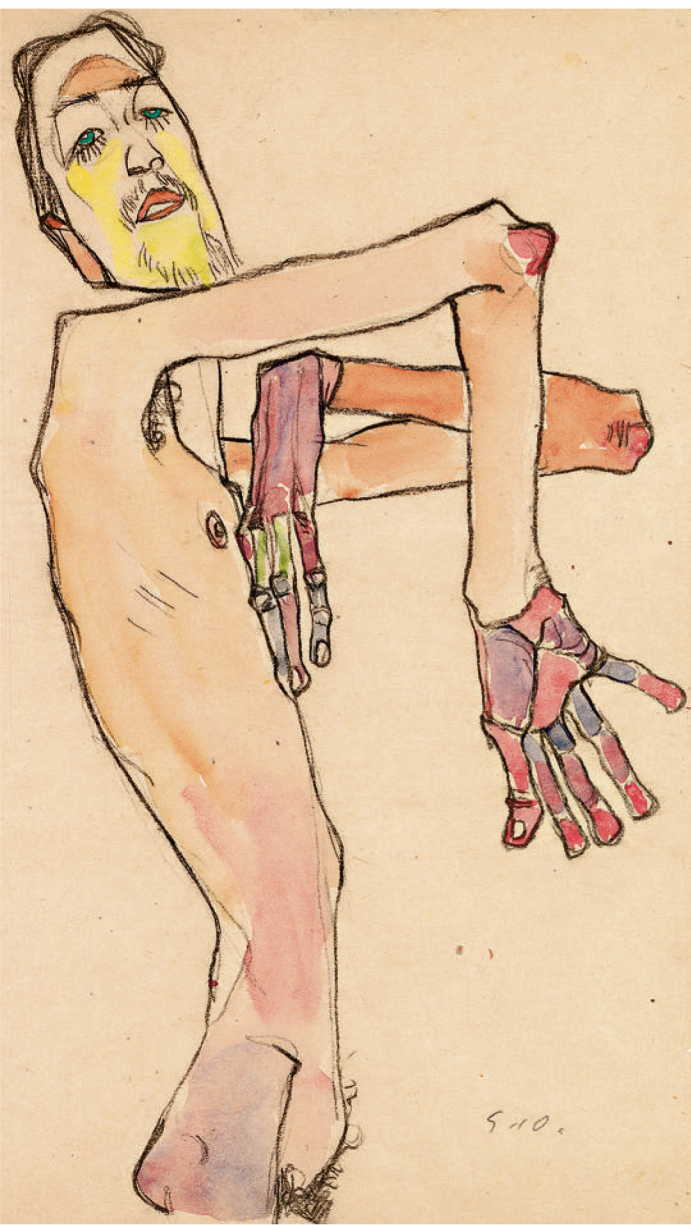


The naked truth: when does art become pornography?

Autumn shows at two London galleries — including works by Egon Schiele, Chris Ofili and Tracey Emin — will reignite an age-old debate, says **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**



An Egon Schiele nude from 1910; below, David Austen's Figure with Red Hair, 19.4.2011



much quoted distinction between the naked human body and the nude. "To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes," he wrote. "The word implies some of the embarrassment which we feel in this condition." The nude, on the other hand, is "not the subject of art, but a form of art". The nude, he suggested, is clothed in culture. However, in our bare-all-and-bone-with-it contemporary world of both physical and psychological exposure, nakedness — and the erotic fantasies that follow in its wake — reclaims its high cultural territories.

There are two exhibitions in London this autumn which should provoke visitors to reconsider outmoded paradigms. The Courtauld is staging *The Radical Nude*, a sharply focused show of images by the Austrian expressionist Egon Schiele. Meanwhile, deliberately addressing Clark's famous distinction, the Drawing Room puts on *The NAKEDS*, an exhibition which, taking as its starting point selected works by Schiele, is devoted to drawings of the body by artists ranging from Andy Warhol or Franz West through to such contemporaries as Bruce Nauman, Marlene Dumas, Tracey Emin and Chantal Joffe.

The Courtauld exhibition, the first major museum show of Schiele's work to be staged in this country for some 20 years, will certainly be eye-stretching. The artist, escaping the decorative influences of his mentor Gustav Klimt, managed in a career spanning barely a decade (he died of Spanish flu at the age of 28) to score a fierce mark on art history with his scandalous expressions of sexuality and death: images in which Eros and Vanitas entangle with a vivid clarity and a violently explicit, sometimes almost frantic force.

Masturbation was taboo at the turn of the century and the threat of turning blind was the least of it. Until Sigmund Freud came along, his pioneering studies into sexuality spreading more tolerant attitudes, doctors would subject patients who suffered from auto-erotic compulsions to sometimes brutal physical mutilations. And yet Schiele did not shy from depicting not only himself but also his female models in states of explicit and often self-stimulated arousal. He was brought up before judges and, tried on a charge of incitement to debauchery, sent to prison.

