

## A Question of Misattribution

### Women's Art & Feminist Art History in Contemporary Fiction

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#### ABSTRACT:

This paper explores three works of fiction — Elizabeth Kostova's *The Swan Thieves* (2010), Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World* (2014) and Jessie Burton's *The Muse* (2016) — all of which attempt to answer the question “why have there been no great women artists?” by exploring the possibility that artworks by women may have been misattributed to their male contemporaries. It is suggested that authors of art-fiction often draw on the work of feminist art historians not only to show how such misattribution might occur, but also how it might be consolidated and perpetuated via the international mechanisms which govern the circulation of art, thus relegating female artists from the status of practitioner to muse. In exploring how the reception of an artwork can be influenced by viewers' perceptions about the artist's gender, fiction about women's art also contributes to the debate over whether it is possible to identify a distinctive feminine aesthetic.

Whilst suggesting that art-history novels often defer to a traditional hierarchy of art forms, in which oil paintings of mythological subjects carry the greatest prestige, this paper argues that art-fiction can also create an alternative narrative of art history which can be used to challenge or at least supplement the mainstream narrative in which great artworks are almost exclusively produced by men.

## **RESUMO:**

Este artigo explora três obras de ficção — *The Swan Thieves* (2010), de Elizabeth Kostova, *The Blazing World* (2014), de Siri Hustvedt, e *The Muse* (2016), de Jessie Burton —, todas elas tentando responder à pergunta “porque é que não houve grandes artistas mulheres?” ao explorar a possibilidade de que obras de arte de mulheres possam ter sido mal atribuídas aos seus contemporâneos masculinos. Sugere-se que os autores de ficção sobre arte [*art-fiction*] recorrem frequentemente à obra das historiadoras de arte feministas não só para mostrar como essa atribuição incorrecta pode ocorrer, mas também como pode ser consolidada e perpetuada por meio dos mecanismos internacionais que regem a circulação da arte, relegando assim as artistas femininas, do estatuto de praticantes de arte, para o estatuto de musas. Ao explorar o modo como a recepção de uma obra de arte pode ser influenciada pelas percepções dos espectadores sobre o género do artista, a ficção sobre a arte feminina também contribui para o debate sobre se é possível identificar uma estética feminina distinta.

Embora sugerindo que os romances de história de arte muitas vezes se desviam para uma hierarquia tradicional de formas de arte, na qual as pinturas a óleo de temas mitológicos têm o maior prestígio, este artigo argumenta que a arte sobre ficção pode também criar uma narrativa alternativa da história da arte, que pode ser utilizada para desafiar ou, pelo menos, complementar a narrativa principal na qual as grandes obras de arte são quase exclusivamente produzidas por homens.

## **KEYWORDS:**

aesthetics; art-fiction; Elizabeth Kostova; Jessie Burton; muse; Siri Hustvedt

## **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:**

Elizabeth Kostova; estética; ficção sobre arte; Jessie Burton; musa; Siri Hustvedt

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## Introduction

Feminist approaches to art history, particularly attempts to rediscover and rehabilitate the work of forgotten women artists, have provided the inspiration for several fictional treatments over the last two decades. This article examines three contemporary novels set in various countries (France, Spain and the USA) and different periods, but all based on the possibility that artworks by women may have been misattributed to their male contemporaries. In Elizabeth Kostova's *The Swan Thieves* (2010) the Impressionist painter Béatrice de Clerval is blackmailed into allowing her work to be exhibited as the work of a male rival; in *The Muse* (Jessie Burton, 2016) Olive Schloss allows her art-dealer father to believe that her paintings are the work of a Spanish artist, Isaac Robles; whilst in Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World* (2014), Harriet Burden attempts to expose the art world's bias against women by perpetrating a sophisticated hoax, only for it to backfire when the critics refuse to accept her claim to be the true author of three critically-acclaimed shows.

In providing fictional explanations for the under-representation of women in art history, writers of art-fiction often draw on academic works on feminist art history which may be cited in interviews, acknowledgements or lists of suggested reading at the back of the novel. In the first edition of *The Muse*, for example, Jessie Burton provided a substantial list of recommended reading, including key works on feminist art history and autobiographies by women artists. Elizabeth Kostova has described how, in writing *The Swan Thieves*, she became “committed to the idea of honouring women painters, who've been so much neglected in the canon” — particularly after discovering that even recent lists of the painters who participated in the first Impressionist exhibitions exclude the name of Berthe Morisot, “on whose life I very loosely based some of my character Béatrice.”<sup>1</sup>

These three “misattribution novels”, in particular, draw on some of the responses to the question posed fifty years ago by Linda Nochlin in her essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971). Whilst the point of the article was largely to warn that in trying to answer the question we risk endorsing its negative implications (that there have been no great women artists “because women are incapable of greatness” [Nochlin, 1999: 154]), that has not prevented numerous attempts to answer it.

Nochlin's question has attracted two major lines of response. The first approach is to *acknowledge* the lack of “great” women artists and instead focus on identifying the barriers faced by women artists in the past — hence the title of Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race* (1979). These obstacles include institutional sexism<sup>2</sup>; domestic responsibilities; a tendency for women artists to be channelled towards the decorative or applied arts, traditionally held in lower esteem than easel painting or

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<sup>1</sup> Email interview with Elizabeth Kostova conducted by Julia Clayton on 17 January 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Lack of access to life-drawing classes, in particular, meant that women artists often lacked the appropriate training to create high-status oil-paintings of historical or mythological scenes; they therefore tended to be pushed into less prestigious media, such as watercolour, and less prestigious genres such as still-life, portrait or landscape (Pollock, 1988: 44; Chadwick, 1991: 33).

sculpture<sup>3</sup>; and the possibility that feminine aesthetics might not meet male critics' criteria for "greatness" (Nochlin, 1999: 155; Pollock, 1988: 26-27).

