

Modigliani and Harvey Weinstein

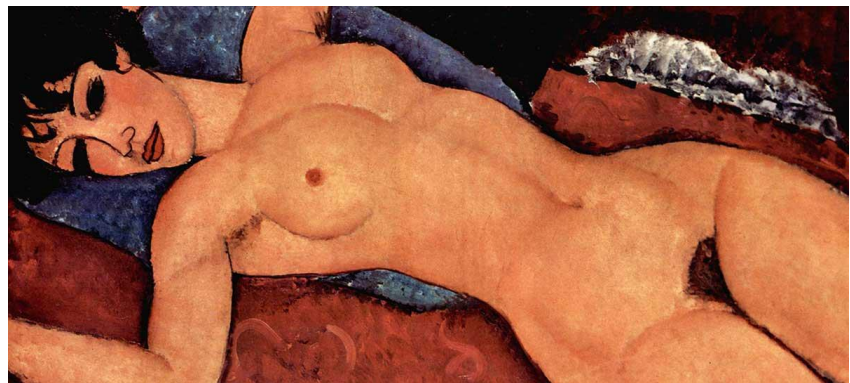
Tate Modern

#TateModern

Robin Richmond, November 22, 10`7



Jeanne Hébuterne, 1919



Nude

I've never taken Modigliani's work seriously. Its decorative, soft-core, faux-naif, pseudo-African, schoolboy fantasy sexuality has always bored me silly, and as a woman, I have always felt spooked by his lascivious male gaze. His female models' elongated torsos and coy, vacuous empty eyes (so many posters in so many college rooms) have seemed decadent, and faintly rotten to me.

Added to these visual tropes, the mythic narrative of his short drug- and drink-addled life in Montmartre and Montparnasse has eclipsed his work, with poor Modi coughing away his short life like Puccini's Mimi. He has been typecast by history and Hollywood as the archetypal renegade Bohemian, with none of his friend Picasso's resilience but all of his devilry and virility. And a handsome figure too, explosive, impossibly attractive to women and men, and tragically dead at 36.

So far so predictable. And in a month where I have been deeply moved by Käthe Kollwitz's excoriating self-portraits at the Ikon Gallery #ikongallery in Birmingham and two major exhibitions of portraits in London which have dazzled me (Cezanne at the National Portrait #nationalportraitgallery and #Soutine at the Courtauld #courtauldgallery - subjects of my last blog) it seemed that this show would present no surprises.

Well I was wrong. So wrong. The luscious nudes seem to me as mushy and as suspect as ever, but the portraits, many of which have never been seen before are wonderful. They are also a roll call of the artistic avant-garde of Paris at the time. Diego Rivera, Constantin Brancusi, and Picasso himself are among them, and they have real emotional heft and depth. Jean Cocteau, one of his sitters (Modi really knew everyone) avowed that Modi's portrait of him looked more like the artist than himself.

And this may be true. I think in some ways all portraits are of the artist and this reflection of self in the portraits is a melancholic and contemplative one. Not at all the Modi that I thought I knew - the voyeuristic, abusive, heedless consumer of female flesh. The curators argue that the nudes present women in a new liberated way, but to me it's still the age-old Harvey Weinstein way and it still bothers me.

I was once asked in a job interview about the role of women in art.
"You mean as models?" I replied.
I didn't get the job.

In memory of #Linda Nochlin, 1931 -2017