Story *of*

Drawings by Natalie Frank

Conversation

Natalie Frank in Conversation with Lawrence Weschler
regarding her drawings of the Story of O

LAWRENCE WESCHLER *Under what circumstances did you first come upon the* Story of O*?*

NATALIE FRANK I think I was fifteen when I found it, 1994 or so . . .

LW *On your parents' bookshelf?*

NF In a bookstore. My parents' shelves ranged from cooking to FDR. Sex wasn't talked about in the South.

LW *Where were you growing up?*

NF Dallas and Austin, Texas. My mother was involved in Planned Parenthood, my father is a pediatrician. I was quite an exhibitionist as a child and though my parents would never tell me that something was right or wrong, my father would just say do it in your room with the door closed; my mother was horrified. (laughs) I think I have always had an active imagination; that's probably why I was drawn to *O*.

I had read D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love,* the first book I fell in love with—it was very erotic to me—the *Story of O* was floating nearby. I carried *O* around everywhere, even on airplanes, and remember that reading it in public was as thrilling as just reading it. I was blushing constantly. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I think it was the first erotic book I read that was written by a woman.

LW *Beyond that, what was your response to the book at the time?*

NF Shock and awe. I just had never heard people speak and interact that way. I didn't know that literature could sound like that—it was obvious that this was a "serious book." I knew that it was controversial enough to have been written under a pseudonym. I liked that idea of anonymity while doing something performative and aggressive, which is I guess what I do now (laughs), minus the anonymity.

LW *Were you aware of the feminist wars about pornography roiling around that time?*

NF Not at all. I knew the book was controversial, took risks, and like anything avant-garde, was causing trouble, in the best way. I'd started looking at the German and Austrian Expressionists just before I found *O*, and was very aware of the precedent of scandalous art and how historically important it is.

LW *And did the book seem transgressive?*

NF No, because I didn't feel that there was any stigma attached; there was only my naïveté, much like O's. I easily saw myself in her. I remember the rush of excitement: how exciting it was that a woman's imagination produced this, that she had vocalized her own desires, and that this narrative came from her imagination. *O* has

always read to me as a story of freedom. When I learned that Dominique Aury—who wrote under the name Pauline Réage—had written the book partially in response to the claim that women didn't have erotic imaginations, the book made even more sense.

LW *Were you frightened by the material?*

NF No, not at all. I think I saw a clear difference between the things that went on in books, which are fictions, and the things that went on in the world.

LW *To what extent did your attitude play off of the traditions of women in the South? The two countervailing archetypes of Southern women: on the one hand, the whole antebellum and Klan idea of white women embodying the pure flower of threatened virtue, but also the notion of brash Southern women loving to hang out with rodeo cowboys.*

NF My mom actually *did* run a cattle ranch that she had inherited from her Russian cowboy father in East Texas, where the KKK in fact had been active during her lifetime. I've never been persuaded that there was ever any purity in women or in flowers, in the South especially. I grew up knowing that choice and speech were rights that women continually had to fight for. My great aunt, Hermine Tobolowsky, was the mother of the Texas Equal Rights Amendment, and I was very aware, through her work, that up until 1967 women couldn't even inherit property!

Around the time I was reading *O*, I was taking figure drawing classes in a woman's garage with sixty-year-old women, drawing from the nude model. My mother accompanied me because I was so young, and the first model was a Grecian god named Alexander who hung from the ceiling from a pole, his penis four inches from my head, which the ladies all thought was hysterical. I took it very seriously. It was just drawing to me. I'd take these drawings to school to discuss with my art teacher, and the head of the department labelled me a pornographer and tried to keep me from hanging them. Eventually, he relented and said I could hang nude women. It was probably also around this time that I picked up Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" from 1971. Let's just say, books have always helped me to put things in perspective!

LW *Do you find that reading the Story of O now, you realize that there's all kinds of stuff you didn't get when you were fifteen?*

NF At fifteen, the book for me was full of imagination. The only sex that I knew about at the time were football players screwing cheerleaders before the morning bell in pickup trucks. This book has never been just about sex to me—sex always seemed like the vehicle for expression and growth as a woman.

LW *Did your attitude toward the book change over the years?*

NF Maybe in my twenties, it felt more like a literary exercise of a woman wanting to transgress. I read the same two books every year and *O* is one of them.

LW *What's the other one?*

NF Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. And, actually, there are strange similarities between the two.

