

# C H A R I M

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Sebastian**

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The five sculptures in this exhibition are portraits of two friends of mine, both of whom happen to be called Sebastian. The choice of a male nude as a theme is not accidental, as isn't the exhibition's title.

Saint Sebastian is famously known for being the main erotic male nude in the history of Western art. His beautiful naked body, pierced by arrows, has been constantly praised by artists from 15th century on. With time the sensual Saint even became the patron of homosexuals and art history's ultimate male nude.

However, it is still shockingly rare to see the interpretations of a male nude by female artists. There are many reasons for that. The circumstances, in which female artists struggled to approach their careers, played a huge role. As we all know, women were excluded from the art academy roughly until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, after gaining access to education in arts, women remained prohibited from painting male nudes in the following 100 years as it was considered immoral. Unfortunately, Modernism made the male nudes almost completely vanish right at the moment when women finally gained equal rights in art education.

As art history shows us, the images of male bodies represented a heroic social ideal, strength and power. Phallogocentric view would only allow the sensuous male's existence in the form of highly feminized, often childlike, impotent form (Bacchus, Faun, Cupid etc). Christianity, fearful of the flesh, also showed male nude in a brutalized, dominated form.

In any case, art history's images of a male nude were intended by men for men, be it homoerotic imagery of ancient Greece, Saint Sebastian of the Renaissance or Robert Mapplethorpe's nudes.

At the same time, the female nude has always existed as a submissive object of sexual desire, a reality, inherent in our culture. Women have always been watching themselves through the male gaze, but were kept from allowing themselves to observe men. In patriarchal society, women's sexuality has been (and still is) largely suppressed, the heterosexual curiosity about male body is still tabooed. For the male figure to be sexually objectified by the female gaze would mean flipping the existing power relations, which is still dangerous (a speaking example would be the feminist artists of the 70s, who started working with male nudes and who's works were broadly censored).

And even that after the female liberation movement made it to an extent possible for women to get their bodies back, the feminist approach would encourage women to explore their sexuality through their own bodies, but avoid objectifying men. Such objectification would be considered inappropriate for using the power mechanisms, already invented by the male gaze.

So, how can a straight woman explore her own desire in a way that flips the existing power roles without becoming a parody of the representations of the sexualized female object? This exhibition is my modest take on this problem.

The works in this exhibition are a result of an approach to bring photographic components into sculpture and to rethink the idea of primary and secondary elements that constitute an artwork. A portrait, especially a photographic image, often presupposes framing which usually plays a secondary role, supporting or underlining an image. In these works, I tried to imagine a situation, where not only an image and its framing become equally important elements of the composition, but also where the associations, evoked by the framing, produce the work's meaning.

The notions and phrases that would be often used to describe a sexually appealing male object were translated into sculptures. For example, "Sebastian S. 1" can be related to the word "hot", as the elements of the sculpture might suggest through their vague similarity with high voltage cables, some of which couldn't even bear the tension and exploded.

The "sweet" gingerbread house ("Sebastian B. 1") indeed evokes the well-known treat, but its black and white aesthetics and the choice of materials, as well as the use of the anonymous male body for purely decorative reasons can be understood as a metaphor of playful exploitation.

"Sebastian B. 2", the flag with its pattern of rubber bows and stripes alludes to the American flag, the symbol of power. The white flag would usually indicate surrender, in this case the surrender of an object, or the surrender of a power symbol itself. The repetitive image of a reclining male nude is passively looking away, letting us explore him in his calm passivity.

"Sebastian S. 3" is referring to testicles as a symbol of masculine power ("he has balls"), but the images, covering the surfaces of two shiny balls, can be associated with an altar of a teenage girl, covered in stickers and decorated with little locks.

Hanger-like structures in „Sebastian S. 4" might allude to the notion of changing partners as clothes, a behavior that indicates power in a male world and is considered immoral and obscene for a woman.

The choice to avoid explicit eroticism in these photographs comes from my desire to make a step forward from phallocracy to human individualism of the models. The non-oppressive phallus contradicts the classical notion of an erotic male model, which doesn't automatically deprive it of potency. On the contrary, it just makes them more than objectified bodies: it allows them to be human beings.