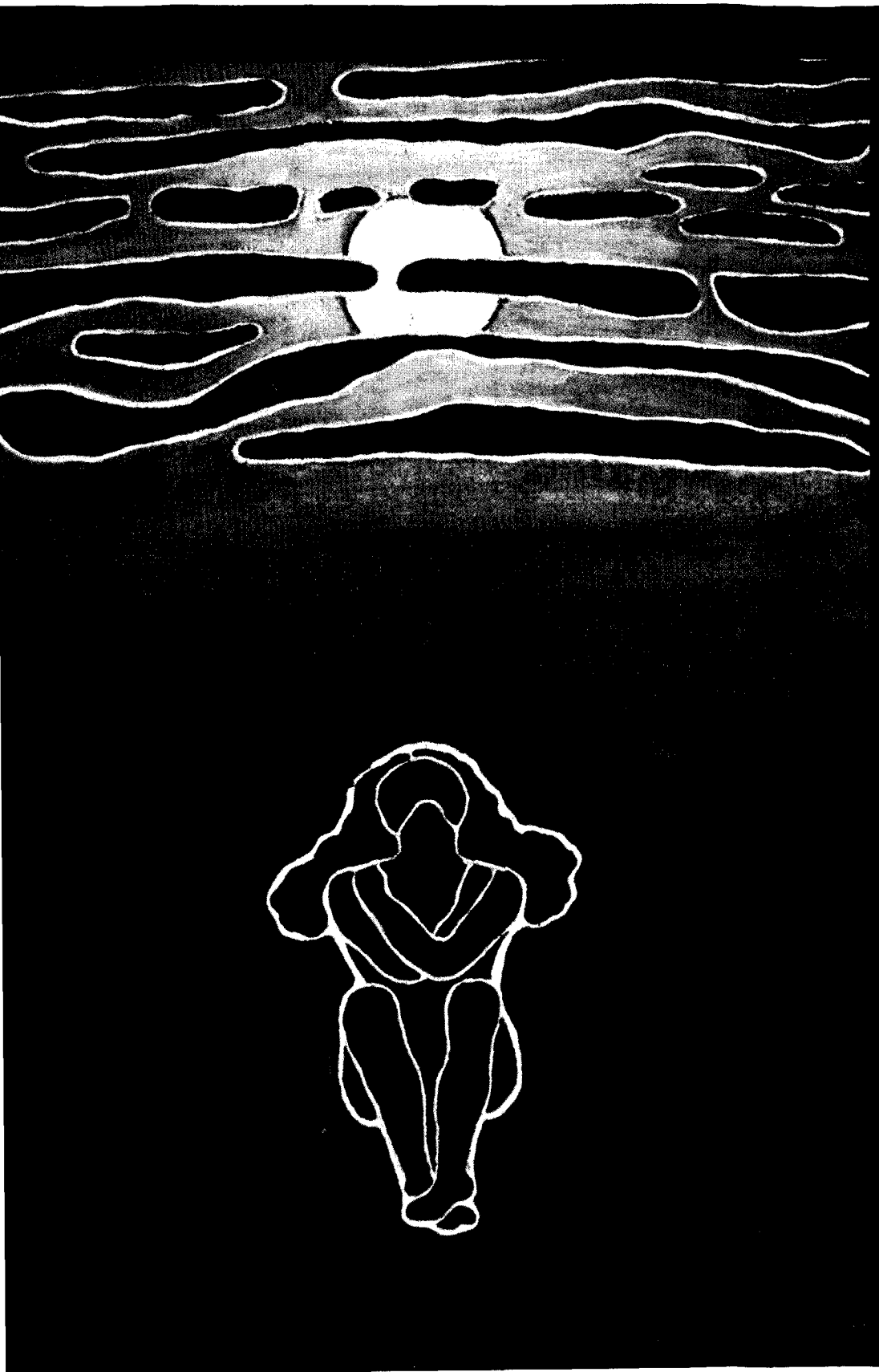
In *Lea* (date not given), the nude is located in an indeterminate setting. I do not see Lea, the soon-to-be-mom, but Lea's *body* as visual take-off point for masculine constructs about motherhood and womanhood. The pregnant womb is metaphorized as a vessel, which is literally echoed by the womb-shaped jar – another receptacle – at the woman's side. Portraying a pregnant body could have been a novel and refreshing departure from the “perfect” idealized *dalaga* of Amorsolo, but in this case, the “imperfect” pregnant body is idealized as *form*. Lea and her specific experiences as mother, is present only as object, drawn as a series of Benitez' special marks, translated into line, texture, shape. Lea as historical agent is not present, and her presence as specific person is incidental. The subject could have been any woman, but the lines, texture and shape would still be Benitez'.