The Goethe is abstract, people coming together and apart and changing each other.

There's a sense of the existential doom of human nature in *Elective Affinities*. And even though *O* feels exciting and liberating and full of power, it has a similar denouement. And yet, O does thoroughly transform.

LW *Before we go any further, could you perhaps give us a brief survey of your development as an artist, beyond that garage, doing life drawings as a young teenager.*

NF Well, at fifteen I went to the Slade in London for a summer program, and that proved a pivotal experience. I went again at seventeen. It's where I was first introduced to the School of London—David Hockney, Peter Blake, Paula Rego, Stanley Spencer, R. B. Kitaj, Lucian Freud—and fell in love with their way of having the body at the center of narration, with doses of magic realism mixed with the extreme cruelty of everyday life.

Paula Rego, *Inspection*

LW *After which, for undergraduate studies you attended Yale. Majoring in art?*

NF Yes. And I actually met Paula Rego there. We became quite close, writing letters, and I started to visit her in London. She'd come to my studio, I'd go to hers. A few years back I posed for a drawing. My face ended up in a Jane Eyre litho, and then on one of her British postage stamps. She has been a tremendous influence. Early on, she showed me what it was like to be a self-possessed, fearless, feminist artist. Her work ethic is almost inhuman! And I always admired how she used her work to interweave the personal and the political. She's made a lot of work about abortion. She uses a model, Lila, who's a stand-in for herself, and she's constantly dealing with narratives of familial negligence, respect and love and romantic relationships. There were always real women that were fleshed out, usually from Lila, and then these graphic, menacing, cartooned figures. She drew a lot on literature.

It was in her studio, in 2009, that she recommended that I look at the Grimms tales. She's done a lot of work with fairy tales, but she's in her eighties and said, "I'm not going to get around to doing these, but you should." And so . . .

LW *Wait a moment, let's catch up with your own career. Did you go on to get a Master's at Yale?*

NF No, undergrad. My first year out, I worked for Nan Rosenthal at The Met. After which I did a Fulbright in Oslo studying Edvard Munch, and used the work I made that year to apply for my MFA, and I went to Columbia for the next two years. And began showing my last year of Columbia, in 2006.

LW *Showing what?*

Natalie Frank, *End of Romance*, oil on canvas, 2005. 80 x 65 inches.

NF Paintings mainly. Women and domestic interiors with a magic realist sense of dread. They were fleshy and quickly painted.

LW *And it was a few years after that, that Rego says you should look at Grimms' Fairy Tales.*

NF Indeed. So, I came home and ordered Jack Zipes' unsanitized edition of Grimms and started to read.

LW *Up until that moment, how had you imagined the Grimms fairy tales?*

NF I had no idea what they were, actually, only a vague recollection of Disney movies. I knew Paula had worked a lot from fairy tales and her sources had proved gruesome, so that it was something I might want to check out.

LW *So, you started reading these things and . . .*

NF I became just transfixed, obsessed. And at this point I was still doing a show of paintings every year. I had never done a body of drawings. I think another reason Paula's such an inspiration is because she has such a strong belief in her own talents. I never thought I could draw, and I also couldn't imagine being able to draw from my imagination.

But I had this huge book of Jack's and I would dip into it for fun. In the meantime, I'd also been reading Marina Warner and Maria Tatar and had realized that the tales were a point in literature where women exercised a very strong voice: how all of the stories began as women's oral tales, and that the Brothers Grimm had adjusted them for poetics, later cleaning them up to increase sales, and simply put their name onto them. But as I say, I was reading Jack's unsanitized versions, some of which embody a nineteenth-century patriarchal attitude, but others are proto-feminist and aspirational. It's clear they were originally told and collected by women. I thought: Oh my god, these unexplored dark areas that women have been existing in, they were all implicit, maybe, in the whitewashed, Disneyfied versions we grew up with, but they really have not been excavated and *visualized*. And I thought, I really want to do this; I wanted to bring those voices back to life. And I did so, in a kind of secret production, for over two years, and then one day I had Claire Gilman from the Drawing Center over and she said, "We should talk about a show."

