Raeda Saadeh Challenges the Masters

In Raeda Saadeh's photography series "Great Masters," the artist challenges four well-known Western paintings. Aida Nasrallah writes about the works of one of the most interesting Palestinian artists, delineating the way Saadeh makes space for herself as an artist and a Palestinian woman who voices her political protests.

Essay / Aida Nasrallah July 8, 2022

In 2007, Raeda Saadeh turned to a different type of art. Instead of experimenting with her own face and body to see what would appear, she began using paintings of great masters that are among the most famous in Western art. She then placed herself in the frame, assuming the position of the women depicted, but clothed differently and located in new, Palestinian settings. Instead of photographing herself, she had a photographer take her picture, directing him specifically how to do it.

The purpose of these deconstructions and reconstructions is threefold: first, Saadeh assumes the position of the artist, replacing male painters who had depicted the female form from their own perspective; second, she questions the archetypes these paintings represent by forcing the viewer to see a real woman, herself, instead of the idealized or effaced figure depicted in the works. To this end, Saadeh carefully chooses clothes from her life and the time when she creates the works, 2007. Third, she uses Palestinian settings and objects as backgrounds, to make the viewer aware of the specific world in which the figure lives, and to drive home the political issues of Palestinian disenfranchisement, more overtly than she has done in preceding works. Thus, she makes space for herself as an artist, a woman defined by her work, and a Palestinian woman who voices her political protests.

ודימוי ראידה.jpg

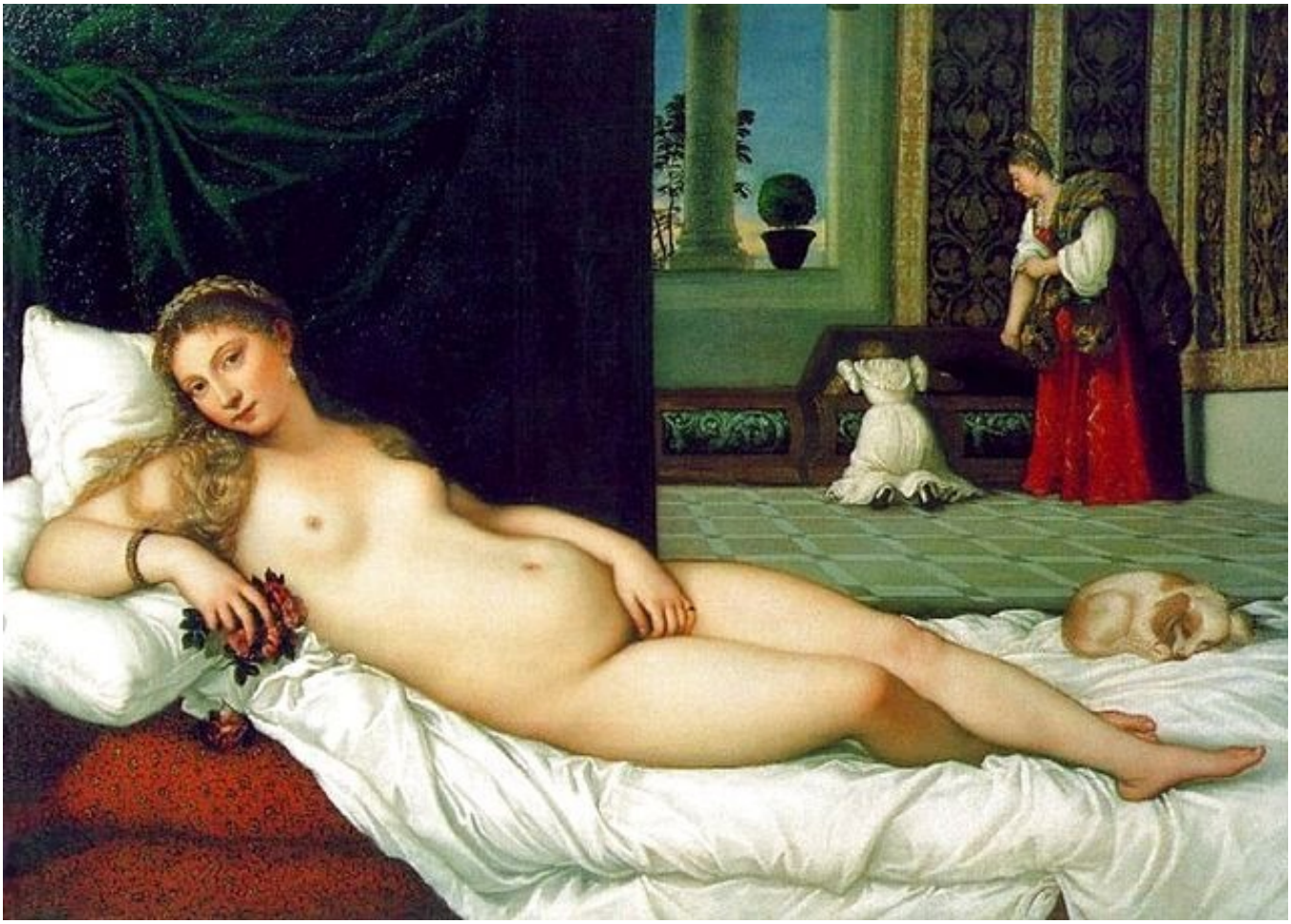
[1]Raeda Saadeh, Who Will Make Me Real?, 120*92 cm, inkjet print on paper. European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium, 2007
Courtesy of the artist

