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Q&A

CONCEPTUAL

Sara VanDerBeek explores representations of the female form

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“From the earliest iterations of the female form, women have been both empowered and burdened by symbolism. Their body is never just their own. It is forever shared”

The conceptual photographer [Sara VanDerBeek](#) began working on her new series *Women & Museums*, from which six images are on show at Metro Pictures, New York, following the birth of her daughter Lee. “I have worked with the female form in the past but the process of birth reframed my relationship to my own body,” she explains “and pushed me to consider a return to representation after working with abstraction for several series.” The project is rooted in VanDerBeek’s exploration of objects from multiple museums across Europe and the United States — artefacts that spoke to her experience as a woman and a mother, and provoke questions about the female body as a site of production and reproduction.

VanDerBeek visited several institutions including the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Warburg Institute, the Ashmolean, and the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. She selected different artefacts and photographed them from

multiple perspectives. The resultant images are exquisite. Realised as large-scale dye sublimation prints, the objects depicted feel palpable — smooth surfaces and curved edges pushing through the picture plane. The colour palette shifts from deep, fluorescent purple and red, to glowing pinks and creams. Pairs of images are juxtaposed in a single frame: ceramic bowls and sculpted busts, textiles and vases.

“The series presents the roles and representations of women as a continuum that is fluid and evolving”



“Observation, transformation, and interchange are central to my practice,” says VanDerBeek. *Women & Museums* encapsulates these methodologies. In presenting the objects depicted in a context divorced from their traditional setting, the artist endeavours to transform them into sites of “contemplation, discourse, and reclamation”. The female form is fraught with tension; a site of continual analysis, debate, and discussion, and the countless ways it has been depicted throughout art history reflect this. VanDerBeek’s work should provoke questions about the representation of the female form and also how institutions choose to curate their representation of it. “Throughout my career, I have examined how museums collect and interpret historical objects,” says VanDerBeek. “This current presentation of what I hope is an ongoing series makes the multifaceted and complex nature of interpreting material cultures evident, while its visual approach underscores the role photography continues to have in shaping our understanding of diverse histories, ancient cultures and societies today.”

Below, the artist discusses the processes and concepts that underlie *Women & Museums*, and her wider practice.

Women & Museums IV. 2019. © Sara

BJP-Online: What interests you about the female body, and its role as a site of production and reproduction. Why is it an important time to be investigating this subject matter?

VanDerBeek: During one of my research trips for the project, I viewed and photographed a Neolithic female figure at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. According to the museum's records, it is one of the earliest representations of the human form in Western art in their collection. With its emphasis on the breasts, abdomen and pudenda, I considered the power and problems embodied within the small handheld form to be foundational to the complex and complicated existence of women today. It is of its time and a threshold to the future.

From the earliest iterations of the female form, women have been empowered and burdened by symbolism. Their body is never just their own. It is forever shared. It is continually shifting from the physical to the ideological — it is a representation of ideals, a space for a message, and a mirror upon which society views itself. The multiplicity of experience for women is at the centre of my approach to the photographic series.

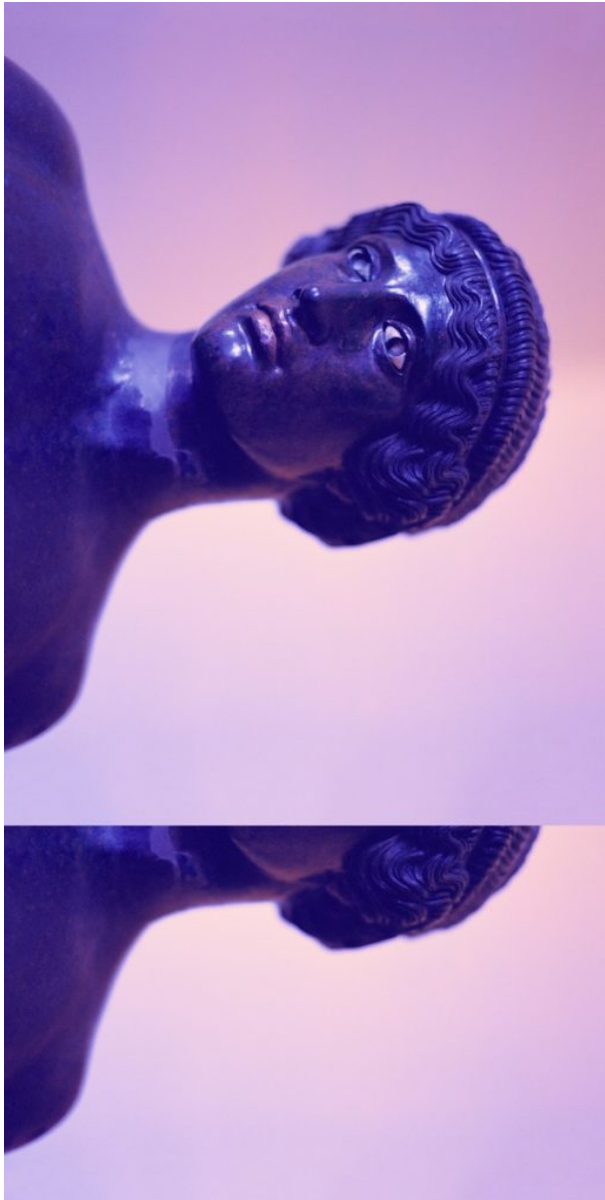
BJP-Online: Could you select a specific piece, and explain the stories behind the individual objects, and why you decided to depict them in this way?