LW *As somebody who was watching you do those drawings at the time, I remember once having described the results to somebody as instances of "the grotesque sublime"—Sleeping Beauty, or Briar Rose as she was originally known, as a rape victim and so forth. Would that be a fair characterization?*

NF Sure, although that way of seeing things just seems like life to me. When I eventually put a book of them together, illustrating Jack's translations, people would say, "How are these relevant? They're so outlandish," but it's actually just what goes on every day. We couldn't be living in a more insane time! I'd approached them with a feminist lens, focusing on the women in the stories, their transformations, and how their narratives reflected life at the time. Women putting their own traumas and triumphs into these oral tales—which were later written down—was a wily act of subterfuge. We need to return to this idea of resistance, now more than ever.

My next book with Jack will draw on the tales of Madame d'Aulnoy, a baroness who was the first and most famous literary feminist fairy teller, writing in the 1690s. She wrote incredible stories, emphasizing female authorship and a postmodern sense of identity.

Natalie Frank, *The Stammerer*, oil on canvas, 2007. 62 x 72 inches.

LW *So you're deep in fairy tales, especially in their original sexualized and grotesque forms, and all of this will soon to be leading to this most recent project of yours, where, in effect, you are going to be taking on the Story of O and seeing it, too, as a fairy tale. But in the meantime, there was a little interlude where you involved yourself with ballerinas and S & M dungeons.*

NF Yes. They seem related to me: contortions of and storytelling through the body.

LW *You've been citing literary antecedents. With your ballerinas, are you likewise tapping into such painterly influences as Degas?*

NF Yes, the Degas who speaks about dancers as "*les petits rats*." Or when he was going into brothels and drawing and making monotypes of whores that mimicked the poses of his dancers. Degas is one of my favorite artists, there's a violence in his work that is inseparable from beauty.

My dancers, I portrayed alone. These were life-sized paintings in which there was a lot of empty space, figures feel like they're suffocating, the brush work encroaching on them.

LW *And for you all this suggested . . . ?*

Natalie Frank, *All Fur III*, gouache and chalk pastel on paper, 2011–14. 30 x 22 inches.

quite surprising to find all of this harrowing twistedness in your work.

NF But really, why is that surprising?

LW *Let's just say that I would not be surprised to find out that the person who did these paintings and drawings was, well, shall we say, way more Goth than you.*

NF Right. But those statements imply that women somehow can't draw on their imagination. That women have to represent outwardly what they are inwardly, which denies integrity. And I don't see the two as being incongruous. I don't think that you can decipher someone's art through their person. It happens in the studio with me, often coming from men. Women aren't surprised that other women have complicated interior lives that might not be expressed on their exterior.

LW *I'm not sure the phenomenon is gendered; I can think of a few male artists where I've been similarly surprised. But be that as it may, next you found yourself venturing into dungeons.*

NF At the time I was drawing superheroes, seemingly related to the Grimms' tales and was interested in what a female superheroine would look like. And I thought: dominatrices! I've always been interested in exchanges of power, especially when sex and violence surround the body. And so I visited quite a few S & M dungeons, photographing women and their submissives.

NF Probably self-portraiture. It seems like a good representation of an artist at work.

LW *his might be as good a place as any to pick up an issue that's so funny for many of your friends—not funny, maybe—but it is the way that out in the world you strike one as a completely well-adjusted, sane person, in control of yourself, and so forth.*

NF So do you!

LW *I understand, but you can interview me later, now I get to interview you. And so it is*

LW *Did getting the permission become part of the performance?*

NF Everything was a performance. Most people were masked. One submissive agreed to show his face—one of his fetishes was even being photographed unmasked while in session, because none of his coworkers, as you said, would have suspected this of him.

LW *Have you learned things from that experience that you were surprised by?*

NF I learned about what they did. I learned there was no sex involved but that the eroticism of what they did was much more powerful, which obviously relates to my *O*. I learned how sensitive the relationship is between the dominatrix and submissive. And I learned the personal stories of why these women came to be doing what they do—which were all radically different. Some were economic or financial, most of them were personal.

LW *And what about yourself?*

NF You keep coming back to that. (laughs) I felt very comfortable with these women and, back to your earlier point, these were women that you would see walking down the street and not have the faintest clue about their lives—that just sounded very Southern—about what they do for work. I love that idea of this mystery. You never really know what's inside of someone and what their imagination can engender. That is power!

LW *Would you have had a similar reaction if you had portrayed male dominance and female submissives?*

Natalie Frank, *All Fur I*, gouache and chalk pastel on paper, 2011–14. 30 x 22 inches.

NF I would never have done that. I have no interest in that because it perpetuates a power dynamic that feels too much a part of everyday life, one that subjugates women. I'm interested in turning the tables.

