

The Body as a Subject in Photography: Depicting Sexuality; Von Gloeden, Mapplethorpe and Opie

Introduction:

Almost as long as photography has been in existence the body has been one of its more preferred subjects; from its use as a form of medical documentation and exploration, to its use within pictorialism to demonstrate photography's validity as an art form, or its use in demonstrating political ideologies such as feminism and socialism, to its exploitation in advertising, not to mention its ability to become a canvas for the self of the photographer. However, this list merely touches on the array of uses that have been bestowed upon the body within photography. It could be argued that its most significant application has been its use in creating a discussion on sexuality; moreover, as a vehicle to articulate sexual orientation. There are few platforms that allow such a visual, literal and realistic narrative to be constructed around a subject marginalised within society. It is this specific use of the body as a subject in photography that this essay aims to explore.

Origins:

The first photographic images of male nudes that appeared specifically geared towards titillating a male audience were attributed to Wilhelm Von Gloeden and Fred Holland Day. Whilst Holland Day took a more pictorial approach to his photographs by using soft focus, manipulating negatives to give a painterly appearance and composing religious and mythical scenarios, Von Gloeden played solely on his models' exoticism. Following a familial financial disgrace, he was forced to generate his own means and took to photography. Having already moved to Sicily he discovered a market for landscape photography and postcards. By using the island's landscape as a backdrop he began to photograph local peasant boys both

nude and semi-nude creating scenes reminiscent of ancient Greece. He found a market for these images among the wealthy Grand Tour aristocrats and libertines (Ellenzweig, 1992).



Fig 1. *Untitled*, c.1900

In (fig 1) *Untitled*, we see Von Gloeden using the landscape as a backdrop to his composition, similar to that of classical paintings of the time. None of his models appear to be concerned with this majestic scenery and are instead completely absorbed by one another. All of the models are naked, one lays fully outstretched on his back, his genitals lying limply against one of his thighs. His face conveys a self-satisfied expression as if he were relishing the gaze of his fellow-subjects. Unlike the second reclined male, he seems confident in displaying himself so openly. The second reclined model appears far less confident in himself; his gaze is fixed on his own genitals however his expression is one of uncertainty and discomfort as if he feels awkward about the attention placed on him. Although the face of his onlooker is not visible to the camera, his pose is seductive; the curvature of his spine and flank, mimic and emphasise that of his buttocks.

His head is lowered to the side, suggesting his gaze may be directed towards the other model's genitals. Due to the darkness of the complexion and eyes of the seated model, it is difficult to tell exactly what part of the other model's body his gaze is directed towards, however it is evident that both he and the standing model are focused directly on the body of the fully reclined model. It is through these suggestive gazes that Von Gloeden infers his intended audience. He uses this sense of adoration of the male physique to convey to his viewers desire and lust and thus arousal.

Visibility:

Although sexual orientation had featured suggestively since Von Gloeden and Holland Day, it wasn't until the nineteen-seventies that photographers such as Peter Hujar, Arthur Tress and Robert Mapplethorpe began to explicitly depict the physicality of homosexuality making it most visible. The 1969 Stonewall riots had paved way for greater levels of visual exposure, some may even argue creating a necessity for it, it inevitably caused controversy; the boundaries between art and pornography were pushed further than ever before and still pose a challenging discourse around this ambiguous subject. As William A. Ewing states, "it is always some perceived transgression of conventional notions of the body, particularly issues relating to sexuality, that ignites public passion" (1994).

