



OU Research

Spectacular Flirtations

Gill Perry

When I was researching these portraits, I noticed that there was an enormous amount of writing on the idea of the actress as seductive, beguiling. So I grew very interested in this idea as the actress as essentially flirtatious as negotiating her sexuality to attract and seduce the spectator. Most of these portraits that I've been looking at have been painted by male artists, and you could argue that the male artist controls the image but if the painting was commissioned by an actress, then the actress would often have some say in the final outcome. She might give her suggestions and ideas about pose, about conventions, they'd often work in collaboration. And there's a sense in which an actress could also use a painted portrait as her own form of advertising. She could promote a certain image of herself as grandiose, or classical costume, as flirtatious, as beautiful. Much in the way one might argue that contemporary female stars use photography and media images to promote themselves, as celebrities.

One of the struggles that was going on at the time within the dramatic arts, was an attempt to separate out the idea of the actress as whore, the idea of the theatre as a kind of marginal low life activity. I wanted to develop the idea of the theatre as an art with equivalent status to painting or poetry.

The culmination of this research and this interest in the idea of flirtation as a way of interpreting portraiture, has been in my book called *spectacular flirtations* and that is forming the basis of the national portrait gallery exhibition.

We hope that those same images are going to seduce the twenty first century audience in the way that they did in eighteenth century audience. That they are going to encourage a contemporary audience to think long and hard with the relationship between art and theatre, and about the important symbolic role that women have played in the professionalisation of the theatre.