

Jasmine Star

Red & Romance

When a girl is born, our first instinct is to wrap her in pink. As she grows, we swap the pink out for a blistering red that traditionally has connotations of impurity, adultery, vulgarity.

It is a trend that I as a female artist have noticed that the art world also follows. A simple google search of 'red in art' will draw up pages upon pages of girls and women cloaked in blankets of passion and sin - there are no men to be seen, but why?

We could delve into the intention behind it, whether it is sexist and systematic or simply an innocent custom so ingrained in making that we have been unable to shake it, but we could also turn the page and begin to think, 'hold on a second, is there a power in choosing to use this colour?'

I am sure if Welsh artist Gwen John (1876-1939) was creating work in today's age, she would argue that there is. Alumna of London's Slade School of Art, and lesser-known contemporary of other male associates - Matisse, Picasso, Brâncuși, and Rainer Maria Rilke - John has gained fairly recent notoriety for her portraits, many of them of the self. In her 1902 self-portrait, John depicts herself in the foreground of a warm brown backdrop, her expression calm and body draped in red. Many claim that John's decision to portray herself, as well as other women this way is entirely purposeful.

Journalist Skye Sherwin, in her 2018 article *Gwen John's Self Portrait: Serene and Troubling*, states that she believes "John's paintings might all be seen as self-portraits of a kind", adding that her 1902 self-portrait is "a picture of a bold woman demanding to be taken seriously."

Is John proclaiming self-love? I chose to think so. After her failed romance with the sculptor Rodin, and playing second fiddle to her also distinguished brother Augustus John, she became an advocate for detached living. John existed in solitude with the exception of her cats for the majority of the time she spent living in France from 1910, and happily boasted that "family has had its day."

She continued painting women in this same way. *Woman with a coral necklace* evokes the same response within me as her 1902 self-portrait. It is reminiscent of Vermeer's (1665) *Girl With a Pearl Earring* in its tonality and composition, but captures just what all of John's other works also succeed in emulating; tranquillity that has stemmed from turbulence.

Would someone without this perspective be able to create a piece so effortlessly dynamic? Maybe. Perhaps. If you scour the Glynn Vivian's permanent collection, you'll find *A Portrait of The Artist's Wife* (1932), painted by fellow Welsh artist Ceri Richards

(1903-1971). The painting is of his wife Francis Clayton - she is depicted wearing a large straw hat and a red poncho.

During her lifetime Clayton also worked as an artist, and it is commonly accepted that through Richards' Picasso influences, he has captured the image of an individual who is unapologetically herself.

While John's paintings are arguably all results of love for the self, this painting by Richards exists because of his devotion to his wife. Regardless of this discrepancy, they both share a common ground of a gentle certainty that is a pleasure to view when exploring the gallery. These women - Gwen John and Francis Clayton, among many others - are bold, brash, unshakable. They don the colour red proudly, as if it is a symbol of their inner selves; I think of them and their defiance whenever I pull on a red jumper in the mornings and smile at myself fondly in the mirror.

Sources

Gwen John's Self Portrait: Serene and Troubling, 2018, Skye Sherwin, The Guardian

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