LW *You do understand that we're about to start talking about the* Story of O*? (laughs)*

NF Yes! But O and Aury turn the tables so dramatically, both women are calling the shots, even if it appears otherwise—that's why this book was so controversial. Men have been writing about repressing women for centuries; this was something else entirely, it was revolutionary.

Natalie Frank, *Domina I*, 2017. Oil on canvas. 65 x 76 inches.

LW *By way of introduction, could you just give me a quick sense of the* Story of O*, as if I'd never read it.*

NF You haven't?!

LW *Of course, I have. I'm just trying to . . .*

NF Oh, right, as if *one* had never read it.

Well: Once upon a time there was a woman, a young girl named O, who didn't know what to expect.

LW *What kind of person was she?*

NF Naive. She is taken by her lover to the Château Roissy, where she's undressed and bathed by women and wrapped in a cloak and brought out and told what will be happening. It's a dark place where men are dominant and women submissive—the whole thing is a send-up of pornography, deploying every trope and cliché you'd expect in a B-movie of an S & M sex castle; however, it is all told from the vantage of a woman—our heroine, O—with women's desire being explored in this way for the first time in literature. She is there by choice and every step along the way involves her consent and her desire.

LW *When was the consent registered in the plot?*

NF They tell her pretty soon after she arrives at the château what happens there and that she can leave at any time.

Anyway, the first hundred and fifty pages are very erotic, describing the opulent interiors, the firelight and velvet. O's taken through scenes of sex and beatings and lives in a cell in this château, interacts with other women, isn't supposed to lift her gaze to look at the men whose faces are partially obscured, and she is tremendously excited by these activities.

And, when I read it this time, the scenes I chose to depict were not this or that other sex act, but rather how she *experiences* the pleasure of the power exchanges that go on. And there is so much humor!

LW *So, you're keying in on the dialectic of the power of the powerless or the dominance of the submissive. The way that the men are mere tools for her own . . .*

NF Yes.

LW *. . . and in some way, she's in charge.*

NF The book is written in different sections and towards the end, her lover takes her out of Roissy, and she's given to his stepbrother, Sir Stephen. In the third section of the book, O reveals that she is bisexual and in previous relationships with young women delighted in assuming the role of the dominant, which she does to a degree with Jacqueline, as well as Nathalie. Another type of female relationship is explored when she is with the older Anne-Marie, wherein all eroticism is removed from sex.

LW *And how does it end?*

NF Ambiguously is how it ends. In one version, Sir Stephen abandons her, passing her on to someone else, and in another she requests permission to kill herself. There seems to be so much confusion about what role she wants to play that she can no longer exist. On one hand, she becomes a Christ-like figure, her self-erasure becomes a type of martyrdom, as if she were destined to be taken apart, becoming symbolic in the process. On the other hand, it feels as though she might have lost her ability to choose, through this extensive process of sublimation, albeit one she chose initially. I think Aury wants it to be ambiguous, and this feels very postmodern and allows the text to rest on the edges of real life/allegory. Remember that she also wrote this book as a series of letters to her lover, and this loss of self is a big part of love.

LW *So, a happy little tale. (laughs) It's not that she finds herself exactly.*

NF No, but she loses herself while coming into her own.

Susan Sontag wrote about the differences between art and pornography, using *O* as an instance of the one and not the other. O develops as a woman, she has an interior life, she feels more and more alive. The sex and violence in the book are a means for her "ascent through degradation," as Sontag explains—this was such a revolutionary little book because it was the first erotic book written by a woman about sex, violence, and women's interior lives and their transformative desires. It also essentially explored a spectrum of relationships that challenged conventional norms. And it is such a send-up of pornography because ultimately O develops emotionally and intellectually, which doesn't occur in pornography.

LW *But even in the meta story, wasn't it an instance of a woman, "Pauline Réage," writing all this for the pleasure of a man, her lover?*

NF She wrote it for herself to show that this is what she and women can do. Women can seduce through means other than with sex—which is the great humor about this book—superficially it revolves around sex, but it was written to flaunt the much more powerful eroticism—of the mind

LW *You know, of course, how there has been a huge debate in feminism about whether the book's good for women or not. What's been your take on that?*

NF I think it's complicated. Ultimately, it's not pornography, where actual women are used in the making of images; it is literature, art. In the

Need caption?

author's intent—and in the heroine's journey—erotic freedom is celebrated. As women, this is a right that has long been denied to us, by men and by other women.

