



Fig. 1. Shary Boyle, *The Lute Player*, 2010,
glazed porcelain, lustre, glass beads, 1/2, 24.5 cm (h.), 23 cm (diam.),
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Sexing the Lute: Adolescent Sexuality and Gender Portrayal in Shary Boyle's *The Lute Player*

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Canadian artist Shary Boyle (b. 1972) is lauded for her feminist explorations of themes such as life, death, sex, injustice and grief.¹ In her solo exhibition *Shary Boyle: Flesh and Blood* (2010) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Boyle's porcelain sculptures were shown alongside seventeenth-century Old Master paintings that she selected from the Gallery's permanent collection.² In this show and in many of her works, Boyle takes issue with the limited narratives offered by the countless representations of women as “betrothed, wedded, bereft, melancholic, or sensual” in historical art.³ Rendered using traditional artistic mediums and techniques, Boyle's porcelain figures subvert these traditional narratives of gender. *The Lute Player* (2010) (fig. 1), which was conceived for the exhibition, extends beyond archetypal depictions of female adolescence by merging the stereotypical image of a metalhead with the female nude to produce a subject who disavows categorization and embodies a more nuanced understanding of femininity.

Boyle exploits the familiarity and charming appearance of traditional porcelain figurines to broach the uncomfortable issue of adolescent female sexuality and identity in *The Lute Player*.⁴ The figure emulates the appearance of a metalhead, with her fiery red hair draped over her face and an electric guitar—not a lute, despite the work's title—in hand. However, her gender, nakedness and natural surroundings disrupt the stereotypical image of a metalhead as a white, long-haired man in black clothing. An amplifier resting on the white base of the sculpture is attached to the guitar by a cord of black beads. The modern act of playing the electric guitar

distinguishes the naked subject from the classical nude. There is a compelling tension between this modern girl and the traditional, highly delicate medium of porcelain in which she is rendered. Two distinct flowers—one wild and colourful, the other delicately pretty—emerge from the white base on either side of the figure, symbolizing the girl's negotiation of dichotomous archetypes of femininity.



Fig. 1. Shary Boyle, *The Lute Player*, 2010, glazed porcelain, lustre, glass beads, 1/2, 24.5 cm (h.), 23 cm (diam.), Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The title of Boyle's sculpture alludes to historical depictions of female lute players, who are often subtly sexualized. Portraits of men and women playing lutes were common from the Renaissance to the Victorian period. Lute playing, which required skilled hands, was seen as a metaphor for sexual skill.⁵ Images of prostitutes playing the lute were thus common in Western art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶ An example is *Mary Magdalene Playing the Lute* (ca. 1520–30) (fig. 2) by the Master of the Female Half-Lengths, in which Mary Magdalene, who gained a reputation as a penitent prostitute or fallen woman in Western Christianity during the Middle Ages,⁷ is gracefully strumming her instrument.⁸



Fig. 2. Master of the Female Half-Lengths, *Mary Magdalene Playing the Lute*, ca. 1520–30, oil on panel, 37.5 x 26.8 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle.

Even allegorical representations of the female lute player carried erotic undertones. For instance, Johann Joachim Kändler's (1706–1775) *Hearing* (1733–1745) (fig. 3) shows a woman playing a lute with one breast exposed.



Fig. 3. Johann Joachim Kändler, *Allegory of Hearing*, 1733–1745, gilt on hard-paste porcelain with glaze and paint, 28.3 cm (h.), The Walters Art Museum.
<http://art.thewalters.org/detail/28739/allegory-of-hearing/>.

In real life, however, the lute was a dignified hobby of the bourgeoisie, and as such its sexual connotations were suppressed. The body was to be positioned in a way to allow for an extension of the beauty of the music.⁹ The player was expected to maintain an impression of ease and contentment, disguising the difficulty of the task at hand.¹⁰ It was also important to not show too much satisfaction with one's own musical performance,¹¹ as doing so was deemed too prideful or self-indulgent. Excessive attention paid to the lute signalled “illicit gratification,”¹² which was considered lascivious. Whereas the eroticism of lute-playing remains subtle in historical art, Boyle makes it explicit in *The Lute Player* through the nakedness of the figure.

Boyle's work resonates with Lori Waxman's analysis of the desiring-desired dichotomy of female adolescence based on the fictional character Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), written by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832–1898) under the pen name Lewis Carroll, and Lolita, the titular character of Vladimir Nabokov's (1899–1977) 1955 novel. Alice “epitomizes the desiring girl, always aggressively in search of knowledge, of something strange and new,”¹³ while Lolita-ness is an essence devised by watchful eyes keenly observing the fledgling sexuality of female adolescence. Lolita is the embodiment of the desired female. “Lolita-ness is a quality that is perceived, not tabulated; it is not an age but a desirability, a projection sent from the beholder to the girl and back again.”¹⁴ Waxman emphasizes that in reality desiring and being desired are simultaneous rather than mutually exclusive experiences within female adolescence. While Alice's desire extends beyond sexual yearning, Lolita is almost always the object of sexual desire. The desire and romanticization of the adolescent or child are so potent and taboo that the bodily presentation of such figures is shied away from in the fear that any amorous thinking will be construed as sexually exploitative. Yet *The Lute*

Player unabashedly addresses adolescent female sexuality. Murray Whyte suggests that *The Lute Player* recalls popular images of “innocent girls with lutes ... in politely repressed [Victorian] society.”¹⁵ However, the figure’s nakedness in *The Lute Player* suggests a conscious shedding of innocence, a sexual boldness and the adolescent process of learning to be comfortable in one’s own skin. The girl is aware of herself as an object of desire, but she is also a desiring subject, yearning for autonomy and fashioning a sense of personal identity through an exploration of musical self-expression and metal culture.