The first work in her "Great Masters Revisited" series is titled *Who Will Make Me Real?*, based on Titian's painting *Venus of Urbino* (1538). After executing this work, she felt that she could claim, "I can be a master too."1 Thus empowered, she turned to three self-portraits in poses derived from the paintings of artists from three different historical periods. They are *Mona Lisa*, based on Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1513), *Diana*, based on Jean-Marc Nattier's *Marie Adélaïde de France as Diana* (1745),2 and Vermeer's *La Lechea* (*The Milkmaid*) (1658). The task Saadeh had set for herself was to answer, through her works, the question posed by Linda Nochlin and others: "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"3 The critic Griselda Pollock was being ironic when she provided what had been the commonly held answer: "Because they [women] did not have the innate nugget of genius (the phallus) which is the natural property of men."4 Saadeh takes upon herself the task of proving that a woman might be a "master" even without a penis, if she stopped being an object in male paintings, and became the master in her own works and the subject of these paintings. By bringing artworks from the past into the present and placing them in her personal milieu, Saadeh provides proof of the creativity of women and their ability to control their art, instead of merely being depicted in the art of others.

Saadeh's first work in her *Great Masters* series is her take on delineating Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538). Titian had adapted the work from Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (1510), which is considered the

first painting depiction of a reclining nude in European art history. Shown against an idealized landscape setting, the woman is depicted as a demure goddess, sleeping and unaware that a viewer is peeking at her, typical of the way goddesses are represented "ly[ing] peacefully, stretched out on a couch or on the ground, asleep or quietly dreaming, attended by Cupid or handmaidens."5 In Titian's painting, the figure is quite different. She is shown reclining on a couch in a room in an opulent palace. Two white satiny pillows support her head and shoulders. More importantly, she displays none of the attributes of the goddess she is supposed to represent, except for the bouquet of red flowers she holds: the sign of Venus. Instead, she appears purposefully sensual; her pose and facial expression are all designed to indicate her flesh-and-blood beauty. Titian's *Venus* stares straight at the viewer. She is awake and fully aware of the observer's gaze.

