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Artistic Tradition and Feminine Legacy in Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto*

Stiliana Milkova

Elena Ferrante's first novel *L'amore molesto* (1992) traces a daughter's search for the truth about her mother's unexpected death. Delia, the first-person narrator, returns to Naples after her mother, Amalia, has been found drowned, and begins to investigate. In tracing the story of her mother's demise, Delia gradually unearths her own repressed memories and in the process begins to understand her relationship with her mother. In narrating her mother's story, Delia also articulates a sense of identity grounded in her physical resemblance to her mother. Delia's recollections fixate on Amalia's uncontainable body, her Neapolitan dialect, and her work as a seamstress supporting the family. As Adalgisa Giorgio argues, *L'amore molesto* is a novel about the daughter's "furious attachment to the maternal body" so that Delia's identification with Amalia is key to her present life and to the mystery of her mother's death.¹ At the end of the novel, the daughter recognizes her mother's image in her own photograph and accepts her mother's legacy.

L'amore molesto is also a novel about artists, artist-like figures, and artistic legacies. Delia is a comic book artist in Rome; her father is a Neapolitan painter of gaudy commercial canvases; and Amalia is an artist who works with fabric—as a seamstress, she invents and reinvents clothes, bodies, stories. Likewise, the text describes a number of works of art: the father's crude paintings of a nude gypsy; a masterful canvas depicting two women, displayed in the window of a lingerie shop; and several photographic portraits of Amalia and Delia. Notably, these images portray the woman's body trapped within the frame of visual representation, within a work of art that is the product of a male artist. The novel also depicts the male artist at work—Delia's father creates numerous reproductions of the nude gypsy as well as garish, mediocre still lifes, seascapes, landscapes. And if the father exposes the nude female body in his art, Amalia strives to recover it and give it identity by sewing clothes for it—first as patterns on paper, then as shapes with fabric. The mother fails to resist the ideology of the male gaze while the daughter succeeds not only in subverting it, but also in reconfiguring it into a new system of visual representation, one based on feminine origin, creativity, and legacy.

By figuring both Delia and her father as artists, Ferrante invites scrutiny of their works of art and the social system enabling their production. In this essay, I shall examine the discourse

¹ Adalgisa Giorgio, "The Passion for the Mother: Conflicts and Idealizations in Contemporary Italian Narrative," in *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*, ed. Adalgisa Giorgio (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 122. Other notable scholarly studies of the mother-daughter relationship in *L'amore molesto* are: Tiziana de Rogatis, "Elena Ferrante e il *Made in Italy*: La costruzione di un immaginario femminile e napoletano," in *Made in Italy e cultura*, ed. Daniele Balicco (Palermo: Palumbo, 2016); Elizabeth Alsop, "Femmes Fatales: 'La Fascinazione di Morte' in Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto* and *I giorni dell'abbandono*," in *Italica* 91, no. 3 (Fall 2014); Eleonora Conti, "Abiti, madri e figlie ne *L'amore molesto* di Elena Ferrante," in *Lettera Zero*, no. 1 (2015); Federica Paoli, "Dell'accettazione e del rifiuto: immagini e figure del materno da Elena Ferrante a Vanessa Ambrosecchio," in *Bollettino di Italianistica*, no. 2 (2005); Patrizia Sambuco, "Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto*: The Renegotiation of the Mother's body," in *Corporeal Bonds: The Daughter-Mother Relationship in Twentieth-Century Italian Women's Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); and Laura Benedetti, "Struggling with the Mother," in *The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

constituted by the discrete artworks in the text to contend that the visual representation of women reflects the processes of objectification, fragmentation, and defacement associated with the male gaze and male artistic practice within an androcentric tradition. I illustrate these processes by analyzing the image of the female nude in *L'amore molesto* through the lens of Western art history and criticism, visual theory, and feminist thought. I argue that Ferrante's novel resists a patrilineal artistic legacy by advocating for a feminine genealogy, connecting Delia and Amalia as artist figures and bonding them through the act of artistic creation. The biological mother-daughter relationship is eschewed at the end of the novel when the two women relate to each other through their creative work, thereby initiating an artistic lineage not contingent on kinship but rather on creative affinity. This reading traces a new route for approaching the mother-daughter theme in Ferrante's text and opens new lines of inquiry into her creative imagination.

L'amore molesto is perhaps Ferrante's most visual novel, both stylistically and in terms of artworks described. That is why, perhaps, the novel has lent itself successfully to the cinematic medium. In *La frantumaglia*, Ferrante's volume of letters, essays, and interviews, we find evidence regarding her pronounced emphasis on visual images and especially on the father's artistic production. In her correspondence with Italian film director Mario Martone about his adaptation of *L'amore molesto*, she suggests ample revisions to his script, in effect prescribing how her text must be interpreted visually. She reiterates the importance of the father's gypsy painting: "Il tema del quadro potrebbe essere arricchito [...] Il tema del quadro—insisto—forse avrebbe bisogno di un tratto in più" ["The theme of the painting could be expanded [...] The theme of the painting—I insist—requires perhaps a few more strokes"].² Ferrante thus foregrounds "the theme of the painting" as an intentional element in her narrative.

