

ART

## The Image Is Erotic. But Is It Art?

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Published: January 20, 2009

WALKING out of a Mel Ramos exhibition the other day, my companion remarked on how benignly amusing his paintings now seemed. Back in the 1970s, when she was a younger, more fiery feminist, his works infuriated her.

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Courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery

"Devil Doll" by Mel Ramos. A small career survey of Mr. Ramos's work continues through Jan. 31 at Louis K. Meisel Gallery in SoHo.

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Courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery

"Cave Girl," by Mel Ramos.

Times have changed, although Mr. Ramos evidently has not, judging from a small (19 pieces) career survey at Louis K. Meisel Gallery in SoHo that includes paintings from the early '60s to the present, as well as luminous painted cast-resin sculptural versions of some of his classic images.

Mr. Ramos is still painting naked, pneumatic women emerging "Birth of Venus"-like from candy-bar wrappers and banana peels, riding oversize cigars like horses and otherwise toying with the lubricious responses of his viewers. What is different is that a 50-year history of ever more sexually provocative imagery in art and popular culture at large makes Mr. Ramos's paintings now seem comparatively innocent and even wholesome.

Although he seems to be continually hovering just outside the club door, the serious art world's velvet ropes have never been let down for him.

Mr. Ramos always painted on the teasing edge between acceptable and unacceptable taste. In the early '60s he made Pop-style paintings of Amazonian comic-book heroines like Wonder Woman and Sheena, Queen of the Jungle. Thickly painted in vivid colors within sharp contour lines, statuesque women in scanty costumes appear in posterlike compositions with their names spelled out in big, graphically charged letters. In the current exhibition, Cave Girl poses in a white fur-trimmed leather one-piece suit in front of the monumental letters of her name, which look as though they were carved from stone.

Unlike the women in [Roy Lichtenstein's](#) paintings, Mr. Ramos's sirens were not just enlarged, slightly modified copies of comic-book images. His innovation was to model their bodies on those of real women — movie stars like [Jane Russell](#) and [Marilyn Monroe](#) or anonymous magazine models. So despite their nonrealistic comic style, Mr. Ramos's women had an erotic presence that comic-book women of the day never had.

Playboy had recently become an object of mainstream popularity, a nudie magazine with literary content that smart men and women could peruse without embarrassment. As if rising to the challenge, Mr. Ramos soon began painting photorealistic pictures juxtaposing Playmate-like nudes and brand-name commodities against blank or nearly blank backgrounds. In a highly condensed form they embodied the Playboy ethos: the smartly produced blend of intellectual sophistication, discerning consumerism and fun-loving hedonism.

Mr. Ramos essentially plateaued at that point. He became a famous yet second-tier Pop Artist, and he continued to recycle the same basic formula over the ensuing decades, even up to the present. But as feminism rose in the 1970s, his reputation declined. While his advocates may have argued that his paintings satirized the use of sex in advertising, he made a certain image of heterosexual male fantasy far too explicit.

An artist like Tom Wesselmann could get away with repeatedly using the female nude by flattening, fragmenting and otherwise abstracting the figure and thereby making it a conceptually loaded sign rather than a pornographic image. But Mr. Ramos kept the figure intact and sexually desirable, and as such his work was too close to a kind of soft-core illustration for the serious art world's taste.

In the 1980s, a decade in which feminist theory more powerfully influenced art-world thinking if not popular marketing, the chances of Mr. Ramos's being seen as anything but an outmoded sexist Neanderthal were nil. If any bodies were going to be sexually objectified, they would be those of men — see Mapplethorpe, R. — or, if those of women, they would appear drained of life, as in David Salle's paintings. ([Eric Fischl's](#) cinematic, psychologically charged paintings of domestic sex scenes in the '80s were exceptional for their Freudian candor.) Then, around 1990, there came a change, which you might have thought would have cast Mr. Ramos in a more sympathetic light.

In 1991 [Jeff Koons](#) exhibited "Made in Heaven," his series of sculptures and big photographs representing himself and the Italian porn star and politician known as Cicciolina, then his wife, having sex. In 1992 Madonna released "Sex," a lavish book of photographs in which she acted out stylishly fetishistic sex scenarios.

In the early '90s Lisa Yuskavage's erotic fantasy pictures of nubile half-naked young women made their debut, and not long after that [John Currin](#) moved from painting yearbookish images of anonymous girls to painting outrageously goofy pictures of women with ridiculously oversize breasts.

So-called pornographic imagery is ubiquitous in art today. Hilary Harkness's lesbian S&M narratives, drawn and painted with old-masterly refinement; the photographer Thomas Ruff's pixelated pornographic imagery, downloaded from the Internet; Mr. Currin's own recent X-rated paintings. A recent exhibition of montages by Richard Prince featured much-enlarged images of naked women from trashy vintage pornography and fragments of de Kooning paintings and drawings of women.

The fault line running through all this involves the question of the "proper" use of sexual imagery in art. Do we ever allow it as an end in itself, or must it always be redeemed by some aesthetic, social, moral or ironic purpose? Can pornography be high art? Indian and Japanese artists raised it to that level in pre-modern times; literature is loaded with great erotica, from the Marquis de Sade to "The Story of O."

On the other hand, whether because of aesthetic convictions, prudery or politics, the modern art worlds of Europe and America have not appreciated the idea of art made for sexual arousal. But why should that be any less worthy an aim than, say, trying to inspire religious feelings? Mr. Ramos may not be the answer to the contemporary sex-in-art question, but he surely belongs in the conversation.