640px-Titian_Venus_of_Urbino.jpg **[2]**



[3]Titian, Venus of Urbino, oil on canvas, 119*165 cm. Uffizi, Florence, 1538

Public Domain [4]

Giorgione_-_Sleeping_Venus_-_Google_Art_Project_2.jpg **[5]**

[6]Giorgione, The Sleeping Venus, oil on canvas, 108.5*175 cm. Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, circa 1510

Public Domain [7]

In Saadeh's photograph, she places herself in the typical reclining position on a couch, but her couch is not like the one in Titian had painted ; it is decorated with a simple Palestinian carpet, made up of stripes of color, rather than Titian’s shimmering white material. The stripes, reaching the bottom edge of the painting, provide a strong background for Saadeh's reclining body. Instead of placing herself in the foreground of the work, as Titian had his Venus, she reclines far back, allowing the carpet a primary place in its own right. To emphasize its importance, Saadeh has her right hand point down to it. Her right shoulder rests on three pillows: two are covered in simple flowered fabric, and the third in white cloth. And instead of having her head semi-reclining on the pillows as in the Titian work, Saadeh raises her head, making it appear much larger than in the original work and more dominant, rather than submissive and sexual, as in Titian’s depiction. Also in contrast with Titian's Venus, Saadeh is positioned in a plain room. The background of the picture is covered in black. She conceals Titian’s deep perspective composition with this closed background and omits the other figures in Titian's painting.

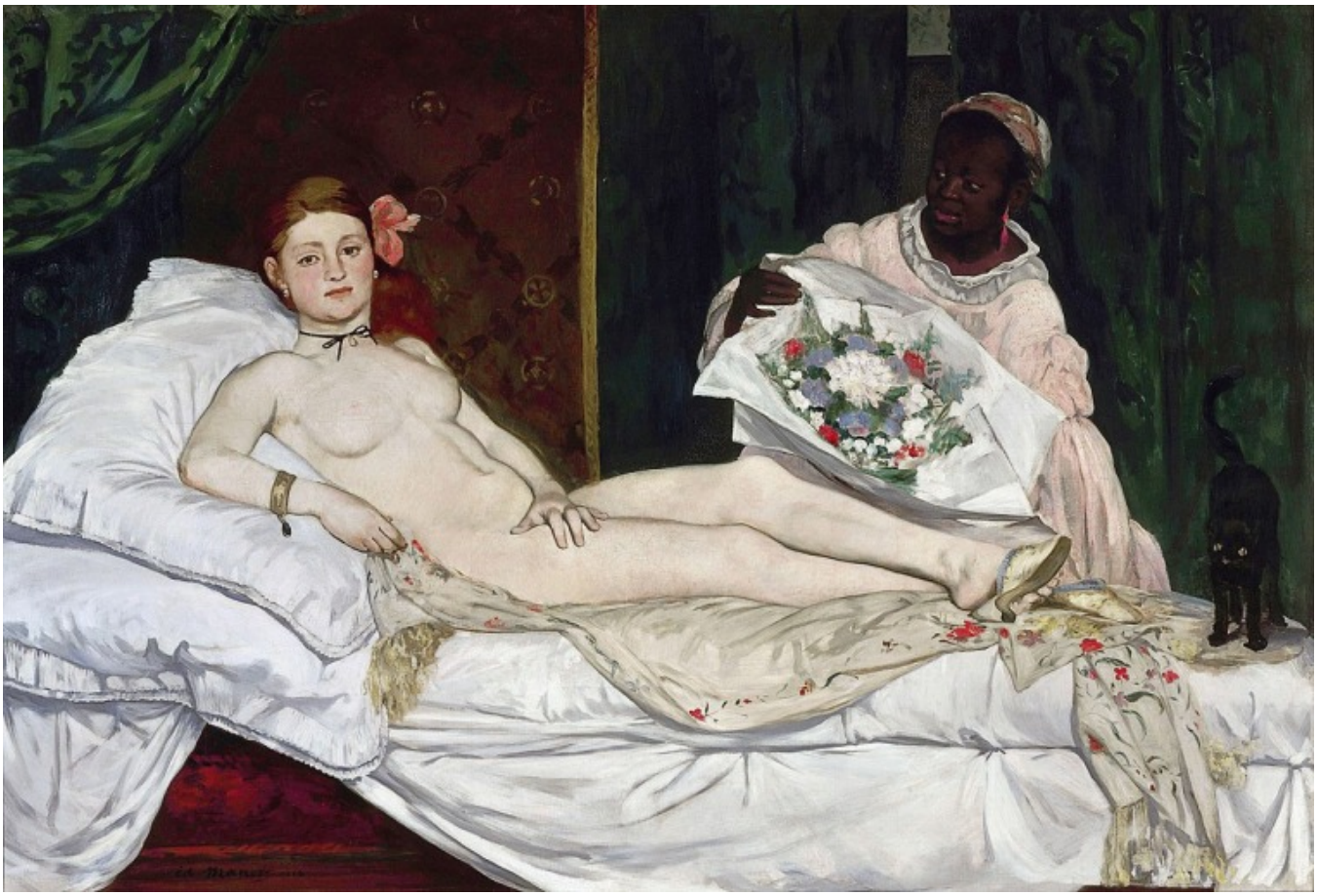
Saadeh uses the carpet not only to indicate her Palestinian origins, which provide the context for the work, but also to counter the notion of art as only being created by men who are labeled "great masters," while the work of women, such as carpet-making, quilting, and embroidery, are traditionally labeled craft, not art. This contrast simultaneously challenges the concept of "craft" as inferior art, as well the idea of "sublime art," which Venus traditionally represents. In Saadeh's photograph, the carpet carries a power that makes it an art form. She also makes it clear, by its dominance and inclusion in the familiar painting, that she is in control of the image; and that image, like the artist, is Palestinian.