An alternative approach is to argue that there *have* in fact been plenty of great women artists, meaning that the art historian's task becomes an "archaeological" one of researching and promoting the work of neglected women artists in order to supplement the existing canon. Whilst this approach perhaps risks exaggerating the talent of a handful of 'anointed' female artists, whilst underplaying the obstacles faced by women artists as a group, the idea of rehabilitating forgotten women painters has remained a popular line of investigation, partly because it lends itself to monographs and small exhibitions. The attempt to dig up "examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history" (Nochlin, 1999: 154), with its attendant risk of exaggerating the talent of minor artists, is neatly parodied by A. S. Byatt in *Possession* (1990), where it is suggested that the reason why none of Blanche Glover's Arthurian paintings have survived is that, frankly, they were not very good. The loss of the paintings, however, enables characters in the novel to talk them up into something special: "they'd be fascinating [...] I imagine them as being voluptuous but pale, lovely willowy creatures with heaving breasts and great masses of pre-Raphaelite hair" (376).

A variant on this approach involves re-appraising the work of women artists who have been overshadowed by their male lovers, tutors or relatives in the ways described by Harriet Burden in *The Blazing World*: "Camille Claudel's reputation swallowed whole by Rodin. Dora Maar's big mistake: she screwed Picasso, a fact that had obliterated her brilliant Surrealist photographs" (Hustvedt, 2014: 140). The absorption of women's art into the oeuvre of their male mentors or lovers, however, also raises the further possibility that women artists of the past *have* produced great work, but that their best paintings have been attributed to their male contemporaries and thus "recorded as the achievement of others" (Greer, 1979: 10). Historically, there are several reasons why such misattributions might have taken place. In some periods it was considered immodest for a woman to sign her own work (14), whilst some women painters, realising that works by men commanded higher prices, used to sign their work under male versions of their own names, such as Rosarius (Rosa) Brett and Antonio (Antonia) Brandeis (75, 320). Margaret Keane, explaining why she continued to allow her husband Walter to take the credit for her "Big Eyes" paintings even after she had divorced him, said: "You've got to remember that back in the Fifties there was a lot of prejudice against women artists. There weren't that many of them, and on the whole their work didn't sell" (Keane, 2022).

In particular, it has increasingly been recognised that the view of the artist as a solitary genius hides the workings of a complex studio system involving a team of students and assistants, which may often have included the artist's female relatives (Chadwick, 1991: 15). Although Tintoretto's daughter, Marietta Robusti, worked in her father's studio for fifteen years, all her work was attributed to him, with his apparently prodigious output only serving to cement his "genius" status (Greer,

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<sup>3</sup> Even in the decorative arts, male designers or workshop facilitators have tended to receive credit for work done by women makers; the anonymity of the Omega Workshops, whose products were just "signed" with an omega (Ω) tended to encourage an attribution to Roger Fry or Duncan Grant even when the item had been made by a woman (York Art Gallery, 2022).

1979: 15; Chadwick, 1991: 18). One of the most celebrated cases of misattribution is that of the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Judith Leyster, as by 1890 her work had been almost entirely re-attributed either to her husband Jan Molenaer or her (presumed) teacher Frans Hals (22). Misattribution also works both ways: just as high-quality work by women may sometimes be attributed to men, inferior work by *male* artists may sometimes be attributed to women, thus damaging the reputation of the female artist.

The authors of the three novels under discussion have all implicitly or explicitly acknowledged the influence of real-life cases of misattribution on their creative work. In an interview on *The Muse*, Jessie Burton cited the Judith Leyster / Frans Hals case as a source of inspiration: “no one thought a woman could paint the paintings she did”, as well as Walter Keane’s appropriation of his wife’s “Big Eyes” paintings.<sup>4</sup> She went on to comment that

Women historically have not been considered capable of “great” works of art, of universal messages to give to the world. Men have. So it stands to reason that unconscious bias and misattribution of authority take place in the cultural field as much as it does in the economic and political ones. (Burton, 2017, *W H Smith* interview)

Elizabeth Kostova has said that although she was aware of historical cases of misattribution, the idea of misattribution appealed “first and foremost as a plot point”, as she “needed something difficult and unjust to occur in the life of Beatrice de Clerval that would effectively end her career as an artist but also deeply wrong her as a woman artist.”<sup>5</sup> In *The Blazing World*, Harriet Burden’s anger with the art world is filtered through her knowledge of historical injustices perpetuated against female artists: “Artemisia Gentileschi, treated with contempt by posterity, her best work attributed to her father. Judith Leyster, admired in her day then erased. Her work handed over to Frans Hals” (140). Burden’s awareness of this history renders it all the more poignant that her attempt to expose misogyny within the art world results in the misattribution of her own work to her male “frontman”, Rune: as one character says, if she knew that “art history had steadily sunk the reputations of women artists by assigning their work to the dad, the husband or the mentor, then she should have known that borrowing a big name like Rune might sting her in the end” (141).

## 1. How does misattribution take place, and how is it perpetuated?

Each novel suggests a possible scenario through which women’s art might have been misattributed to male artists, whilst also exploring, through the reception of

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<sup>4</sup> When Margaret Keane sued her former husband regarding his claim to be the author of the ‘Big Eyes’ paintings, the judge ordered that each of them should create a painting in court. Whereas Margaret completed her painting in under an hour, Walter ‘refused even to try, complaining that he had hurt his shoulder’ (Keane, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Email interview with Elizabeth Kostova conducted by Julia Clayton on 17 January 2022.

these invented artworks, how such misattributions might have been perpetuated beyond the artists' lifetimes.