Artist:	Jonathan Benitez
Title:	Lea
Year:	Not given
Medium:	Pastel on paper
Size:	26" x 20"



Prieto has since stepped out of the confines of her windows, into landscapes of her own making, so much like the small landscapes of rice terraces painted with the textures and lines of textile (*Heavy Clouds, No Rain*, 1998). *Moon in Blue*, 1998, which was painted during her period of transition from self-doubt to self-discovery, shows a female figure drawn in outline, balling herself like a cocoon, yet communing with the sheltering expanse of land, sea and air.

Artist: Dinggot Prieto
Title: *Moon in Blue*
Year: 1998
Medium: Oil on canvas
Size: 20" x 16"



Nostalgia for Nature...

At first glance, the painting appears to be a pastoral and nostalgic tribute to the sea and land. On second glance, the sea comes across as a source of confinement – even if it provides a “marine highway promising boundless worlds beyond.” (Wenceslao 1999) While the tree depends on the sea for its nourishment, it is also confined and isolated within the sea’s constricting frame. In this work, I discern a restless spirit, which strains through the limits of the artist’s social station, and the push and pull of her dreams and personal conditions.

Artist:	Nene Lungay
Title:	<i>Where Have All the Mangroves Gone?</i>
Year:	1997
Medium:	Oil on canvas
Size:	Not available



In Pat Marquez' *Life Within Your Hands*, 2000, and *Bayanihan*, 2001 there is a similar concern for the environment and its people, but he is more directly prescriptive in content and visual strategy. His inspiration for *Life Within Your Hands*, as he puts it, is a watershed area. In *Bayanihan*, he draws his visual resource from an indigenous custom, and his "message" is a plea for solidarity and cooperation.

There are no "whole" people in both these paintings; instead, we see "fragmented" body parts, such as the highly abstracted human hand, which functions both as metaphor and as visual device, in *Life Within Your Hands*. Metaphorically, the hand in this painting, represents the human body and its capacity to recreate what in reality, actually destroys. As a clever visual device, it denotes itself (as literal hand), and something other than itself (as twigs and branches of a tree).

Artist:	Pat Marquez
Title:	<i>Life Within Your Hands</i>
Year:	2001
Medium:	Acrylic on canvas
Size:	59" x 34"



Trauma, Loss and Leaving: Healing and Hope Through Other Worlds

Susan Sales-Tupas differs from Lungay and Marquez, in the sense that she is more diaristic and more directly “emotional” and autobiographical in her works. She does not have any particular thematic preference, she says, and that her paintings’ subjects depend on what is happening to her at particular moments.

In a series of paintings of her friends’ faces, for example, she struggles to assuage her loneliness at having left her friends, nephews and other loved ones, when she resettled to Puerto Princesa, from Bacolod and Manila. And since she did not have their pictures, she decided to access their memory through their faces, especially during those times when she is left alone in the house. Cast in a linear, almost abstract and stylized style she developed from her training and experience in interior design, the identities of her friends’ faces can be indexed through anecdotal visual codes, and their specific associations: orchids for Glen, cattleya and a fan made out of anahaw for Weng, a butterfly garden for Eden, and an eagle for herself.

From top left, clockwise: *Glen, Weng, Self-portrait* and *Eden* 1999. From *Face Series*, 1999, acrylic on board, 21” x 16”



In her paintings, Nelia Lungay strives to achieve a less morbid, “uplifting” tone, despite the grave and emotionally wrenching subject matter of her paintings and poems – the loss of a friend, her feelings of social and artistic insecurity and confinement, conflicts with her mother, among others. She draws on images of children – whether at play, dreaming or sleeping – to evoke the “same little child we harbor in each of us.” Strangely however, the images of children also tell us – in more poignant and telling ways – that this world can at times be a difficult place, so much so that we often retreat – as children and as adults – to a world where we can “finally be free.”

In a series of small paintings (12” x 18”) in acrylic on handmade paper she produced for *Bangka Nga Papel*, a group exhibition at the UP Vargas Museum (2000), Nelia Lungay painted a girl-child dreaming, sleeping and hitching her paper boat to a star. At first glance, the series looks like an innocent illustration for a children’s book or a peaceful scene from a nursery wall. On second glance however, the series tells of a young woman striving to dream, and find her own voice, if not in this world, then in another one beyond.