Delia's narration itself unfolds according to the pictorial logic of drawing, so that the novel is also her artistic recreation of the past. Delia's memories emerge first as rough sketches, mere outlines of events or figures of the past; then they are gradually filled in and fleshed out until the past begins to form distinct visual tableaux. This narrative process becomes apparent when Delia remembers Amalia and her husband's friend Caserta standing in the funicular station forty years earlier. Delia depicts their figures, expanding the composition, and then adds visual details to the scene: "Ricorsi a dettagli scelti alla rinfusa per colorarle e vestirle" ["I chose details at random to color and clothe them"].³ Delia's tendency to portray the past in pictures is related to her selective memory. The narrative is comprised of fragmentary memories, discrete parts of a whole, which only at the end of the novel are assembled into a coherent if not comprehensive account. This narrative fragmentation anticipates the female body parts represented in the father's painting and in the lingerie shop canvas.

When Delia remembers details or scenes from the past, they acquire visual characteristics. She recalls a scene of domestic abuse employing the iconography of still-life painting, zooming into details rather than perceiving the whole picture:

Ora, per esempio, vedo le pesche schiacciate sul pavimento, le rose sbattute
dieci venti volte sul tavolo di cucina coi petali rossi per aria poi sparsi tutti intorno

² Elena Ferrante, *La frantumaglia* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2003), 30–31. My translation.

³ Elena Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 1999), 89. Subsequent quotes from *L'amore molesto* are from this edition and will be cited in parentheses following the quote. The English translation is from Elena Ferrante, *Troubling Love*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2006), 73. Subsequent quotes in English are from this translation and will be given in brackets following the quote.

e i gambi spinosi ancora fermati dalla carta argentata, i dolci scaraventati dalla finestra, il vestito bruciato sul fuoco della cucina. (57)

[Now, for example, I saw the peaches trampled on the floor, the roses slammed ten, twenty times against the kitchen table, the red petals scattering everywhere through the air, the thorny stems still wrapped in silver paper, the pastries dumped out the window, the dress burned on the kitchen stove.] (49)

Still-life painting depicts inanimate objects, such as flowers and fruit, arranged on a tabletop typically in an indoor setting. Traditionally, an allegorical meaning underlies the image as a whole and each of its components individually, so that messages about temperance and moderation, vanity, and mortality can be read in the canvas. Rotting fruit or wilting leaves might suggest the transience of life, whereas luxurious textiles might point to the vanity of human existence.⁴

In Delia's memory, the crushed peaches, the scattered flowers, the discarded sweets, the fabric of the mother's dress can likewise be read as the elements of a still-life painting.⁵ Still-life belongs to the novel's realm of visual references, explicitly linked to Delia's father's artistic production: he specializes in "pastoralle, marine, nature morte" (64) ["landscapes, seascapes, still lifes" (54)], and is hence implicated in that particular memory. Prior to the 20th century, these pictorial genres were considered "minor" (in contrast to historical painting, for example) and therefore more suitable for women painters.⁶ The employment of still-life iconography here at once implicates the father in the scene of domestic violence and weakens his position as a male artist working within such "minor" genres. It also identifies Delia herself as a woman artist, since it is she who recreates the past as a still-life painting, drawing on a genre traditionally available to women artists. Delia's recollected still-life scene presents a fragment of the violent past, framed aesthetically as a visual tableau, so that moments of battery take on the color and shape of a painting. This aesthetic framing screens her from the trauma of the past: the details of the scene are visible but their meaning is only implied. On the other hand, the aesthetic framing functions entirely within the patriarchal tradition of artistic education, production, and consumption.

The novel itself relies on images from within that tradition. Structurally, two paintings and two photographs frame the novel. These images also provide the visual impetus for Delia's fragmentary visions of the past and thus propel the plot forward. The two canvases—the father's painting of a nude gypsy and a masterful portrait of two women—appear at key junctures in the narrative; first separately, early on in the text, and then side by side in the father's studio at the end of the novel. Likewise, Delia's journey through Naples begins with a defaced photograph of Amalia and concludes with the alteration of Delia's own photograph. The images that open the novel establish a paradigm of artistic representation whereby women are stripped and subjected

⁴ On the iconography of still life in European painting, see Norman Bryson, "Chardin and the Text of Still Life," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1989); Stefano Zuffi and Matilde Battistini, *La natura morta: la storia, gli sviluppi internazionali, i capolavori* (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 1999); and Luca Bortolotti, *La natura morta: Storia, artisti, opere* (Florence: Giunti, 2010).

⁵ On Ferrante's iconography of still-life painting in *La figlia oscura* and especially on still life as a visual symptom of the female narrator's disgust for traditional gender roles, see Milkova, "Mothers, Daughters, Dolls: on Disgust in Elena Ferrante's *La figlia Oscura*," *Italian Culture* 31, no. 2 (2013).

⁶ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," in *Art and Sexual Politics*, ed. Thomas Hess and Elizabeth Baker (New York: Collier Books, 1973), 25.

to the objectifying, aggressive male gaze, as visual evidence of the artist's sexual domination and virility, to borrow art historian Carol Duncan's phrasing.⁷ These works of art, the product of an androcentric tradition, capture the pictorial and extrapictorial violence done to women in the male symbolic. The images that close the text subvert this paradigm of oppression and introduce a new model of feminine artistic genealogy. To arrive at the novel's ultimate revision of male legacy, we need to establish and trace the parameters of artistic production, especially the iconography of the female nude.

