

# Amazing illustrators on the body-positive art breaking female taboos

**Taboo no more: Oliwia Bober, Ana Curbelo and Hazel Mead talk about their inspiring illustrations devoted to the female body.**

First things first, the artwork in this feature is NSFW. But nor safe it seems is their subject matter for conversation in polite society.

While men can joke freely in Seth Rogen films about cumming and pissing, and workplaces around the world are allowed to Slack double entendres about willies, nobody will yet dare to admit that hey, women have bodies which do certain things – and which they do certain things with.

But enough talk from us; let's turn it over now to women in arts and illustration who are working on breaking down taboos about the female body in fun and provocative ways.

We're talking about artists all based in Britain, relative newcomers one and all but with already impressive bodies of work.

We have Ana Curbelo, who illustrated a book about unjust period taxes that won the PR Grand Prix at Cannes Lions just yesterday. We have Oliwia Bober, who you may have seen on BBC News talking about her painted vulvas in public restrooms. Finally, there's Hazel Mead, who recently smashed Instagram with images of taboo sex and female masturbation.

We've already interviewed some of these talents on *Digital Arts*, so it's great once again to step into their worlds.

# Ana Curbelo illustrates *The Tampon Book*

The London based Ana Curbelo talks about illustration for *The Tampon Book*, a recent release from German platform The Female Company also available in English. The book this week won the Cannes Lion PR Grand Prize for the agency Scholz & Friends Berlin.

“My brief was to create illustrations for the Tampon Book, a campaign that aims to end the ridiculous ‘luxury tax’ on tampons by outsmarting the law – selling tampons hidden inside a book,” Ana tells us.

“They were looking for proud, confident and positive characters with body positivity for the different chapters of their book.

“The idea was that the book would cost the same as tampon boxes – but with a 7% tax price of books instead of 19%. So in order to keep it cheap and save production costs it was decided that the book would be printed in only black, white and red.

"They initially asked for the characters to be in different shades of grey to express different skin colours. However I thought they looked stronger without a filling, and that way the characters have no specific skin colour.

"I started by scribbling down initial ideas and poses, almost always on paper (sometimes directly on my iPad Pro). Some poses were done in seconds but some were trickier and needed references.

"I then traced the sketch and developed them on my iPad using Procreate. Once I was happy with the graphic I traced it again and again until the single line was perfect for the conceptual effect I want to create."

“With these figures I want to free people from the taboo subject of periods, but I also want people to relate to the characters and make them feel okay with themselves.

“My characters are not only proud, confident women, unashamed of periods, but they are also posed in our relaxed natural state – an unfiltered, genuine look, as opposed to the stereotypical ‘Instagram look’. Hairy legs, hairy armpits, spots, floppy bellies, floppy boobs, cellulite, exposed labia. It was important to me to show all shapes and forms.

**Ana on exploring the female body through**

## art

"I don't draw the female body specifically because of the female subject – but because it's the body I know best.

"I see my characters as neutral; they just happen to have boobs and vulvas.

"I commonly draw my characters naked unless asked otherwise. I like the sense of liberation and of uninhibitedness. Drawing clothes on them can end up distracting from the idea I want to express.

"I see the human body as just a pile of flesh, which is why a lot of my poses are uncompromising and not afraid to be explicit.

"I'm not interested in drawing delicate perfect characters; the only delicate thing about my work is the single line that carefully shapes the effect I am hoping to achieve."



**Oliwia Bober's yonic imagery  
replacing graffiti dicks**

**Oliwia Bober talks about installing beautiful vulva art in all shapes and sizes across toilet walls and doors for Bodyform and AMV BBD0's Viva La Vulva campaign. The art was on display in the Queen of Hoxton pub and London's Tara Theatre.**

"The initial brief for the Queen of Hoxton bathrooms was very open ended and it was to create vulva-inspired imagery.

"I received two separate briefs for this project, the second (after completing the first set of the bathroom paintings)

took into account all the amendments that had to be made in order for the paintings to really drive the point home about the variety and diversity in vulva shapes and sizes.

“I used the ‘Viva la Vulva’ video (below) as a starting point for the first brief and decided to go down the more symbolic route of finding yonic imagery. I think the final design that went up on the toilet doors is obvious enough in the context of the campaign, but maybe not explicit enough as stand-alone images.

[embedded content]

“I had seen the music video for the ‘Viva la Vulva’ campaign a while back and immediately made the connection between it and the brief that I had received. Despite having never created art centred around this subject, there has been a pattern in my personal work that tackles the theme of vulnerability – the vulnerability that we feel in ourselves, as well as in the relationships we have with other people.

“Ultimately, this project was completely in line with the work that I am interested in making as it takes the most delicate, intimate and vulnerable aspect of our bodies and puts it in plain sight, forcing us to begin a conversation about the relationship we have with it.

“Hopefully it is a conversation that results in a more positive and loving approach to viewing what has often been the subject of unsolicited (and negative) scrutiny.

## **Oliwia on public toilets as her canvas**

"I did not receive the photos or exact measurements of the first venue until the day before painting, at which point I had already created the designs," Oliwia writes. "It was decided on the day that they would go up onto the cubicle doors, something that made the most sense with the space that was available."