LW *It's interesting that we happen to be having this conversation in the very wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and all the others that seem to be following it, and the #MeToo movement. What do you make of all that?*

NF I am so thrilled by and appreciative of the ways in which women are speaking up in many fields about harassment and abuse and it seems, finally, they are beginning to be heard.* Let's be absolutely clear, though—with these drawings, I am not condoning violence towards women, or the repressive levels of patriarchy. I am advocating for exactly the opposite. It would be superficial to confuse the two. This book is about freedom to explore boundaries and appetites— for O, for the reader, and for women, and for myself, in making this work.

This book is about choice and complex desire. It begins and ends with consent and was written as an almost anarchic yet also banal assertion of female imagination. It celebrates the power of words, and also of images. *O* is a fairy tale that feels very contemporary. Today there is today a great rage among women as to how we are allowed to represent ourselves, the ability to legislate our own bodies, and an increasing visibility in us speaking up. In Trumpworld, the rights we have successively claimed since the 1950s feel tenuous at best.

LW *You were saying before that after having observed the dungeon scenes and so forth, your sense of the book this time was very different. How so?*

NF It was heightened. The eroticism of the beginning felt a lot more erotic. The scenes of domination and submission—which I think I understood better because now I had actually watched them firsthand—were both more terrifying but also more alluring.

In addition, the ending of the book felt like a very accurate representation of how it feels to be an artist. One becomes so involved in fictions and dynamics and theatrical performances that by the end of the day one's self is almost erased, whereas the interior life one has endured and created has triumphed.

LW *That makes it sound like the artist is a submissive.*

NF In some ways.

LW *To the muse or to what?*

NF It's the *person* who is the submissive. When you were talking about the disjuncture of how I seem out of the studio and in the studio, there's a very clear separation between the two, and as an artist at times I become subsumed by what I am making and the stories from my imagination, and that's a terrifying feeling. I've been completely alone but feel like I've been talking and interacting with people all day.

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LW *So tell us a little about some of the drawings you've completed so far, the ones you have lined up along that wall over there.*

NF Well, they begin with her fully formed, drawn in a very realistic, whole way, in the car with her lover, who's. . .

LW *Ironically, a second ago you described her as naive and unformed, but that drawing of her is indeed the most composed we are ever going to see her. She thinks she's fine.*

NF Exactly. (laughs) Just wait until she's fragmented. She's going to love it! (a line delivered with singular mock relish) She's in the car with her lover, she has her gloves on and, under his instruction, she's taking her panties off so her thighs can feel the leather, and it's the beginning of her initiation into the S & M world. Her lover, by comparison, is fragmented, and has a double set of features. But, really, the men in all these images are beside the point. I'd taken a similar approach in the fairy tale drawings.

LW *One of my own ways of reading that first image, indeed, is, "All of this roil and turmoil over* that guy, *over* him*?!"*

NF (laughs) Yeah, no, it's not. It's about *her* coming to life. And so next, she's being perfumed and made up, and it's a scene of an artist drawing a character; they're literally putting her together.

LW *As are you in drawing the scene.*

Natalie Frank, *Domina I*, 2017. Oil on canvas. 65 x 76 inches.

NF I highlighted paragraphs and scenes I thought were important. In many of the drawings, parts of the figures sometimes become transparent. So the idea of boundaries and personal space and what's real and what's not are constantly collapsing.

LW *Did you use a professional model or . . . ?*

NF No, there was someone who I met through a friend and after what I felt was an appropriate number of get-togethers, I asked her if she would pose as O.

LW *Why were you drawn to that model?*

NF I knew immediately. She has these big kind of Catherine Deneuve eyes, but there was this thing about her that made her seem very vulnerable but at the same time tough and gritty.

Eventually she agreed to do it, but said, "By the way, we're not showing my breasts or my bum or my stomach." I said, "Really?" But actually, as things turned out, that was perfect: I wanted to focus on the eroticism and not the actual anatomy. So there's just a hint of the flesh, a hint of the narrative, a hint of the transactions. The lights, the color, the heat of the body, and just a bit of the whipping, some of the environment—but always focusing in on her figure.

LW *Do you think with these drawings you are attempting to be erotic or arousing in the way the book is erotic?*

NF I try to include humor in the way the book does. However, I'm focusing mostly on her interior life and how she's moving through these scenes, how she feels. How parts of her feel a part of her environment, others feel off limits, and how these limits erode and shift across her narrative.

