Me, Me, Me
All photos are autobiographical

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My desire is to be understood without having to use words or explanations. I want, in a moment, to be understood. I can do this with photography as people believe that it is directly related to reality, that it has documentary or evidential status. This is a misunderstanding, but it is one that I enjoy exploiting. When I make a personal photo it is assumed that I and my thoughts can be seen. My teacher describes this phenomenon as a "spirit left in a photo". What if the subject is plain or unrelated to you in any way? What if your decisions are random or unimaginative? However, I believe it is impossible not to make a decision when you take a photograph. Therefore, inevitably, the photograph contains a trace of your instincts, thoughts, or imagination. All photographs, it could be argued, are autobiographical.

Fig.1 Duane Michals - Chance Meeting, 1972

In (fig.1) Duane Michals encapsulates this idea in his photographic sequence *Chance Meeting*. This image explores sexuality and homoerotic relationships. A seemingly simple look is captured and the use of a sequence demonstrates that the 'look' is not just an unconscious glance but a prolonged moment of lust. This image was taken in 1972 when gay sex was only legal in a few American states. The image suggests that the men are cruising, the sometimes dangerous act of pursuing sex in public. There is some hesitation towards the man, perhaps because if the man was not gay, he may react violently. My teacher's suggestion that the photo could represent a man seeing his younger self reminded me of Threshold Concept #7[1], that photographs are not fixed in meaning and that

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[1] https://www.photopedagogy.com/threshold-concept-7.html

context is everything. This is a challenging concept to me since arguing your case for something ambiguous, especially when it's your own work, can be testing.

Fig. 2 Duane Michals - Chance Meeting, 1972 (illustration)

I am often inspired by Michals' compositions and this image is no exception. In the first photo there is space between the men created by the light; neither of the men are the focus and the dark wall creates symmetry in the image, with the man facing away from us creating a similar dark shape. The fact that the man walking towards us is not in the centre indicates that they are now both inconspicuous characters. In the second image the men are in the light space of the image and off-centre. Michaels breaks the rule of thirds here but the effect is that the two men are pushed together by the light, making their encounter seem intentional, which reinforces the idea that they are indeed cruising. In the third image the two men are level and the man walking toward us looks at the other along with the dark wall. This yet again pushes our focus to the side, as if we are turning our head to look at him as well; this is repeated in the fourth. In the fifth, the man completely blends in with the wall making him seem like an observer - he is with us, and finally the man walking away is alone. In the final image the man stops, turns and bends as if he is now the same to do so. This creates a line following from the wall extending to the man's curiosity.

Duane Michals was influenced by surrealist artists of the 1920s and 30s. This influence can be seen in the combination of the personal and political in his work and in his desire to photograph interior states and dreams. The surrealists were concerned with physical and psychological liberty and pursued a belief in cultural and political revolution. As a gay man, Michals uses photography to express his sexuality but also the power of dreams and imagination to transform our experience of reality. Michals was not trained as an artist and so never felt constrained by photographic conventions. He recognises the ability of photography to capture an inner and an outer reality, much like the surrealists.

"Photographers tend not to photograph what they can't see, which is the very reason one should try to attempt it. Photography has to transcend description. It has to go beyond description to bring insight into the subject, or reveal the subject, not as it looks, but how does it feel?"
– **Duane Michals**

Fig.3 Otto Steinert - Grand Palais I, 1955

Otto Steinert suggested that *subjective* photography (a phrase he helped popularise) humanises and individualises photography allowing the work to be self reflective and for the viewer to project their feelings and experience onto the work. Steinert's ideas came to fruition after the horrors of WW2 and with a desire to revisit the formal photographic innovations of the Weimar period. *Grand Palais I* (Fig.3) is a perfect example of this as the person is entirely removed from their surroundings and is almost featureless. The layers of imagery obscure the identity of the central character, allowing the viewer to imaginatively enter the picture space. I have been influenced by Steinert's *subjective* approach in which ambiguity creates space for the imagination.

In my project I have found context to be incredibly important, hence my use of family photos and Slovakian folk music as well as myself as the subject. However, these elements are not overly explained or justified. Rather, they provide background texture so that the ambiguity of the imagery can work its magic on the viewer.