Now a changing society has finally cleared his name. Schiele's images, it is now argued, speak less of voyeuristic titillation than of uncompromising intimacy. He is admired as an artist who confronts our human condition with an unflinching honesty. He has come to be seen as a purveyor of a profound truth.

However, Gemma Blackshaw, the professor of art history who has co-curated the Drawing Room show, challenges this view in a catalogue essay for the Courtauld exhibition. The essay takes as its main focus an incriminating portfolio of lithographs done after drawings by Schiele and owned by the art dealer Karl Grünwald who, in 1923, was charged for the dissemination of obscene prints. Grünwald was eventually acquitted. Even though these

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BUDAPEST; A/GS; LEOPOLD MUSEUM, VIENNA; MANFRED THUMBERGER

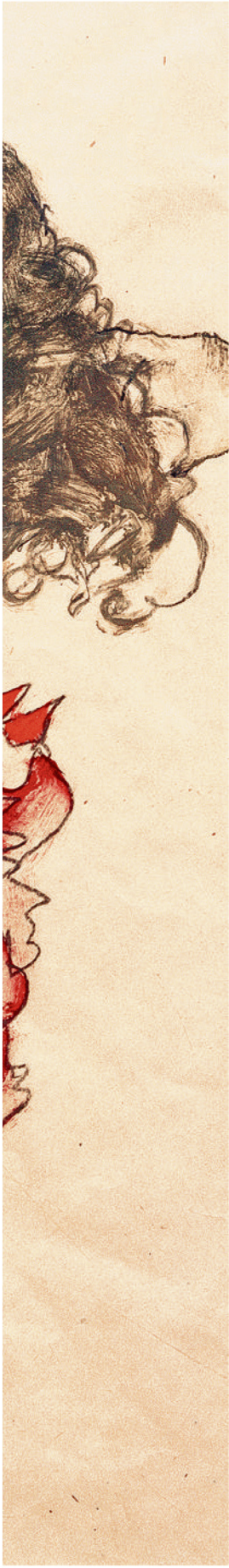


were images in which the artist had had no hand in the making, the pictures were judged to be artistic rather than pornographic by the court.

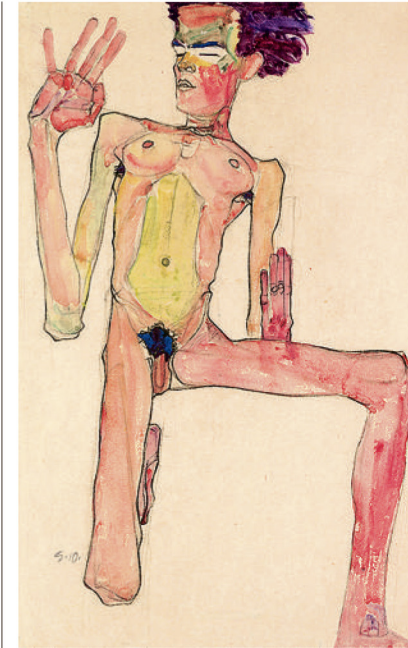
Blackshaw thinks differently. In Schiele's major paintings, destined for public display, his studies of women needed to function as a nude, she argues. He suggests rather than directly depicts the genitalia. In his graphic works, however, he was

more free. He tested art historical categories by fully revealing the vulva.

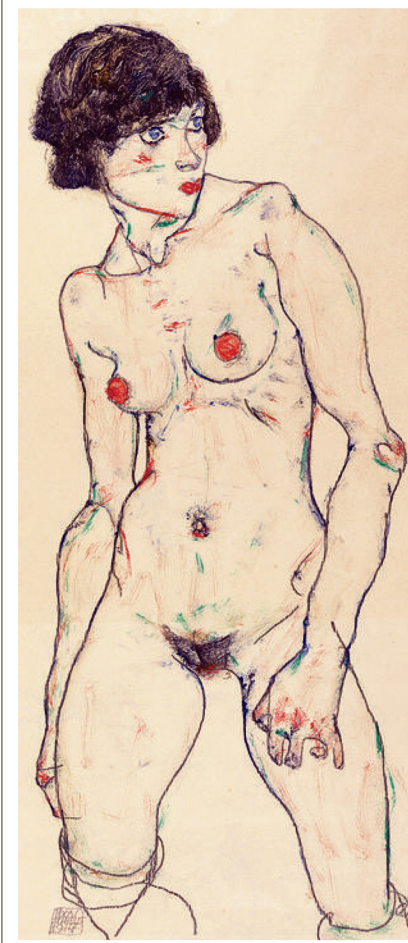
"Pornography always flourished in Vienna," declared Oskar Kokoschka. "The more pornographic, the easier it was to sell." Schiele, Blackshaw argues, a master draughtsman but financially skint, "radicalised" his academic tuition in life drawing "to produce explicit images of the female body that quickly found their



NOTHING TO HIDE Above, Schiele's Zwei Freundinnen; top, a 1910 self-portrait; right, Standing Nude with Stockings



Schiele was charged with incitement to debauchery and sent to prison



market". The art history professor claims back Schiele for the side of pornography.

