

Press release: for immediate release on May 2015

A controversial portrait exhibition shows famous women from politics, the arts, TV and radio against a backdrop of naked models to challenge sexism in the media.

Portraits of powerful and successful women, including Glenda Jackson, radio and television presenter Fi Glover, Baroness Helena Kennedy, Green MP Caroline Lucas, and Jane Garvey, the presenter of Radio 4's Woman's Hour are part of controversial new exhibition.

Artist Sue Spaul has hung the life-size portraits on a painted backdrop of naked women, inviting the viewer to explore and question the use of the female body.

Spaul's new exhibition, What Are You Looking At?, which is at The Strand Gallery, central London, from 2 June to 8 June, highlights the impact of the sexualisation of women in the media, including pictures of women in newspapers and magazines.

All the women who agreed to sit for Spaul's lifelike and intricate portraits are keen that the portrayal of women in the media should be debated.

Caroline Lucas says: "Sue Spaul's exhibition challenges us to think about how we view women, and encourages us both to question the increasing objectification of women's bodies in the media, and to celebrate the achievements of all women"

Fi Glover comments: "I love the premise behind Sue's work - that although the woman in the portrait might be multi talented and successful, behind the image of every woman lies the powerful force of imagery which still likes to rate women for their sex appeal to total strangers"



Sue Spaul says: "I wanted to challenge the casual use of images of naked women by placing them together with portraits of well know women.

"The portraits could hang in any boardroom were it not for the fact that formal settings such as these are traditionally filled with portraits of powerful men.

"I'm hoping the portraits capture the gravitas of the sitters, pointing to the importance of professional women more generally. But then there is so much imagery in the media focusing just on women as sexual objects. I wanted to question whether that impacts on the way we see all women."

Naked female body images dominate the pages of many newspapers and magazines. Spaul has placed her classically painted oil portraits of well known women on top of a flesh coloured wallpaper. The painted backdrop is full of images found from everyday magazines, newspapers and adverts, including The Sun and The Mirror.

There are 10 portraits in Spaul's latest exhibition, including Sian Edwards, the former music director of the English National Opera, Maggie Aderin Pocock, the space scientist and paralympic swimmer Stephanie Millward. The paintings range in size from 6.5 x 3.5 feet to 3.5 x 2.5 feet.

Fellow contemporary artist Sirpa Pajunen-Moghissi says of this approach : "Sue is asking us to challenge the identity of the women in the wallpaper. There is almost a slight element of comedy and discomfort in putting the portraits in this setting. But these two worlds do very much co-exist in today's culture. By placing them together, she forces us to ask difficult questions."

Chief among the questions is: "What Are You Looking At?" Do you really see the women in the portraits or is it the nameless naked women that draw your gaze?

The exhibition is at The Strand Gallery, 32 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6BP, from Tuesday 2 June until Monday 8 June, 11am – 6pm. Private View: Tuesday 2 June 6pm-8pm

The paintings are on sale from £2,500. A selection of images can be seen at www.suespaul.com
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Images of photographs available on request.

Sue Spaul is a figurative painter who works in oil using neo-classical painting techniques. Sue lives and works in London and Cornwall. She exhibits in London and has had work shown in the Mall Galleries, as part of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters' Annual Exhibition and in the Federation of British Artists' Exhibition. She is Deputy Head of Painting at the Art Academy, London SE1.