In the novel's second chapter, Delia attends her mother's funeral. In the absence of her father, she carries the casket containing Amalia's body during the funeral procession. The father's painting of a semi-nude gypsy woman accompanies the procession:

Quando il corteo fu fiancheggiato per un tratto da un uomo di colore che portava in spalla certe tele dipinte montate su telaio, la prima delle quali (quella visibile sulla sua schiena) raffigurava rozzamente una zingara discinta, sperai che né loro né i parenti se ne accorgessero. L'autore di quei quadri era mio padre. Forse stava lavorando alle sue croste anche in quel momento. Di quella zingara odiosa, venduta per le strade e nelle fiere di provincia da decenni, aveva fatto e seguivava a fare copie su copie, obbedendo per poche lire come sempre alla richiesta di brutti quadretti da soggiorno piccolo borghese. L'ironia delle linee che congiungono ore a incontri, a separazioni, a vecchi rancori, aveva mandato al funerale di mia madre non lui, ma quella sua pittura elementare, detestata da noi figlie più di quanto detestassimo il suo autore. (13)

[When the procession was accompanied for a short stretch by a colored man who was carrying on his back some paintings mounted in frames, the first of which (the one visible on his back) showed a crude portrayal of a half-naked Gypsy, I hoped that neither they nor the relatives would notice. The maker of those paintings was my father. Maybe he was working on one of his trashy canvases at that very moment. He had made, for decades, and continued to make innumerable copies of that hateful Gypsy, sold on the streets and at country fairs, supplying for a few lire the constant demand of petit-bourgeois living rooms for ugly pictures. The irony of the lines that connect moments to meetings, to separations, to old rancors had sent to my mother's funeral not him but that elemental painting of his, detested by his daughters even more than we detested its author.] (15–16)

The father is replaced by the product of his brush, the painting standing in for the artist and thus for a male-dominated artistic tradition. This substitution can be read as a synecdoche for the sexual, social, and visual power relations pervading the text. The female body is a recurring subject in the Western artistic tradition with a genre of its own, that of the female nude. Or, as John Berger puts it, "In the nudes of European painting we can discover some of the criteria and

⁷ I borrow the phrase "virility and domination" from the title of Carol Duncan's essay which argues that representations of nudes in the early twentieth century reduced women to objects of flesh—dehumanized, faceless bodies—as evidence of the artist's sexual domination. See Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982).

conventions by which women have been seen and judged as sights.”⁸ Art historian Linda Nochlin has shown convincingly how, since the 19th century, the woman’s nude body has been represented for man’s erotic pleasure.⁹ The nude projects male fantasies of access, sexual availability, and possession, while securing the man’s status as artist, spectator, and owner.¹⁰ The picturesque subject of the gypsy woman also reflects a fascination with the exotic or wild, sexual other as well as an attempt to harness, visually at least, her potentially subversive energy.¹¹ Moreover, as Nochlin argues, women artists were traditionally excluded from painting nude models and thus denied the most important stage in formal artistic education. This exclusion, among other social and cultural factors in a patriarchal society, accounts for the paucity of great women artists.¹² In the context of European art production and art history, the father’s artwork belongs to the tradition of depicting nudes for the pleasure of male artists and male viewers. The gypsy painting embodies an established androcentric practice of artistic production, consumption, and interpretation.

The father’s canvas bodies forth an ideology of male domination, an assertion of masculine power over feminine nakedness. This ideology is sustained by a second substitution at work in the passage. The half-naked gypsy flanking Amalia’s casket stands in for Amalia’s body inside the casket, for her nude corpse which Delia has observed at length a page earlier and which is now butchered by the autopsy, “macellato dall’autopsia” (14). This substitution reaffirms the objectification and commodification of the mother’s body, its valorization as the product of a male artist in a patriarchal society, as well as its violation (“macellato”) by that society. The substitution works in reverse as well: the eroticized semi-nude gypsy, juxtaposed with Amalia’s coffin, becomes corpse-like, a painted cadaver which resists the male gaze by implying man’s ultimate objectification in death. In fact, as we find out a few chapters into the novel, the gypsy is dancing naked (“una zingara che ballava nuda” 58), and hence the painting accompanying Amalia’s funeral procession can also be seen as a *danse macabre*: the human body denuded of flesh dancing its way to the grave.¹³

Despite this symbolic substitution, the semi-nude gypsy reveals what art historians Norma Broude and Mary Garrard describe as “the controlling part that sexual attitudes and assumptions have played both in the creation and naming of ‘Art.’”¹⁴ The painting reifies the father’s salacious gaze in particular, and the collective male gaze in general, both of which control Amalia’s life. Constantly pregnant, Amalia is forced to comply with a sexual economy that satisfies the needs of her husband and the demands for reproduction in a patriarchal society. Likewise, she partakes in a visual economy that posits her as a spectacle or sight, coerced to perceive herself through the male gaze, or in John Berger’s terms, as both surveyor and

⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London and New York: Penguin, 1972), 47, 63.

⁹ Linda Nochlin, “Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art,” in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 136–144.

¹⁰ Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1991), 42–44. See also Linda Nochlin, “Women, Art, and Power,” in *Women, Art, and Power*, 1–19.

