

Gender and Beauty Presentation in Art

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ABSTRACT

How do the perception and presentation of both beauty and gender differ and compare? These concepts (feminism, masculinity, and beauty) have struggled to be defined in their respective fields, Gender Theory and Aesthetics, due to their multiplicitous nature. When analyzing the works of gender-questioning artists Cindy Sherman and Claude Cahun, the connection between the subjectivist approach to aesthetic analysis and Judith Butler's theory becomes apparent. In these works, it is the signifiers, not the person who allows us to interpret the art as gendered or beautiful. The idea of no inherent gender on a body is essentially the same as no intrinsic beauty within a work. This idea then questions the perception and study of art and gender.

In other words, the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of "women" are constructed. (Butler, 1990, p. 19)

Thrown into the beginning of one of the seminal feminist texts of the twenty-first century, Butler makes a bold claim about the state of feminism and "women." She states that the category of women is impossible to define due to the vast array of experiences and cultures that fit into the term and trying to accomplish this leaves important categories out of the discussion. The thought continues, and she claims that feminism has no need for a defined woman. Instead, she suggests the importance of taking the focus off of defining the experience and onto those who experience it. This thought stands both in contrast and coherence with the field of Aesthetics, the study of aesthetic experience. While an inquiry into aesthetics has existed since ancient Greece, the formalized field of study developed no more than one hundred years ago. In this time, people have looked to define the undefinable: Beauty. The grand, all-encompassing nature of the word and concept has fascinated and stumped philosophers. This split the aestheticians into two, the Objectivists and the Subjectivists. So, where are "women" and "beauty" connected? Obviously in long connotations of women holding pure beauty, but specifically here we see both concepts as indefinable because of the multitudinous array that falls under the terms. Artists, along with philosophers, have looked at these categories, both to define and break them. Cindy Sherman and Claude Cahun are two artists whose self-portraiture has played with the ambiguity of gender. Butler's theory of gender performativity can be applied in conjunction with the subjectivist theory of beauty to the androgynous body of work presented by Cindy Sherman and Claude Cahun. This analysis helps us learn how the idea of gendered bodies in art affects the way we view it and begs the question of how art analysis would change without these distinctions.

Confusion around Butler's theory of "performativity" often stems from this term itself. Second Wave feminist thinkers began to differentiate sex (biologically assigned) from gender (socially prescribed) in the 1960s. In the early 1990s, Butler saw this dilation happening and decided to push it further. Her foundational text *Gender Trouble* denies the idea of an inherent internal gender and that the sex has any effect on gender. Rather, all bodies are gendered from the start of their social existence, and sex is as socially constructed as gender is, having gender subsume sex. Butler defines gender as, "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the experience of substance, or a natural sort of being" (43). There are three key

parts to this definition: *act, stylization, and repetition*. An act is something that is done or presented, like walking or the way in which one speaks. Stylization is not conscious. The feminization of a walk is not something that happens continuously. Stylization is something that is informed by cultural, familial, and media influences, how we unconsciously present gender. Repetition is key to her theory; the act and stylization all grow from the repetition of them through time. Butler's theory of Gender Performativity has promoted a focus on the act rather than the intrinsic identity, allowing for new interpretations of art.

Discourse and identity are prevalent topics in Aesthetics, the study of Beauty, and these topics are also heavily analyzed in Gender Theory. Two prominent schools have emerged within the field: Objectivism and Subjectivism. Most Aesthetic methods can either be grouped under one of these or described as a mix of both. Objectivism and Subjectivism have worked to define and study the concept of "beauty" though they have one key difference in the way that they go about this. The variability lies in whether they believe there is some internal, intangible essence to beauty, an objectivist thinks so and a subjectivist would not. An objectivist would look at a painting and believe that something about that painting has drawn an aesthetic reaction out of them, whether this is awe or disgust is inconsequential. A subjectivist, on the other hand, would look at a painting and feel that all enjoyment comes from the mind itself, that there is nothing in the actual painting that leads to their aesthetic experience. These abstract concepts of beauty and gender have tangible impacts when discussing the idea of identity and being.