In *The Swan Thieves* Béatrice de Clerval, as a respectable married woman, submits one of her paintings to the Paris Salon under the pseudonym of Marie Rivière. The artist's true identity is guessed by a pair of unscrupulous art dealers, Gilbert and Armand Thomas; they acquire a hold over her when they observe her on holiday with her husband's uncle (Olivier Vignot) and steal a letter providing evidence of the couple's adulterous affair. Gilbert Thomas comes to Béatrice's studio while she is working on *Leda and the Swan*, asking "what price I might put on my reputation or that of my child" (Kostova, 2010: 595) before proceeding to blackmail her by saying that he had seen her on holiday with Vignot: "it was wonderful how women were beginning to enter the profession ... but a woman may change her mind about painting, after she becomes a mother, and certainly about any public scandal" (596). Thomas exacts a heavy price for his silence:

Money was not sufficient reward for this superb painting, but if I would finish it to the best of my ability, he would honour it by putting his own name in the corner of it [...] and he would be happy to do the same for any future paintings, with the understanding that I would be spared any unpleasantness (596).

Thomas therefore takes credit for Béatrice's masterpiece and *Leda and the Swan* is accepted for exhibition at the Paris Salon in 1880 under his name. One of the novel's messages is that such misattributions tend to stick: more than a century later, the caption in the National Gallery in Washington still gives a spurious authority to Thomas's claims:

*Léda vaincue par le Cygne*, 1879; purchased 1967. Gilbert Thomas, 1840-90 (41).

Béatrice decides that the only way to free herself from Thomas's control is to stop painting completely: "I will never paint for this monster after I finish, or if I do it will only be once, to record his infamy" (597). However, her retirement from the art world at the age of twenty-nine goes largely unremarked because it coincides with her becoming a mother, a pattern so common in this period that nobody thinks to investigate whether she might have abandoned her career for other reasons.<sup>6</sup> Her threat to expose Thomas's appropriation of *Leda* is however fulfilled in her final work, *The Swan Thieves*, in which the two hunters stalking the swan are so obviously the Thomas brothers that they can never risk exhibiting the painting (566).

A second scenario whereby a woman's artworks might be misattributed to a man is explored in Jessie Burton's *The Muse*, which inverts the stereotype of the passive female muse inspiring the dynamic male artist. Instead, it is Isaac Robles who becomes Olive Schloss's "muse", and it is her works which pulsate with colour and energy, not his. Isaac's work is technically competent, but bland, shown by Olive's reaction to his joint portrait of her and her mother: "it wasn't terrible. It was two women on the front of a Christmas card" (2016b: 202). Isaac understands that

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<sup>6</sup> As a 1988 Guerrilla Girls poster put it, one of the "advantages of being a woman artist" is "having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood" (Mullins, 2019: 12).

originality is the hallmark of a good artist (105-106), yet he cannot incorporate this knowledge into his own practice: ‘there was no humour, no spirit or power, no exciting use of colour of line’ (201).

The identification of the ‘muse’ of the title is however perhaps less clear-cut than initially meets the eye, reflected in Burton’s comment that ‘Olive thinks Isaac is her muse, but she’s just displacing responsibility and all the creativity comes from her’ (Burton, 2017). Some readers have suggested that it is actually Teresa, Isaac’s sister, who is Olive’s muse (Cordner, 2016), and it is certainly Teresa who inspires Olive’s two greatest paintings, by telling her the story of SS. Justa and Rufina. Olive nevertheless *acts* as if Isaac is her main source of inspiration; when she loses the desire to paint after creating *Rufina and the Lion*, she attributes this to his absence as he becomes more involved in the Republican cause.

Perhaps a bigger question relates to Olive’s complicity in allowing her father — and the outside world — to believe that her four great masterpieces were painted by Isaac Robles. Although it is Teresa who decides to substitute Olive’s *Santa Justa in the Well* for her brother’s mediocre portrait (Burton, 2016b: 196), Olive jumps at the chance to convince her father, by proxy, of her artistic talent. Harold Schloss is a successful Paris art dealer, but none of the twenty-six artists he represents are women, reflecting his belief that women are incapable of producing great art: “they haven’t got the vision” (249). Failing to understand *Santa Justa*, or even to realise that the same woman is depicted in both halves of the painting (he believes it to be Robles’s imaginative interpretation of the commission for the joint portrait), he gives it the title *Women in the Wheatfield* (197). Once the painting has been re-titled and misattributed, Olive herself begins to perceive it as a different painting to *Santa Justa in the Well*, even though they are one and the same canvas (237). When Teresa urges Olive to admit her authorship of the painting, Olive asks, “but would it be the *same* painting?” (203, my italics).

Like Harriet Burden in *The Blazing World*, Olive’s eventual intention is to reveal her authorship of her art *after* it has received critical acclaim: she wants her paintings to achieve such a level of success and visibility that nobody can take them off the wall, or off the market, just because they are by a woman (Burton, 2016b: 250). From this perspective, perhaps one of the most perplexing aspects of the novel is the way in which Olive allows the misattribution of her works to continue, even after they have been purchased by no less a figure than Peggy Guggenheim. The key to this problem perhaps lies in Olive’s statement that allowing her work to be attributed to Isaac gives her “all the freedom of creation, with none of the fuss” (Burton, 2016b: 205). Jessie Burton has described writing *The Muse* in the aftermath of the attention she received following the publication of *The Miniaturist* (Burton, 2016a, *Foyles* interview) and it is tempting to suggest that she was perhaps transferring some of her own desire for privacy and anonymity to Olive.