¹¹ For a discussion of the gypsy as an exotic internal other, see Ken Lee, “Orientalism and Gypsylorism,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 44, no. 2 (2000): 132.

¹² Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”

¹³ On the iconography and meaning of the *danse macabre*, see Sophie Oosterwijk, “Of Corpses, Constables, and Kings: The *Danse Macabre* in Late Medieval and Renaissance Culture,” in *The Journal of the British Archeological Association* 157 (2004).—

¹⁴ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, “Introduction: Feminism and Art History,” in Broude and Garrard, *Feminism and Art History*, 2.

surveyed.¹⁵ This is exactly the visual mode Ferrante critiques in *La frantumaglia*: “le donne delle generazioni precedenti [...] si sorvegliavano poco e se lo facevano lo facevano a imitazione di chi le sorvegliava, come aguzzine di sé stesse” (113) [“Women of the previous generations [...] observed themselves little, and if they did it at all, they imitated those who observed them, like jailors of themselves”].¹⁶ Women preceding Delia’s generation have learned to perceive themselves through the confining, subjugating male gaze. Even at the end of her life, Amalia still cannot escape this mode of self-surveillance which she has internalized: “si immaginava stretta tra quattro pupille, espropriata da due sguardi” (163) [“she imagined herself caught between two sets of pupils, expropriated by two gazes”] (128). Amalia sees herself trapped by the combined gaze of her husband and his friend Caserta, her body their property. Delia’s hatred for the painting is as much about her father as it is about the system in which it is created.

The nude also enters the market of both women and works of art as merchandise. The father capitalizes on Amalia’s body as his nude model:

Spesso le pose della zingara erano malamente ricopiate da certe foto di donne che mio padre nascondeva in una scatola dentro l’armadio e che io andavo a sbirciare di nascosto [...] Ciò che gli veniva meglio erano i capelli. Lasciava quelle donne senza volto ma sull’ovale vuoto del viso tratteggiava con efficacia una costruzione maestosa, inequivocabilmente simile alla bella pettinatura che Amalia sapeva realizzare coi suoi lunghi capelli [...] Quando nostro padre portò a termine la sua zingara, io ne fui certa e anche Amalia: la zingara era lei: meno bella, sproporzionata, pasticciata nei colori, ma lei. (141–142)

[Often the poses of the Gypsy were rough copies of some photographs of women that my father kept hidden in a box in the closet and that I peeked at in secret [...] What he did best was the hair. He would leave those women without features but above the empty oval of the face he would skillfully draw a majestic construction, unmistakably similar to the beautiful creation that Amalia knew how to make with her long hair [...] When our father finished the Gypsy, I was sure of it and so was Amalia: the Gypsy was her: less beautiful, the proportions wrong, the colors smudged; but her.] (112)

In turning her body into a reproducible commodity, the painter defaces Amalia, divesting her of personality. The gypsy painting enacts and reflects a social order which, as Luce Irigaray puts it, “requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate.”¹⁷ The erasure of uniqueness is a necessary condition for the circulation on the market of Amalia’s body as a semi-pornographic image. Mary Ann Caws goes even further in stating that the model, alienated from her body and its representation, present and future, suffers a violent death at the hands of the painter.¹⁸ In discussing the nude in Western art, Carol Duncan argues that this de-humanization and transgression of the female body enables

¹⁵ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 47.

¹⁶ My translation.

¹⁷ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 172.

¹⁸ Mary Ann Caws, “Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art,” in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), 384.

male fantasies: “the artist’s eye is a hyper-male lens that ruthlessly filters out everything irrelevant to the most basic genital urge.”¹⁹ In her letters to Mario Martone guiding his cinematic interpretation of her novel, Ferrante underscores typographically the importance of Amalia as the father’s nude female model for the gypsy painting—she italicizes the word “nudo” perhaps to suggest that Amalia must also be understood in the art historical context of male artists painting female nudes.²⁰

The father’s art effaces Amalia’s identity twice: first within the realm of visual representation and then again within patriarchal discourse. Delia describes him as the man who “l’avrebbe coperta col suo cognome, che l’avrebbe cancellata col suo alfabeto” (138) [“who would cover her with his name, who would annihilate her with his alphabet” (110)]. The name-of-the-father literally and symbolically covers and erases Amalia, reducing her to her body parts. When Amalia objects to selling the gypsy paintings and attempts to regain some control over the circulation of her body, the father asserts his right as artist, spectator, and owner, in a scene of brutal violence. Delia succeeds in recollecting the entire picture in its gory details only towards the end of the novel: “mio padre senza preavviso colpì Amalia due volte in faccia [...] lei scappò [...] fu tirata fuori a calci [...] Amalia si rialzò e strappò tutti i disegni dalle pareti. Fu raggiunta, afferrata per i capelli e sbattuta con la testa contro lo specchio dell’armadio, che si spezzò” (142–3) [“My father without warning hit Amalia twice in the face [...] she fled [...] she was dragged out and kicked [...] Amalia got up and tore all the drawings off the wall. He caught her, grabbed her by the hair, pounded her head against the mirror of the armoire, which broke” (112–3)]. This scene takes place in the parents’ bedroom, which serves as the father’s studio and the site of both domestic abuse and painting, sex and art. Here, Delia revives another memory in which Amalia is seen as comprised of fragmented and bleeding body parts, so that blood becomes symptomatic of both femininity (menstrual blood appears several times in the novel) and the feminine condition within the symbolic order (125–6).