These different theories of aesthetic experience can be used to examine the alternate modes of gender expression through the work of artists like Claude Cahun. A queer, surrealist artist whose work deals with the themes of gender and sexuality and was created in the early to mid-1900s. Their main medium for this exploration was the self-portrait, which was key because they were both the subject and the director of the shot. One of their most important and well-known works is *I am in training don't kiss me*. To analyze this portrait, one can look at when Butler writes, "The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1990, p. 179). Yet, in this piece, these nuanced and mundane performances are incoherent in a sense. Cahun, elaborately costumed and intentionally coy, sits dressed as a satirized strongman gazing at the camera as almost a vindication for the viewer's attraction. The titular phrase "I am in training don't kiss me" is embroidered upon the flat plane of their shirt, framed by fake and prominent nipples. The feminization of the strongman, a figure typically hailed for theatrical masculinity, displays the blur with which Cahun replaces the typical binary. A handlebar mustache has been replaced by perfectly gelled down curls, and red hearts along with a painted pout stand in stark contrast to the expected masculinity of the strongman portrayed. While true that Butler's theory relies on repeated stylization, the strength of photography as an art form is its ability to show an instant for an extended time period. In this moment, there is a parodied version of gender that is put on by Cahun, displaying the spider web of connections between the two (gender and performance). Herein lies a question though: if gender has no intrinsic meaning or place in the body can this be seen from a subjectivist perspective? The subjectivist thought process links well here; the idea of no inherent gender on a body is essentially the same as no intrinsic beauty within a work. In this picture, it is the signifiers, not the person themselves who allow us to interpret the art as gendered. Viewing gender and beauty as something that is performed, not inherent, changes the meaning. However, it also begs the question, if the expression and understanding of gender are tied to nothing but culturally informed perspectives, does this not show the inherently subjective nature of the work? Butler's theory and this aesthetic analysis work together in this way to help create an understanding of the work's manipulation of both gender and beauty expectations.



Yet none of this is to say that their subversion comes only from a place of performed masculinity, through works like *Self Portrait 1929*, they equally parody the feminine. Here, the put upon nature of the feminine, the painted on lips and eyes, demonstrate a level of constructed-ness to the feminine identity. Here, they show that the feminine figures are almost equally as made up as their masculine ones, displaying a literal and tangible sense of performativity in their gender expression. In this piece, Cahun uses double exposure to create contrast and continuity through this feminine figure. The figure in the foreground has an almost dichotomous view of gender as seen through color, the signifying parts of the feminine are all highlighted with black, the bindings of a dress, the curve of a lip, the framing of the eyes. This figure looks on at the camera almost blankly, but still discerningly sad. Meanwhile, the figure in the back raises their eyebrows almost defiantly, questioningly, asking how the viewer sees them and why. But yet, how can we say that any of these traits being presented are female traits as much as they are male traits? In saying,



“Beauty is not a quality of the circle...It is only the effect which that figure produces upon a mind, whose particular fabric or structure renders it susceptible to such sentiments,” the subjectivist point of view agrees with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity (Kovach, 1974, p. 64). There are no qualities that “are” beautiful just like there are no qualities that “are” feminine. What we perceive, what our mind produces from a complex convergence of signals, is the meaning of something but those things on their own do not necessarily mean anything. Take this image. The background figure in this image has a painted face, rounded lips, and a slight tilt to the head and is read as decidedly feminine. Yet, in *I am in training don’t kiss me*, their face is similarly painted and positioned however it is read as decidedly masculine because of the other aspects of the image. So, these images come to support the idea that femininity and masculinity do not belong to specific traits, but rather the understanding of the aggregate, similar to how Subjectivists view the understanding of Aesthetic pleasures.