Artist:	Nelia Lungay
Title:	Bangka Nga Papel
Year:	2000
Medium:	Acrylic on handmade paper
Size:	12” x 18”



India, Jharkhand, 2000

This seeming “retreat” to an imaginary world can also be seen in a work-in-progress done in batik by Susan Canoy. In that work, Canoy narrates the story of a pair of ill-starred lovers. The woman turns into a mermaid during the day and a “normal” woman during the night. The man turns into a bat at night, and a normal man during the day. They never meet, except during an eclipse, which happens, as the cliché goes, only once in a blue moon. Canoy says the story is all about her, and her own failure to find the right man. Like the mermaid, it will probably take a miracle – like an eclipse – before she can meet the “normal” man of her dreams.

Artist:	Susan Canoy
Title:	Batik
Year:	In progress
Medium:	Batik
Size:	Not given



Wee Wee Seloterio similarly recreates imaginary worlds through abstraction, and these can be found in works that are at times highly “personal” and autobiographical, but at other times, also strongly social realist.

Spontaneous, “free” expression, as in the “action painting” of Jackson Pollock. In one sense, Seloterio’s *Crucifixion*, 1992, falls within this tendency. She says that at one stage of the process, she imprinted her “anger” and frustration directly and spontaneously on the canvas, during a severe bout with depression. In another sense, the process is not exactly “free,” since she subjects her surplus of emotions to control. In other words, one part of her work is largely unconscious, emerging out of extreme feelings of rage and pain. The other part involves the creative management of such feelings, one that involves restraint. As she recounts,

When I had my breakdown, I was breaking things, but they did not know it was coming. I rarely get mad, and maybe this is also seen in my works. But when it comes to the finished product, the anger is restrained. It is already underneath and in the whole painting. I am angry, but it has already developed.

Unlike Pollock, who finishes his canvases in one “sitting,” Wee Wee’s works develop over time and in more than one setting. “First I painted a black background. Then, when I got depressed, I copied my brothers’ doodles from when we were children. *Yung doodles nila, may bisikleta. Pero yung mga bisikleta, nagiging mata.*” (They make doodles of bicycles. But the bicycles also become eyes.)

The black background and the doodles were painted from the floor of their house. When the intense emotion subsided, she then proceeded to work around the shapes and developed her colors in the boarding house. The “anger” she felt when she was doodling does not come out up front, and becomes almost indiscernible as an undertone. “*Kasi hindi naman importante na makita talaga ang detahye ng anger mo.*” (It is not important to see all the (stark) details of your anger.)

In these and other paintings, Seloterio strives to recreate other worlds different from the one she has now. “That which I cannot do in reality,” she says, “I can remake in my painting. For me, the aesthetic value is not important in my painting, but my reverence for life. The painting also seems to have a life of its own.”

Artist:	Wee Wee Seloterio
Title:	Crucifixion
Year:	1992
Medium:	Acrylic on canvas
Size:	54” x 72”



In *Ramificacion Birhen Maria*, 2001, one of her most recent works shown in the Silliman University Centennial exhibit, Taniguchi presents another version of the Madonna and Child icon, by casting the figures amidst a washed background of restless and thick brushstrokes. We see a meek and humble Madonna, framed but at the same time threatening to break out of an indistinct outline.

In these and other works, Taniguchi shows an awareness of the burdens of motherhood, including the dilemmas of childbirth and childrearing. While fate, destiny and religion appear to play an important part in their lives, she is aware of how the patriarchal order operates, not only in her and Maria's lives, but also that of her and her own mother.

In her use of the scarred maternal body in *Mariyah*, and of the shakily-drawn image of the Madonna in *Ramificacion*, Taniguchi offers a reworking of the Madonna-and-Child imagery, in a way that highlights the profound contradictions of her roles as mother and daughter. The maternal image – nude in the former and fully clothed in the latter – provides the intersection, as well as tensions, between their sexual (as women and as female body) and reproductive roles (as mother, homemaker, nurturer). In both paintings, there is a constant exchange between mother and child – an exchange that arises from a bonding that is far from reassuring and comforting.

Artist: Cristina Taniguchi
Title: Ramificacion Birhen Maria
Year: 2001
Medium: Mixed media
Size: Not available



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