By emphasizing the handicraft of Palestinian women, side-by-side with the image of the Titian-inspired Venus, Saadeh provides local Palestinian references. She is declaring: "I am sitting in a local

room adorned with Palestinian furniture, thus giving my work attributes of my society and my world."6 Saadeh's declaration echoes Walter Benjamin's argument:

“The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura. Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult.”

1200px-Edouard_Manet_-_Olympia_-_Google_Art_ProjectFXD.jpg **[8]**



[9]Edward Manet, Olympia, oil on canvas, 130.5*190 cm. Musee d'Orsay, Paris, 1863

Public domain [10]

Saadeh's reworking of the Venus theme provides a new context for interpretation by localizing it and shifting its temporal and spatial elements, just as each artist who ever approached the Venus as a subject has done, from the Greeks to Edward Manet to Saadeh. All of these images represent "forms of visual rhetoric,"7 as Marcia Pointon has put it: the way in which a particular artist from a specific period and time "reads" the image and transmits it. In Saadeh's version, women's bodies and their coverings carry several themes.

First, there is the social pressure inflicted on women to conform to narrowly defined standards of

beauty, determined by patriarchal forces. In fact, Saadeh's work exposes the violence of imposing a standardized notion of beauty on all women and challenges the traditional male depictions of female beauty, as seen in paintings of Venus, and also challenges the male aesthetic philosophy by which an artwork is being evaluated.8 Second, there is societal emphasis on clothing and adornment to heighten beauty. It is in the clothes Saadeh wears that she differs most startlingly and powerfully from Titian. She had created a dress made of clippings cut out from newspapers that she glued directly onto her body. The surface of the newspaper clippings replaces the naked, luminescent skin of Titian's Venus, becoming a second skin. It is she who takes the paper, cuts it into fragments, designs her "dress" and determines its shape. Her Venus thus becomes a Palestinian woman, her body covered by the news written in Arabic. Thus her newspaper dress subverts the traditional nude of Titian. It also critiques the distorted orientalist images of Ingres and others by replacing the stereotypical coverings for women that they have used with actual social, cultural and political items from the *Al-Quds* newspaper.

Third, she suggests that the work of the dress designer can be seen as parallel with that of the artist, thereby challenging the male judgment of what constitutes art. In Saadeh's other three works in the *Great Masters* series she uses real garments machine-sewn; thus the creative work of the designer becomes an art form itself, to be recognized, instead of the dresses worn by the women in the masterpieces assumed to be creations not of craftspersons of their time – which they well may have been – but of the artist. This erasure of any women creators behind famous male artworks is what Griselda Pollock calls "structural sexism."9 Regarding handicraft, Carolyn Korsmeyer argues:

> [S]ince many of the arts that women typically produced include artifacts such as needlework made for decoration and domestic uses, the division between art and craft had the effect of eliminating a number of genres where women had a prominent presence10 from the concept of art proper.

