REVIEWS

'Masculinities: Liberation Through Photography', Barbican Art Gallery, 20 February–17 May 2020.

Since Simone de Beauvoir famously declared that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, woman' (2010, p. 293), it has become common to think of gender identity not as something inherent but acquired. Taking this idea as its starting point, *Masculinities: Liberation through Photography* brings together works from over fifty artists from 1960 to the present using photography and film to explore ways in which masculinity has been 'experienced, performed, coded, and socially constructed' (Alison and Pardo, 2020, p. 6).

The exhibition is a rich and multifaceted exploration of masculine visual identities in art. Charting the increasing destabilisation of binary genders since the 1960s, it raises complex questions of social justice that intersect with issues of sexuality, race, and class. As its title clearly implies, the exhibition makes a positive case for the role of art in addressing these questions. All of the works are framed as achieving liberation either by challenging restrictive codifications of what it means to be male or by affirming more individual, non-conforming expressions of masculinity. The plural 'masculinities' is central to the exhibition's optimistic narrative. Masculinity as it has traditionally and singularly been represented may not be a good thing, the exhibition argues, but the power of art to critically reflect and expand upon these representations is. There is, however, a tension that runs deep in the exhibition's claim to liberation through photography. For the question that the exhibition raises, but does not resolve is: can constructs of masculinity, however plural, ever ultimately serve to liberate, or do they always eventually become restrictive types that limit individual freedom and expression?

The choice to include exclusively photographic works partly reflects the conceptual turn in art practices from the 1960s, but also the role that photography has played and continues, ever more pervasively, to play in shaping cultural representations of gender. It also reflects the political function of the photographic medium that Walter Benjamin (1999) identified and that has been associated with radical art practices since the early-twentieth century. Many of the works in the exhibition use appropriation or mimicry as strategies to draw attention to and disrupt mainstream representations of masculinity. A particularly effective example of this is Hank Willis Thomas's 2005–8 series *Unbranded: Reflections in Black Corporate America 1968–2008*. In the series, the artist removed all text and branding from reproductions of advertisements depicting African Americans. The simple intervention of concealing the images' commercial messages is remarkably effective at directing attention to the black cultural stereotypes that the advertisements trade on and perpetuate. As a mode of image making, photography has a privileged epistemic claim to represent reality, and arguably this is what underpins the power of the medium both to shape cultural constructs of gender in ways that largely go unnoticed and to undercut those same constructs when redeployed in unfamiliar ways.

The exhibition is structured as a series of thematic groupings. The first two grouping focus on traditional representations of masculinity—that is, white, heterosexual, 'manly' men. Disrupting the Archetype looks at the myths surrounding masculine types including soldiers, cowboys, fighters, bodybuilders, and sportsmen in order to challenge the idea of masculinity as something natural or un-assumed. Many of the works in this section complicate traditional masculinity by revealing a sense of vulnerability, emotional sensitivity, or homoerotic

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desire among their subjects. Catherine Opie's photographs of American high school football players artfully capture her subjects attempting to project an internalized image of manhood. These pictures seem to catch Judith Butler's (1990) notion of gender as a performance in the act. *Taliban Portraits* (2002) by Thomas Dworzak is a surprising and difficult to interpret collection of found images retrieved from photographic studios in Afghanistan. The photographs present Taliban fighters in ways that appear, at least to Western audiences, unexpectedly feminine or homoerotic—holding hands and wearing heavy black kohl eye makeup.

Several works in the exhibition examine the connection between masculinity and the biological male body. Two photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe of Arnold Schwarzenegger posing as a bodybuilder are contrasted with another of Mapplethorpe's photographs depicting the female bodybuilder Lisa Lyon. Schwarzenegger—posed in tight black underwear, photographed against a plain studio wall next to a paisley curtain—looks misshapen and gormless. Lyon—arms raised, naked, outdoors, photographed from a low angle—appears resolutely self-confident and statuesque. The pairing highlights that masculine bodily traits are not exclusive to biological males, and also that there is a performative dimension to physical manifestations of masculinity, regardless of biological sex. If anything, Schwarzenegger's physical masculinity looks more artificial than Lyon's does. But the contrast of Schwarzenegger and Lyon also raises the question of whether masculinity can ever be fully detached from biological sex, thus suggesting a limit to notions of gender as constructed or performed. Such issues are addressed in other works, including those of transgender performance artist Cassils and Elle Perez's photograph *t* (2018), which depicts the artist holding a glass vial of testosterone.

