

Changing Perceptions of Beautiful Bodies

The Athletic Agency Model

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1 Introduction

Traditionally, art students learned to draw the unadorned human body by copying original works of art or by looking directly at a nude model in a figure drawing class. There are obvious differences between those types of perception but even more distinctive is the recent phenomenon of artists and viewers routinely seeing paradigmatic unclothed beauty of the human physique by looking at the toned and fit bodies of contemporary elite athletes. Athletes photographed by Helmut Newton and Annie Leibovitz, images appearing in *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times*, and *Life* magazines, nude Olympians in *Playboy* and most recently, *ESPN Magazine: The Body Issue*, have provided us with examples of both male and female athletic beauty that are reminiscent of ancient Greek ideals in light of a changed context. Due to perceptions evolving over time, how do we view these beautiful bodies today?

Recent analyses of various modes of perceiving cast suspicion on basic writings in aesthetics dating back to the eighteenth century which offered us both a simplistic notion of perception – given what we now know from studies in cognitive science – and a limited concept of pleasure as the accompanying sentiment of one's experience of beauty. I will consider what draws us to perceiving beautiful bodies in art and athletics – repeatedly and over time – that is informed by viewers' changing perceptions derived from recent publications in fashion and sport, the philosophy of sport, feminist film theory and aesthetics under the ever-expanding umbrella of somaesthetics. Not nearly as simple as aestheticians may have us believe, nuanced perception depends not only on the many changes we see when viewing men's and women's bodies but also on the evolving cognitive framework – complete with implicit bias such as that of a male/patriarchal gaze – that we might bring to the act of looking. Although many theorists have noted the ethical problems of elite female athletes posing nude, this essay will suggest a new strategy of viewing and argue that perceiving beautiful athletes' bodies can be best accomplished by using an Athletic Agency Model that focuses on the performing body typical of athletic

competition – not just the body-to-be-looked-at as seen in high art, pinups, and pornography.

2 Changing Perceptions: Fashion and Sports

Against the backdrop of ancient Greek sculpture, reclining Renaissance nudes, and innumerable creative variations on the theme of the female body through artistic movements such as Romanticism, Abstract Expressionism, and Super Realism, artists have often sought to imbue physical manifestations of a woman's body with their own ideologies of sexism, racism, and colonialism. As E. H. Gombrich famously stated in 1956, "The innocent eye is a myth".¹ In an early challenge to the dominant modes of perception within visual high art, British painter and writer John Berger appeared in revolutionary videos in 1972 and published a book entitled *Ways of Seeing* that reverberated for decades, enhanced in subsequent decades with fresh and insightful theorizing by feminist art historians, critics, and aestheticians. His mantra was "men act and women appear" as he set the stage for the future:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.²

Women who fail to act then internalize the eyes of men upon them. They pose: to be perceived, ultimately to please. They self-consciously silence themselves and still their bodies to be looked at, poised for pleasure. Artists – who are recast as "masters" and no longer extolled as creative geniuses in the production of "masterpieces" throughout the male-dominated history of art – are the pleased and privileged lookers.

Basing her theory within the analysis of film, Laura Mulvey argued that men look with a "male gaze" that is neither disinterested nor dispassionate but rather "projects its fantasy onto the female figure".³ Within film, the male

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- 1 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 298.
 - 2 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin, 1972).
 - 3 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in her *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 19.

director, actors, and spectators are all bearers of “the active power of the erotic look” while the woman is image and spectacle whose “visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation”.⁴ The influential theory spawned much controversy when feminist theorists objected to the narrowness of a proposed gaze that failed to account for differences – in race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation – embodied within the intersectionality of marginalized identities. At first, an alternative “female gaze” was proposed but ambiguous in meaning, it sometimes captured how a woman (just like a man) had become habituated to look with a male gaze, while at other times it functioned as a “gender-neutral gaze” – particularly for women operating within “the male-controlled institutions of filmmaking”.⁵ For some theorists, the concept of a “patriarchal gaze” better captured the culturally learned sexist, voyeuristic, white, middle-class, hetero-sexual, “male-dominated” and “male-gendered” – though not necessarily male – mode of viewing woman-as-object.⁶

Additional strategies arose to subvert the norm of the male/patriarchal gaze such as the “oppositional gaze” proposed by bell hooks for black women spectators who failed to identify with white women in popular film narratives.⁷ Another strategy that functioned as a “consciously adopted political perspective” and “means of resistance” to the male gaze, was Mary Devereaux’s suggested notion of “active readership” by which she meant a specific form of “female gaze” or “female voice” that encouraged a “gendered spectator” to “engage more actively with the text” by “re-reading,” “re-visioning,” and “reading against the grain.”

Reading against the grain is a strategy designed by out-of-power groups to counterbalance the dominant textual traditions by offering alternative interpretations of works within those traditions.⁸

Thus the ever-evolving and complex notion of the male/patriarchal gaze invites a deeper look into how we in the twenty-first century view beautiful female athletes’ bodies, particularly in light of recent trends within fashion

4 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 19–20.

5 Mary Devereaux, “Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator: The ‘New’ Aesthetics,” in *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, ed. Peggy Zeglin Brand [Weiser] and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 129–130.

6 Devereaux, “Oppressive Texts,” 126.

7 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

8 Devereaux, “Oppressive Texts,” 138–139.

and sports media that have brought together high art photographers with *Playboy* and *ESPN Magazine* to habituate our looking into newly adopted perceptual skills and responses that chronicle our changing perceptions of beauty. Moreover, the subject matter of sport forces viewers to acknowledge gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation as well as disability as athletes of color challenge norms of white beauty, Paralympians compete with prostheses, and transgender categories expand.

By 1981, successful fashion photographer Helmut Newton had created a series of images as a testament to the shift in subject matter that bridged the fine art versus fashion photography divide.⁹ The female subjects in his series were notoriously *not* thin, anorexic, or ideal fashion models of the 1960s-1970s like British teenage supermodel Twiggy, named for her thin figure, short hair, and androgyny. Rather, these women aspired toward neither fashion nor adornment. In fact, they were so strong in body and mind due to rigorous training routines that they were sports world contenders in running events and marathons. Featured first in *Sports Illustrated* and then in an essay titled, “Strong Women: The Super Athlete as the New Ideal of Grace and Beauty,” one example was Gayle Olinekova, Canadian sprinter and marathon runner who said, “The Twiggy look is out. The Botticelli nude look is out. I feel my look is the look of the eighties”.¹⁰ In a well-known image from 1981, Newton focused on the runner’s legs – feet uplifted – as if ready to sprint (Figure 1).

At her passing in 2003, *Los Angeles Times* writer Jon Thurber attributed “changed perceptions” about individually cultivated female beauty and cultural views about “allure” and “athleticism” to her “chiseled, muscular legs” as he quoted her claim:

Strength is beauty ... I grew up in the ‘60s when it wasn’t cool [for a female] to be athletic. The Twiggy look was in. Nobody wanted to have muscular legs in miniskirts. I was running even then.¹¹

9 See <https://helmut-newton-foundation.org/en/helmut-newton/> for information on Helmut Newton (1920–2004).

10 Andy Meisler, “Strong Women: The Super Athlete as the New Ideal of Grace and Beauty.” *New West*, March 1981, 93. Several months earlier, Olinekova was featured in a “lavishly” photographed *Sports Illustrated* magazine profile in 1981 under the headline, “Greatest Legs to Ever Stride on the Earth.” In the 1979 New Orleans Marathon, she became the third fastest female marathon runner with a record time of 2:35:12.