Saadeh is not the first one to employ the theme of Venus to undermine ideal notions of beauty and disrupt the concepts associated with classical nudes as seen by male artists. French artist Ingres' painting *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) seems to follow in the footsteps of the great Venetian master Titian, but upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Ingres does not offer a classical setting.11 The peacock fan, the turban, the enormous pearls, the hookah (a pipe for hashish or perhaps opium), and of course, the title of the painting, all refer to the French conception of the Orient, particularly of the exoticism of women.

Arab women artists, in addition to Saadeh, have also taken up the challenge by offering a correction both to Titian's idealism and Ingres' orientalist stereotypes. Lalla Essaydi, a Moroccan-American, and Majida Khattari, a Moroccan living in France, have each attempted to negotiate and claim her heritage by refiguring the Odalisque. Essaydi's female model is adorned with calligraphy painted in *henna*. She is not a European model who plays the role of the exotic Eastern woman, but a Moroccan in her home. She is black, not white, and she is real, not imaginary. Essaydi made another photograph, entitled *In the Harem* (2009), whose "Venus' is sitting, wearing a traditional Moroccan folk dress called *kandora*, adorned with arabesques. The model's face and legs are decorated with calligraphy, written in henna. She sits in a place decorated with blue arabesques, common in Moroccan homes. Khattari is more provocative: she poses herself in her room like Saadeh had done, but she gestures toward the cover as if someone were there in the room with her.

unnamed.jpg **[11]**

[12]
Lalla Essaydi, LFM Revisited #2, 2010
Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate, 180.4 x 223.5 cm. From an edition of 5
© Lalla Essaydi. Courtesy of the artist, Leila Heller Gallery and Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York and Zurich

Jewish women artists have also created their own variations of Venus. In her article "The Jewish Venus," Gannit Ankori addresses the function of the Venus theme in the works of three Jewish artists of different ages and nationalities: the American artist Hannah Wilke (1940–1993), the Polish-Israeli artist Yocheved Weinfeld (b. 1947) and the Mexican artist Silvia Gruner (b. 1959). Ankori argues that "all three artists use the remythologized Venus as a vehicle for self-expression, as they reveal specific aspects of their Jewish identity within a more general and explicit feminist framework."12 For example, Weinfeld in her work *Untitled 1983–84* painted herself after famous depictions of Venus by Cranach, Botticelli, and Titian.13 In all these Venuses, Weinfeld represents herself with a bald head to remind the viewer of Jewish female suffering under the Nazi regime, according to Ankori's analysis.