Male Order: Power, Patriarchy, and Space shifts the focus away from the body to the relationship between masculinity and institutions of social and political power. Richard Avedon's *The Family* (1976) is a series of sixty-nine portraits, taken in Avedon's characteristic style—front on, three-quarter length, against a bright white background—of those who held positions of political and cultural power in America at the time. The few exceptions only go to emphasize the overwhelming preponderance of besuited middle-aged white men.

Where the first two themes focus on works employing critical strategies to highlight and deconstruct representations of traditional masculinity, the next three—Too Close to Home: Family and Fatherhood, Queering Masculinity, and Reclaiming the Black Body—use photography to assert images of non-conforming and underrepresented masculinity in more positive, yet frequently also complex and ambivalent, ways. Japanese photographer Masahisa Fukase's series *Memories of Father* (1971–1990) is a poignant and deeply personal photographic account of the artist's relationship with his ageing father. The images are by turns stark and tender. By documenting his father's increasing frailty at the end of life, Fukase highlights an uncomfortable aspect of being male that tends to be eclipsed from the mainstream. Anna Fox's series *My Mother's Cupboards and My Father's Words* (1999) is one of the most memorable and affecting series in the exhibition. It reveals gendered manifestations of violence in the family home by pairing photographs of the artist's mother's pristine cupboards with excerpts of her abusive father's outbursts. A photograph of a neat stack of patterned plates adjoins words in small, delicate typeface, 'She should be fried in hot oil'.

Queering Masculinity contains works that celebrate gay and queer sexualities as well as works that document the oppression of non-heterosexual men associated with traditional masculinity. Writing about Mapplethorpe's work, Dave Hickey (2012) has pointed out that beauty can be used politically in art to affirm subjects that are otherwise often discredited. Peter Hujar's seductively beautiful black-and-white photographs of the drag performer David Brintzenhofe are testament to this interaction between formal aesthetic quality and social message. The same strategy is used in George Dureau's erotically charged photographs of the disabled model B. J. Robinson, as well as in the work of Nigerian-born photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode, whose

stunning studio self-portraits celebrate the black male body from a queer perspective. On the other hand, Sunil Gupta's series *Exiles* (1987) serves as a useful reminder of the ongoing effects of discrimination against homosexuals by depicting furtive encounters between gay men in his hometown of New Delhi.

A. W. Eaton (2012) has argued that the sexual objectification of women in art and mainstream media is especially problematic when these images outweigh (as they do) sexually objectifying images of men. Many of the works in the exhibition can be read as successfully employing the corrective strategy that Eaton's argument implies for a diversity of groups by presenting sexualized images of underrepresented (queer, non-binary, black) masculine identities. Tracey Moffatt's video *Heaven* (1997), from the final section, Women on Men, goes beyond this, however. *Heaven* comprises video clips, mostly shot clandestinely from a distance, of conventionally attractive male surfers in Australia dressing or undressing before going to the beach. The work's blatant voyeurism undermines its supposed feminist message, making it complicit in the same power structures it seeks to critique. In contrast, in her series *Fully Automated Nikon (Object/Objection/Objectivity)* (1973), Laurie Anderson ingeniously turned the tables on the male gaze by photographing men on the streets of New York who made sexually inappropriate comments to her. Anderson first asked the men if she could take their pictures, and in the printed photographs blocked out the men's eyes, simultaneously protecting their identity and implicating their misdemeanour.

