

## **Positions Through Contextualising: Extended Critical Analysis**

**Stopler, G. (2008) 'A Rank Usurpation of Power' - The Role of Patriarchal Religion and Culture in the Subordination of Women' *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy*, Vol. 15, 2008**

Stopler's ideas surrounding religion and its relationship to womanhood has been one of the more important references for laying the foundation of my recent explorations. As I zoom in on more specific lines of inquiry—primarily the question of whether or not women's actions are predetermined under a patriarchal system, and how this predetermination gives men the false sense of authority over spaces they were not invited to—this article provided very compelling evidence to argue that too many of our choices as women are influenced by the patriarchy, and therefore could be viewed as predetermined. I assert that where there is a lack of freedoms, or a restriction of freedoms, there is also a lack of true choice.

In this article, Stopler's primary arguments are that power and power structures are pervasive in every corner of our societies, but extraordinarily so in our religious and political structures; these institutions use tactics such as restriction of knowledge and hyper-focus on the individual-state relationship to maintain the domination of patriarchal structures and, through that, the subjugation of women.

Which is why it is interesting to contemplate how the 'formal qualities of the work' support the key ideas of this article, because as a scholarly piece of work (most likely the culminating thesis of years of study), there are stringent regulations in place that limit what choices the author can make about presenting said work, and therefore it is most likely that the author had little to no say in the final formatting. While I believe there are many good reasons for these rules to be in place (e.g. to ensure continuity across bodies of work, professionalism in an academic environment, etc.), I can't help but wonder about who it was that decided what this format would look like. I think we can safely assume that, because women were by and large excluded from academia throughout history, it was men who created these rules. This only serves to further prove Stopler's point about how deeply entrenched male domination is in our societies.

If we allow ourselves to let this train of thought continue, and we think about what other patriarchal structures are in place that limit expression and subjugate women, the art and design worlds cannot be overlooked. While it can be an incredibly daunting thought to reflect on the limitations historically placed on women in these fields, I feel that in some ways it can also be incredibly liberating as artists today to remember that many of the rules that dictate how we consume and create art/design are in fact arbitrary and were created by men to restrict who gets to participate in said consumption and creation. While I am not naive enough to think that you can always play by your own rules and still succeed as a designer, considering this line of thought encourages me to think critically

about why I am being asked to do things, and in what ways I can push back against the patriarchal structures that surround me.

As I look to the future of my work, I am still preoccupied with questions about women's choice and men's authority. Previously, I explored this theme through illustration and physical format ('God's Fortune Teller'). My latest explorations in this topic led me to the creation of collages that reinterpret the biblical event of the 'Annunciation' by removing both Mary and the angel Gabriel from their respective paintings and reimagining them in a new, modern context. I have titled this work the 'Unannounced', as it plays on the imagery of Gabriel as a predatory figure and Mary as a submissive. Moving forward, I am intrigued by the idea of retelling a story that has been told, reusing imagery that has previously been used, and recontextualising dynamics that go unquestioned. I will continue to experiment with mediums, especially as I explore how ancient mediums interact with modern mediums (such as painting and photography).

**Rosler, Martha (1966–72) *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* [Photo Montage].**  
**<https://www.martharosler.net/body-beautiful-or-beauty-knows-no-pain-carousel>**  
**(accessed: May 15, 2025)**

While I used Rosler's series *Body Beautiful* as a reference in its entirety, there were two specific pieces that were most interesting to me as I started my exploration of collage and photomontage as a medium (see attached *Bowl of Fruit* and *Untitled (Playboy)* below). The photomontages included in this specific series deals with the theme of the commodification of women's bodies, packaged and presented for consumption, as well as the role that male fantasy plays in shaping how women exist in modern society. It is the two attached photomontages below that I think do the most interesting job of portraying these themes and turning them on their head.

I think that the history and context of this medium is important to remember as I discuss how the formal qualities of this photomontage series lend itself to the themes portrayed by Rosler. Though collage as a medium has been around for centuries, it saw a resurgence in the early 1900's in part as a means of political commentary since artists would use newspaper clippings, magazine articles, ads and more as a vital piece of their collages. Rosler was no different in her use of mainstream media—particularly ads that feature women—to make a statement about what is expected of women in our modern societies. The artist drew from Playboy, a famously male-centric pornography magazine that sells the fantasy of the unattainable, over-sexualized woman, in her collage titled *Bowl of Fruit*. The model is taken out of the context of the magazine and placed in a seemingly innocuous, homely space that could very well have been her own home. However, using this nude model from Playboy and placing her out of the context of pornography and into the context of a home creates a sense of invasiveness on the part of the audience. In this new image, we as the viewer are made to feel as if we are the perverts having stumbled upon a private moment, whereas the casual porn-seeker would not feel so having found this nude image within the context of Playboy. In this way,

it is crucial that Rosler have used the medium of collage—using existing imagery that many consume on a regular basis—to convey her point.

It's also the medium of collage itself that challenges my view of graphic design. More specifically, my view on the role of a designer/artist. Since collage takes from existing media and recontextualizes the imagery and words found there, I have to wonder about how intention and application play a role in design meant for mass consumption. If an image says something entirely different, even contrary, when stripped down, is it my role as an artist to have considered the subliminal messages it may send?

While I don't have an answer to the question above, this photo montage series has had an important effect on the way I will approach my project moving forward. As I strip down imagery of Mary the mother of Christ and reposition her in modern settings, I will think more critically about the story that is being told and how I can responsibly shape that message.