After the funeral, another painting emerges from Delia’s memories. Delia visits the Vossi sisters’ lingerie shop to investigate the expensive undergarments in her mother’s possession at the time of her death. She remembers seeing a beautiful painting, framed by the shop’s window. The ensuing description evokes the themes of fragmentation, commodification, and male domination that are embedded in the mechanisms of looking and display:

Mi ero fermata spesso all’esterno, soprattutto perché mi piaceva la vetrina d’angolo dove gli indumenti per signora erano distrattamente appoggiati sotto un dipinto che non ero capace di datare, sicuramente di mano esperta. Due donne, i cui profili quasi si sovrapponevano, tanto erano vicine e impegnate negli stessi movimenti, correvano a bocca spalancata, da destra verso la sinistra della tavola. Non si poteva sapere se inseguivano o erano inquisite. L’immagine sembrava segata via da uno scenario molto più ampio, sicché delle donne non si vedeva la gamba sinistra e le loro braccia tese erano troncate ai polsi. (66)

[I had often stopped outside because I especially liked the corner window, where women’s garments were carelessly placed beneath a painting that I wasn’t able to date, but that was certainly by a skilled artist. Two women, so close and so identical in movement that their profiles were almost superimposed, were running

¹⁹ Duncan, “Virility and Domination,” 296.

²⁰ Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, 29.

openmouthed, from the right side of the canvas to the left. You couldn't tell if they were following or being followed. The image seemed to have been cut away from a much larger scene, and so only the left legs of the women were visible and their extended arms were severed at the wrists.] (55)

The pieces of underwear scattered in the window outline a fragmented female body. Linda Nochlin has argued that the body-in-parts belongs to the visual representation of modernity and the modern experience.²¹ Purveyed through signboards, paintings, and photographs, the fragmented or cut-off female body metonymically evokes the body as whole, referencing the sexual attractiveness of the invisible owner or the availability of appetizing female bodies beyond the boundaries of visual representation.²² The lingerie shop window functions within this system of sexual power relations.

The painting in the Vossi shop window confers cultural and social value upon the window display but more importantly, used as advertising, it perpetuates the image of the chopped-up female body on offer for the male gaze. Cut from a larger work, the canvas itself emblemizes violence. The two women's bodies, caught in the act of fleeing, their legs missing and their hands truncated at the wrists, are likewise disfigured by the severed canvas. This image recalls the intentional cropping of female figures we find in the work of European male artists since the late 19th century. This pictorial strategy alludes to women as objects and fetishizes their body parts.²³ In Ferrante's text, the canvas not only embodies the representational violence of dismembering the female body, it also works as a visual metaphor for the literal violence the father inflicts on Amalia. It recalls the bedroom scene quoted earlier—Amalia running away from the father's blows, his catching up with her, kicking her, striking her, hurling her against the mirror which breaks into pieces. Like the two bodies in the painting, she is trapped, denied wholeness and visibility, reduced to battered body parts. Likewise, Delia is fleeing from a violent past she refuses to remember but which imposes itself onto her memory and invades her present through the picture. Giancarlo Lombardi suggests in passing that the Vossi canvas stands for the narrative itself, as an emblem of women's containment and imprisonment.²⁴ Tiziana de Rogatis contends that the two women's superimposed profiles provide a metaphor for the doubling of Amalia-Delia within the narrative.²⁵ De Rogatis further notes an important plot element: that in the weeks preceding Amalia's death, the Vossi canvas becomes the price that the now old Caserta pays Amalia's ex-husband to obtain his permission to court Amalia.²⁶ The painting thus becomes embroiled in the objectification of women, confirming their status as exchangeable objects.

The truncated painting also constitutes a visual metaphor for sexual difference, for the threat of castration that woman represents and that necessitates her subjugation, demystification, and fetishization. In her often-cited 1975 article on visual pleasure in narrative cinema, Laura Mulvey provides a useful lens for approaching the Vossi painting:

²¹ Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

²² *Ibid.*, 39–40.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7–59. On surrealist representations of the fragmented female body, see Caws, "Ladies Shot and Painted."

²⁴ Giancarlo Lombardi, "Scambi d'identità: Il recupero del corpo materno ne *L'amore molesto*," *Romance Languages Annual* 10 (1999): 288–291.

²⁵ Tiziana de Rogatis, "Elena Ferrante e il *Made in Italy*: La costruzione di un immaginario femminile e napoletano," in *Made in Italy e cultura*, ed. Daniele Balicco (Palermo: Palumbo, 2016), 303.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

[U]ltimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of penis as visually ascertainable, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.²⁷

The materiality of the Vossi canvas makes tangible the lack that organizes the symbolic order, a lack reified in the novel through uncle Filippo's severed arm as a surrogate image for castration. That is why, perhaps, the painting remains enclosed within the window frame, subordinate to the scopie regime of display, consumption, and visual/sexual pleasure.

