

GAVLAK

Sharon Mizota, "Review: How would you describe women? Betty Tompkins asked, then painted 1,000 answers," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 2016

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Since the 1970s, New York artist Betty Tompkins has created frank, unvarnished paintings and drawings of female genitalia and explicit sex acts. These, on view at Gavlak Gallery with paintings of words used to describe women, form a potent examination of our culture's attitudes toward women and sex.

Copied from heterosexual pornography, the monochromatic paintings of genitalia are extreme close-ups, executed in a soft-focus airbrush technique. While the close cropping preserves the source's prurient gaze, softening and rendering the image in black and white makes the content more distant and clinical. The images walk a fine line between titillation and demystification, asking us to regard them openly, like looking in the mirror to know exactly what is "down there." They suggest that we don't have to choose between virgin and whore.

The walls of a rear gallery are lined salon-style with 1,000 small word paintings that Tompkins has created since 2013. The words come from responses to an email in which she asked people to send her terms that describe women.

The most common ones are "slut," "mother," and two impolite words that begin with a B or a C. I could not find "goddess" or "riot grrrl" among the paintings, but "gold digger," and "nympho" are there, as well as terms I'd never heard of: "cactus," "piano legs," "axe wound." The paintings are of various colors, textures and sizes, but the overall impression is depressing. If a picture is worth a thousand words, hopefully it's more expansive than this limited vocabulary.