Figs 4 & 5 Alfred Stieglitz - Equivalents, 1923-34

Steinert's ideas can be traced back to those of pre-WW2 photographers like Alfred Stieglitz and his work 'Equivalents' which attempts to discover a visual correlation to the subjective experience of the photographer. These photographs of clouds were not representations of his feelings but equivalents that could be interpreted by a sensitive viewer through the telepathic power of photography. When I try to photograph my feelings and someone doesn't see them it doesn't change my feelings. Their feelings are just as valid as mine and I am pleased when anyone responds emotionally to my work.

What has changed more recently in my practice is how I view the subject matter. I used to see the emotionality of a topic whereas now my work has become more autobiographical, documenting my emotional states. This happened as I started to draw more inspiration from the surrealists and those influenced by them. I try to pursue a philosophy of photography, a combination of techniques, ideas and morals. My "philosophy" [2] incorporates layers of light in the form of flares that disturb a planned composition. I enjoy the dialogue between three and two dimensions in photography. I often use video to document my installations. I like to describe the spaces between things. When I make documentary photographs of my work, I enjoy the way things get flattened and relationships are created that didn't exist in reality.

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[2]
https://erickimphotography.com/blog/2018/06/16/what-is-your-personal-photography-philosophy-2/

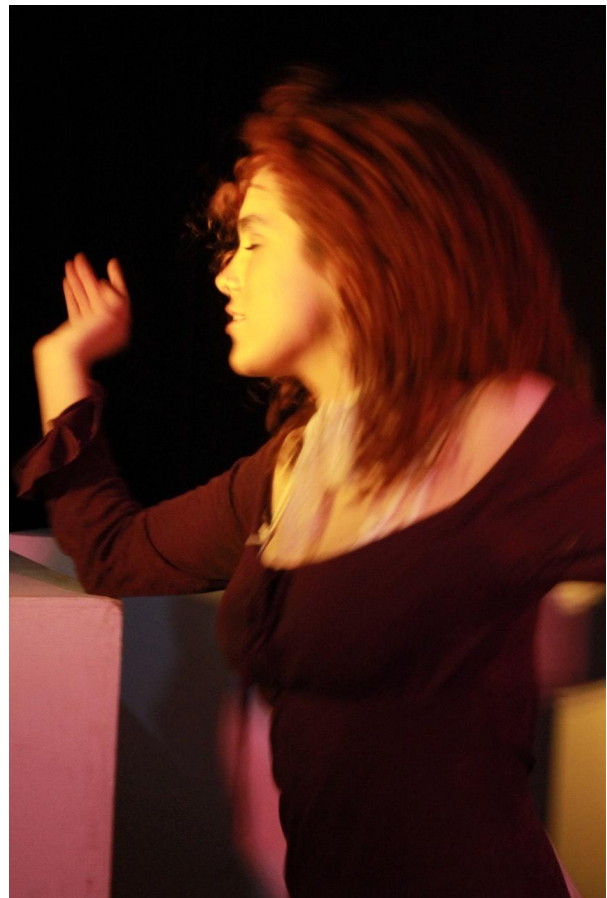Fig. 6 Claude Cahun - Self-Portrait (as weight trainer), 1927

Since my work has become more autobiographical, I have become concerned with my relationship to my own body. Women's bodies were a contested and contentious subject for the surrealists. Although women played an important part in the movement, the male surrealists tended to idolise the *femme infant* and found adult women to be simultaneously inspiring and frightening. Claude Cahun, an artist and writer associated with both the Dadaists and Surrealists, made art about their complex identity. The *Self-Portrait* of 1927 (fig.6) is one of their most iconic. The sheer top with drawn-on nipples and the phrase "I am in training. Don't kiss me", mocks the idea of nudity. The drawn-on hearts remind me of some fantastical fairytale or *Alice in Wonderland* and this contrasts with the

bodybuilder disguise. This could be seen as deliberately complicating gender identity conventions. They never present themselves as one gender or the other but always seem interested in both together. Cahun, who is often referred to with 'she/her' pronouns, seems to mock masculinity, but wonders if they even cared about binary gender identity. Cahun wrote: "Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me."[3] In this photograph, sport is sexualised with Betty Boop-like hair and heart-shaped lips and curved hips. The composition of the photograph is relatively simple. The backdrop is in the frame, a signature of Cahun's work signalling the staged nature of the performance and the dark curtain contrasts with their pale skin. Cahun's work has influenced me. They perform for the camera and explore the female gaze. Their images have prompted me to wonder about the female or queer gaze.