11 Jon Thurber, “Gayle Olinekova, 50; Changed Perceptions About Allure, Athleticism.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 2003.



FIGURE 1 Helmut Newton: Gayle Olinekova, *Marathon Runner*, 1981
 © HELMUT NEWTON ESTATE, COURTESY HELMUT NEWTON FOUNDATION.

Another well-known female athlete shot nude working out in her studio by Newton was body builder Lisa Lyons.¹² Having photographed fashion models nude, this was not a departure for Newton except that Lyons was an athlete, thereby setting a new standard which was hardly noticed in the fashion world and world of fine art. Body builders have played an interesting but marginal role in the history of women in elite professional and Olympic sports, functioning as the inappropriate outer limit of female body mass and muscle. A male-dominated, heterosexual sports world has routinely proscribed images

¹² Newton photographed Lisa Lyons from 1980–1981; see <https://www.phillips.com/detail/helmut-newton/UK040408/32>. Lyons was also photographed extensively by Robert Mapplethorpe.

of female athletes to remain within a narrow range of femininity in that muscles due to steroid use make them appear masculine, butch, and threateningly lesbian: considered unappealing role models for young girls. Another way to regulate femininity within sports culture whereby female athletes prove their heterosexuality and attractiveness to men was to be viewed erotically. At first, resemblance to highly sexualized and borderline pornographic depictions of women were unacceptable but the norms of beauty were slowly beginning to change along with viewers' tolerance for bodies like that of Lyons.

On the cover of its August 30, 1982, issue with the headline, "Coming On Strong: The New Ideal of Beauty," *Time* magazine placed a thin, bony, hand-on-her-hip long-haired woman, posed in leggings but showing no sweat.¹³ Today's students laugh at the sight of her; the air-brushed arms lack muscle and she actually appears unfit. She looks directly at the viewer in a "coming on strong" way but in reality does nothing but pose. She turns herself into an object.

In May 1996, famed photographer Annie Leibovitz shot both color and black and white photographs of sixty-one of America's most promising male and female athletes – "The New Olympians" – posed together in group shots as well as running, throwing, and vying for a chance to compete in the summer Olympics in Atlanta.¹⁴ Thoughtful compositions, manipulation of lights and shadows, and the skillful exposure of muscles at work, made for highly artistic portraits by a professional photographer in *Vanity Fair*, a popular venue. The photo spread was considered new subject matter for the accomplished artist who had already photographed fashion models, celebrities, and other famous persons. The depictions of athletic competitors lifted them to a level of high art, above that of fashion model and sports jock. This publicity started a trend of treating athletes more seriously: as fashion models or as fine art models reminiscent of ancient Greek statues. Many of the bodies on display were shown in action shots: incorporating each athlete's signature talent as essential to her/his official portrait.

In June 1996, *The New York Times Magazine* did a cover feature entitled, "Women Muscle In: An Olympics Special Issue" with an article by Holly Brubach, style editor of the magazine, on "The Athletic Esthetic: A Different Kind of Beauty" and another by Elizabeth Royte written to accompany "fifteen of the world's greatest female athletes photographed by fifteen of the world's greatest female photographers".¹⁵ Brubach wrote, "Now that women

13 See <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601820830,00.html>.

14 Annie Leibovitz, "Let the Games Begin ..." *Vanity Fair*, May 9, 1996. <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/photos/1996/05/annie-leibovitz-olympic-portfolio>.

15 Elizabeth Royte, "Their Moment." *The New York Times Magazine*, June 23, 1996, 28.

are physically coming into their own, there's a new ideal emerging whose sex appeal is based on strength".¹⁶ Her examples included professional volleyball player Gabrielle Reece and basketball star Sheryl Swoopes – noticeably a woman of color. Brubach claimed that throughout history, women were allowed only two types of body options. The first was a body custom-built for clothes – “an image of women as they would like to see themselves”.¹⁷ The second: a body custom built for sex: “a vision of women as men would like to see them,” as exemplified by “languorous, passive and complacent ... odalisques in the Victoria Secret catalogue” who routinely deny themselves food to stay thin.

The fashion body is an achievement, arrived at by means of renunciation; it is the paradigm for an esthetic of purity ... their looks are outward evidence not of what they've done but of what they *haven't* done.¹⁸

With the Olympic games pending, she cited a third option: a body custom built for athletics, “a different kind of beauty” that was “unsettling,” “far-reaching” and “despite the anxieties it provokes, it's also sexy”.¹⁹ She cited the unique Condé Nast publication, *Self*, begun in 1979 which – unlike their other magazines for women such as *Vogue*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Glamour* – capitalized on the emerging focus on women's exercise, thereby creating a “science of aerobics” and resulting in a new medical interest in aesthetics of the female body.²⁰

Woman's self-image was now focused on building muscle; indeed, the phrase, “Women Muscle In” was meant to convey that there was no stopping the spreading fitness craze as well as the bodily changes in elite level female athletes. Women were not asking for permission. They were demanding their “space” to grow and muscle up; if someone happened to snap their portrait in the process, they paid no attention:

Caught in the act of biking, running, jogging, training for a triathlon, they look as if they refused to stop long enough to have their pictures taken. These women exude competence ... Their bodies aren't the point: the point is their ability to perform.²¹

16 Holly Brubach, “The Athletic Esthetic: A Different Kind of Beauty.” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 23, 1996, 48.

17 Brubach, “The Athletic Esthetic,” 48.

18 Brubach, “The Athletic Esthetic,” 48–50.

19 Brubach, “The Athletic Esthetic,” 51.

20 Brubach, “The Athletic Esthetic,” 48.

21 Brubach, “The Athletic Esthetic,” 50.

Thus Brubach, as style editor, captured a crucial notion that proved essential to updating our conceptions of perceiving a beautiful body: the athletic body not toned or “sculpted” for looks – to be seen – but rather for skill, speed, efficiency. This observation marked a new and evolving “athletic aesthetic” as deeply steeped in physical capabilities and competition and as far as possible from fashion modeling: for the sake of merely showing off an article of clothing or accessory. Independent of men’s approval, “The image of a muscular woman has been particularly slow to gain currency, perhaps because women’s gain is suspected of being men’s loss”.²² A “different kind of beauty” risked displeasing men as it was not meant to be sexy, intended for the male/patriarchal gazer alone. These athletes began to “exude competence” – their bodies taking on toned physiques – as women viewers began to look differently at muscular women who competed with skill and stamina in order to flaunt their athleticism, not (just) their looks.

