

# It is Black and White

## A Comparison of the Black and White Female Nude in Feminist Art

By Maria Davila

### Introduction

Second and third-wave feminists sought political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. They had the same goal in mind but had different ways of achieving it. In art, second wave feminists viewed the body as something to be celebrated, something to be reclaimed as their own. Third wave feminists agreed but their multiperspectival approach to feminism allowed them to see how reclaiming the female nude would be a different struggle for women of color.

The differences in this reclamation of the female form can be seen in a comparison of second-wave feminist Judy Chicago's installation *The Dinner Party* and third-wave feminist Renee Cox's photograph *Hot-en-Tot*.

### Literature Review

Second wave feminism is based on the celebration of women's bodies; women viewed their bodies as a connection to other women. Judy Chicago, a leading feminist voice in the 1960s and founder of the first feminist art program in the United States, utilized these ideals in her artwork. This can be seen in her landmark installation *The Dinner Party*. The installation is a massive, triangular 48' x 48' x 48' open table. On the table are 39 place settings meant to honor 39 specific women for their accomplishments and contributions to the western world. The 39 plates were sculptures of abstracted female sexual organs. A celebration of womanhood, it equates womanhood with a white, vaginal opening.

Second wave feminism emphasized the female, particularly white, nude body. By doing so they failed to address the concerns of women of color. So third-wave feminism was born out of critique of the second wave. Third-wave feminism was fueled by postmodern questions of identity and is meant to be diverse and inclusive while rejecting the idea of a singular female experience.

Renee Cox, a black third-wave feminist artist, dedicated her career to deconstructing sexual stereotypes about black women. In *Hot-en-Tot*, Cox emulates Sartja Baartman. Baartman, otherwise known as the Hottentot Venus, was a Khoisan woman from South Africa who was paraded as a side show attraction in London and Paris in the early nineteenth century. With enlarged buttocks, breasts and elongated labia, she attracted large crowds who came to view her naked body. For an extra fee they could even touch her buttocks. Baartman's humiliation did not end with her death; she was dissected and her brain and genitals put on display in the Paris Musee de l'Homme. It was not until 2002, after an eight year legal battle that her remains were returned to South Africa for burial.

### Discussion

*The Dinner Party* celebrated women by associated their accomplishments with their genitals, making nudity something to be happily and easily celebrated. Such an assumption ignores the baggage that comes with the black female nude and effectively ignores the black female experience. A white vagina does not carry the same social and racial ramifications as a black one. Not only are black bodies in direct opposition of European ideals of beauty, Europeans have a history of eroticizing and exploiting the black female body, as seen in the case of Sartja Baartman.

Therefore Renee Cox emulates Baartman in *Hot-en-Tot* to illustrate the baggage that comes with a female nude. With that photograph Cox recalls Baartman's painful past and addresses the racist sexual exploitation of black women while simultaneously critiquing European beauty standards. Upon closer inspection one can note Cox's carefully applied makeup, manicured nails, and well-groomed dreadlocks. The dreadlocks are significant, as they are an icon of African beauty that challenges European ones



*Hot-en-Tot* by Renee Cox

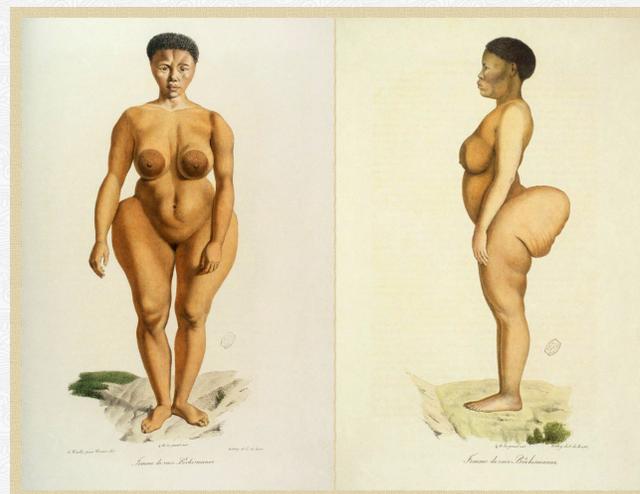


Illustration of Baartman from *Illustrations de Histoire naturelle des mammifères*



*The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago



*The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago. detail

### Conclusion

We do not live in a post-racial, sexism-free society; race and gender are contested issues. Movements such as Black Lives Matter and the Women's Marches illustrate this point. An analysis of race in feminist art would be a place where these movements intersect, making this topic extremely relevant.

*Hot-en-Tot* and *The Dinner Party* are only two pieces of art in this ongoing conversation about race and gender. A further analysis of different artworks from the same movements will reveal a similar story as these two. One can pick other artworks from the second and third wave to continue to compare the black and white female nude or take into consideration what the new fourth-wave feminists have to say.

#### Selected Bibliography

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