LW *My memory of the book is that part of the power of the submissive is the very affirmation of being desired. Is that not your sense of the book, too?*

NF No, as I say, my sense was that it was not really about being desired in an external sense. It was about her sublimating her identity in becoming something else, mainly to prove to herself that she can do it.

LW *That she was strong enough?*

NF Yeah.

LW *So that this is a kind of body building.*

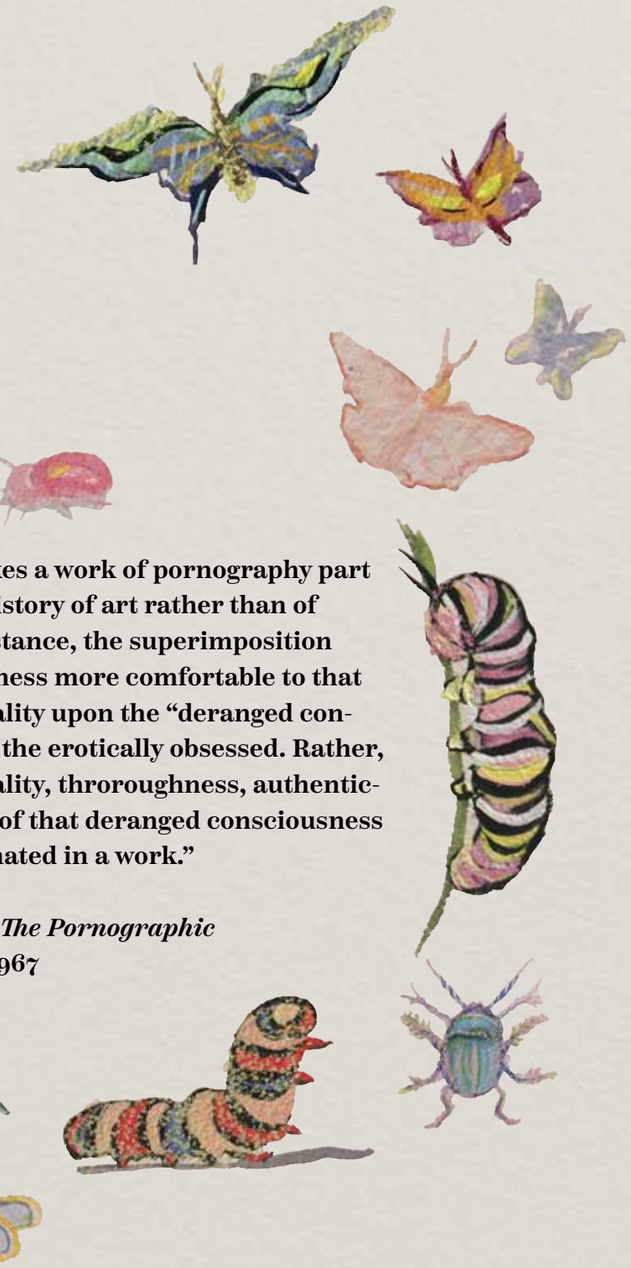
NF (laughs) And I think she's ravenously curious about how all of this might change her. I think that's what it was—above all, it was a deep curiosity.

LW *And almost an alchemical form of* self-fashioning. *The latter-day alchemical magi spoke more allegorically of taking the leaden parts of themselves and endeavoring to transmute them into something more golden. And so you get Prospero, Faust, and eventually Carl Jung coming out of that tradition. And you are suggesting, in a way, O as well. O is trying to sublimate herself —sublimation being another alchemical term—through this process into the strongest material that she can be without breaking . . .*

NF And she doesn't make it. And I think that's the point—that very few do, that it's a fiction that belongs probably, ironically, in fairy tales: that you can get through any of this for life, without breaking apart.

LW *I don't suppose we're ever going to get a better ending than that.*

* Natalie Frank, "For Women Artists, the Art World Can Be a Minefield," *ArtNews*, November 13, 2017. http://www.artnews.com/2017/11/13/women-artists-art-world-can-minefield/



"What makes a work of pornography part of the history of art rather than of trash is not distance, the superimposition of a consciousness more comfortable to that of ordinary reality upon the "deranged consciousness" of the erotically obsessed. Rather, it is the originality, throroughness, authenticity, and power of that deranged consciousness itself as incarnated in a work."

Susan Sontag, *The Pornographic Imagination*, 1967