Her arguments could well stir up a bit of a rumpus, but they shouldn't. We are dealing with complex interlocking issues of art, morality and sexuality. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau puts it in her exploration of photography and female subjectivity: "The barriers between what is deemed licit and illicit, acceptably seductive or want-



Constable: The Making of a Master at the V&A

Read Rachel Campbell-Johnston's review at thetimes.co.uk/visualarts

only salacious, aesthetic or prurient, are never solid because contingent, never steadfast because they traffic with each other — are indeed dependent upon each other."

The nude has always possessed a power to excite the erotic imagination. Sexual gratification — of both the artists themselves and the viewers of the work — was fundamental even in the era of old masters. Leonardo da Vinci considered it a feather in his cap when the buyer of one of his madonnas found that the picture aroused such feelings of lust that he asked for the religious iconography to be removed. Think of Cranach's coquettish Venuses, Bronzino's teasing provocations, Rubens' ripe flesh, Boucher's beribboned bedroom fantasies; they all have the power to arouse, to disturb, to titillate.

This force runs amok in the modern world. Manet's 1863 *Olympia* — a portrait of a Parisian prostitute reclining on bed, staring insolently out of the picture at viewers who thereby become implicated as prospective clients — opened the floodgates. The 20th century is awash with images that flaunt their ability to excite. Kandinsky described his canvases as virgins to be taken. Renoir, when asked how he painted with hands so crippled by arthritis, replied "with my prick". Picasso, according to his biographer, John Richardson, was "always apt to associate sex with art: the procreative act with the creative act".

In our contemporary world, Freudian ideas linking sexuality and the unconscious have broken down old taboos. The nude, stripped of the rules and conventions that once shrouded it, can now expose the animal as much as the god, the carnal as well as the spiritual. It can speak of the quintessentially bifurcated human condition. It was our western religious heritage (a sense of sin that finds its foundations in St Augustine) that made us so nervous of exposure, which taught a society to be embarrassed by the body. Now, however, in a widely irreligious era, sex crops up far more openly. Its visceral urges are acknowledged as a human truth.

And where visceral feelings start stirring, the question of pornography raises its irrepressible head. Pornography is explicit and represents people as objects, while art invites us into the subjectivity of the represented person and relies on suggestion. This is one of the most popular ways of drawing a distinction.

Do the objectifications of pornography preclude a consideration of aesthetic value, though? Fiona Banner showed her *Arsewoman in Wonderland* for the Turner Prize exhibition in 2002: a transcript of a sex movie unscrolling in pink letters across a massive canvas. "He cums in her face, she moans and rolls over." The spectator's discomfort perhaps serves to intensify his reflective responses, to provoke him to consider more carefully what constitutes art.

Of course, most porn is, artistically speaking, rubbish. Still, like art it is intended overwhelmingly to be visual. There is a large area of overlap on the Venn diagram. And we should not fight shy of reconsidering distinctions, of facing up to our feelings and directly addressing the emotions that such debate stirs. Remember that Velázquez's *Robeby Venus* was considered pornographically exploitative



Chris Ofili's Untitled (Afronude), 2006 in The NAKEDS show at the Drawing Room

Art lets us safely venture into what would have once felt like dangerous places

by the suffragette who once slashed it. Now we flock to gaze awestruck at the masterpiece.

Art can provide what feels like a safe forum for the contemplation of a potentially explosive issue. Duchamp transfigured a public urinal into an artwork by displaying it in a gallery. Now a plethora of the sort of determinedly explicit images that might once have been dismissed as pornographic (the blow-up dollies cast in bronze by the Chapman brothers, Thomas Ruff's clips from sex sites, John Currin's *Kissers*, Steve McQueen's nymphomaniac movie *Shame*, Emin's animated drawing of herself spread-legged and masturbating), are claimed as art by virtue, if nothing else, of the fact that they turn up in museums. (The flip-side of this was exposed when a

scandal arose involving Tyneside civilian police staff suspected of selling CCTV photos of a Spencer Tunick art work involving 1,500 people. Images seen as acceptable when branded as art became something disreputable when passed under the table in pubs). Art allows us safely to venture into what in the past would have felt like dangerous places.

It is time for traditional distinctions between art and porn to be ditched. Shows such as those at the Courtauld and the Drawing Room reveal a way forward into complex new philosophical territories. They re-open a timely debate between ethics and aesthetics, obscenity and beauty. And in so doing they can more fully reveal the complexities of the human condition. And this, after all, is a fundamental purpose of art — even if it means facing up to the fact that porn is a part of our culture.

The NAKEDS is at the Drawing Room, London SE1 (020 7394 5657), from Thur to Nov 29; Egon Schiele: the Radical Nude is at the Courtauld Gallery, WC2 (020 7848 2526), from Oct 23 to Jan 18