In a striking similarity to *I am in training don't kiss me*, Sherman's *Untitled #615* satirizes the masculine. She sits, staring into the camera, draped head to toe in what at first glance looks like that parody of the American masculine (camo), but upon closer analysis, it is a print depicting cowboys on horseback as well as on the ground.



Here, there is a fashioning of identity, from the bucket hat and bomber jacket to the heavy set brow. Yet, something is unnerving and intangible about the image. It comes from the distortion in the background, presenting the idea of the fleeting nature of this specific figure. This uncomfortable feeling and discontinuity again agree with the subjectivist. Each part of this image does not have a holding in either of the typical binaries (at least, not in any true or solid way). What makes this image a masculine one is the perception of the total of the acts, the entire performance. Supporting this, Butler says, "If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction" (Butler,

1990, p. 180). Here, she argues that because these acts are all just that, acts, they hold no true bearing over the internal gender of a person. As such, if there was no gendering of the attributes in the photo, if our eye did not make the immediate connection between camo-lite and masculinity, how would the perception of this image change?

Contrasting the made-up appearance in the previous images, Cahun's work *What do you want from me* expresses androgyny in simplicity. This could be explained by the artist's inner sense of self, and the trueness they felt in this expression, it should be noted this idea would go against Butler's idea of a lack of intrinsic gender. Here, Cahun is stripped down, facing themselves through double exposure while posing the question: What do you want from me? Who is this question posed to? Themselves or the viewer? Is looking at themselves meant to indicate the questioning of an internal self or of the inherent voyeurism of viewing art? In any sense, what is most interesting about this piece is the almost alien-like androgyny that is presented. There are none of the usual signifiers of gender (at least from a western perspective): no eyebrows, eyelashes, hair, or anatomical references for the audience of the piece to understand the gender of the artist. Is this because gender is the least important or most important part of this piece? If when stripped back, when unpainted and undone, gender is not so easily perceived, does this point us again towards subjectivism? Here, there is almost a natural performance for Cahun, a sense of self integral to the work's power. While informed by different standards of the feminine and masculine to achieve androgyny, there is still subversion that lies within.



Just as masculinity was seemingly painted on, so was the epitome of young feminine beauty in Sherman's characterization of the femme fatale in *Untitled Film Still #6*. This contrasting construction means that both presentations are equally made up and equally baseless. Here, there seems to be almost a mockery in the presentation of femininity. Unclothed, unfurled, gazing up into assumed nothingness with the most prominent parts of the image (those being in black) being the mirror, her bra, and her eyes. As there is a mockery of the feminine, this seems to translate into the idea of ridicule for the objective idea of beauty. There seems to be something hollow in this image, from the unnaturalness of the pose to the blankness of the face, asking that if an image plays into the ideas of beauty can it be beautiful? In this way, it is almost agreeing with objectivism, but I argue that this is not what this image says. If there is a presentation of beauty, in all the forms it should take,

there is still a disconnect. This beauty is not all-consuming, it is unnerving. This brings us back to where we were before, the idea that "the beautiful is not a physical fact; it does not belong to things" (Kovach, 1974, pg 52). When the beautiful is not a physical fact, it cannot be so far off to assume that conception of gender is not either.



This brings us to the question if gender in art began to be understood as the aggregate of symbols presented rather than something intrinsic to the subject within the art, how would the perception of and study of art and gender change with it? If we no longer understand gender as inherent to a piece of art but rather as a way of interpreting and understanding the work, does the meaning change?

How has the repetition of these symbols in art defined how we perceive them? As mentioned earlier, one of the key aspects of Judith Butler's theory is the idea of a repeated action through time. Can the same thing be said about art? Could the conscious and subconscious expressions of gender through art over time define how we now view parts of our gender? In these interpretations of these small, repeated acts the subjectivist rears its head. For how else can we describe the complex notion of now having a true center (a nucleus, a true kernel as the Greeks might have said), yet still being perceived/perceiving things as the masculine or the feminine. In becoming aware of this lack of a true kernel, it leaves room for new interpretations and expressions of these ideas.

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