The misattribution of Schloss’s paintings to Robles is never corrected (not even by Teresa Robles, who reinvents herself as the art historian Marjorie Quick), partly because both painters are killed soon after the paintings are completed, and partly because they are so bound up with a particular place and time: Andalusia, 1936. Once the viewer is told that Robles disappeared whilst fighting for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, this sustains a false narrative in which art historians

speculate that Robles painted *Rufina and the Lion* “as he reached the cusp of his powers before war came” (Burton, 2016b: 135), or solemnly debate “the particular Hispanic pathology around the myth of Justa and Rufina” (312). The novel therefore offers a salutary warning against applying national stereotypes to works of art, as the reader knows that the “Robles” paintings are the work of an Anglo-Austrian teenager who has only spent a few months in Spain. One of the most powerful instances of invented reception in the novel is the inclusion of an essay from a broadsheet newspaper in which Robles is elevated into the pantheon of twentieth-century Spanish greats: “*Guernica*, the works of Dali and Miró — and now *Rufina and the Lion*, an allegory of Spain, a testament to a beautiful country at war with itself, carrying its own head in its arms, doomed forever to be hunted by lions” (339) — a complete mis-reading of the painting which is heavily coloured by hindsight.

In *The Blazing World*, Harriet Burden’s hoax is intended to achieve recognition for her own work whilst also raising the wider issue of the under-representation of women in the art world: “I knew that despite the Guerrilla Girls, it was still better to have a penis” (Hustvedt, 2014: 33).<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to prove that art is taken more seriously, and valued more highly if there is “a cock and a pair of balls” behind it (269), she mounts a series of three shows, each fronted by a male artist: *The History of Western Art* (Anton Tish, 1998), *The Suffocation Rooms* (Phineas Q Eldridge, 2001) and *Beneath* (Rune, 2003).<sup>8</sup>

Burden’s objective is to prove that our perceptions of a work of art are conditioned by our expectations, within the context of what the artist Grayson Perry has described as the “Default Male World” (Mullins, 2019: 7). The critics are prepared to accept that Anton Tish, an inarticulate monolingual twenty-four-year-old who believes that Andy Warhol is the greatest artist who ever lived (Hustvedt, 2014: 40) is responsible for an erudite and witty show containing allusions to obscure art-history texts, including an essay which is only available in French (20). Gushing reviewers fail to pick up that Tish is an anagram of “shit” (Burden removed the “c” from Tisch, his real surname [59]), whilst convincing themselves that his gaucheness is a finely judged act: “he played the naïf perfectly, the Forrest Gump of visual art” (45). Critics also fail to spot the clues hiding in plain sight in the second show, *The Suffocation Rooms*, including the handwritten “wallpaper” containing the repeated statement “Phineas Q Eldridge is really Harriet Burden” (137). Hustvedt has spoken about how the “masculine enhancement effect” and its corollary, the “feminine pollution effect”, are so entrenched in our socialisation that they even cause women to under-rate women’s art (White, 2014): when the gallerist Cynthia Clark is asked in the novel whether she would have shown *The History of Western Art* if she was aware of its true authorship, her awkward response suggests that she felt an association with Burden would have tainted her brand (Hustvedt, 2014: 21).

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<sup>7</sup> The Guerrilla Girls, a US-based collective of women artist-activists, have been campaigning on this issue since 1985. Their summer 2021 UK campaign, *The Male Graze* (<https://www.themalegraze.com>), featured reproductions of famous nudes from British collections accompanied by the slogan “Are there more naked women than women artists in UK museums?” (Figes, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> These three shows are collectively known as the *Maskings* project, leading Valeria Cammarata to suggest that Burden’s work can be seen as a modern version of the seventeenth-century masquerade, including its frequent subversion of gender roles (Cammarata, 2019).



The reception of Burden's second show, *The Suffocation Rooms*, provides a particularly good demonstration of how we see what we expect to see. The installation consists of a series of seven rooms, each containing two chairs, a table and two metamorphs (humanoid figures); each room gets progressively scruffier, hotter and darker, until the seventh room feels "like a Finnish sauna" (131). Each room also contains a wooden trunk, from which a hermaphroditic "alien", made of wax, gradually emerges (133). Burden suspects that if she had exhibited the show under her own name, as a woman in her sixties, it might "look old-womanish all of a sudden" (158). As it is, because the show is fronted by Phineas Q Eldridge, a mixed-race gay drag artist, the critics choose to interpret the show either from an LGBT angle, suggesting that the box from which "the eerie intersex person" rises is "also the closet" (210) or as a piece of commentary on racism in America, suggesting that the two metamorphs represent the right-wing family values of white America (210). Although the show was conceived and created before 9/11, the timing of its opening in the immediate aftermath of those events also leads visitors to place an unintended interpretation on the ominous heat of the seventh and final room (137), with its claustrophobic atmosphere and air of decay (210-211).