A reading of this painting as a visual metaphor for male domination is endorsed by the father's claim of authorship. But the Vossi painting is unlike his mediocre, vulgar work; to Delia it appears the masterful product of an expert hand, "mano esperta." Yet, the father himself has acquired a level of mastery over his gypsy paintings so that his mechanical reproduction of nudes becomes masterful work through sheer repetition:

Fissava la tela bianca al cavalletto e ne abbozzava i contorni con mano esperta. Poi il corpo diventava di bronzo con luccichii rossastri. Il ventre si arcuava, le mammelle si gonfiavano, i capezzoli si ergevano. Intanto spuntavano occhi lucenti, labbra rosse, capelli corvini in gran quantità e pettinati a quel modo di Amalia, che col tempo era diventato antiquato ma suggestivo. In poche ore la tela era completata. (143)

[He attached the blank canvas to the easel and sketched the outlines with an expert hand. Then the body became bronze with reddish highlights. The belly curved, the breasts swelled, the nipples rose. Meanwhile, sparkling eyes emerged, red lips, raven hair, masses of it, combed in Amalia's style, which over time had become old-fashioned but evocative. In a few hours the canvas was finished.] (113)

The recurring phrase "mano esperta" establishes a link between the two works of art and posits the father as the possible author of both the gypsy painting and the Vossi canvas. The father's creative process consists of the mechanical reproduction of the same features—stomach, breasts, nipples—which again reduce the nude to the bodily signs of her sex and her availability. This fragmentation aligns with the visual rhetoric of the Vossi canvas. In her instructions to Mario Martone, Ferrante does not dismiss the father as the possible author: "Bisogna immaginarsi che il padre di Delia avesse all'origine un suo talento rozzo—forse è davvero suo il quadro delle sorelle Vossi" ["We must imagine that Delia's father initially had a raw talent—perhaps the Vossi sisters' painting is really his"].²⁸ Ferrante again foregrounds the role of visual art in her novel, insisting once more on art as a male-dominated practice.

A miniature version of this artistic practice reigns inside the Vossi shop as well. When Delia visits the shop, the painting she remembers has been replaced by a gaudy still-life arrangement of

²⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 64.

²⁸ Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, 29. My translation.

lingerie in electric colors, bald mannequins, and gilded objects (67). The clients inside replicate the window display: vulgar nouveau riche women are showing off gold and silver jewelry, parading their abundant semi-nude bodies for the sake of a tanned and sleazy male salesperson. In Delia's eyes, this garish reenactment of the dynamic of submission and domination governing Neapolitan society and embodied in the father's paintings, acquires the shape and colors of semi-pornographic comic strips ["da fumetti semiporno" (70)]. The women inside the Vossi shop, figured as inanimate drawings, reiterate the visual trope of the painted semi-nude gypsy.

After a confrontation with the sleazy salesperson who turns out to be a childhood friend, Delia is forced to recognize her physical resemblance to her mother. The encounter initiates the process of coming to terms with the past and with Amalia. Delia's recognition transpires by way of Amalia's photograph. The daughter realizes that her mother had intended the expensive lingerie for Delia's birthday rather than for herself. In an attempt to find out how her mother obtained that merchandise, she shows her mother's photo identification to the Vossi salesperson. Instead of encountering a definitive sign of her mother's death, she finds her own likeness in the image.²⁹ Like the Vossi painting described only pages earlier, Amalia's photograph represents the conflation of two women:

Lanciai uno sguardo alla foto-tessera di mia madre. I lunghi capelli baroccamente architettati sulla fronte e intorno al viso erano stati accuratamente raschiati via. Il bianco emerso intorno alla testa era stato mutato con una matita in un grigio nebuloso. Con la stessa matita qualcuno aveva lievemente indurito i lineamenti del viso. La donna della foto non era Amalia: ero io. (73)

[I looked at the photograph of my mother. The long, baroquely sculpted hair on her forehead and around her face had been carefully scraped away. The white that emerged around her head had been changed with a pencil to a nebulous gray. With the same pencil someone had slightly hardened the features of her face. The woman in the photograph wasn't Amalia: it was me.] (61)

A passport photograph documents official, government-constituted identity and sanctions a relationship of equivalence between name, image, and person. In this case, the official, objective discourse of the photograph has been disrupted and replaced with another. The mother's face has been altered so as to inscribe the daughter's features onto it. This procedure can be seen as similar to the father's painting technique—leaving blank the oval of the face, depicting "donne senza volto" but with Amalia's ornate hairstyle (141). The photograph constitutes a double portrait of Amalia-Delia, the superimposition of faces and identities enabled only through the erasure or deformation of official ideology and iconography. As Delia remarks about Amalia's photograph, "qualcuno [...] le aveva deformato il viso per ridurla al mio corpo" (78) ["someone [...] had disfigured her face to fit my body" (64)]. Who has executed Amalia's visual transformation into Delia? Is it the father whose creative process entails blank faces and the superimposition of features and bodies? Or perhaps Amalia who as a seamstress excels at outlining women's silhouettes on paper? These questions are central to my argument and I return to them at the end of this essay.

