

# The Violin Lady

by Alexandra Gill

*Simple and graceful, disciplined, precious, resonant and sullen, under the rhythm of the other, bold and gentle, caresses tearing music in the air, full-bodied expression of sensuality and desire, of art... Isabella becomes violin.*

The treatment of woman as an object is a crime of deprivation perpetrated by society. It is literally the deprivation of subject - of self. The uninhibited submission by women to the seductive power of objectification can lead to a loss of identity, of that which is human, of intelligence, compassion, creativity, emotion and imagination. Objects are inanimate... Isabella becomes violin.

*Isabella wears wigs, on special occasions only, of every colour. On a hot night in the middle of June, she chooses a favorite black one and with an old vinyl comb, stuffs her hair away. It makes her more desirable, at least she finds herself more desirable. She leaves through the parlour door and then thinks of Molloy. A dear old man, asleep in the fireplace. Malone is less sociable and lies crumpled on the floor. Isabella and Molloy leave the derelict mansion and roll down the street, rock arm-in-arm.*

Some women have become very confused because they are the victim of a paradox. Women have been taught that in order to have a place in society, an identity, they must be desirable - an object of desire. And yet, it is quite



impossible to discover a sense of identity through objectification. A woman's notion of what is desirable (in this day and age) is largely conditioned by images in the media. Men are also conditioned in this fashion. Men are taught that it is "manly" to desire images that depict women as objects. This may sound old-fashioned but, unfortunately, it is *more* true as it becomes increasingly permissible to exploit sexual imagery in everything from beer commercials to summer teen flicks, sitcoms to rock videos. As Frank, Jim and the boys sit around the pool with the ghetto blaster blasting we, the audience, are made all too aware of the purpose of the gathering – to consume. The object of desire, a frosted beer bottle, is presented to us – along with Melissa – whose chest is conveniently swaying just above the serving tray where the longed-for beer sweats ferociously. We never see Melissa drinking beer. She is not a consumer... she is to be consumed. Some women have become very confused. They find images of women depicted as objects, as in the example above, sexually stimulating. Some women have learnt, as successfully as some men, that these images are supposed to personify Desire. Women use these images to become aroused because they are available in the media – the quickest, easiest and learned turn-on. These women are not lesbians.



Isabella: Have you ever tried to give yourself head, Molloy?  
 Molloy: Oh yes.  
 Isabella: And could you do it?  
 Molloy: No, I couldn't quite reach. What about you?  
 Isabella: No, I couldn't reach either. (Pause) Just as well don't you think?  
 Molloy: Just as well.

In discussing the photography of Francesca Woodman, Abigail Solomon-Godeau suggests that the artist's intention was to present the "drama of the woman artist – the creative subject, subject of desire – who as a woman is positioned in culture as the fetishized object, the object of desire" (Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Our Bodies, Our Icons", *Vogue*, February 1986, p. 98). A woman does not have to be an artist, however, in order to play the role of the "creative subject, subject of desire". Any woman who seeks to develop an identity through the appropriation of images commonly found in the media is both the subject and the object, the creator and the created, the artist and the work of art. It's almost as if Francesca Woodman, in her revealing photographs of herself, entered into a sado/masochistic drama, a one-woman-show where she was both the sadist and the masochist. The eroticization of power relations that characterize S/M occurred as an interior dialogue and provided Woodman, as a woman, with an opportunity to explore in herself the implications of power and powerlessness, master/slave relationships that are found outside of ourselves, in our culture. Francesca Woodman took her own life at the age of twenty-two.

Isabella likes the feel of the cool white sheet and lies a wrapped cocoon on the church pew. The walls of her parlour are peeled and pastel and through the french doors she sees a garden grown heavy from spring. Molloy watches dragonflies from his spot by the peonies. Isabella stands, the white sheet is redspeckled with blood stains. In front of the doors she can see her reflection full of flowers and lets the sheet slip to the floor. Following the curves of her hips and waist, purple and blue a tattoo, newly cut, throbs.

In conventional filmmaking the "creative subject" (the auteur or director) is not expected to surrender her/himself as object before the camera. Instead, the actor or actress whose image is transferred to celluloid quite literally becomes an "objet d'art" and the filmmaker and performer enter into a dramatic relationship – between subject and object or master and slave. A drama is not a single action but a sequence of events that relate to a narrative. The filmmaker may or may not attempt to stretch the parameters of the "narrative" involved in the act of filmmaking. In some "self-reflexive" cinema filmmakers, like Francesca Woodman, position themselves as both subject and object, artist and work of art. Bruce Elder in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* films himself masturbating and provides a graphic metaphor of the joys and limitations of this approach to cinema. Annette Mangaard, in *The Iconography of Venus*, "(dis)places her body across the cut by acknowledging its simultaneous presence behind and before the camera" L. Mike Hoolboom, "The Iconography of Venus", *Vanguard*, April/May 1988, p. 30. and

Bruce McDonald's *Knock Knock* dispenses completely with the dramatic narrative between subject and object by creating a film that loses its director and is forced to propagate itself through the random activity of the performers.

Isabella lay her bare back on the cold hard glass and stretching back, dropped her cherished dime in the slot. Quietly she lay until the light flickered off and then, with a soft and sure motion, she slid from the xerox to the floor. Isabella went home, and balancing on one leg on a frog green chair, she hung the last, the final portrait. Like large white sheets on a line the portraits hung in rows and breathed a deep breath every time the summer breeze blew. Standing back, Isabella could see that, taken off the wall, she could staple the sheets together and make a giant flipbook... and watch her tattoo grow.

Feminist theory and its specific concerns for the relationships between the artist and her/his art, and the artist and her/his subject (!), has brought these issues out of the obscurity of "self-reflexive" cinema and into the limelight of independent feature-length filmmaking. In two of the most successful films to emerge from Toronto independents – Atom Egoyan's *Family Viewing* and Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* – the characters' use of video cameras involves them in a dialectic that is at once voyeuristic and self-reflexive. The

performer is acting out (and thus experiencing) this new narrative – the drama of the artistic process so clearly demonstrated by Francesca Woodman – on behalf of the filmmakers themselves. The viewer is provided with a pathway on which to travel through the work of art, to the artist. And although the relationship between the filmmaker and the viewer is also one of master and slave in which the filmmaker exercises control over what is seen on the screen and the image's connection to the narrative, the filmmaker's acknowledgment of his or her presence behind and, in a sense, before the camera, helps to loosen the strict relationships that govern filmmaking and begin the development of a vocabulary that will allow each of us to speak to one another in unequivocal and equal tongues.

Isabella lies wasting on the floor. She's sad and secret with long slim arms thrust between her naked legs and her favorite wig askew, falling across one dark eye. A young woman with a director's cap approaches and kneels beside Isabella. With a gentle touch she smooths aside the thick black hair and finally rests her hand on a quivering, moist neck. Molloy and the crew stand and watch in terror... and in silence.

PHOTO: FRANCESCA WOODMAN