The reason why Burden's plan ultimately fails, cementing rather than exposing the misattribution of some of her work, is due to the very institutionalised sexism she had sought to expose. When Rune, her third "mask", refuses to acknowledge her as the creator of *Beneath* (308), nobody else is prepared to believe her either, leading one reviewer to suggest that the true subject of the novel is "the indefatigability of denial" (Cusk, 2014). Rune undermines Burden by claiming that she is too mentally unstable to produce such a complex work: "Harriet was an important collector, but she was unbalanced, a bit of a fruitcake, megalomaniacal [...] delusional" (Hustvedt, 2014: 276). In another interview he says "she had a hard time after her husband died, and she's been in psychiatric treatment for years" (308). Most depressingly, from Harriet's point of view, Rune does not even acknowledge that women are under-represented in the art world: "There are lots of women in art now. Where is the battle?" (234).<sup>9</sup>

Another reason why the misattribution sticks is that Burden covers her tracks too well. She allows Anton Tish to sign the works from her first show, and to keep the proceeds: "pieces from that show signed by Anton Tish command high prices" (21). She goes back through the records of her collaboration with Rune, only to realise that their email correspondence had been deliberately cryptic; that her studio assistants had failed to realise what was really going on<sup>10</sup>; and that the cheques she wrote to fund the show's production only served to confirm Rune's version of her "generous support" for the project (309). Unlike her first two frontmen, Rune did not need the cash, the exposure or the critical acclaim, as he already had "a palace-size apartment on Greenwich Street [and] a house in the Hamptons" (139). Given that Rune's most

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps more surprisingly, the feminist critic Terry Castle also suggested, in her review of the novel, that Hustvedt was attacking a paper tiger, listing forty-two female artists and photographers who "somehow managed to flourish at a very high level despite patriarchal obstacles" (Castle, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> *The Blazing World* could be seen as a satire on the modern studio system operated by artists such as Jeff Koons, who rely on large teams of artists and craftsmen to realise their designs (Kon-Yu and Van Loon, 2018: 54).

famous work was a film about plastic surgery called *The New Me*, including scenes featuring surgical knives, blood-soaked gauze and the slicing of facial skin (141), it is hardly surprising that the critics picked up on similar imagery in *Beneath*, including masks which were “sliced through the cheek” (262) — suggesting that either Burden made the mistake of trying to allude to Rune’s work, or that Rune had a greater input than Burden was prepared to admit.

Most importantly, as Hustvedt herself has said, “there is a difference between using a made-up name and using real people as pseudonyms. People are not costumes you can wear. They are flesh and blood” (White, 2014). Burden was dealing with real people — artists whose behaviour sometimes proved unpredictable and who inevitably influenced the nature of her own work. One character compares her manipulative relationship to Anton Tish to “the Pygmalion myth with the sexes reversed” — but whilst Pygmalion’s ivory statue only comes to life at the end of the story, Burden’s creation “had the misfortune to be made of bone and muscle and tissue from the start” (Hustvedt, 2014: 112).

The effect of misattribution is often to relegate the female artist from the status of practitioner to that of muse, a process explored by all three novels. In *The Swan Thieves*, Robert Oliver’s obsessive painting of the same woman (eventually revealed to be de Clerval) acts as a metaphor for this process, suggesting that Gilbert Thomas’s actions in appropriating Béatrice’s work not only ended her career as an artist, but also transformed her from a *producer* of art into a mere object for representation in men’s paintings. Harriet Burden also finds herself reduced to the status of muse and satellite: when she stakes her claim to be the true author of *Beneath*, Rune’s press statement thanks “Harriet Lord” (deliberately using her married name, which she never used as a professional artist) for being “a true supporter” and a “*muse* for the project” (Hustvedt, 2014: 308, my italics). In *The Muse*, a photograph of Robles in his studio, with Schloss and her painting *Rufina and the Lion* in the background, becomes a star exhibit in a Robles retrospective mounted in 1967. As the only known photograph of Robles, it is “blown up to cover four enormous boards”, accompanied by a caption stating that it shows Robles with “an unknown woman” (Burton, 2016b: 340). The curator comments that she was “probably a model he used” (134).

One of the observations which can be drawn from all three novels is that the misattribution of women’s art to men enables awareness of the work to circulate in a way which would probably not have happened if it had been correctly attributed. Historically, women’s art has tended to be excluded from the channels through which art circulates, “absent from art magazines and newspapers, rarely featured in glossy monographs and survey show catalogues” (Mullins, 2019: 9). *The Muse*, in particular, explores the ways in which art circulates via an international network of dealers and collectors: sold in Paris to an American collector, awareness of the “Isaac Robles” paintings spreads through exhibitions, art magazines, newspaper features and art-history institutes such as the fictional Skelton.

## 2. Is there such a thing as a distinctive feminine aesthetic?

In exploring how the artworks are received, each novel also invites the reader to decide whether it is possible to guess the gender of an artist simply by looking at their work, thus contributing to the long-running art-historical debate over whether gender is ‘linked to the production of certain kinds of imagery’ (Chadwick, 1991: 8). The notion of a feminine aesthetic is linked to the argument that women are under-represented in traditional art historical discourse because they are less likely than men to belong to a ‘school’ of painters, or paint in a defined style, thus defying the traditional categories on which art history relies as a discipline. In *The Blazing World* the critics were baffled by Burden’s early work because it was “too busy, too off the beaten track. It didn’t fit into any schema”, yet “she wasn’t Judy Chicago either, making a feminist statement” (Hustvedt, 2014: 19) — suggesting that, perhaps counter-intuitively, critics might be more comfortable with overtly feminist artworks that can at least be categorised (or pigeonholed) as such.<sup>11</sup>

Attempts to define a distinctive feminine aesthetic have ranged from the potentially patronising adjectives used by nineteenth-century male critics (*gentle, decorative, precious, delightful, sentimental, winning, appealing, exquisite, charming, fresh, sweet, graceful, delicate* — and of course, *amateur* [Greer, 1979: 75, 314; Chadwick, 1991: 9]) to claims that women’s art employs a central core of imagery “derived from the form of female genitals and from female bodily experience” (Pollock, 1988: 27), involving circular forms, “sensuously tactile” textures and looser handling of paint than men (Chadwick, 1991: 323). It is also often suggested that women are more likely than men to paint domestic scenes, although such scenes by men (Johannes Vermeer) carry a far higher value than similar scenes by women (Berthe Morisot).