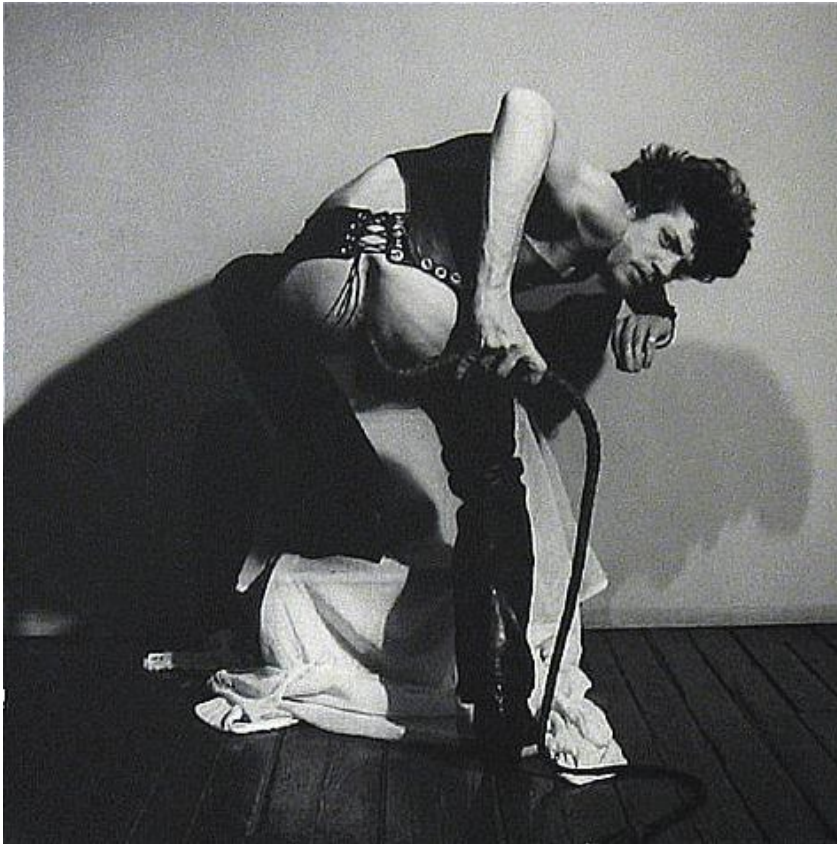


Fig 2. *Self Portrait*, 1978

Few images have managed to go so far beyond 'conventional notions of the body' as Robert Mapplethorpe's (fig 2) *Self Portrait*, 1978. The image portrays Mapplethorpe in a fetish outfit consisting of a leather waistcoat and leather chaps with a corset style binding allowing full exposure of his genitalia and anus. He is positioned over a chair with his back to the camera; one foot is resting on the chair allowing his anus to be penetrated by the handle of a whip. Tension is visible in his forearm and hand as he guides and controls the whip. His torso is twisted sideways enabling him to gaze directly into the camera. This gaze is important; it is defiant and confronts the viewer as if to say, I see you looking. The gaze plays up to the perversion of the image, challenging the viewer to question their own sense of repulsion, desire or possibly both.

Controversy:

Although Mapplethorpe's desire to make homosexuality visible was admirable, his methodology was almost harmful, portraying aggressive physicality that only existed within a small community, further testing the boundaries between art and pornography. His later work concerning the body, concentrated more highly on displaying the nude in a subtler manner, focusing on fragmented body parts and intimate poses, using a high level of contrast to emphasise the images' artistic credibility.

Despite this later work being less graphic in its nature, it still pushed the boundaries through its subject matter. By mixing race between couples within his images, Mapplethorpe challenged a subject with a recent turbulent history in America. The more controversial issue however, arose through Mapplethorpe's inclusion of children in suggestive poses. Through these poses he removed the consent of the subject as a willing participant and instead undertook a more sinister exploitative approach. In 1990, (fig 2) *Self Portrait*, 1978 and two images of children were amongst seven of Mapplethorpe's images that became the subject of a trial carried out against the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Centre and its director. They were being charged with violating obscenity laws; the case was acquitted (Kinney, 1990).

Whilst Ellenzweig describes Mapplethorpe's work as "...disturbing moral laxity infecting the arts" (1992) it is vital to note the socio-historical context under which many of Mapplethorpe's images were taken and displayed and surrounded the court case. AIDS had broken out in 1981 and there were high levels of anxiety and fear surrounding the body, gender and sexuality (Pultz, 1995). Mapplethorpe died on the 9th March 1989 as a result of complications attached to the AIDS virus thus posthumously highlighting the political value of his work.

Female Sexuality:

Historically female homosexuality has tended to be less visible in photography. The majority of the early, and often contemporary, images depicting women coupled in a sexual manner tend to be directed towards a male audience. Contrary to much of the male homosexual imagery produced, the predominant body of work produced by women surrounding female homosexuality often tends to be focused on identity and visibility rather than the physicality of sexuality. Similar to male homosexual imagery, there was a liberation of expression in the seventies, one which female photographers embraced, allowing them to confidently confront their sexuality visually. This liberation has allowed contemporary photographers to continue this exploration of identity more aggressively, continuing to challenge boundaries.

Although Catherine Opie's work covers a large range of topics, identity is the unifying underlying theme. In her project *Being and Having*, she focused on the identity surrounding female gender play specifically within the lesbian community. In 1994 Opie began what would become a series of three exploratory self-portraits.



Fig 3. *Self Portrait / Cutting*, 1993

Deeply rooted in her interest in sadomasochism, Opie uses her own body as a canvas. (Fig 3) *Self Portrait / Cutting*, 1993, shows Opie from the waist up. She is naked and sits with her back to the camera against a patterned fabric background. Her skin has been freshly carved with a picture of two stick characters holding hands in front of a house. The characters are assumed to be two women by the fact that they have been drawn wearing dresses. The image creates a series of paradoxes. The picture is drawn in a childlike fashion, portraying what should be a stereotypical heterosexual domestic scene however due to the assumed gender of the characters, this contradicts societal norms. Again the childlike nature of the picture proves significant when considering how it

has been created; playing on the viewer's sense of protection and innocence surrounding children whilst witnessing the results of painful scarification. The formal background and style of the composition, mimicking the painterly style of Hans Holbein, versus the contemporary and controversial subject matter, are again at odds with one another (Catherine Opie, 2009). The final paradox is far subtler and relates directly to Opie's personal and sexual identity. The traditional means of identifying gender through clothing and the portrayed sense of desire for domestic normality are in ways both contradictory to Opie's previous works and later works.

Conclusion:

It goes without saying that exposing controversial subjects has always proved challenging, and none more so than homosexuality, but it is evident that using the body as a subject in photography has become a powerful vehicle for creating such exposure. The body is one of the few things that humanity shares as a whole and as such; it is the single most unifying subject. No one is immune to feeling when confronted with images violating, suggestively or otherwise, the body. Given the power of the photograph as one of the most literally visual means of recording, it follows that using the body as a subject in photography is the most effective means of confronting issues surrounding homosexuality.

IMAGES:

Figure 1. Von Gloeden, Wilhelm (c.1900) *Untitled* [Photograph; unknown]. In: Ellenzweig, A. (1992) *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe*. Oxford: Columbia United Press.

Figure 2. Mapplethorpe, Robert (1978) *Self Portrait* [Photograph; Gelatin Silver Print]. In: Marshall, R. (1988) *Robert Mapplethorpe*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art.

Figure 3. Opie, Catherine (1993) *Self Portrait / Cutting* [Photograph; Colour Print]. In: Molesworth, H. (2011) *Catherine Opie: Empty and Full*. Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art.

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