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Reframed: *The Woman in the Window*

Emma Bryning

Dulwich Picture Gallery, London
Curated by Jennifer Sliwka
May 4, 2022—September 4, 2022

Emma Bryning is a PhD student at the University of York working on a project funded through the AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnership scheme and involving English Heritage. Her project explores heritage aspects of historic and contemporary graffiti. Prior to starting her PhD, she worked in a variety of heritage roles, including as Learning and Community Officer and Visitor Experience Manager for the Monastery Manchester. In addition to graffiti, her research interests include the intersection of contemporary art and heritage; the interpretation and presentation of heritage and historic sites, and performance art.



This exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, utilised a transhistorical lens to explore how the “woman in the window” has been used across a variety of geographic locations, cultures, and time periods to reflect issues of “gender and visibility” contemporaneous to each work. The exhibition’s curator, Jennifer Sliwka, has described how artists have long used the combination of women’s bodies as a canvas and the visual device of the window as a frame—a frame within a frame—to illicit a variety of responses from the viewer including empathy, voyeurism, protection, and confinement. As Jennifer Scott, the gallery’s Director, has explained, she saw the exhibition as a “window in itself” which opened “a new way of looking”: women were not only framed as the subject but also utilised the motif themselves to harness the female gaze.

Over fifty works were brought together for *Reframed*, exploring the motif, including ancient works such as a carved Phoenician ivory panel of a woman looking out of a window (700—900 BCE) and a Mycenaean fresco wall painting of three women (c.1450 BCE). Later depictions of the motif included Dirk Bouts’ religious *The Virgin and Child* (c.1465), Hans Baldung Grien’s potentially bawdy parody *The Bewitched Groom* (1544—45) and Sandro Botticelli’s *Portrait of a Lady known as Smeralda Brandini* (1470—1480). The presentation of Grien, Bouts and Botticelli’s versions of the women in the window—the Virgin Mary, sorceress, and the Lady respectively—illustrate the limited ways in which women were often depicted: heavenly and pure, a hag or witch, or a beauty. In contrast, in another featured work, *Two Noblewomen at a Window* from Jaipur, India (c.1800), the women are shown having greater objectivity as they look at one another, rather than purely presented as women to be gazed upon.

Many of the modern and contemporary depictions of the motif also challenged these historical limitations, including through women artists depicting themselves and other women. Both Cindy Sherman and Marina Abramović position themselves as the “woman in the window” through a transformative, artistic process. Sherman’s work continues her use of the themes of identity construction and representation: in *Untitled Film Still* (1978), she presents herself as a stereotypically sexualised female protagonist in Hollywood cinema to explore women’s presentation in popular culture. Meanwhile, photographs from Abramović’s performance piece, *Role Exchange* (1975), show how the artist also took on a different role of the “woman in the window,” that of Amsterdam based sex worker, Suze, with whom she traded places. Abramović marks a delineation between the public and private space, while demonstrating how the window can also be a site of commercial exchange. Through their respective works, Sherman and Abramović highlight how both the literal window and the film or photographic camera have traditionally acted as a frame for the male gaze but show how this space can also be a site of feminine performance.

Figure 1. *Reframed: The Woman in the Window* exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, featuring Ajarb Bernard Ateywa's *Posing with my Parrot* (2021). Photo courtesy of the Dulwich Picture Gallery.



Figure 2. *Reframed: The Woman in the Window* exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, featuring photographs from Marina Abramović's performance piece, *Role Exchange* (1975). Photo courtesy of the Dulwich Picture Gallery and by Graham Turner.



Meanwhile, in Andrew Jackson's photograph, *Hand #1, Kingston, Jamaica* (2017), it is the woman in the photograph who is shown taking control of how she is to be viewed by the photographer, and subsequently by the viewer, by raising her hand to obscure her face from the camera. Catherine Caroline Cathinka Engelhart and Vanessa Bell are also shown challenging the depiction of women as objects. In Engelhart's *The Artist in her Studio* (1894), she depicts herself with her back to the window; she is not an object to be viewed from others outside but presents herself looking into her own artistic space. In Bell's *Woman in a Red Hat* (1915), the female subject is also depicted turning away from the window and instead returns a confrontational gaze to the viewer on the other side of the frame. Whilst in Louise Bourgeois' *My Blue Sky* (1989—2003), there is power in absence. There is no literal depiction of the "woman," but a sculpture of a window salvaged from Bourgeois' own New York home, which is presented as an artist's tool to view the outside world and a source of artistic inspiration. Like in Engelhart's work, the woman is no longer simply viewed.

Rather than taking a linear and chronological view of "the woman in the window," as may be suggested above, Sliwka's exhibition was instead thematically grouped, allowing for

interesting transhistorical comparisons. One such connection is that of Johannes Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657—1659) and Tom Hunter's *Woman Reading a Possession Order* (1997). Both women are shown facing the window: light streams in from outside as they look down at the letters in their hands, potentially from an absent lover in the former and a possession order for the woman and her baby in Hackney, East London, in the latter. Other intimate works include a presentation of pandemic photography, a late addition due to the reluctant postponement of the exhibition, which shows how the exhibition's motif relates to the themes of confinement and loneliness which have taken on new meanings for many in recent years. In addition to this, the gallery's inclusion of "other perspectives"—interpretations of works by local community groups and individuals—throughout the exhibition, allowed for a multi-vocal response to these pieces and opened the window for wider interpretations.

Figure 3. *Reframed: The Woman in the Window* exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, featuring Wolfgang Tilmans' *Smokin' Jo* (1995). Photo courtesy of the Dulwich Picture Gallery and by Graham Turner.



Though the exhibition explored how the “woman in the window” has been treated as subject, and how women have subsequently reclaimed this idea for themselves, I had some scepticism about the exhibitions’ initial universalising presentation of the motif. The promotional materials, which predominantly focused on the European artists within the exhibition, raised questions about who would be presented as the “woman in the window,” and whether some important representations and self-representations of the motif would be missing from the visual conversation. In reality, the exhibition included a more diverse array of works than initially suggested. However, it could have focused further on questions relating to what it means to be a woman and wider perceptions of womanhood. Though the inclusion of Wolfgang Tilmans’ *Smokin’ Jo* (1995) presents ideas of gender identity and performance, works which further challenge binary understandings of gender could have added another interesting element as well as fostering a further sense of trans-inclusivity. One of the most powerful and impactful works in the exhibition was that of Ajarb Bernard Ategwa’s *Posing with my Parrot* (2021), which featured an array of bright colours and patterned textiles. Despite the exhibition marketing’s largely Eurocentric focus, Sliwka framed Ategwa’s piece at the entrance to the exhibition meaning that our first view of the woman in the window was actually presented as a “powerful presentation of female African identity.”