DON MILLIGAN'S
Off The cuff
February 7, 2018

Most fellas have always fancied women – Get Over It!

'FANCY' is a troubling word in this context. It can mean elaborate or decorative or even expensive and exclusive. Whatever it means, it is usually applied to an object or a place. In relation to sexual attraction and attractiveness it inescapably refers to 'objects' and hence to 'objectification'. People fancy each other as objects usually without knowing anything beyond the appearance of the person fancied. So fancying might arise within a gaze on the street, on the bus, in a bar, and be intrinsically idle, carrying no intention of getting to know the person fancied, or it might be the prelude to attempting to strike up a friendship. The initial objectification might then morph into a much more complicated set of emotions and responses as those doing the fancying get to know the desired person in a more rounded manner.

Sexual desire always involves 'objectification'. Depending upon ones predilections these might be associated with particular kinds of genitals, body types, and a host of secondary physical characteristics. I particularly fancy slim-hipped young men (but each to their own). I'm fully aware that 'fancying' a person, and having a good encounter or a rounded relationship are not vitally connected. I doubt very much that I would enjoy a relationship with a slim-

hipped youth for a whole set of very obvious biographical reasons, most prominent being that I'm a man in his seventies.

Manifestly, there is a difference between what we might call abstract desire and concrete desire. In my case an abstract desire for slim-hipped youths has little or no relationship to what I actually want from friends or potential lovers. This, of course, does not mean at all that I refuse celebration of aesthetic and erotic enjoyment of images and artworks – paintings, photographs, drawings, and movies of young men I might fancy.

I assume that something similar is as true for heterosexual men and women, as it is for me.

This brings us neatly to the erotic interests of a late Victorian painter, John William Waterhouse. He, like many of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had a penchant for representations of women that are both luscious and lascivious. Recently, his painting, 'Hylas and the Nymphs' in which a handsome young man is lured to his death by seven naked young girls, standing around in what appears to be a lily pond, has been taken down from the wall of Manchester City Art Gallery.

Clare Gannaway, the gallery's curator, has taken the picture down "to provoke debate, not to censor" or deny "the existence of particular artworks". Gilane Tawadros, vice-chair of the Stuart Hall Foundation, has gone further in describing 'Hylas and the Nymphs" as "a mediocre, semi-pornographic Victorian painting". So, we're being invited to see this painting as an intrinsically unimportant piece, of poor quality, that is "semi" pornographic.

The prefix "semi" is deployed here to remove Waterhouse's picture from the realm of art to the much darker and more directly instrumental images constructed by pornographers because Gannaway and Tawadros do not, strictly speaking, want us to discuss the pictorial merits of the work. They want us to think of it simply as emblematic of the way in which the male gaze has configured the work of a great

many painters, patrons, and of course, the sale of pictures over the last four or five centuries.

These curators and their supporters want to have a political discussion about the largely passive nature of images of women constructed during the many centuries in which women were not simply subordinate to men, but were in many respects regarded as the property of men.

There's nothing wrong with this desire or intention. However, initiating discussion of a work by hiding it – by removing it from public view – is most certainly censorship and is in keeping with the censorious tone of attacking the history of erotic images as if there is another more positive, more active story to tell. There is, of course, Donatello's sculpture, commissioned by Cosimo de Medici, of Judith and Holofernes, in which Judith is depicted hacking off the Assyrian general's head. Caravaggio brilliantly realised the same incident in his painting, 'Judith beheading Holofernes'. Many other artists have in numerous other visualisations depicted Judith's heroism; it is even alluded to on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in a fresco by Michelangelo.

Judith's decisiveness and courage is an unusual subject in painting and sculpture. For centuries women have more often than not been depicted as passive objects, not as the subject of a work, or as the subject of history. In paintings like that of Waterhouse's, the real subject is absent from the painting altogether, because the subject is the men looking at the image, rather than anything in the image itself. This reflected the manifest position of women in a society, still largely rural, in which women were active labouring in the fields, or as domestic servants, active in workshops, cotton mills, in markets and counting houses, but rarely in positions of power or decision, and consequently, not often active as the buyers or makers of artworks.

Women were prominent in the nineteenth century as novelists, philanthropists, and as campaigners struggling against slavery and for the

improvement of everything from prisons and workers' housing, to the care of injured soldiers. But, women like the mathematician, Ada Lovelace, were as rare as hen's teeth in the nineteenth century. So too were female political theorists, architects, and composers. There was however a Pre-Raphaelite 'sisterhood' - not the artists' models, lovers and wives of the men – but one composed of painters like Lucy Madox Brown, Evelyn de Morgan, Christina Jane Herringham, and at least a dozen others, but in keeping with the material and social circumstances of the time these painters never acquired the popularity or standing of their male brethren.

The notion that women have been 'hidden from history' has much to commend it, because there was always much more going on below the surface of the grand historical narrative than has seen the light of day. Consequently, it might be a more profitable enterprise for the curators of the Manchester Art Gallery to stage (or restage) an exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite paintings by women, rather than removing those of the Brotherhood. It remains true however, that the passive representation of women, as sexual objects, mothers, domestic ornaments, or helpmeets, in Victorian painting is not part of some male conspiracy. These images of women reflect, among other things, the subordinate position of women in most circumstances and in most classes of society at the time that 'Hylas and the Nymphs' was first exhibited.

Clearly, those involved in removing this picture from the wall of Manchester Art Gallery have a lively awareness of the role of art institutions in shaping what they have called "our cultural identities". And, they have a point, because the arrangement of works and objects in museums and galleries can never be innocent or neutral; there is always some pedagogic or ideological intention skulking about in the background. For this very reason we should welcome anything that curators do which reveal the

foreconceptions or prejudices that have guided their selection and arrangement of works.

However, there is a profound danger in imagining that "shaping our cultural identity" must involve effacing the attitudes and outlook of previous historical periods or generations. The Pre-Raphaelite collection in the Manchester gallery is accompanied with some wonderful ceramics, glassware, and furniture, made at the behest of the city's bourgeoisie at the height of the cotton trade. What are we to make of these proceeds of twelve-hour shifts, child labour, and chattel slavery? The gallery itself has a handsome classical portico and a grand entrance decorated with casts of the Parthenon marbles, famously torn off the Acropolis and other buildings, on the instructions of the noble Lord Elgin, after the exchange of filthy lucre with officials of the Ottoman Empire occupying Athens at the time.

Manchester City Art Gallery is in every element of the building, and its historical collections, saturated with the oppression of labouring people, women and men, ringing down the ages. This cannot be censored, nor approached, with some brazen didactic attempt to remodel "our cultural identity". As the vast public interest and popularity of both modern and contemporary art has made abundantly clear over the last fifty years the general public are perfectly capable of grasping the dynamic relationship between different periods, styles, and the assumptions inherent in them. We do not need curators telling us what to think about the past, we need them to reveal, the way in which people in the past, their circumstances, and assumptions, were profoundly different from ours.

Attempts to police our encounter with days gone by, like those of the curator, Clare Gannaway, are doomed to failure, because their trajectory tends more towards *unravelling* the past, rather than *revealing* it. Like the iconoclasts who want to remove the monuments of our grotesque imperial grandeur from Britain's streets and institutions, those who seek to clean up our history are engaged in bowdlerizing our

public culture, rather than developing a deeper knowledge and understanding of our history and how we have actually arrived at where we are now.

I hope and trust that 'Hylas and the Nymphs' is put back where it belongs without a 'trigger warning' or a 'contextualising' note telling us how to look at it, and what to feel about it, because although the girls in the lily pond are lovely, I'd rescue the lad from their clutches every time.