

# Old Game, New Rules

By Raphael Rubinstein in Brooklyn College Art Gallery  
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Like the old masters, Despo Magoni uses painting to tell a story but there is an unexpected element in her work, a turn in the story she tells, that ushers us into a world very different from the one that art history has made familiar. By a single maneuver, at once elementary and complex, Magoni has turned art history on its head. In this suite of twenty-three paintings titled *The Queen's Moves in a Game of Chess*, Magoni has broken with a thousand precedents by the simple act of making her protagonist a mature woman.

Art history is, of course, filled with women. Indeed for centuries at a time, the chief task of painters seems to have been to depict as many female bodies as possible. But almost all of the women we find are present as (male) ideals of feminine beauty and/or as passive or secondary figures. That is, they are examples of conventional beauty; or female nudes---young, available---presented for the pleasure of the male spectator; or genre figures illustrating the variety of subservient social roles of women. If you ran through the most familiar images of women in European art history it will not take long to confirm this. From Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* to Manet's *Olympia*, from Botticelli's *Primavera* to Goya's *Maja*, from Bernini's *St. Teresa* to Degas' sculpture of a fourteen year old ballet dancer. The exceptions? Images of women who are neither young nor beautiful, subservient nor passive? Women who are protagonists? Critic and novelist John Berger – an early and perceptive investigator of these questions --- cites Ruben's *Helene Fourment in a Fur Coat* and Rembrandt's *Danae* as rare exceptions where the artist includes the subject's "will and her intentions in the very structure of the image." One might also include certain depictions of the biblical figures of *Salome* and *Judith*, although even these strong images can be diluted by the male-directed eroticism, as in Moreau's *Salome*, who resembles nothing so much as an "exotic dancer". Significantly, one of the most powerful examples of this genre was created by a woman: Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith*. And there is Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, except that she, like the *Nike of Samothrace*, is more symbol than human.

Did the twentieth century, which broke with so many ancient traditions, also break with this one? Picasso? Man Ray? Marcel Duchamp? Warhol? *The Demoiselles D'Avignon*; a naked woman with two slits in her back that transforms her into a musical instrument; the keyhole glimpse of another naked woman, faceless with legs spread; Marilyn Monroe – these are hardly examples of independent women. Perhaps the best thing modernism did to change how women were represented was, focusing on non-figurative art, to leave them (and men too) out of the picture altogether.

The role of the female figure in Western art is particularly sensitive and crucial because it hinges on the very nature of looking at a work of art. The idea of a spectator gazing a beautiful and valuable object is simultaneously the model of visual aesthetic and sexual politics. To quote John Berger again: "In the average

European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator.” There’s actually a technical term that can be applied to this situation, “scopophilia,” which, as film critic Laura Mulvey has pointed out, is a kind of voyeurism that Freud linked to the process of “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.” In other words, to look is to control, the gaze is a sign of power.



*Move #12, oil on canvas, 67 x 45 inches, 1991*

When we confront a painting, at some point we must ask “Who is looking? Who is being looked at?” It’s a sign of Magoni’s awareness of these issues, that she has made the gaze so central to this series of paintings. The queen never looks at the viewer until the penultimate moment in painting #12, which is also the first time we see her pubic hair. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Let’s suspend this question of who is looking in order to answer the more basic question: what is happening?

The title of this series of paintings, which Magoni painted between October 1989 and August 1992 tells us where to begin: *The Queen’s Moves in a Game of Chess*. In chess, the queen is the most powerful piece on the board, able to move in all directions as far as she wants but, as Magoni is well aware, this power is only there to protect the king, a much weaker piece but one in whom ultimate power, or at least legitimacy resides.

Thus in Magoni’s paintings the “queen’s move” will be the moment when the queen begins to act for herself, rather than in service of the king. But despite her great power, the queen cannot immediately do what she wants. In these paintings we follow her difficult, painful education in freedom of action.

In some ways the very choice of chess as the stage for this allegory already says a lot: a game in which the pieces are sexed and only one on each side is female, surrounded by fifteen male pieces; a game that is an allegory for that other male-dominated scene, the battlefield; a game that in modern art immediately brings to mind Marcel Duchamp, whose idea of provocative wit was to have himself photographed playing chess with a woman, who was, needless to say, naked and years younger than the artist. The game of chess is also still dominated by male champions. Magoni seems to be issuing the challenge: “I’ll beat you at your own game.” Among the various reasons for Magoni’s choice of the chess metaphor, one of the most important is surely that the queen’s isolation in the game of chess mirrors the female artist’s sense of isolation in male dominated art history.