> "Woman stand in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions [...] by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."
> — Laura Mulvey, Visual And Other Pleasures[4]

How might it be possible to break free of the constricting and oppressive view of female and gender non-binary bodies imposed by men? What constitutes a female or queer gaze?

Figs 7 & 8 Biba Cummins - Untitled, 2023

[3] https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/claude-cahun-10611
[4] https://www.filminquiry.com/film-theory-basics-laura-mulvey-male-gaze-theory

In my project, I have tried to focus on showing the viewer how I relate to my body image rather than simply commenting on its existence and its political nature. However, In the above photographs (Figs 7 & 8) I employed Cahun's strategy of overly confident performance to parody ideas that overt femininity often comes with accusations of loudness and vanity. Here, I worked in the studio, as I often do, so that I could control the space and not be restricted by reality. This is why I take photos of objects that relate to the female experience (mannequins, clothes, my own body parts), rather than real women, as I can't take photos of them without them being part of the process. What if they don't relate to the project? What if it makes them uncomfortable? What if they feel used? Instead, I use old photos of my mother and grandma. Neither of them knows anything about my project or process.

The idea of using the female form without photographing real women is associated with artists like Hans Bellmer whose life-sized dolls were pulled apart and reconfigured. Bellmer's work typifies the male gaze, specifically a paedophilic view of girls as non-human objects [5]. It is widely thought that Bellmer "potentially suffered from several psychosexual (paraphiliac) disorders" [6]. This calls into question the moral implications of an artists' work. In the video game Bioshock[7] Cohen murders people and calls it art[8], making aesthetically good art in terms of colour and composition yet he is revered for his practises rather than creations. Of course the use of dolls means no real people were hurt in Bellmer's work. But there is also a strong argument to be made that photographs of symbolic bodies being dismantled to create art are violent towards women. I make reference to this historic use of body substitutes in the history of photography in my own use of mannequins.

Figs. 9, 10 & 11 Biba Cummins - Untitled, 2022

These three images (Figs. 9, 10 & 11) are examples of one of the many times I have used mannequins in my personal investigation . I placed the two models in front of the mannequins and had them ignore them completely. In these images I find the models' gestures and poses far more interesting than the mannequins', especially as the two models are friends and were talking with ease and love for each other. I chose to use the mannequins in this way as I wanted them to represent a shadow of the two women. The mannequins are, in some ways, representations of the viewer projected into the images.

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[5] https://cmsmc.org/publications/corrigendum-wahlen#:~:text=%E2%80%9C Bellmer%20 potentially%20 suffered%20from%20 several,woman).%E2%80%9D%20 page%206.
[6] https://cmsmc.org/publications/corrigendum-wahlen#:~:text=%E2%80%9C Bellmer%20 potentially%20 suffered%20from%20 several,woman).%E2%80%9D%20 page%206.
[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BioShock
[8] ▶ 7 Deadly Art Sins

Laura Mulvey coined the term the "male gaze" in her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema*. It is the idea that all women behave in a way that subconsciously appeals to men. CIndy Sherman was inspired by this feminist critique and began to explore the female gaze in a controversial way, directly protesting against the Reagan administration's censorship of challenging contemporary art. Sherman made deliberately disgusting images, such as pictures of shit and vomit, as well as dismembered dolls relating to both pornography and sex crimes. Her work was inspired by the feminism of the '70s and focused primarily on the private sphere of domesticity and socialisation within the nuclear family. Sherman was perhaps unconscious of certain intersectional issues and got into trouble over her use of blackface [9], something for which she has since apologised. Whether her apology should or has been accepted is up for debate as she was a highly educated adult woman when she made the decision.