Also in July 1996, *Life* magazine published a special issue (designed with different covers to increase sales) of images of both men and women entitled, “Naked Power: Amazing Grace” with “A Photographic Celebration of the Olympic Body” by Joe McNally²³ and accompanying essay by Lisa Grunwald, “A Meditation on Athletic Beauty”.²⁴ In unprecedented manner, “naked power” referred to the fact that all the athletes featured were nude – as Grunwald reminded readers regarding the first Olympic athletes in 776 B.C. – their bodies discreetly posed or captured in motion, revealing little that was sexually explicit but powerfully provocative. What accounted for the seismic shift that prompted both men and women to shed their uniforms? The highest aesthetic judgment of “athletic beauty” was now explicitly bestowed upon posed and performing members of the men’s water polo team as well as female synchronized swimmers, upon eight-time Olympic gold medalist Carl Lewis as well as three-time Olympic heptathlon champion Jackie Joyner-Kersey.²⁵ Men came to resemble women who had routinely posed nude only in non-sports viewing traditions of high art, fashion photography or a venue previously untapped: pornography. The wholesome context of *Life* magazine clearly provided a safe context whereby the athletes felt comfortable.

Thus, gender equity in terms of the mode of representation – photo shoots appearing in mainstream publications such as *Vanity Fair*, *The New York*

22 Brubach, “The Athletic Esthetic,” 50–51.

23 Joe McNally, *Life*, July 1996.

24 Lisa Grunwald, “A Meditation on Athletic Beauty,” *Life*, July 1996.

25 Jackie Joyner-Kersey was named by *Sports Illustrated* as “The Greatest Female Athlete of the 20th Century,” <http://jackiejoynerkersey.com/>.

Times Magazine, and *Life* – featured both sexes and became acceptable. But it occurred against the backdrop of an alternate trend that was already growing and generating controversy: the unprecedented practice of female athletes posing nude in traditional sports media and pornographic settings. It began in 1994 with swimmer Jenny Thompson – on the eve of the Sydney Olympic games – appearing in *Sports Illustrated* with only her fists covering her breasts. It was followed by gold medalist figure skater Katarina Witt posing nude in 1998 in *Playboy* long after she competed in 1984 and 1988, and yet again in 2004 when *Playboy* published “12 pages of spectacular nudes” in a section titled, “The Women of the Olympics” that included high jumper Amy Acuff. Few sports props got in the way of the female anatomy pictured and if no clue appeared at all, the image revealed nothing of the athlete’s sport. Moreover, a noticeable change had transitioned the positioning and posing of the athletes’ actively-engaged bodies to more sexualized, porn-like postures.²⁶ The most eroticized pose was Katie Vermeulen: on her knees, leaning back with her hands on her heels in order to point her breasts upward, she looked directly out at the viewer in a standard “come hither” look.²⁷ Other standard sexualized poses were adopted by Americans Mary Sauer (pole vaulter) who lay on her stomach with her rear to the viewer and Haley Clark (100-meter backstroke), fully frontal as if diving into water with her hands joined above her head. Several of these athletes had already posed nude or near-nude for men’s magazines *FHM*, *Stuff*, and *Maxim* (and at least two – Sauer in 2000 and Vermeulen in 2004 – later failed to qualify for Olympic competition).²⁸

Given the long-standing pornographic context of publications like *Playboy*, feminists – whose job was to support and promote female athletes – were

26 Paul Davis has identified three types of sexualized poses: deliberate focus on particular, sexually significant body parts for the purpose of titillation; freezing or emphasis on body postures for titillation purposes; and with respect to photographs, accompanied by a punned caption, sexualized comic relief; see Paul Davis, “Sexualization and Sexuality in Sport,” in *Ethics in Sports*, ed. J. William, K. Meier and A. Schneider (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2001), 285–290.

27 Charlene Weaving (“Smoke and Mirrors: Women Olympians’ Nude Reflections.” *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 6 no. 2 (2012), 248) cites M.C. Duncan as the “leading North American scholar on image analysis” for her 1990s theories that include, “body canting – the bending of body parts which conveys unpreparedness, submissiveness and appeasement” – making the woman appear “off-balance, insecure and weak,” (M. C. Duncan, “Sports Photographs and Sexual Difference: Images of Women and Men in the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 7 (1990)).

28 See Jeff Merron, “Sex & Sports,” *ESPN.com*, December 20, 2004, <http://www.espn.com/espn/page2/story?page=sexsports/two/2004> and August 11, 2004, <https://www.espn.com/espn/page2/story?page=bloc/040811>.

divided about these venues. Even posing in *Sports Illustrated* was controversial given its history since 1963 of sexualizing women in their annual swimsuit issue.²⁹ Donna Lopiano, then executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation, lamented, "Any exposure in a sports magazine that minimizes athletic achievement and skill and emphasizes the female athlete as a sex object is insulting and degrading".³⁰ In response to the *Playboy* spread, world-famous record-holding distance swimmer Diana Nyad argued, "I braced myself for depressing cheesecake, but instead found 12 elegant, full-page photographs of female Olympians who are decidedly more athletic than they are sexy. Or, rather, they are both athletic *and* sexy – the new sexy".³¹ Citing photos of swimmer Mark Spitz adorned with seven Olympic gold medals whom she described as "a proud icon of athletic beefcake – proud to the point of defiance, unabashedly showing every inch of his body that a Speedo loincloth doesn't cover," Nyad made the analogy that Olympic volleyball player, Logan Tom, "just as proud, stares at the lens with self-assured machisma".³² Nyad defended another female athlete who said that she chose to pose in a sexy way but had not felt exploited by claiming, "she is the one who is exploiting her Olympic stature to break into the modeling field".³³ Nyad's admission exposed the athlete's hope to switch to the more profitable world of fashion that promised to pay more but was no longer about performing as an athlete. Nyad, like Brubach before her, could not abandon the term "sexy." The more important question was whether athletes were being exploited, i.e., being used, degraded, or harmed within an unequal power relationship.

Charlene Weaving has analyzed many reactions to the contentious visual history of women Olympians posing nude. In 2002 she argued that like beauty, exploitation is in the eye of the beholder by comparing analogous representations of nude women within the context of pornography – designed for the sexual arousal of a man. She distinguished "tasteful" from more typical poses in *Playboy* in which athletes are posed lying down, submissive, passive, "assuming 'sex kitten' poses of erotic body positions and gestures".³⁴ Her reading of Gabrielle Reece as *Playboy* cover girl in January 2001 elicited, "the male gaze is

29 Charlene Weaving, "Examining 50 Years of 'Beautiful' in *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 43, no. 3 (July 2016).