"The unusual location would seem like a freeing playground to create new work, but there are a lot of logistical elements and constrictions that begin to reveal themselves as you begin site-specific work that you would not have normally had to consider had you been simply working with paint on paper."

“All the artwork created for this commission is temporary and the site has to be returned to its original condition. Finding paints and temporary mediums posed a challenge in itself, in the end I ended up cutting out stencils of vinyl and painting directly onto those as opposed to any of the surfaces.

“On the other hand, the unusual location as well as all the challenges that came with it contributed to a creative environment that I have not encountered before. Having little experience with the materials that I was working with meant that things often went wrong and I was forced to react quickly to solve the issues, which in a way was quite freeing.

“Even though that first commission had so many uncertain variables, in the end, I think it worked out well. The design itself is somewhat symmetrical and splitting it between three doors allowed it to retain that symmetry; it also meant that it would reflect in the mirrors opposite.

“You were able to see it when you walked into the toilets as well as when you were leaving- reflected behind you.

“The Tara Theatre, as well as having a stricter brief, also had specific guidelines as to where I could paint; in that sense, the doors were also the most logical step.

“The colours that feature in the first painting frequent a lot in my work – shades of pink and blue are a palette that I always return to. I also like figures shown in various forms of embrace; in this instance I used them as a way to frame the central section of the image that resembled a vulva.

“Flowers were the most common yonic reference that appeared during my research to interpret the brief in a symbolic way. They are also present in a lot of my other work, so it felt like a good match. Although it is slightly cliché to use petals or flower buds to represent a vulva, it is a widely

understood reference which is definitely beneficial.

“To me the most important part of the brief was the body positivity aspect, the aspect that aims to tackle and offset the balance of genitalia graffiti in bathrooms came as secondary.

“I think it’s imperative to see the images in the context of their surroundings, e.g. the Tara Theatre throughout the month of May has a festival that celebrates women creatives and acts. Although in the grand scheme of things, the normalisation of the appearance of vulvas is not at the top on anybody’s list of priorities, it’s definitely a facet of the body positivity movement that is often omitted from the conversation.

“I will be happy if people who see the paintings realise that there is no wrong way for a vulva to look. If they have been made to feel otherwise, maybe it will be a good starting point to question where the idea of a ‘normal’ vulva stems from; whether it is porn or individual sex partners, and who benefits and profits from the feeling of shame and embarrassment that often veils this intimate part of our bodies (from the cosmetic to the beauty industries).

“More importantly though, if we can normalise conversation about vulvas, begin to unlearn the negative messages that have been perpetuated and see them beyond their basic physiological functions, it will lead us to having a better relationship with that part of our body.

## **Oliwia on the female body as her canvas**

“The female body is something that I have explored within my work previously. I used to be an avid life drawing-goer and the nude characters in my illustrations with wobbly lines are a result of that.

“I always found the models with a lot of folds in their skin more interesting to draw. I suppose since my paintings and drawings are usually very detailed, the same was applied to this commission; the more folds in the skin, the more interesting it was for me to paint as I could layer the different colours.

“In the context of the vulva, the more folds, the more unsightly it is deemed. I enjoyed subverting this idea and creating appealing visuals for something commonly regarded as less attractive.

[embedded content]

“With other work of mine I also try to explore the female body, although the style I work in has simplified it to a simple outline and fill.

“However I think I am more interested in portraying bodies in relation to each other, how you can convey emotion through body language, e.g. how two hands fit together, how you can tessellate two figures etc.

“In that sense, exploring a very specific aspect of the body and having it take center stage of the artwork is something unusual that I have not done before.

“On the one hand, creating art about it feels very liberating as you are forced to confront your feelings and ideas about this aspect of the body; on the other, it is an open invitation for feedback and scrutiny, which if negative can play on your insecurities. I think that can be quite daunting.”

## **Mead on Masturbation**

Hazel Mead is, in some respects a 'period artist', but her more recent work has taken the form of pieces like the above, showing scattered nudes in a kind of sticker sheet/noticeboard-style in poses of a taboo yet common nature. In other words, like Ana she shines a light on what's been dusted under the proverbial carpet.

"It's liberating and then some to explore the female body intimately through art," she tells us.

“It feels like liberation for my 16 year old self and her friends that denied ever having masturbated because it was ‘gross’, even though we were all doing it. It feels like a ‘Fuck you’ to the society that has made female masturbation a taboo in the first place, despite it being very natural and human.

“It also makes me feel powerful because I am confronting both society and the younger, more timid version of me, and saying *hey, I wank, a lot, deal with it.*

“I love to challenge taboo, especially taboo surrounding the female body and sexuality because they were both something I was ashamed of in my youth. The best part of doing art exploring this subject is that I’m normalising different

bodies and female sexuality for the next generation, and I get a lot of encouraging words of thanks from younger girls saying they feel less ashamed of themselves.

“That’s the most wonderful thing I could hope for for my art.”

**Read next:** Hazel Mead on finding her niche in illustrating women’s periods

<https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/illustration/amazing-illustrators-on-body-positive-art-thats-breaking-female-taboos/>