Cindy Sherman - **Title and date?**

This is a classic Sherman image, busy, explicit, unsettling and confusing. The stare into the camera is made by the eyes being slightly crossed and the brow furrowed. The pieces of the mannequin are balanced on top of one another to create a pose as if the body is bending its back, especially when shadows are formed by the cusp of the plastic. The cool and warm light sources play across the deathly pallor of the plastic skin, conveying a disturbing sense that this disjointed figure is about to have sex on a stage set, a common trope for Sherman who often mocks the porn industry.

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[9]
https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/cindy-shermans-early-blackface-photos-and-the-art-worlds-white-gaze_n_57b5abb5e4b0fd5a2f415daa

Sherman has become a huge inspiration for me, mainly in her use of dramatic lighting. I was also inspired by the idea of submitting oneself to criticism by becoming ugly. In my project, I have painted myself gold or worn clown make-up. When I was selecting my photos, I found myself deleting pictures where I looked bad even though my face was painted, for example those where my arms looked thinner (Fig. 8), my jaw looks sharper and my nose is pointed and small. I would not have done this if I was not the subject.

I was scared to take images of myself because of the idea that women must always be changing how they look. Every photo of a woman shows her potential as if it's a before photo. So, when I looked at female artists, especially ones who photograph themselves, I had to see these women as creating something of a parody, as women can never be a subject without ideas about them being attached. They were performing, not to look nice but to simply perform. In my project, I have incorporated the strategy of performance, not with any reason other than to be loud and dramatic. As I painted clown makeup on myself, what shocked me was that I found myself pretty. I then performed as if I was killing the mannequin and then being shocked by my behaviour.

Fig. .14 Lea Colombo - Title and date?

Lea Colombo is a photographer who is explicitly inspired by the female gaze. Her collection 'Colours of my Body'[10] explores the female form. Colombo uses the body as a canvas rather than an object, using post-production techniques such as painting and re-printing.

> "In her first book, Lea examines her own physicality as a canvas for expression [...] Notions of the female gaze blur in and out of focus, as she pushes further from the figurative form to create on a purely abstract plane [...] Created through performative exercises of 'light painting', Lea's dark room prints weave in and out of formality: auras pulse around joints and concentric circles or flurries of inverted pyramids denote chakras and energy centres, activating strength and acknowledging fragility all at once."[11]

Disappointingly, Colombo has collaborated with Cos, a brand responsible for poor working conditions and practices[12] that exploit women. I have tried to use ethical practices in the production of my pieces, using found fabric to amplify ideas of femininity as well as consumption.

Seeing the 'British Journal of Photography: Single Image Show' in person caused me to think about the choices made when displaying my work. I considered the size of the images, some used as wallpaper rather than in frames, others in clunky frames pushed away in the corner, all made by a curator with seemingly no connection to the work. When I asked the person running the gallery I was disappointed to hear that such dramatic decisions could have been made without the contribution of the artists. I felt that their work had been changed or misrepresented. As for me, I have always preferred physical displays in which I can experiment with scale, as I find that the viewer can become part of the project and be overwhelmed by it. In the final evolution of my project I hung fabric with my photos on and projected on them more abstract photos made of textures and light. I did this to dramatise the space and create something interactive.

I hope the final iteration of my Personal Investigation conveys feelings of rage, discontent and sadness. However, I know that photographs (mine in particular) can't represent all women's struggles with body image. I'm white, middle class and grew up in England so I have a narrow view of the perception of women and what it means to be a woman. Yet the intertwined issues of female bodies, identity, and sexuality run through my project and I am left with a profound respect for other women whose daily battles with body image and identity are carried out with dignity and self love.

I've learnt that there is always a gap between the self and the other (the subject or the work) this is expressed by Tim Carpenter in his book 'To photograph is to learn how to die' which explains how when an artist creates they must accept that they will never be fully understood and that, that gap is where we find a viewer's perception of the work.

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https://shop.clairederouenbooks.com/products/lea-colombo-colours-of-my-body-tier-4#:~:
text=Colours%20of%20My%20Body%20by,dialogue%20with%20colour%20and%20light.
[11] https://shop.clairederouenbooks.com/products/lea-colombo-colours-of-my-body-tier-4
[12] https://directory.goodonyou.eco/brand/cos

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