²⁹ On the intimate relationship between photography and death, see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981); and Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

The Vossi painting emerges from Delia's memories and into the present towards the end of the novel when she visits her father in their old apartment. The painting now occupies his bedroom/studio, the very site of her mother's abuse and exploitation, of the production and reproduction of the father's crude art:

Mentre parlava, vidi di sbieco, sotto la finestra, la tavola che avevo ammirato da ragazza nella vetrina delle sorelle Vossi. Le due donne urlanti dai profili che quasi combaciavano—slanciate da destra verso sinistra in un movimento mutilato di mani, di piedi, di parte delle teste, come se la tavola non fosse riuscita a contenerle o fosse stata ottusamente segata—erano finite lì, in quella stanza, tra le mareggiate, le zingare e le pastorelle. (149)

[While he spoke, I saw obliquely, under the window, the table [sic] that I had admired as a girl in the window of the Vossi sisters' shop. The two shouting women whose profiles almost coincided—hurled from right to left in a mutilated movement of hands, feet, part of the head, as if the table had been unable to contain them or had been bluntly sawed off—had ended up there, in that room, among the stormy seas, the Gypsies, and the pastoral scenes.] (117–118)

The women's open mouths are now described as screaming, their movement a union of mutilated body parts. This scene elaborates an even more pronounced visual rhetoric of pursuit, entrapment, and disfigurement. Placed beside the father's mass-produced gypsy paintings, the Vossi canvas likewise projects a vision of women—Delia and Amalia—as fragmented, commodified bodies. But in this second appearance, the mutilated bodies exceed the boundaries of the canvas. Liberated rhetorically by a linguistic figure, “come se” (“as if”), the two women exit the prison of the frame, the movement of their mutilated limbs now evoking rage, energy, and action.

The second appearance of the Vossi painting in the father's studio liberates Delia from the male-dominated artistic tradition. The artist's studio is a topos familiar to us from numerous European paintings of an artist drawing (or sculpting) a nude female model. This topos prescribes a traditional distribution of power relations between an active, controlling male viewer/artist and a passive, nude female model. But in this scene Delia refuses to step into the role of a model and thus retrace her mother's steps. Instead, Delia inhabits a position as artist, spectator, and critic of her father's art: in an authoritative and dismissive gesture, she accuses him of lacking artistic vision. Observing him while he is painting, she tells him: “Il mare non può essere azzurro se il cielo è rosso fuoco” (145) [“The sea can't be blue if the sky is that red” (114)]. The father does not recognize her and asks her “Chi sei?” [“Who are you?”], perhaps because she addresses him from the subject position of the (male) artist. The question undoes the familial ties between father and daughter, disrupts the patrilineal artistic legacy, and severs the social and visual bonds that link women to male artists. Delia asserts herself as an artist in the present, relegating the father, with his garish, primitive art, to the past.

The novel concludes with Delia's act of artistic creation, which appropriates the visual rhetoric of the Vossi canvas and reinvents it to tell another story. Delia uses a pen to paint over her photograph and to transform it into a portrait of Amalia. The text ends with the superimposed, coinciding faces and stories of Amalia-Delia, as the product of Delia's hand:

Fissai la foto a lungo, studiandomi di riconoscere Amalia in quella immagine. Era una foto recente, fatta apposta per rinnovare il documento scaduto. Con un pennarello, mentre il sole mi scottava il collo, disegnai intorno ai miei lineamenti la pettinatura di mia madre. Mi allungai i capelli corti muovendo dalle orecchie e gonfiando due ampie bande che andavano a chiudersi in un'onda nerissima, levata sulla fronte. Mi abbozzai un ricciolo ribelle sull'occhio destro, trattenuto a stento tra l'attaccatura dei capelli e il sopracciglio. Mi guardai, mi sorrisi. Quell'acconciatura antiquata, in uso negli anni Quaranta ma già rara alla fine degli anni Cinquanta, mi donava. Amalia c'era stata. Io ero Amalia. (178)

[I stared for a long time at the photograph, studying myself in search of Amalia in that image. It was a recent photo, taken when I renewed the document. With a pen, as the sun burned my neck, I drew around my own features my mother's hair. I lengthened the short hair, moving from the ears and making two broad bands that met in a black wave, over the forehead. I sketched a rebel curl over the right eye, barely contained between the hairline and the eyebrow. I looked at myself, smiled at myself. That old-fashioned hairstyle, popular in the forties but already rare at the end of the fifties, suited me. Amalia had been. I was Amalia.] (139)

The photograph as a double self-portrait of Amalia-Delia becomes the representational site of their symbolic union, the moment when Delia recognizes the past and embraces it by painting over it. Delia's identity is thus constructed not only through the visual image of her mother but also in the act of painting, mastering, and controlling her own image.

Delia's photograph recalls Amalia's through a chiasmic inversion. In the earlier image, Amalia's face is scraped away and Delia's features traced onto it. In the latter, Delia herself enacts this process to transform her face into Amalia's. The photographs' shared visual rhetoric and creative strategy link the two images and the two women. This linkage excludes the male artist and instead visualizes a relationship between mother and daughter that is not contingent on the symbolic order but rather on shared artistic skill and mutual representation. Amalia's sartorial art consists of capturing and recreating the female body out of paper and fabric: "Quelle misure, prese abbracciando discretamente col metro giallo da sarta corpi femminili di tutte le età, diventavano modelli di cartache, applicati alla stoffa con spilli, disegnavano sul tessuto ombre di seni e di fianchi" (129) ["Those measurements, taken by discreetly embracing, with her seamstress's tape, female bodies of all ages, became paper patterns that, fastened to the fabric with pins, portrayed on it the shadows of breasts and hips" (103)]. Amalia's art entails drawing and outlining the female body, cutting it and shaping it to create its double, as Delia exclaims when she is about to put on Amalia's old blue suit: "Oh, ero affascinata dalla sua arte di costruire un doppio" (159) ["Oh, I was fascinated by her art of constructing a double" (126)]. If Amalia's art is the art of constructing doubles, then it is not the father who has altered Amalia's photo to make it look like Delia. Amalia has erased her own features to open a space for Delia to inscribe and recognize herself. In this way, the mother establishes a feminine creative legacy, handing down her artwork to her daughter together with the opportunity for the daughter to find herself in that artwork and assert her own identity as a woman, daughter, and artist. In other words, when considered together, the two photographs bypass the male-centered artistic tradition by articulating and visualizing a feminine legacy facilitated through images of and by mothers and daughters. This legacy is consolidated through the exchange of clothes (the mother's creation)