In the first canvas, the queen is not even present. What we see are two men huddled at the base of a towering yellow castle. In the parlance of chess, two pawns

and a rook. It is only in the second painting of this twenty-three part series that the queen appears, but this first canvas announces that the central theme will be power, symbolized by the dominating castle. (In chess, the castles are also sometimes casually referred to as “towers” which sounds a lot like “power.”) Prison and fortress, the castle is for us a symbol of the Middle Ages, and also the symbol used by Kafka for a book that described in hallucinatory prescience the totalitarian universe. The image of the castle shows up again in #8 of the series, where Magoni’s queen makes her escape by leaping in the moat. We see her in mid-air, legs and arms outspread, like a skydiver descending, with two men/pawns again visible at the base of the tower.



*Move #8, oil on canvas, 67 x 56 inches, 1990*

Who are these men, the figures that surround the queen in every canvas? The figure on the right in painting #8 is strikingly contemporary. In fact it’s no accident that some of the male faces in Magoni’s paintings bring to mind politicians and bureaucrats since she often takes her images from newspaper photographs. Sometimes apparently recognizable – I am convinced that the laughing head in the lower left-hand corner of painting #11 must be Oliver North – other times they are types, military men, public servants, business executives, all those serious fellows who keep our great institutions running. But in Magoni’s world we see them stripped of their signs of office, no uniforms, no “power suits.” Only rarely in painting #12 for instance does she show us one of these characters in a suit. Instead, we see their tired flesh, their five o’clock

shadows, their bleary, compromised eyes. She wants to reveal them for the crude pawns that they are, and to drive the point home often places them alongside much more primitive figures, reborn Cro Magnon men. The intent is clear: it’s only the outer trappings—clothes, hairstyles—that distinguish contemporary savagery from the prehistoric brand.

In an interesting supplemental series to the *The Queen’s Moves in a Game of Chess*, Magoni has painted eight small canvases showing only the heads of her pawns, sympathetically judging them one by one while also summoning a host of historical allusions from Roman sculpture to the grimacing bust of 18th century German sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt to Picasso.

But it’s not just the pawns that are miserable specimens. Even higher up on the scale of power, the big men are not much to look at. The Bishops are duplicitous and pinched. The king, when we finally see him in the guise of Henry VIII in the concluding triptych, is a tired and pale figure, not at all the robust image of legend. Magoni also subjects Holbein, whose portrait of Henry VIII inspired this image, to her gaze that refuses to be overwhelmed by the tricks of male power. Still Magoni never condemns painting itself as impossibly compromised by its use as a tool of male

power. On the contrary, she has a great affection and admiration for the medium and its history. A good example of this can be seen in how she spotlights in the background of painting #4, which could be for an operating room or a night game in a stadium, recall the backgrounds and drapery in El Greco. This influence is made more explicit in the highly El Grecoesque right panel of the concluding triptych where the queen, now crowned, seems to be Queen Elizabeth I, had she been painted by El Greco. It's no accident perhaps that Magoni often paints with El Greco in the back of her mind –after all, she too is a Greek-born artist working far from her homeland.



*Pawn #2, oil on canvas, 17 x 17 inches, 1992, private collection, USA*

If the men are diminished figures in these paintings, it's first of all for the obvious reason that the star is the queen. In every painting except the first, her figure dominates the canvas. As we follow the queen through this quest for the crown, through each of her twelve moments of struggle, it's hard not to be reminded of Jesus and of the stations of the cross. This parallel is made explicit in the seventh canvas where the queen, framed by an inferno of red, is holding a heavy cross in one hand. This canvas also highlights one of the trademarks of Magoni's fluid style; a bouquet of expressive, claw-like hands. But the parallel need not be strictly Christian for the queen's tests also recall the Classical story of the labors of Hercules.

But finally, these paintings do not need any such references to be understood. Painting practically without precedent, Magoni has had to rely on her own powers of invention, in effect creating a new genre of painting. (Perhaps the only real help in history were portraits of real Queens and it's no accident that Magoni ends with an image of Queen Elizabeth.)

From the outset, from the moment she decided to make a woman, strong, independent and no longer young, the focus of her paintings, Magoni was committed to exploring a region left largely untouched in the history of painting. These paintings belong to a small but growing list of works of art which are not afraid to present women as protagonists in other senses than the sexual. In this light, the distance from Despo Magoni to Cindy Sherman is not as large as you might think. Don't be deceived by Magoni's choice of expressionistic figurative painting as her medium; this is unknown territory, an old game whose rules Magoni is bravely changing.