30 Joe Drape, "Olympians Strike Pinup Pose, and Avoid Setting Off a Fuss." *The New York Times*, Aug. 14, 2004, C17.

31 Diana Nyad, "The Rise of the Buff Bunny." *The New York Times*, August 15, 2004, 7.

32 Nyad, "The Rise of the Buff Bunny," 7.

33 Nyad, "The Rise of the Buff Bunny," 7.

34 Charlene Weaving, "Like Beauty, Exploitation is in the Eye of the Beholder: An Examination of Women Olympic Athletes Posing Nude." *The Global Nexus Engaged: Sixth International*

definitely present in all shots”.³⁵ In spite of athletes’ stated reasons to the contrary, she argued, “when women athletes pose nude their talent and incredible skill are trivialised because they are sexually objectified”.³⁶ Weaving defined “objectification” of the sexist, oppressive sort by invoking Martha Nussbaum’s *Sex and Social Justice* definition involving instrumentality (treating the object as a tool), denial of autonomy and self-determination, inertness (lacking in agency), fungibility (interchangeability with others), violability (lacking in boundary integrity), ownership (can be owned, bought or sold by another), and denial of subjectivity.³⁷ Noting that Nussbaum’s criteria allowed for degrees of objectification and was not always unwelcome on the part of women who freely consented, Weaving was still moved to judge certain images of female Olympians posing nude as sexually objectified, “problematic and grounded in sexism”.³⁸

In spite of these controversies over breakthrough representations in sport and fashion, however, our expectations and perceptions have undeniably changed. Whereas we as viewers in 2004 might have been shocked by elite athletes posing nude in *Playboy*, we have since grown accustomed to sexualized images of athletes rather than images of them performing their sports. It was only five years later that ESPN leveled the playing field, so to speak, by featuring numerous nude athletes – female and male – in a new (annual) sports publication that celebrated their athletic feats and beautiful bodies. *ESPN: The Body Issue* significantly changed viewers’ perceptions when it began in 2009.

With internet access, perhaps there is no greater distributor of images of nude athletes’ bodies as this commercial source.³⁹ Over the past eleven years, production has become more sophisticated, slick, and successful. Showcasing athletes who are tattooed (Colin Kaepernick in 2013), tattooed and disabled (Kristie Ennis in 2017), and pregnant (Kerry Walsh Jennings in 2013), the venue highlights numerous athletes amidst “galleries” of photographs taken by numerous artists. For instance, the 2019 issue offered twelve

Symposium for Olympic Research, last modified 2002, <https://www.uwo.ca/olympic/files/pdf/proceedings/proceedings-2002-toc.pdf>, 211–212.

35 Weaving, “Like Beauty, Exploitation is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 212.

36 Weaving, “Like Beauty, Exploitation is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 233. Justifications for posing nude cited by Weaving expanded beyond the original rationale of lack of funding for participating in one’s sport to include “enhanced media image and marketability,” “a goal of showcasing their strong powerful athletic bodies,” and “homophobia” (Weaving, “Like Beauty, Exploitation is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 234).

37 Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 218.

38 Weaving, “Like Beauty, Exploitation is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 238.

39 http://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/27400369/the-body-issue.

shots of Scout Bassett, a 30-year old 4'9" female sprinter and jumper weighing in at 89 pounds, Bronze medal winner of the 2017 Para Athletics World Championship (100m and long jump) and 2016 Paralympian – with a prosthetic leg – performing chin-ups, dead lifts, and running. International soccer star and Olympic gold medalist Hope Solo (at age thirty) commented when she posed nude in 2011:

Growing up, I felt insecure about my build ... Guys would say, 'Look at those muscles! You can kick my ass!' I didn't feel feminine. But that's changed in the last four years ... I still don't buy the idea that I'm a sex symbol, my entire purpose is trying to be the best, and if that exudes beauty too ... it means the image of the typical female body type is finally evolving.⁴⁰

Given expanding changes in perception over the years, how do we now perceive beautiful female athletic bodies, particularly within the context of somaesthetics?

3 Changing Perceptions: The Somaesthetics of Athletic Bodies

Influenced by the pragmatist tradition of William James and John Dewey, aesthetician Richard Shusterman began in 1992 to systematically construct a conceptual framework within philosophy in general, and within philosophical aesthetics in particular, that was intended to “celebrate the living, sentient body as the organizing core of experience”.⁴¹ This field of analysis was initially defined as “the critical, ameliorative study of one's experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning”⁴² to address a long-standing neglect of the internal aspects of the human body within aesthetics:

40 Rennie Dyball, “Hope Solo Poses Nude for ESPN ‘Body Issue,’” *People.com*, last modified October 5, 2011, <https://people.com/tv/espn-body-issue-hope-solo-naked/>.

41 Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992); Richard Shusterman, “Somaesthetics and *The Second Sex*: A Pragmatist Reading of a Feminist Classic,” *HYPATIA: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* Special Issue, ed. Peg Brand [Weiser] and Mary Devereaux 18 no. 4 (Fall/Winter 2003), 106.

42 Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, Sage House, 2000), 138.

Somaesthetics claims that the body deserves more careful aesthetic attention not only as an object that externally displays beauty, grace, and other aesthetic qualities, but also as a subjectivity that experiences aesthetic pleasures through somatic sensations.⁴³

For Shusterman, this is an aesthetics of “renewal” or “revitalization” of topics in art, aesthetics, and the appreciation of the body following its de-emphasis within postmodernism and Hegel’s argument for the end of art – a moving away of aesthetic theorizing narrowly confined to “compartmentalized fine art” with little to no consideration given to actual bodies that experience art and its attendant aesthetic pleasures.⁴⁴ This is also a significant conceptual turning away from modernist notions of autonomy, historical prioritizing of disinterestedness, and aestheticism’s formalism. Somaesthetics both acknowledges, broadens and privileges a person’s aesthetic experience – both of the viewer and the body on display engaged in physical activity – and inclusively folds in studies as disparate as fashion, beauty, the art of living, hip hop, street art, cyberspace, and the human sciences.⁴⁵

Shusterman stipulates three forms or categories within somaesthetics: (1) the experiential – the all-important lived experience of the actual active, transformative body, (2) the representational – the “dull and inert” body, subject to cosmetic surgeries and makeup,⁴⁶ and (3) the performative – group methodologies focused on the building of the body toward the goals of strength, health, or skill, e.g., weightlifting, athletics, and certain martial arts.⁴⁷ He also delineates three branches within somaesthetics: (i) analytic – word and texts as the traditional means of talking but not acting about the soma, (ii) pragmatic – involved with improvement, and (iii) practical – physically engaging in somatic care, i.e., “moving limbs, in reflective, disciplined, demanding corporeal practice aimed at self-improvement ... conceived as a comprehensive

43 Shusterman, “Somaesthetics and *The Second Sex*,” 109.

44 Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 4.

45 The Somaesthetics Center of East China Normal University (Shanghai) and the Center for Body, Mind, and Culture of Florida Atlantic University were scheduled to hold a conference in May, 2020 on “Somaesthetics in Fashion, Craft, and the New Media.” Recent publications in the Brill book series entitled, *Studies in Somaesthetics: Embodied Perspectives in Philosophy, the Arts and the Human Sciences*, include Richard Shusterman, ed., *Bodies in the Streets: The Somaesthetics of City Life* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019) and Richard Shusterman, ed., *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2018). *The Journal of Somaesthetics* began in 2015.

46 Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 137–142.

47 Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 143.

philosophical discipline concerned with embodied self-care".⁴⁸ A person's "creative self-fashioning" takes place within the practical realm, either for the purpose of an "inner feeling of power or external exhibition" (the latter in reference to athletes and dancers, for example).⁴⁹ Clearly athletes may pursue both goals; for them, it is not necessarily an exclusionary choice. The organizing structure of the newly defined field offers opportunities for further discussion, to be pursued here, as a helpful backdrop for advancing an operative Model of Athletic Agency as a new perceptual strategy that subverts the male/patriarchal gaze by blocking objectification while encouraging self-care and an inner feeling of power for women.