Studies attempting to demonstrate the existence of a distinctive female aesthetic, whether in terms of style, colour, subject-matter or technique, have proved inconclusive: Renée Adams’s recent study on gender in the art market, for example, showed that whilst ‘roses’ might be labelled as a particularly feminine subject, 85% of paintings of roses sold at auction are actually by male artists (Adams, 2019, “Gender Diversity”). Participants in this study, when shown a series of paintings by male and female artists, only managed to correctly guess the gender of the artist 50.5% of the time (Adams et al., 2017: 5), leading the researchers to conclude that most “participants are unable to guess the gender of an artist simply by looking at a painting” (1). The most significant finding from the study, however, was that affluent male art buyers were likely to give a lower “appreciation rating” to a painting if they were told that it was by a female artist (7): *perception of an artist’s gender is all-important.*

<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Alison Lurie’s novel *The Truth About Lorin Jones* (1988) also makes the same point, as Jones’s biographer comments that “her most characteristic work hovered in a no-man’s-land — *a woman’s land, perhaps* — between representation, abstraction and surrealism” (Lurie 1989: 45, my italics).

<sup>12</sup> The difficulty in proving the existence of a distinctive feminine aesthetic leads to the suspicion, as a Guerrilla Girls poster put it, that whatever kind of art women make, “it will be labelled feminine” (quoted in Mullins, 2019: 12).

The three “misattribution” novels under discussion all appear to start from the assumption that there *is* such a thing as a distinctive feminist aesthetic, although the suggestion is — particularly in *The Swan Thieves* and *The Muse* — that the difference between the work of male and female artists lies in their *treatment* of a particular subject, rather than the choice of the subject itself.

In *The Swan Thieves*, the subject-matter of much of Béatrice de Clerval's work is typical of that of real Impressionists such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot: domestic settings and places of family recreation, including gardens, seaside resorts, parks and boating-lakes. Béatrice paints her maid sewing (Kostova, 2010: 552), her husband reading a book in the garden (529), and the swans in the Bois de Boulogne (530). Griselda Pollock has convincingly demonstrated that female Impressionist painters were limited to such settings because “respectable” women could not access the type of venues which featured in the work of the male Impressionists: brothels, bars, cabarets and backstage areas (1988: 53, 56), and it is often suggested that female painters may have been drawn to Impressionism largely *because* it legitimised the subject matter of domestic life, hitherto relegated to the category of “genre painting” (Pollock, 1988: 56; Chadwick, 1991: 214), whilst simultaneously rejecting the historical and mythical subjects for which women painters often lacked the appropriate training (Chadwick, 1991: 215).

The cosy domestic world of most of de Clerval's paintings therefore makes it all the more striking that the painting which drives the plot, *Leda and the Swan* (even if it utilises her studies of swans in the park) is very *atypical* of Impressionist art in its subject-matter, as Greek myth was the province of the “Academic” painters against whom the Impressionists were reacting (Kostova, 2010: 41). *Leda* is also a large canvas (“about five by eight feet”, 40), suggesting that Béatrice was deliberately subverting the expectation that women should produce small, delicate paintings. Perhaps most significantly, however, Kostova also suggests that a woman artist might be able to take a well-worn story, portrayed by dozens of male painters before her, and put her own spin on it, as Artemisia Gentileschi had done with her version of the story of *Susanna and the Elders* (1610).<sup>13</sup> In presenting a version of the story which was less salacious and voyeuristic than its predecessors, Gentileschi drew on her own experience of being raped by her father's studio assistant; she removed any suggestion of Susanna's complicity in her rape by avoiding the usual setting of a garden (a metaphor for female fecundity); by presenting Susanna as completely nude, rather than seductively draped; and by making one of the elders gaze towards the viewer, finger to his lip in order to silence us (Chadwick, 1991: 98). In the same way, Kostova has said that she wanted to take “a myth that represents the helplessness of the female subject”, and *subvert* it, by showing it through a woman's eyes: “I thought it would be a fascinating task to try to ‘design’ a painting of Leda's experience from a female painter's point of view, even a fictional one”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kostova has also spoken of her own pleasure, in seeking subjects for her novels, of “taking a worn-out cultural topic” — for example *Dracula* (*The Historian*, 2005) — “and trying to breathe new vitality into it, to make it real and specific through the lives and experiences of characters” (email interview with Elizabeth Kostova conducted by Julia Clayton on 17 January 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Email interview with Elizabeth Kostova conducted by Julia Clayton on 17 January 2022. The theme of *Leda and the Swan* continues to be explored by women artists, for example Helen Chadwick's *The Oval*

In some respects the *ekphrasis* of the painting, with its focus on the scantily-clad woman, appears to place it firmly among the seductively reclining Ledas of the classical tradition: “a wisp of drapery caught over her middle and slipping off one leg, her shallow breasts bare, arms outspread” (Kostova, 2010: 40). Yet when the psychiatrist Andrew Marlow sees *Leda* for the first time in the National Gallery in Washington, he feels there is something which sets it apart from the neighbouring paintings which also show women being raped or tortured in mythical or religious contexts: the ‘voluptuous victimhood of the classical paintings [...] the soft porn Sabine women and Saint Catherines’ (41). He is impressed by the painting’s graphic depiction of Leda’s *fear* (“the terror in her very hands as they dug into the earth” [41]), and also by the way in which the artist has managed to convey Zeus’s aggressive masculinity, even in swan form: ‘the swan needed no genitalia to make it masculine — that shadowed area under the tail was more than enough, as were the powerful head and beak’ (41). Such is the authority of the gallery’s attribution of the painting to Gilbert Thomas, though, that does not even entertain the possibility that the true author might have been a woman, instead concluding that Thomas ‘must have been a highly perceptive man’ to create such a work (41).