that occurs when Delia puts on her mother's old "tailleur blu": "Sentii quell'abito vecchio come la narrazione estrema che mia madre mi aveva lasciato e che ora con tutti gli artifici necessari mi calzava a pennello" (171) ["I felt that that old garment was the final narrative that my mother had left me, and that now, with all the necessary adjustments, it fit me like a glove" (134)]. The juxtaposition of the mother's story ("narrazione"—which can also be seen as Delia's story or the narrative of *L'amore molesto* itself) and the paintbrush ("pennello"), used idiomatically to describe the suit's perfect fit, indicates the visual, artistic bond between the two women.

The final scene of *L'amore molesto* articulates a feminine creative genealogy that claims and reclaims artistic work and production for women. This genealogy dispenses with the nude, with the male artist, spectator, and owner, and with the male subject position altogether. Amalia-Delia's self-portrait, executed by them together, for each other's sake, replaces the social-sexual-visual discourse of the nude and inaugurates its own, based on an exchange between two women artists, mentors, and collaborators. This new model even circumvents the biological mother-daughter relationship by avoiding any lexicon of kinship in the novel's chiasmic repetition of "non era Amalia: ero io" and "Io ero Amalia." *L'amore molesto* forges a feminine legacy that can be understood as a form of what Italian feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro terms *affidamento* or entrustment between women as a social and pedagogical practice. *Affidamento* is a vertical, elective "mother-daughter" relationship in which a woman "entrusts" herself to a more experienced mentor.³⁰ In this relationship, "mothers" and "daughters" attempt to create a female symbolic order, which enables the exchange of knowledge and desire between women and rejects the male symbolic order of the father. Through their practice, Amalia and Delia lay the foundation of a feminine creative legacy, initiating each other in the art of painting or narrating. In *L'amore molesto*, Elena Ferrante, who claims familiarity with French and Italian feminist thought, elaborates, by way of Luisa Muraro writing about Luce Irigaray, a practice which "has led us to choose to stay among women, to choose to act in accordance with the judgment of our fellow women, to accept the authority of women, and to seek the nourishment of female thought for our minds."³¹

In the opening pages of *La frantumaglia*, Ferrante addresses her newly found talent for writing on command. She illustrates her approach with a mundane example, then she proceeds to discuss a subject close to her heart: learning to love the mother. On the topic of the mother, she unequivocally relates her writing to that of Irigaray and Muraro: "troverò una strada per svolgere il mio compito fino a citare ad arte Luce Irigaray e Luisa Muraro" ["I will find a way to carry out my assignment to the point of skillfully quoting Luce Irigaray and Luisa Muraro"].³² In her review of *La frantumaglia*, Luisa Muraro herself refers to that exact quote: "Non faccio commenti, perché il commento lo fa lei e io lo condivido, non importa qui stabilire se la cosa risalga al libro stesso (intendo *L'ordine simbolico della madre*) o all'uso che ne abbiamo fatto"

³⁰ Luisa Muraro's theory of *affidamento* is elaborated in her *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1991). On *affidamento* see also Graziella Parati and Rebecca West, "Introduction," in *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice*, ed. Graziella Parati and Rebecca West (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press and London Associated University Press, 2002), 18–19. Leslie Elwell reads Leda and Nina's relationship in Ferrante's *La figlia oscura* through the lens of *affidamento*. See Leslie Elwell, "Breaking Bonds," chap. 4 in "Italian Female Epistemologies Beyond 'The Scene of the Crime,'" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2013).

³¹ Luisa Muraro, "Female Genealogies," in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, trans. Patricia Cicogna and Margaret Whitford, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford (New York: Chicago University Press, 1994), 331. On Ferrante's knowledge of Luce Irigaray and Italian feminist thought, see *La frantumaglia*, 132.

³² Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, 20. My translation.

["I won't comment because she is the one making a comment and I share it—the point here is not to establish whether she is referring to my book (by which I mean *L'ordine simbolico della madre*) or to the use we have made of it"].³³ These two quotes not only explicitly link Ferrante's and Muraro's texts, they establish a dialogue between the two, a discursive encounter, which has already occurred on the pages of *L'amore molesto*.

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³³ Luisa Muraro, "Pensare con Elena Ferrante," in *Via Dogana: Rivista di pratica politica* 68 (2004): 12, http://www.libriadelledonne.it/_oldsite/Via%20Dogana/testi/vdog_68c.htm. My translation.

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