Returning now to the question posed at the beginning, how successful is the exhibition in realising its goal of liberation? The exhibition's curator Alona Pardo summarized this goal as follows: 'Rejecting any idea of a singular "ideal man", the works argue for an understanding of masculinity untethered from societal expectations and gender norms' (Pardo, 2020, p. 19). What is not clear, however, given the exhibition's insistence on the socially constructed nature of gender, is whether this goal is coherent. The worry is that replacing a singular idealized image of masculinity with a plurality of masculinities only pushes injustice a step back. A construct of masculinity liberates those whom it fits and oppresses those whom it does not. Logically, this extends all the way down to the individual, at which point the notion of a social construct becomes void. How then can any number of masculine identities liberate individuals from societal expectations and gender norms?

This dialectic of liberation and oppression is highlighted by Herb Ritts' homoerotic photograph of a muscular male model, *Fred with Tires, Hollywood* (1984). Images such as this served to challenge negative representations of gay people during the time of the AIDS crisis, and to that extent provide an example of liberation through photography. In turn, the idealized type of the white, muscular gay man, which Ritts' photographs helped construct, serves to oppress gay or queer males who fall short of it. Hal Fischer's series *Gay Semiotics* (1977) pokes fun at the way gay visual culture in American became rigidly codified following the liberation movement, demonstrating how easily non-conformity to one type can turn into conformity to another.

Perhaps the most successful works in the exhibition are those that intentionally resist typifying masculinity or which prompt the viewer to question their own assumptions and normative judgements. Paul Mpagi Sepuya's photograph, *Darkroom (_2010616)* (2017) presents entwined, naked black and white male bodies in a studio, mostly concealed from view by a piece of fabric held up from behind by one of the subjects. Both the content of image and its title signify homosexuality, but the use of the fabric to largely hide the subjects from view prevents their being simplistically typified as 'gay', 'black', 'white', or anything else. Hilary Lloyd's disarmingly simple video *Rich* (1999) shows a young man having his head shaved by another who remains mostly out of frame. Lacking any context or narrative explanation, the video invites a multiplicity of readings. These works of Sepuya's and Lloyd's suggest something of the distinctive power of ambiguity in visual art, which seems

especially apt in comparison to notions of queer and non-binary gender.

It may be that ultimately the liberation the exhibition calls for can only be achieved by doing away with masculinities altogether. Such is the view defended by Sally Haslanger (2005). But even if this is possible and desirable, we are obviously a long way off yet, and to get there will require using gendered concepts to address social injustices on the one hand and promote individual expression on the other. To the exhibition's credit, many if not most of the works in *Masculinities* achieve this aim admirably and in artistically compelling ways.

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Aesthetic Evaluation and Film

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Early in the introductory chapter of *Aesthetic Evaluation and Film*, Andrew Klevan refers to Carl Plantinga's article 'Film Theory and Aesthetics: Notes on a Schism', noting that, from his position within the discipline of film studies, the 'schism' seems as wide as ever (3–4).[1] This claim is likely to sound odd to aestheticians who have followed the rapid development of the philosophy of film—often in collaboration with 'cognitivists' in film studies—over the last few decades. However, with regard to the central topic of Klevan's book, aesthetic and artistic *evaluation*, it is a matter of fact that, as a discipline, film studies has still little dialogue with philosophical aesthetics and even the little evaluative criticism of film that *is* undertaken within film studies tends to occur in relative disciplinary isolation. Nowhere is this more evident than in film studies' pedagogical practices, which regularly feature 'analysis' and 'interpretation', largely eschewing evaluation except when the target of an evaluation is political or ideological content. It is important to understand this context in which Klevan is writing; and, in relation, it is important to understand that he is writing primarily for students and scholars in film studies.

These contextual factors significantly shape the aims of *Aesthetic Evaluation and Film*. In the introductory chapter, Klevan describes the book as 'a work of archaeology', whose purposes are 'to introduce the philosophy of criticism to Film Studies', 'to help film evaluation discover an unknown ancestry, or at least foreground a lineage' (3), and 'to provide a supportive framework for academics working or teaching in the area and to be accessible to students' (5). However, such statements do not do justice to the ambition of Klevan's project, which comprises three parts. Part

1 Carl Plantinga, 'Film Theory and Aesthetics: Notes on a Schism', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993).