VanDerBeek: I approach most objects with an earnest reverence and I am often entranced by the object as I am photographing it. I shoot many frames of the film moving carefully around the object until I feel all perspectives are captured. This photographic approach then transposes to the conceptual as I am composing the final images intending to connect divergent forms and views in which to present a multiplicity of cultural and temporal perspectives.

During my time at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, I learned via Juan Lucero, a ceramic artist from the Isleta Pueblo, of the work of Lucy M. Lewis, an artist from the Acoma Pueblo and mother of nine children working throughout most of the 20th century. Creating phenomenal vessels by hand, the artist followed a primarily matrilineal pottery tradition and adopted ancient patterns found among ancient shards in the earth near her home. She was a revolutionary artist bringing the past forward via her distillation of ancient patterns into her contemporary visual language and she is a model for me as I move forward with the project.

In *Women & Museums V*, my image of her seed vessel from 1968 is layered atop a detailed view of a Meisen Kimono produced in Japan in the 20th century. I was drawn to this particular kimono because its pattern emulates marble. The marble pattern speaks of stone, (it was designed to emulate marbled Italian Renaissance paper) but also of water with its undulating lines. The pattern on the Lewis vessel derives from earlier rain patterns

she found on ancient Pueblan Pottery. The pattern on her vessel is also similar to water patterns painted on Cycladic vessels I had observed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England.



Women & Museums VI. 2019. © Sara VanDerBeek

BJP-Online: What did you want to achieve by divorcing the works from their museum context? What do you hope that audiences will take away from viewing these works?

VanDerBeek: While my perspective is highly subjective, I aim to address a collective experience. I feel it is important to strive towards inclusivity albeit with an understanding that in regards to certain objects I do not have any shared cultural heritage with that object and its creator and therefore I am an outside observer. The collection and presentation of these objects within museums place these forms in an interstitial space suspended in time. I am interested in exploring this suspension as a parallel to our contemporary screen-based existence in which we are often operating between multiple spaces and modes at once.

The scale and layout of the *Women & Museum* series were inspired by the simultaneous verticality and horizontality of Japanese screens, computer screens, phone scrolling, the Mnemosyne Atlas and memories. I am interested in the pairing of historical objects with that of contemporary image space; the meeting of film capture with its grain; the push and pull of focus with that of emergent digital printing processes such as dye sublimation, which I used for this new

series.



Women & Museums II. 2019. © Sara VanDerBeek

my experience of the object.

In some images, I used the softer light of dusk. I am interested in that transitional time called the blue hour, and dusk as a meeting of day and night when shadows become blue and sometimes pink and everything feels transitory. Much of this body of work rests in this dusky hue.

Women & Museums is on show at Metro Pictures until 19 October 2019.

We are at a phenomenal moment in the evolution of photography, where rapid technological innovations continue to be strengthened and informed by its ever-expansive history. The layered compositions of these works imply movement and my hope in that is to encourage an active engagement on behalf of the viewer, which is open to change.

BJP-Online: Can you explain how the work's distinct aesthetic plays into the narrative it is exploring?

Layering images of figures, faces, and vessels captured at multiple museums, the series presents the roles and representations of women as a continuum that is fluid and evolving. The work's associative network of images posits questions of institutional authority, cultural appropriation, and the roles of artists and museums at this critical moment of discourse around the female form.

Much of the colour in my work is a combination of actual and imagined colour. The colours are often drawn from the existing site of capture and the time of day in which I was working. At the Minneapolis Institute of Art, I had the opportunity thanks to the generosity of the Photo department to use the photo study room as my studio and I employed daylight to capture many of the objects. I used the shifting strength of the light as it changed over the day to interpret