

Art or Porn: An Examination of the Nude

What is Art and What is Pornography: A Look at the Nude

By

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In the fall of 2007, American photographer Nan Goldin had one of her photographs removed from Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in England by police stating it was a violation of their child protection act. The photograph was of young girls titled *Klare and Edda belly-dancing* showed one of the girls nude. Why was this newsworthy for the BBC News? It just so happened that the photograph belonged to Sir Elton John himself.

The age old debate between what is art and what is pornographic continues to exist regarding the nude. This is nothing new as artists have always walked a tightrope between artistic impression and what was held socially and culturally as offensive. Whether it was during the rise of Christianity in Medieval times or it is more recently where lines between government and religion are blurred, the question remains a matter of debate.

Legislators struggle with how to define the criteria of pornography without over-stepping the boundaries of censorship. The First Amendment to protect the right of free speech and expression must be protected to the utmost degree. However, at what point does the nude go beyond the scope of expression? Some legislation defines this as the point where a nude form becomes dehumanizing and degrading. But who makes this determination?

In some circles, citizens who fight for pornographic protection have limited views of what is justifiably called art. In a broader sense, allowances for child images of the nude are even more restricted. There is a sentiment among many that if it looks like it could be pornography and feels uncomfortable, then it probably is. This is a “better to be safe than sorry” type of approach, but clearly a common one.

In visiting many blogs on the subject, a different sentiment is portrayed. The focus in this setting is not as much on the image or art, but on the viewer. While one nude piece may be viewed by one as a glorification of the nude body in an artistic light, another may become sexually aroused. Therefore, the “uncomfortable” feeling of sexual arousals defines the answer to the question, not the image itself.

Obviously this makes the distinction less clear between nude art and pornography since we each have different perceptions and viewpoints. An objective definition states that pornographic material is erotic in nature with intent to cause sexual arousal. The Greek basis for the word stems for “writing about prostitutes.” In contrast nude simply is defined as naked which is also its Latin derivative.

So in essence, the difference is in the material’s intent. But whose intent? The intent of the artist or pornographer, or the intent of the viewer in what they want to capture? In today’s society where paranoia runs rampant about many social injustices, the nude offers another opportunity to restrict expression and art

under an umbrella of pornographic intent. Despite this being an age-old question, its relevance is always present.

The bottom line is that what results in sexual arousal for one person may not for another; also, what may be artistic to an art enthusiast may not be to someone more concrete. It does not matter if it is online or in a famous gallery. What matters is the intent and the degree of abstractness of the work. It appears this is a question we each must individually determine rather than letting society define for us all.