But first, consider two noteworthy aspects. Shusterman expands the range of aesthetic discourse about practitioners in discussing dancers, yogis and athletes in ways where the body is neither "mere physical object or mechanism" but rather a "living, sentient 'bodymind'" to which philosophical attention "should not remain merely theoretical; it should be aimed at improving our bodily functioning, not only by criticizing those practices and ideologies that result in somatic misery and misuse but also by directing our attention to methods that foster better somatic experience".⁵⁰ Elite level athletes provide an excellent somaesthetic paradigm: contenders who are physically fit, skilled, and take pleasure in their own bodies that perform at self-fashioned peak competitive levels.

Second, somaesthetics is influenced by, supportive of, and contributing to long-standing feminist theorizing about the performing body. Shusterman's analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's classic 1949 text, *The Second Sex*, raises significant historical questions about how we continue to perceive women's bodies.⁵¹ His most recent suggestion concerns dance aesthetics whereby he urges us to look past the art object – the dance production, theatre or concert "dance-works" – toward "greater concern with the embodied subjectivities who practice the art of dance, namely the dancers".⁵² Within this context Shusterman delves into Plato's writing on beauty and bodily excellence to argue for dance as art, theatre, and practice.⁵³ However, because dancers perform the work typically without a script or score (unlike theater or music), "the dancers'

48 Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 143–144.

49 Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 143.

50 Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and *The Second Sex*," 109.

51 Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and *The Second Sex*."

52 Richard Shusterman, "Dance as Art, Theatre, and Practice: Somaesthetic Perspectives." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 44 (2019), 144.

53 Shusterman, "Dance as Art, Theatre, and Practice," 146.

bodies are perceived as constituting that artistic object and the dancers in turn become objectified as bodies".⁵⁴

As we have seen with depictions of athletes in *Playboy* and elsewhere, the problem of objectification, especially for women is acute. Recalling Nussbaum's criteria of objectification helps to differentiate not only the contexts of viewing – dance versus porn – but also the activity undertaken – active dancing versus passive posing. Moreover, the autonomy, agency, and subjectivity of the dancer are neither diminished nor surrendered as the dancer chooses to be looked at, fully and freely functioning as a performer. Shusterman eventually resolves his worry into a praiseworthy judgment of beauty, but further complicates the performance of the dancer who is often relegated to a low status within the hierarchy of fine arts:

This objectification of the dancer as body, as material means of beauty for the specular pleasure of others, fosters the unsettling undercurrent of predatory voyeurism that haunts the milieu of dance spectatorship.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, female athletes are once again linked to fraught histories of the imbalance of power perpetuated by viewers who can potentially see them (only) as objectified and eroticized bodies. Does philosophy of sport offer any helpful frameworks for viewing female athletes' bodies of beauty? Two authors – one invoking ancient Greece and another reviving neoclassical models from the nineteenth century – offer important touchstones on gender and modes of viewing that preview a workable Model of Athletic Agency in Section 5.

4 Changing Perceptions: Philosophy of Sport and Past Theories of Athletic Beauty

Heather Reid's analyses of philosophical texts are instructive in demonstrating that an ancient Greek seeing the body of an athlete such as that portrayed in Polykleitos' *Spear-bearer* or Myron's *Discus-thrower* involved "seeing" the whole person: his drive to win a competition as well as to achieve virtue and serve as a good citizen of the city-state.⁵⁶ Careful readings of Plato's elaborate

54 Shusterman, "Dance as Art, Theatre, and Practice," 149.

55 Shusterman, "Dance as Art, Theatre, and Practice," 149.

56 Heather Reid, "Athletic Beauty in Classical Greece: A Philosophical View." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 29 no. 2 (2012).

instructions for how local gymnasia should benefit a young boy to grow strong and be educated in Athenian ways included specific recommendations for hard work, practice, and exemplary sportsmanship. In comparing the spectacle of a posed Usain Bolt intentionally imitating a spear-wielding statue of a Greek god like Zeus or Poseidon, she asks, “What Did the Greeks See? What Did It Mean to Them? How Was It Erotic?” and adds, “What about Female Athletes?” She explains how the Greeks saw muscle, proportion, symmetry, canonical athletic beauty, but also virtue indicative of the moral and educational ideal of *kalokagathia* – beautiful goodness – of the whole person, body and soul, whereby beauty symbolized the values of Aristotelian ethics: the good, areté.⁵⁷ Eroticism meant homoeroticism: the education of young men by the older through partnerships, emotional bonds, and common values with erotic appeal not focused on sexual acts. The main emphasis was on male beauty, strength, skill, courage, and goodness. Pentathletes, singled out for praise by Aristotle, exemplified virtue which was not inborn but rather achieved through strenuous athletic training; their beauty – not “superficial” according to Reid – reflected balance and harmony of body and soul.⁵⁸ Clearly we do not “see” nude male athletes the same way now.

Female athletes were generally excluded from Olympic games and the male-dominated Classical athletic aesthetic. Small bronze statuettes – such as those of Spartan running girls sporting muscular calves and thighs – were not typically depicted nude. Rather the purpose of erotically posed female bodies – such as the many larger-than-life size statues of the goddess Aphrodite – were to remind women of their potential for marriage and reproduction rather than to offer an alluring body for male titillation or female imitation. Aphrodite was typically posed standing, fully frontal, bare-breasted, in a contrapposto S-curve stance, with voluminous drapery resting precariously around her hips. She looked neither athletic nor attempted to combine athleticism and sex appeal but still presented a contrast to sexualized athletes today:

I will stop short of claiming that athletic females were sexualized in ancient Greece the way many of them are in modern sports iconography. There is nothing in ancient athletic art that remotely resembles the favored beach volleyball photograph of a bent-over woman’s behind – a pose that closely resembles explicitly pornographic images.⁵⁹

57 Reid, “Athletic Beauty in Classical Greece,” 281.

58 Heather Reid, “Athletic Virtue and Aesthetic Values in Aristotle’s Ethics.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 47 no. 1 (2020) 63–74.

59 Reid, “Athletic Beauty in Classical Greece,” 292.

Plato, who admired the education and training of both boys and girls at Sparta, is thought to have proposed in the *Republic* that female souls were capable of areté.⁶⁰ Like young men, they were encouraged to participate in athletics as well as the military, government, and public life. Only the exemplary depictions of Amazon women and the goddesses Artemis and Atalanta offered the embodiment of female areté in contrast to depictions of Aphrodite. Looking more like male warriors and athletes, they were athletic-looking doers, not just passive posers.