When Béatrice’s lover Vignot initially suggests that the story of Leda would be “just the sort of thing a Salon jury would welcome” (508), her first reaction is to question whether a story so loaded with male desire and female submission might be too “strong” a subject for a woman (509). But then, in one of the most significant passages in the novel, Vignot shows her how to turn the bourgeois domestic subject-matter she *is* permitted to paint into a scene of Classical rape and bestiality: she can use her own garden as a setting, use a swan from the Bois de Boulogne as a model for Zeus, and use her maid as the model for Leda (509), thus circumventing her exclusion from life-drawing classes.

Olive Schloss in *The Muse* also takes a mythological subject popular with male artists — the tale of SS. Justa and Rufina — and puts her own spin on it, creating the paintings *Santa Justa in the Well* and *Rufina and the Lion*. Jessie Burton has described how she chose this subject for her invented artworks *before* realising “that Goya, Velazquez, Murillo and Zurbarán had all painted [it]. That little moment of serendipity thrilled me so much” (Burton, 2016a). The story is about female artistic integrity (Kyte, 2016): the two sisters, Christians who worked as potters, were asked to make pots for a pagan party, but refused (Burton, 2016b: 122). The Roman authorities threw Justina into a well and Rufina into the arena with a lion; when the lion would not touch her, the Romans cut off her head and threw it down the well (123).

Olive’s first treatment of this story, *Santa Justa in the Well*, shows Justa before and after her arrest. On the left-hand side, Justa stands in a field of ripe wheat (highlighted with gold leaf),<sup>15</sup> carrying a heavy pot painted with deer and rabbits (175). On the right-hand side, however, the crop has become “deadened and limp”; Justa is curled up inside the circle of the well whilst live deer and rabbits look down

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*Court* (first exhibited 1986), which featured photocopied collages of the artist’s naked body with a swan and armfuls of flowers (Mullins, 2019: 72-73).

<sup>15</sup> One of the mysteries of *The Muse* is where Olive obtains the gold leaf she uses in *Santa Justa and Rufina and the Lion*, especially as she succeeds in keeping her painting activity secret from her art-dealer father.

on her from its edge, “as if set free from the broken crockery” (176). It is tempting here to see the influence of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, as Justa’s arrest causes the crops to fail and the natural order to be disturbed. When the painting is exhibited as the work of Isaac Robles the presence of the animals receives little critical comment — other than to suggest that the circle represents “the rotundity of planet earth” (311), but we cannot help wondering whether these same animals would have been seen as cute, charming or sentimental if the critics were aware that the painting was by a woman.

*The Muse* comprehensively rejects any suggestion that women artists might favour pinks, pastels and “cloud-colours” (Lucy Lippard, qtd. in Chadwick, 1991: 323), as nothing could be further from the bold indigos, purples, golds and bright greens favoured by Olive Schloss. However, rather than being inspired to use such strong colours by the bright Spanish sunlight, we learn that she bought them – perhaps a bit too conveniently — in London before travelling to Spain, selecting them as if impelled by some external force: “I just picked them up and put them on the counter [...] a vivid grasshopper-green — and a shade of scarlet, and oil called Night Indigo, a plum, and a silvery grey — all colours I’d never used before” (Burton, 2016b: 106).

A large part of the joke in *The Blazing World* is the way in which Siri Hustvedt, in creating Harriet Burden’s installations, not only drew on stereotypes about “feminine” art but also on genuine works by women artists — yet in the novel the critics and the public unquestioningly accept these shows as men’s work and stubbornly resist any suggestion that a woman might be behind them. We have already explored the suggestion that a female aesthetic might derive from an exploration of the female body, and in that sense Harriet’s work is very “feminine”, especially her “metamorphs”: huge, padded, doll-like images which appear (through the use of packs from electric mattresses) to generate their own body heat (Hustvedt, 2014: 30). It has been suggested that the metamorphs may have been based on the huge fabric sculptures created by Louise Bourgeois — who, like Burden, was overlooked for many decades before finally gaining recognition in her sixties (Castle, 2014)<sup>16</sup>, whilst the “gigantic sculpture of a woman” in *The History of Western Art*, covered in tiny reproductions of artworks (44) may be influenced by the work of Nikki de Saint Phalle: visitors to *Hon (She, 1966)* entered a huge female figure through her vagina (into an amusement park), and there was a milk-bar inside one of her breasts (Chadwick, 1991: 312). Burden’s installations continue to use the same domestic settings (“quirky dollhouse stuff” [Hustvedt, 2014: 46])<sup>17</sup> and giant “dolls” which were dismissed as “fussy and pretentious” (46) when she exhibited them under her own name, or as “an odd blend of pretentiousness and naïveté” (32-33) — yet when these installations are presented as the work of male artists, these features cease to be regarded as “feminine” and are instead interpreted as pieces of serious social commentary.

<sup>16</sup> An advantage of being a woman artist, according to the Guerrilla Girls, is “Knowing your career might pick up after you’re eighty” (1988 poster quoted in Mullins, 2019: 12).