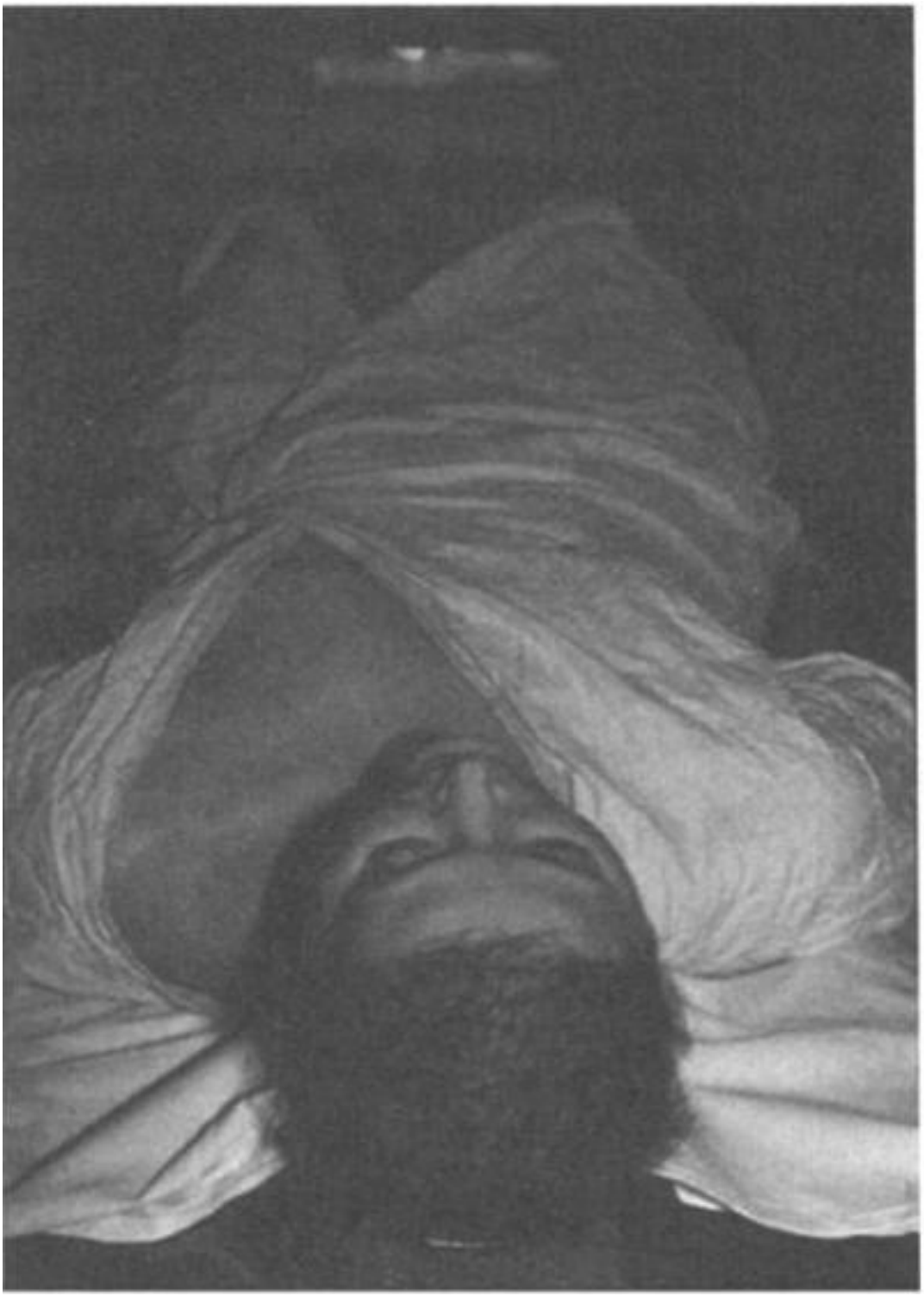
The various female artists adapting the Venus archetype aim to convert the canonized images of women seen through patriarchal lenses to include experiences of real women, the ways they have

been oppressed, victimized, and used for specific ends. They seem to share the belief that women are not just flesh; they are not just objects. In this regard Saadeh says: "Woman's body is not just a flesh. A woman's body contains her emotions and her memories. Woman is not only flesh."[14]

Saadeh does not reject the seductive aspect of women. But she rebels against the attitude toward a woman as – in Stuart Ewen's term – a "commodity self."[15] Saadeh's Venus points to this commodity self through her newspaper clothing, but it also shows the power of a Palestinian woman artist through the insertion of her own body, much as Wilke does, however not as a dying victim, but as powerful director of her own depiction. It is important to understand that it is Saadeh who is the artist, the figure in the painting, and the one who is directing the photographer about how to capture her image. Roger Scruton's comments are helpful here. He has written:

> “I may take a photograph of a draped nude and call it Venus […] In other words, the process of fictional representation occurs not in the photograph but in the subject: it is the *subject* which represents Venus; a photograph does no more than disseminate its visual character to other eyes. This is not to say that the model is (unknown to herself) acting Venus. It is not she who is representing Venus but the photographer, who uses her in his representation. But the representational act, the act which embodies the representational thought, is completed before the photograph is ever taken.[16]

hanna wike.JPG **[13]**



[14]Hannah Wilke, Untitled (From Intra-Venus Series)
Hannah Wilke, Untitled (From Intra-Venus Series), super-gloss print, per formalist. Self-portrait produced with Donald Goddard's assistance. 71 1/2*47 1/2". Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York. 1991–1992