Looking at contemporary athletes raises questions beyond obvious similarities to images we see in fashion, past sports media, and examples from ancient art, raising the question: do we perhaps view nude athletes as we view nude bodies within works of art? Art history offers a veritable flood of depictions of nude women painted nearly exclusively by male artists over many millennia, considered by “experts” to constitute the artistic canon of “masterpieces” of high art. As with film theory, the charge of viewing nude female bodies with a male/patriarchal gaze has been leveled at the creators and viewers of art historical icons as well.⁶¹ Consider a challenge to the tradition: a provocative depiction of WNBA athlete Liz Cambage by photographer Sophy Holland in the 2019 *ESPN: The Body Issue* posed as the mythological Three Graces (charm, beauty, creativity) of Botticelli’s *Primavera* from 1482.⁶²

Sports fans with little experience in viewing fine art might be uninterested but those of us with years of looking at art – in galleries, museums, art history books, online – might ask, “What, if anything, is different in how I perceive a performing body versus an artistic representation of such?” Time precludes delving into the issue here but, of course, dance scholars are primarily apt at thinking about bodies as performers and philosophers of sport have routinely written about athletic bodies in many sports as similar to performing dancers.⁶³ Our goal here is to pursue the question posed within the particular

60 Reid, “Athletic Beauty in Classical Greece,” 292.

61 Peg Brand Weiser and Edward B. Weiser. “Misleading Aesthetic Norms of Beauty: Perceptual Sexism in Elite Women’s Sports.” *Body Aesthetics*, ed. Sherri Irvin (Oxford University Press, 2016).

62 Liz Cambage, pictured in *ESPN: The Body Issue* (2019) at age 27, is a 6’8” Australian basketball player who plays center for the Las Vegas Aces and was a two-time Australian Olympian who has been open about mental health struggles; see http://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/27400369/the-body-issue#!liz_cambage (image number 4 – accessed 27th August 2021). For Botticelli’s painting, see <https://eclecticlight.co/2015/04/10/favourite-paintings-18-sandro-botticelli-primavera-spring-c-1482/>.

63 Insightful work by Graham McFee comes to mind, including his *Dance and the Philosophy of Action: A Framework for the Aesthetics of Dance* (Hampshire, UK: 2018).

framework of somaesthetics, namely, how do we perceive beautiful female bodies while avoiding the problem of objectification? How do we honor Shusterman's goal of "perceptual appreciation toward the goal of their self-cultivation and enrichment, their creative self-fashioning?" The photographer, Sophy Holland, has demonstrated an ongoing interest in portraying athletic women like Cambage with not only her work for ESPN but also with portraits published in a volume entitled, *Strong Like Her: A Celebration of Rule Breakers, History Makers, and Unstoppable Athletes*.⁶⁴ Her images reinforce self-cultivation over exploitation, enrichment over objectification. As Brubach hinted in 1996, "These women exude competence." Is this a model for how we should view female athletes?

Congenial to the ever-growing popularity of the athletic and aesthetic value of women in sports is the theorizing of Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza who argues that there is a difference between athletic bodies and bodies of athletes and that the norm for the ideal athletic body – indeed the athletic competitor – has always been the male. His prime example is a public Spanish sculpture from the nineteenth century entitled, "Representation of Sport" that unquestioningly pictures young, strong-looking men reminiscent of "Greek and Roman statues that have acted as canons of male beauty and power through history" which is generally understood to be a universal standard.⁶⁵ This example of the neoclassical body, according to a Spanish author writing in the nineteenth century, "elicits a conscious, long, and desiring gaze. These are beautiful, powerful bodies that we should marvel at, lust after, and strive for".⁶⁶ Ilundáin-Agurruza argues that the Neoclassicism movement in its revival of ancient Greek male beauty and power continues to influence the dominant framework in sport that sidelines women athletes and relegates them to less serious treatment as sexualized, objectified bodies: meant for male pleasure and amusement.

According to Ilundáin-Agurruza, "not all bodies of athletes are athletic, and not all athletic bodies belong to athletes" (Ilundáin-Agurruza 2008, 16).⁶⁷ The more prolific yet less desirable *athletic body* embodies a divine ancient Greek idealized canon of beauty; exhibits symmetry, definition, controlled hypertrophy; is the result of "body-sculpting" that is not too muscular whereby

64 Haley Shapley, *Strong Like Her: A Celebration of Rule Breakers, History Makers, and Unstoppable Athletes* (New York: Gallery Books, Simon & Schuster, 2020).

65 Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza, "Athletic Bodies and the Bodies of Athletes: A Critique of the Sporting Build." *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2008), 15.

66 Ilundáin-Agurruza, "Athletic Bodies and the Bodies of Athletes," 15.

67 Ilundáin-Agurruza, "Athletic Bodies and the Bodies of Athletes," 16.

appearance, not functionality, is primary.⁶⁸ In contrast, an *athlete's body* – pre- and post-performance and/or while performing – is real; it follows no canon of beauty; seeks to perform at peak levels regardless of resulting aesthetic effects; exhibits asymmetry, lack of definition, uncontrolled hypertrophy; is the result of bodybuilding not body-sculpting; primarily serves functionality, not appearance; is the paradigmatic body of the performing athlete; and finally I would argue, is exemplified by the athletes featured since 2009 in *ESPN: The Body Issue*.

As illuminating and important as these observations may be to making progress toward how we perceive and subsequently judge female athletes' bodies, Ilundáin-Agurruza's claims are already outdated. Much has changed since his essay appeared. More and more female athletes appear in media outlets forcefully defending individual choice to train hard, compete, and pose nude. As a result, women's bodies have increased in strength and stature. Ilundáin-Agurruza comments upon typical media images of athletes in a way that unfortunately does not distinguish between the venues of *Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN: The Body Issue*, and *Playboy*.

The male athletes almost always shown in powerful moves, in effort, grinning, flaunting their muscle, whereas the female athletes are usually shown posing and evoking grace and femininity – thereby divesting them of athleticism.⁶⁹

Moreover, I would argue, our perceptions have changed beyond his claim here:

Typically, the implicit standards of popular taste demand that not too much muscle be present in females. The muscle required for women to excel in athletics in many disciplines is regarded as neither beautiful nor attractive on the female physique.⁷⁰

Ilundáin-Agurruza seems to be saying both that popular taste precludes acceptance of amply muscled women in general and also such muscles are unacceptable on women in sports. It is difficult to get a specific read on who counts as a consensus of eligible arbiters of “popular taste” but in either case,

68 Andrew Edgar also discusses the athletic body, comparing Johnny Weissmuller and the more muscular and “sculptured” Michael Phelps, in “The Athletic Body,” *Health Care Analysis* 26, (September, 2018).

