

Sandow Birk

BLOUINARTINFO

11 Artworks Depicting Love Gone Very, Very Wrong

By Charles Shafaieh
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SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



Sandow Birk's "The Revenge of Lorena Bobbit" 1994. (Courtesy of P.P.O.W. Gallery, NYC)

Whether it's the chaste tenderness depicted in Auguste Renoir's "In the Garden" or the more carnal imagery of Egon Schiele's drawings, the joys and pleasures of love are no strangers to the gallery. Recently, entire exhibitions, such as "The Art of Seduction" at Rome's National Gallery of Modern Art and "Seduced: Art and Sex from Antiquity to Now" at London's Barbican Centre, have been curated around the theme. But while love's successes may frequently inspire, so too does its many failures. From bad breakups to lust-fueled abductions, its darker side has been the subject of a fair share of significant — and often startling — artworks. In anticipation of Valentine's Day, we've compiled some of our favorites.

1. Camille Claudel — “L’Age Mûr,” 1894-1900 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris) Most lovers who do the rejecting only have to contend with a few pointed insults — not Auguste Rodin. Camille Claudel immortalized in bronze Rodin’s decision to leave her in favor of his older mistress and mother of his son, Rose Beuret. In letters to her brother, Claudel identified the younger woman in this piece as herself, and, in this autobiographical context, it becomes difficult to read the man’s extended hand ambivalently, as perhaps a final effort to resist the pull of the more mature partner. Instead, the piece (which was even commissioned by the state due to Rodin’s intervention) seems imbued with tragedy.

2. David Lynch — “Bob Loves Sally Until She is Blue in the Face,” 2000

It is not widely known that Lynch made his first films — a series of animated shorts — while studying painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. In 2014, PAFA launched a retrospective of his work, which included this mixed media piece. The simple language of the inscription, similar to those found throughout Lynch’s oeuvre, suggests a childlike incomprehension of how signs that usually connote physical affection can sometimes mean quite the opposite. (Note also Sally’s coiffed hair, which bears a striking resemblance to Lynch’s own.)

3. Edvard Munch — “Love and Pain,” 1893-94 (Munch Museum, Oslo)

Munch, whose work on love (or any subject) does not bring words like “cheery” to mind, did not name this painting “Vampire,” as it is popularly known today — that was critic Stanislaw Przybyszewski’s interpretation of the piece, which was also deemed “degenerate” by the Nazis. Whether it is a macabre representation of a man submitting to a sinister woman against his will or two lovers consoling each other remains ambiguous.

4. Fernando Botero — “Leda and the Swan,” 2007 (Ebisu Garden Place, Tokyo)

Stories differ regarding Leda’s consent when she was visited by Zeus in the form of a swan, and contemporary audiences are often perturbed by the many unflinchingly erotic depictions of this encounter which produced, among other offspring, Helen of Troy. Raped at worst and consenting to bestiality at best, Leda remains a polarizing figure — a fact that critics of Botero have not ignored. In the eyes of those who consider the Colombian’s curvaceous figures sleek, trivial, and as inflated as their sale prices, such depictions of “love” do not warrant their place in Tokyo’s and New York’s public plazas.

5. Gian Lorenzo Bernini — “The Rape of Proserpina,” 1621-22 (Galleria Borghese, Rome)

“Rape” in the 17th century meant “kidnap,” and the latter is unquestionably what Bernini depicts in his representation of the act, the result of which, according to the myth, is our cold winter months. Though Pluto desired Proserpina and even sought the permission of Zeus (her father) before the abduction, her mother, Demeter, and not least of all Proserpina herself had no interest in spending her life in the underworld. But if Pluto had obeyed any sense of decorum in his courtship, Bernini may not have had as much cause to manipulate the marble as virtuosically as he does, in particular the dynamism at the site where the god’s hand encloses itself around his captive’s bare thigh.

6. Hugo Simberg — “Adam and Eve,” 1895 (Ateneum, Helsinki)

If Eve alone had eaten the forbidden fruit, she and Adam may only have had a tumultuous argument. But when Adam succumbs to partner pressure and is questioned by God about his actions, he immediately blames “the woman you put here with me.” The results are far worse than those of any other couple’s

squabble. The Finnish symbolist Simberg seems to align his sympathy behind a carefree Eve while he depicts Adam as still embarrassed for his nakedness, not only in front of God but pig, lion, and ass as well.

7. Paul Cézanne — “Lot and His Daughters,” 1865 (Private Collection)

After the total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot’s daughters could find no man with whom to start a family — except their father. Rationalizing getting Lot drunk and sleeping with him to “preserve our family line through our father” is problematic but, in the realm of myth, not entirely absurd. That at least one daughter should be so enthusiastic to do so, as Cézanne depicts the scene, is not as easy to rationalize.

8. Andrej Pagowski — Poster for Roman Polanski’s film “Rosemary’s Baby”

The calm and even tender undertone of this mother/child embrace evokes the disturbing final moments of Polanski’s film. Rosemary (Mia Farrow) learns that Satan, with the help of her husband, raped her in her drugged stupor and that the child bears an uncanny resemblance to its father. The slight smile that appears on Rosemary’s face as she rocks her son’s cradle suggests a budding love that would raise the eyebrows of even the most devoted mother.

9. Salvador Dali — Untitled, for the 1942 campaign against venereal disease

Philippe Halsman’s iconic 1951 photograph of Dali and his skull made of seven women was preceded in 1942 by the surrealist’s chilling contribution to a WWII anti-venereal disease campaign. According to the initiative’s many posters, soldiers with VD would let down the free world itself by weakening the armed forces. But faltering patriotism may have been less frightening than Dali’s nightmare of death awaiting any man enticed by seductive women.

10. Sandow Birk — “The Revenge of Lorena Bobbitt,” 1994

In depicting the sensational emasculation of John Wayne Bobbitt by his wife Lorena, Birk references Artemisia Gentileschi’s dramatic and unflinchingly violent “Judith Slaying Holofernes.” The act of violence against the patriarchy in the Gentileschi is made that much more explicit by Birk in this darkly comic reminder (which includes the outdoor search for the discarded genitalia) that marital passions do not always manifest themselves in pleasant ways.

11. Victorian “After Death” Photograph of Husband and Deceased Wife (The Burns Archive)

Taking photographs of and with deceased loved ones was common practice in both Europe and America during the 19th century, particularly when Queen Victoria embraced the ritual of mourning upon the death of her husband, Albert. This daguerrotype of a husband with his late wife would have served as a memento mori, a reminder of a lost love as well as mortality in general. Modern Anglo-American sensibilities, which favor distancing ourselves from the realities of death, shift focus instead toward the shades of necrophilia captured by the camera.