Unlike Scruton's attribution of power to the photographer, describing the figure as irrelevant to the message conveyed, Saadeh makes clear that she is the wielder of the representation in all its forms. However, this representation does not try to impose one meaning. Saadeh's work gains its power from the complexity of her images. Her work is not only about dismantling traditional notions of

beauty; it also calls attention to the ways in which women are turned into consumer objects and their bodies used to sell products and ideas. "The body itself is exchanged as goods in the commodity culture, like vases."17 Barbara Kruger titles one of her works Your Body is a Battleground. I mention it here because its message is close to the one found in Saadeh's *Who Will Make Me Real?* As Katherine Calak asks in relation to Kruger's work, who or what does make a woman real in a period in which "everything can be sold and owned, an ideology extend[ing] to relationships amongst individuals further causing struggle over control and power."18 Saadeh's work expresses this complex relation between the body, its past iconic images, and its relation to present time and place.

- 1. Saadeh in an interview with the author, December 2008.
- 2. Marie Adélaïde de France (1732–1800) was the fourth daughter and sixth child of King Louis XV of France and his Queen Consort Maria Leszczynska. As the daughter of the king, she was called *la fille de France*.
- 3. Nochlin, Linda. 1988. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists." in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*. New York: Harper and Row. P. 145–77.
- 4. Pollock, Griselda. 1988. *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*. London: Routledge, p. 2.
- 5. Wilson-Bareau, Juliet. 1986. *The Hidden Face of Manet: An Investigation of the Artist's Working Processes*. London: Burlington Magazine, p. 43.
- 6. Saadeh, interview with the author, October 2007.
- 7. Pointon, Marcia. 1990. *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting*, 1830–1908. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, p. 34.
- 8. Brand, Peggy Zeglin & Carolyn Korsmeyer. 1995. "Introduction: Aesthetics and its Tradition." In *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*. Ed. Peggy Zeglin Brand & Carolyn Korsmeyer. College Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP. Pp: 1–28.
- 9. Pollock, Griselda. 1988, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art.* London: Routledge, p. 1.
- 10. Korsmeyer, Carolyn. 2006. "Terrible Beauties." In *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Ed. Matthew Kieran. Oxford: Blackwell, 27.
- 11. Regarding Venus as one of the central aesthetic archetypes, Carolyn Korsmeyer argues: "Certain artistic institutions arose in the modern period that provided venues for pure aesthetic enjoyment, most particularly concert halls for listening to music and art museums where paintings were made available to the public to appreciate the efforts of artists past and present, who were now conceived to be persons who create for beauty and aesthetic insight" (Korsmeyer, Carolyn. 2006. "Terrible Beauties." In *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Ed. Matthew Kieran. Oxford: Blackwell. P. 24).
- 12. Ankori, Gannit. 2001. "The Jewish Venus." in *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*. Ed. Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd. New Brunswick & London: Rutgers UP, p. 238.
- 13. Ankori, Gannit, (Spring/Summer 1989). "Yocheved Weinfeld's Portraits of the Self" in *Woman's Art Journal*. 10(1), pp. 22-27.
- 14. Saadeh in an interview with the author, October 2007.
- 15. Stewart Ewen, qtd. in Sturken, Marita & Lisa Cartwright. 2001. *Practices of Looking*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001, 198.
- 16. Scruton, Roger. 1981. "Photography and Representation." *Critical Inquiry* 7.3:588.
- 17. Saadeh in an interview with the author, October 2007.
- 18. Calak, Katherine. 2008. "Barbara Kruger, *Your Body IS a Battleground*." < http://dspace.sunyconnect.suny.edu/bitstream/handle/1951/43953/Barbara_Kruger_Your_Body_Is_a_Battleground.pdf?sequence=1 [15]>.

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