69 Ilundáin-Agurruza, “Athletic Bodies and the Bodies of Athletes,” 20.

70 Ilundáin-Agurruza, “Athletic Bodies and the Bodies of Athletes,” 20.

I contend, it seems false that muscled women – with the exception of steroidal body builders – are regarded as neither beautiful nor attractive. Reconsider athletes depicted in *ESPN: The Body Issue* and Sophy Holland's choice of muscular, active, "unstoppable" athletes. Since taste and resulting beauty standards have changed decidedly over the past decades, I would therefore disagree with Ilundáin-Agurruza's conclusion about "tame images:"

Popular culture and tastes, particularly through the 'multi-venue' mouth-piece of the mass media, presents as adequate only tame images of female athletes who embody a narrow conception of feminine finesse ... In short, the not so muscular athletic yet feminine (whatever instantiates this) body is preferred to the athlete's real body.⁷¹

Do the 2019 *ESPN: The Body Issue* bodies of tennis star Serena Williams, Liz Cambage, and CrossFit champion Katrin Davidsdottir count as "tame" or rather do they show that muscle and skill have replaced a narrow conception of femininity tinged with erotica? Muscled women count as both beautiful and attractive and women, young and old, emulate these new ideals. Even men – who certainly comprise a healthy portion of the full array of judges of popular taste and standards – have come to accept these new ideals. In our current age of Black, gay, lesbian, intersex and transgender challenges to any residual notion of a single, universally accepted White, heterosexual, cisgender, "tame" image of female beauty, muscled women are held in high esteem, particularly because of the work involved in achieving their physique and sport skills. Recall Davidsdottir's reflection, "I'm so proud of every single muscle of my body. I had to work for it. I had to earn that. They don't just show up".⁷² What Ilundáin-Agurruza shows us is that even though contemporary sport coverage is still dominated by male athletes and a cultural legacy of Neoclassical male beauty and power, women have achieved new levels of strength in body, musculature, and power to counterbalance the belittling effects of the male/patriarchal gaze. Women are achieving parity within sports but given the overall patriarchal context of viewing women's bodies influenced by fashion and pornography, they will never be viewed apart from the risk of sexualization, as are nude male bodies. We simply don't "see" male nude bodies as passive and objectified within our culture – even when eroticized. Given these gender differences and in light of the advancements of women's athletic abilities, how

71 Ilundáin-Agurruza, "Athletic Bodies and the Bodies of Athletes," 20.

72 Katrin Davidsdottir, *ESPN: The Body Issue* (2019).

best might we gaze at women's bodies keeping in mind Shusterman's recommendation of "perceptual appreciation toward the goal of their self-cultivation and enrichment, their creative self-fashioning?" The answer lies in women's agency and enrichment, not in men's self-pleasuring.

5 Perceiving Beautiful Bodies: The Athletic Agency Model

In light of changing standards of beauty, evolving models of athletic bodies, and the impetus of analyzing sports within a context of somaesthetics, I suggest a new feminist challenge to the male/patriarchal gaze – a Model of Athletic Agency – for perceiving beautiful bodies, particularly those of female athletes. Inspired by a video running in my mind, I can see an athlete in motion (or between movements) as she competes with an agentic body, with "agentic" referring to not only the potential but the actuality of an athlete acting as the agent in control of her doing, acting, full-bodied engagement in competition. This notion of agency, influenced by insights from Diana Tietjens Meyers, suggests that cultural imagery dominated by patriarchal oversight can be "neutralized" or resisted by women through self-knowledge, self-definition, and self-esteem.⁷³ Wrestling control of representations of their bodies that are misread as hyper-sexualized, objectified, and exploitative is precisely what (some) female athletes seek to attain. When Tietjens Meyers encourages skills that enable women "to express their feelings and ideas openly, to interact respectfully, to reflect intelligently, and to judge conscientiously" as well as "to resist detrimental interpretations effectively," she is recommending the development and implementation of "agentic skills" that

put women in touch with themselves and enable them to discern what they *really* want and care about and ... enable women to improvise ways to express their *own* values and goals, both in the medium of speech and in that of action.⁷⁴

Assigning agency displaces and repudiates the passiveness of a woman purportedly posed for the male/patriarchal gaze who is vulnerable to the sexual predator, surrendering to his desire. Agency embodies all the traits that feminists encourage in terms of resistance to patriarchal norms, namely,

73 Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery & Women's Agency* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

74 Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror*, 19.

acting – for oneself and/or for others – and engaging. In the case of sport, this includes competition, often alongside teammates. Unlike the traditional male/patriarchal gazer of a woman posed in an artistic “masterpiece,” the Model of Athletic Agency relocates a perceiver’s attention on the performer of action that presupposes her preceding and subsequent agentic accomplishments. Such actions may take place before the still shot or after, but any still shot presumes a continuum, a series of images of a woman in motion. This model suggests that a viewer “freeze frame” the video of the athlete at play: setting up for a dunk or stripping down to her sports bra after scoring the winning goal.⁷⁵

In effect, we recall, intuit, or imagine an athlete’s past actions – which we may have actually witnessed or not – as well as possible future actions. Capturing her body on record, as Brubach suggested, is the athlete “Caught in the act of biking, running, jogging, training for a triathlon, they look as if they refused to stop long enough to have their pictures taken.” This is easily discerned when an athlete is caught in motion, caught in action. Yet I contend that the Model of Athletic Agency is a viable strategy for perceiving bodies even when an athlete is posed provocatively, say for *Playboy*, since it is still the case that “Their bodies aren’t the point: the point is their ability to perform.”⁷⁶ Posing like porn stars, however, jeopardizes the primacy of agency. It diverts a gazer’s attention away from athletic agency toward sexiness. Their bodies *are* the point in virtue of their ability to perform at the highest levels of skill and competition since motion has been stopped and the still likeness captured, but these athletes lose our *full* attention as we are distracted by the competing provocative sexual pose.

This capturing of arrested motion in time is suggested by Jason Holt in *Kinetic Beauty*, under the rubric “frozen moment” in which a “static sportistic artwork present[s] a frozen structured moment divorced from but still part of the dynamic athletic event.”⁷⁷ His paradigm example is Myron’s *Discobolus* whose athleticism would never be questioned both because he looks like a strong male and is stopped mid-throw. But the unmet challenge, I contend, is to extend his analysis to that of an elite female athlete who risks prompting a sexualized response, presumably by a viewer with a male/patriarchal gaze. The

75 Recall the extensive controversy over Brandi Chastain’s removal of her soccer jersey in 1999 in celebration of her game-winning penalty-kick goal in the World Cup final against China; see her book, *It’s Not About the Bra: Play Hard, Play Fair, and Put the Fun Back Into Competitive Sports* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005).

76 Brubach, “The Athletic Esthetic,” 50.

77 Jason Holt, *Kinetic Beauty: The Philosophical Aesthetics of Sport* (London: Routledge, 2020), 88.

agency of the athlete is at stake and must be taken seriously. Contributing to the problem, data from the past twenty-five years has consistently shown that televised sports news and ESPN *Sports Center* have routinely failed to publicize women's athletic achievements opting instead to show them in relationship to men: as mothers, wives, or girlfriends.⁷⁸

The new Athletic Agency Model of perception incorporates changes in both athletes' availability to pose and to be photographed for the media and public as well as changing ways of viewing: from the dominating and possessive male/patriarchal gaze to looking at a body with full awareness of the sport context in which that performing body appears. Looking at beautiful bodies of posed nude female athletes in any context is only superficially like looking at paintings of nude women in "masterpieces" by male artists throughout art history – they may appear similar but knowledge of the athlete's accomplishments, her actions before and after the pose, and her agentic control of athletic feats makes all the difference at a deeper level of perception: our cognitive processing. The same observation applies to comparing athletes to posers in pornography; the background information we bring to the perceptual process separates the athletes from the sex workers. As Mary Devereaux contends, "Observation is always conditioned by perspective and expectation."⁷⁹ Of course, as with all art and visual imagery, the possibility of misinterpretation exists. This happened often with explicit sexual imagery of feminist artists in the 1970s and 1980s such as the vaginal imagery of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* created in defiance of patriarchal proscriptions, but mis-readings and misguided interpretations of visual imagery are always a risk for an artist, a sitter, or an athlete willing to be depicted.⁸⁰ Consider the risk that male athletes took when they started to pose nude like their female counterparts. It was a different sort of risk that operated within the macho world of male athletics where one should only be pictured strong, in action, decisively engaged in athletics. These male athletes risked being interpreted as overly concerned with their looks: stripping for other men to look and enjoy. But did they risk being viewed as passive, objectified sex objects? Devereaux defines "objectification" as merely making someone or something the object of my gaze.⁸¹ "Aestheticization" means treating people or things as

78 Cheryl Cooky, Michael A. Messner and Michela Musto, "It's Dude Time!": A Quarter Century of Excluding Women's Sports in Televised News and Highlight Shows." *Communication & Sport* 3, no. 3 (2015).