An homage to the female folk musicians in Boyle’s life, *The Lute Player* shows an independent adolescent girl desiring to transgress gender norms and participate in the hyper-masculine world of metal music. Yet such transgression comes at a cost: Zoë Chan writes about how “the culture of metal is known for embracing an often morbid and misogynist ethos, ... ‘a collective investment in a “fantastic” masculinity’.”¹⁶ Women who intrude in this culture are rebuked solely because of their gender. The exclusion of women from the metal scene was experienced by Boyle herself: while male friends would roughhouse and dog-pile one another, they would stop immediately if she tried to join in.¹⁷ Boyle was forcibly reminded of her gender and the differing definitions of respectability assigned to men and women. *The Lute Player* may thus be viewed as a self-portrait of Boyle as a young woman yearning to be “one of the boys.”

However, the girl in *The Lute Player* is not merely interested in being a part of metal culture, but also in subverting it. Being a girl in a male-dominated culture often means being reduced to one’s gender; however, the figure in Boyle’s work not only unapologetically declares her sex by being naked, but also resists being defined as simply a sexual object by obscuring her face and

parts of her body from the viewer. She is not entirely knowable, and thus retains her subjectivity and autonomy. This dichotomy between concealment and display is also evident in Boyle's *Snowball* (2006) (fig. 4), although in this work the female figure is covered from head to toe in flowers but maintains a stoic gaze. Concealment implies secrecy; interestingly, because the lute was an instrument that a woman tended to practice in solitude, it was conceived by female French poets of the sixteenth century as a kind of confidant.¹⁸



Fig. 4. Shary Boyle, *Snowball*, 2006, porcelain, approximately 26 x 17 x 16.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Rather than performing on stage, the girl in *The Lute Player* is rehearsing her performance alone in a natural setting. Historically, playing a lute in private was less acceptable than performing within the semi-public salon for mainly male audiences, as the sexual aspect of lute-playing could be regulated by the male gaze.¹⁹ In Boyle's work, the obstruction of the girl's gaze by her flaming red hair—itself a signifier of sexuality—disrupts the possibility of consent or

engagement between the viewer and subject. In this way, she demonstrates the conflicting desires of an adolescent girl who may want sexual attention, yet at the same time fears it. To ward off unsolicited sexual advances, girls are taught to suppress their own desires. In *The Lute Player*, the girl's decision to hide her face behind her hair offers a multiplicity of readings: sexual shame, defiant ownership of her sexual passions, and decided engagement in the sexually and gender-coded world of metal culture.

Whereas *The Lute Player* represents the initial stages of sexual discovery, New York-based artist Justine Kurland's (b. 1969) *The Pale Serpent* (2003) (fig. 5) depicts a young, self-possessed woman who is unafraid to fully embrace her sexuality.



Fig. 5. Justine Kurland, *The Pale Serpent*, 2003, chromogenic print, 2/8, 110.6 x 136 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Similar to *The Lute Player*, the naked woman is presented in a natural setting. However, there is a naked man lying beside her and they appear to be in a post-coital siesta. She is both a desiring subject and an object of desire, but she is different from the girl in *The Lute Player* in that she

has already acted on her desires.

NOTES

¹ “Shary Boyle’s Flesh and Blood to go on display at AGO,” Art Gallery of Ontario, accessed November 15, 2015, <http://www.ago.net/shary-boyles-flesh-and-blood-to-go-on-display-at-ago>.

² Ibid.

³ Michelle Jacques, “Art and History,” in *Shary Boyle : La chair et le sang = flesh and blood*, ed. Louise Déry (Montreal: Galerie de l’UQAM, 2010), 136.

⁴ Vanessa Nicholas, “Shary Boyle : Flesh and Blood,” *Canadian Art*, last modified October 21, 2010, https://canadianart.ca/online/reviews/2010/10/21/shary_boyle/.

⁵ Carla Zecher, “The Gendering of the Lute in Sixteenth-Century French Love Poetry,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Autumn 2000), 774.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard J. Hooper, *The Crucifixion of Mary Magdalene: The historical tradition of the first apostle and the ancient church’s campaign to suppress it* (Sedona: Sanctuary Publications, 2005), 81.

⁸ Interestingly, in Flemish the words for “lute” and “vagina” are one and the same: “luit.” See Zecher, 774.

⁹ Zecher, 771.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 772.

¹³ Lori Waxman, “Through the Looking-Glass with Heart-Shaped Sunglasses: Alice and Lolita,” in *Girls! Girls! Girls! In Contemporary Art*, ed. Catherine Grant and Lori Waxman (Chicago: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 21.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Murray Whyte, “Shary Boyle at the AGO: Outsider gets in,” *Toronto Star*, last modified September 11, 2010, http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2010/09/11/shary_boyle_at_the_ago_outsider_gets_in.html.

¹⁶ Zoë Chan, “Young Folk: Steven Shearer’s Heavy Metal Youth and Culture,” *ETC* 92 (February–April 2011): 23.

¹⁷ Whyte.

¹⁸ Zecher, 781.

¹⁹ Ibid., 789.

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