<sup>17</sup> The reception of Burden’s ‘quirky dollhouse stuff’ may be based on responses to Miriam Schapiro and Sherry Brooks’s *Dollhouse* (1972), in which each room related to a different female role: mother, lover, nanny, cleaner and artist (Mullins, 2019: 30).

*The Blazing World* therefore proposes that even a “feminine” subject can remain unrecognised as such if the viewer believes they’re looking at a work by a male artist, and that this same work can even have “masculine” qualities attributed to it. Burden’s third show, for example, is described as “a rigorous, complicated installation” (10), and as ‘hard, geometrical, a real engineering feat” (277).<sup>18</sup> Reading the review in *The Gothamite*, Burden feels a sense of triumph that the critic “doesn’t know that the adjectives muscular, rigorous, cerebral can be claimed by me, not Rune. He doesn’t know he is a tool of my vengeance” (292).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, novels about women artists, with their fictional biographies and lengthy passages of ekphrasis, can be viewed as an attempt to answer the question “why have there been no great women artists?” by “writing women back” into art history (Pollock, 1988: 55) — a point made by a reviewer who described *The Swan Thieves* as “a fictional addendum” to Germaine Greer’s *The Obstacle Race* (Taylor).

In “adding” artists to the canon — in this case, a French Impressionist, a 1930s Symbolist and a late twentieth-century conceptual artist — misattribution-novels and art-fiction more generally can be viewed as an attempt to create an alternative narrative of art history (“a parallel extra-academy, extra-museum art history”, Chapman, 2009: 785) which can be used to challenge — or at least supplement — the mainstream narrative as outlined in works such as Ernst Gombrich’s classic textbook *The Story of Art*,<sup>19</sup> in which great artworks are made by a succession of male individuals who possess the “golden nugget of Genius” (Nochlin, 1999: 157). In addition to promoting the work of female painters, fictional art can also be a way of recovering the initial *frisson* of art movements that have become so familiar that we’ve forgotten how radical or shocking they once were. Kostova has spoken of the need to remember that Impressionism was not always “a synonym for safe art”, featured on “umbrellas and tote bags, mugs and notecards — an industry that trivialises and commodifies it, and at the same time makes it relentlessly familiar”.<sup>20</sup>

These alternative narratives, however, still come with some qualifications. We have seen how all three “misattribution novels” suggest that there is such a thing as a distinctive feminine aesthetic, in treatment of subject-matter if not in style, colour or technique, yet they simultaneously *undermine* this concept, as the works by these three fictional women artists are all so readily accepted by dealers, critics, collectors and gallery visitors as being the work of male artists.

Even fiction which overtly seeks to challenge the mainstream narrative of art history often defers to a traditional hierarchy of art forms in which oil painting sits

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<sup>18</sup> The contrast between the language used to describe men’s and women’s work in *The Blazing World*’s fictional reviews is also discussed by Kon-Yu and Van Loon (2018: 55).

<sup>19</sup> Although Gombrich’s textbook (first published in 1950 but regularly updated) has become the go-to single-volume of art history, out of the 228 plates depicting works attributable to a single artist in the 1995 edition only one depicted an artwork by a woman: Käthe Kollwitz’s *Need* (Plate 368).

<sup>20</sup> Email interview with Elizabeth Kostova conducted by Julia Clayton on 17 January 2022.

at the top of the pyramid, particularly oil-paintings of mythological or historical subjects such as de Clerval's *Leda and the Swan* or Schloss's *Rufina and the Lion*; *The Blazing World* is a rare example (along with Pearl S Buck's *This Proud Heart*, 1938) of a novel involving a female artist who is *not* a painter. Jessie Burton's *The Muse*, in particular, also buys heavily into the idea of original genius which characterised Irving Stone's novels on Michelangelo and Van Gogh (Chapman, 2009: 787): although Olive Schloss is a self-taught nineteen-year-old with no formal artistic training, she can still paint museum-quality masterpieces such as *The Orchard* in a single overnight session (Burton, 2016b: 87), a point raised by a reviewer who looked at the novel from an artist's perspective: an untrained but inspired young woman creates a breathtaking piece of art without any training, instruction or advice" (American Girls Art Club).

*The Muse*, however, also provides an excellent example of the playfulness which so often characterises novels about invented artworks, sending readers scurrying to Google whether a particular painter or painting is real. Jessie Burton has been so successful in creating a fictional artist (Isaac Robles) firmly linked to a particular time and place (Spain at the start of the Civil War) that many readers have understandably assumed that Isaac Robles was a real Spanish Symbolist painter, even if the works attributed to him in the novel are fictional. One book group review commented that "several members thought that the mystery painting was based on a real work of art [...] the comment was made that the author had *tricked the readers into believing in its existence*" (Cordner, 2016, my italics). Typing "Isaac Robles" into a search engine brings up a whole gallery of "his" paintings; it is only by digging down further that we realise that these paintings are from Jessie Burton's Pinterest board on "Isaac Robles" and that they are mostly by Joan Miró, interspersed with photographs of Miró in his studio and paintings of Justa and Rufina by other Spanish artists. Isaac Robles' internet presence surely provides the ultimate endorsement of the problem of misattribution, as — in an act of supreme irony — the fictional male artist still manages to steal the thunder from his fictional female contemporary.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In a real-life example of such upstaging, in October 2018 Jenny Saville's self-portrait *Propped* broke the record at auction for a price paid for a work by a living female artist — only to be ignored in press reports in favour of Banksy's self-shredding painting, *Girl with Balloon*, which featured in the same sale (Mullins, 2019: 21).



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