79 Devereaux, "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator," 122.

80 Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* can be viewed at https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party.

81 Devereaux, "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator," 130.

object of aesthetic contemplation. Men like Richard Gere in the film *American Gigolo* have been thus objectified, eroticized and aestheticized. But they have not experienced “degradation” by being demeaned or debased, denied dignity and respect, de-valued. “It is with respect to actual degradation that the asymmetry between men and women reappears”.⁸² Male athletes simply do not risk being misread as do females. Moreover social norms and perceptions have already changed enough so that few would misread Colin Kaepernick’s tattooed body as anything other than an accomplished strong black man and Superbowl champion. His posing expanded the array of bodies to be looked at and we were able to recall his throwing arm and anticipate his next game as we viewed his body on display.

I am reminded that Shusterman defines “art” as “a form of dramatization in the sense of putting an object or action in a special frame or scene that magnifies the significance of that object or action by its framing focus”.⁸³ This characterization brings us back full circle to somaesthetics and the role of the performing body in both athletics and art. “Freeze framing” an athlete stops her/his agency in time but only artificially: long enough for enlightened perceivers to savor and enjoy, i.e., to “see” and appreciate the self-fashioning and personal enrichment of the athlete. A recent example shows the complexity of this process. Recall Annie Leibovitz’ successful photo shoot in 1996 of Olympic athletes in contrast to her July 2020 cover shoot of Olympic gymnast Simone Biles. Some challenged *Vogue* magazine to hire “someone who better understands Black skin tones” while others objected to the “painterly” way Leibovitz portrayed the athlete: lackluster amidst dark colors, her head partially cropped from the picture plane of the magazine cover.⁸⁴ Did Leibovitz belittle and degrade? How might we learn to portray women athletes with more perceptual appreciation of their self-fashioning in the future?

New work in cognitive science, the psychology and philosophy of perception, and philosophical theorizing about the role of prior knowledge can play a promising role in the next stage of more deeply improving what happens when we perceive, interpret, and judge. We already know from studies of the well-known duck-rabbit picture that seeing or thinking in advance about a duck or rabbit can play a role in deciding between incompatible readings of

82 Devereaux, “Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator,” 130.

83 Richard Shusterman, “Aesthetic Experience and the Powers of Possession,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 55 no. 4 (Winter 2019), 18.

84 Mary Papenfuss. “Critics Pile On *Vogue* Over Simone Biles Photos, Call For More Black Photographers.” *Huffington Post*, last modified July 11, 2020. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/simone-biles-vogue-black-photographers_n_5f09613ac5b6480493d05283.

ambiguous figures.⁸⁵ We are also aware that perceptual sexism, another form of implicit bias, can be a barrier to informed and fair perception when viewing an athlete such as Caster Semenya – a world class runner accused of looking like a man which disqualified her at age seventeen from a full year of international competition.⁸⁶ Studies that show artists perform better than non-artists on not only drawing tasks but on all strictly visual tasks prompts the question as to whether artists more aptly perceive athletes' bodies.⁸⁷ Eye movement patterns of so-called art “experts” – when viewing an unfamiliar picture – differ from eye movement patterns of novices indicating specific perceptual, not cognitive skills.⁸⁸ Can such skills be learned?

Mohan Matthen suggests such skills are “abilities that are acquired by repeated trying” although some are acquired by mere exposure.⁸⁹ Perhaps it's not just perceptual noticing but rather the allocation of one's attention differently.⁹⁰ Some contend that perceptual attention is a genuine perceptual phenomenon, a perceptual skill that can be developed into an expertise.⁹¹ Finally, still untapped are possible gender and racial differences in perception as well; for instance, studies show that there are subtle differences between men and women and their judgments of art,⁹² i.e., what women want is (among other things) quality in art and they are better judges of art.⁹³ Stereotypes arise, e.g., that Black women athletes are more athletic than White, that we can learn to fairly process.⁹⁴

85 Peg Zeglin Brand [Weiser], “Disinterestedness and Political Art,” in *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer. (Maden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

86 Weiser and Weiser, “Misleading Aesthetic Norms of Beauty.”

87 Aaron Kozbelt, “Artists as Experts in Visual Cognition.” *Visual Cognition* 8, no. 6 (2001).

88 Stine Vogt and Svein Magnussen. “Expertise in Pictorial Perception: Eye-Movement Patterns and Visual Memory in Artists and Laymen,” *Perception* 36 (2007).

89 Mohan Matthen, “Play, Skill, and the Origins of Perceptual Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55, no. 2 (April 2015).

90 Kevin Connolly, “Perceptual Learning and the Contents of Perception,” *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014).

91 Dustin Stokes and Bence Nanay, “Perceptual Skills,” In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Skill and Expertise*, eds. Ellen Fridland and Carlotta Pavese. (London: Routledge, 2020).

92 Martin Tröndle, Volker Kirchberg, and Wolfgang Tschacher. “Subtle Differences: Men and Women and Their Art Reception,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2014).

93 Christopher Perricone, “What Women Want: (Among Other Things) Quality Art,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2011).

94 Monica Biernat and Theresa Vescio. “She Swings, She Hits, She's Great, She's Benched: Implications of Gender-Based Shifting Standards for Judgment and Behavior,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, no. 1 (January 2002).

These avenues hold promise for understanding more fully how we perceive a beautiful female athlete's body and how we can train ourselves to perceive more immediately and clearly that agency is at the heart of the physical – soma – we enjoy. More nuanced examinations of the concept of pleasure are also in order.

Somaesthetics and its overlap and interaction with fashion, sports, the philosophy of sport, feminist film theory, feminist philosophy and aesthetics, and cognitive science welcomes many contenders onto the playing field. It points the way to a future where perceiving beautiful bodies – particularly female athletes' bodies – can be a more skilled and rewarding experience.

Acknowledgments

I offer my thanks to participants Sonia Sedivy, Graham McFee, Jonathan Weinberg, and Dustin Stokes in my 2018 American Society for Aesthetics panel, "Perceiving the Athletic Body," where I presented an earlier version of this paper as well as the 2020 College Art Association panel, "Embodied Beauties: The Politics and Aesthetics of the Moving Body," with Eva Kit Wah Man, Aili Bresnahan and Andrea Baldini.

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