

**How do visual narratives in contemporary photography explore female identity and empowerment?**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores how contemporary photography addresses female identity and empowerment, focussing on the works of Juno Calypso and Petra Collins as case studies. Photography, as both a tool for representation and a means of challenging societal norms, plays a critical role in shaping and reshaping gendered narratives. Drawing from feminist theory, particularly the work of Susan Best and Laura Mulvey, the thesis examines how Calypso and Collins use visual language to navigate the complex nature of feminine identity. The work of both artists, although differing in terms of aesthetic quality, taps into the surreal and uncanny in order to explore themes of unrealistic beauty standards, stereotypical femininity, and in order to reclaiming agency over female representation. Through employing surreal, hyperfeminine imagery and indulging in this, both artists blur the boundaries between self-representation of feminine identity and femininity as a performance. Critiquing traditional portrayals of women, they offer alternative perspectives that empower women to take control over the portrayal of their own identity.

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# **How do visual narratives in contemporary photography explore female identity and empowerment?**

## **Introduction**

Photography, as a medium of artistic and social expression, has been used as a tool to construct and deconstruct societal narratives surrounding gender, identity and power. Its unique capacity to capture and manipulate visual stories has positioned it at the forefront of shaping how individuals are represented in visual culture. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, photography has both mirrored and influenced cultural norms and values, acting as a mechanism for the projection and perception of identities. The representation of individuals in photographs shapes how they are understood in society, impacting their roles and treatment in public and private spaces.

Women have been present as both subjects and creators in photography, and over time their roles have evolved significantly. This is a reflection of broader societal and cultural changes regarding gender and identity, as well as growing recognition of women as active participants in the construction of their own narratives. Art historian Catherine McCormack argues that “women's identity has long been stifled by a limited set of archetypes” (McCormack, C. 2021, p.28). These archetypes, perpetuated through art, were largely framed through male perspectives, with women often depicted as passive subjects who are viewed in relation to men, rather than as autonomous individuals. This dynamic perpetuates and reinforces a patriarchal gaze, where appearance has implications on women's perceived value. As John Berger explained, “men survey women before treating them. Consequently, how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be

treated” (Berger, J. 1972, p.36-37). Men look at women to assess or judge them; therefore the way women present themselves is crucial, as it dictates the way in which they shall be treated. This dynamic established a visual framework where women are judged and objectified, with their appearance and compliance with societal expectations determining their value.

A turning point came in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when female photographers, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, began using their work to interrogate and challenge the traditional portrayal of women. As photography became a more widespread medium and became more easily accessible, a wider demographic of were able to create work and shape new narratives. Photography was no longer limited to a tool for those who could access and afford it. By asserting agency behind the camera, female photographers and artists had the ability to shape new narratives around their identity. This emergence of female photographers led to work that became exploring themes of autonomy, self-representation and empowerment. They began rejecting stereotypes and reclaiming their place within visual culture. These themes of redefining female identity remain central to, and continue to resonate with, the work of contemporary artists. It is crucial to consider the importance of contemporary work that addresses issues surrounding female representation, “especially when making pictures” (McCormack, C. 2021, p.14).

This thesis aims to explore how visual narratives in contemporary photography reflect and empower female identities, with particular reference to the work of artists Juno Calypso and Petra Collins. These case studies will delve into thematic concerns, stylistic choices and the resulting cultural impact of both Calypso and Collins. Through analysis of how contemporary photographers approach the portrayal of femininity, this thesis will

investigate how these artists challenge and redefine traditional representations of women, offering a deeper understanding of female subjectivity and empowerment in the contemporary art world.

## **Historical and Theoretical Context**

The role of women in photography has evolved significantly from its invention. According to Catherine McCormack,

until recently, men have had almost exclusive access to creating our cultural images.

They've also been able to control the archetypal constrictions of womanhood that have influenced ideas of how women should appear and how they should behave (McCormack, C. 2021, p.11)

Art critic Laura Freeman supported this, explaining it is not the case that women are simply “left out”, but “they are actively excluded- from studios, from workshops, from art colleges, clubs and academies”. She explained that domesticity restricts women, and critics diminish them (Freeman, L. 2021, p.48). This exclusion has resulted in an imbalance between men and women in the art world. This imbalance in access to creating work, and therefore control over what social image art portrays, meant that for much of art history women were not only excluded from the creation of cultural imagery but were also represented as passive subjects to be viewed by the patriarchal society they lived in. For a large part of history, women in art have been presented in a way that was decided by the patriarchal society. Writer Laura Mulvey developed the theory of the 'male-gaze', in which she

explained women in film are shown in relation to men, as the patriarchal society “projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly”, as the woman in film “holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (Mulvey, L. 2009, p.715). She argues that mainstream media is structured around a patriarchal perspective, with the male gaze operating through the gaze of the camera, the gaze of male characters within the narrative, and the gaze of the audience. Mulvey draws links to psychoanalytic theory and the pleasure of looking, known as scopophilia. She explains that the “fascination of film is reinforced by preexisting patterns of fascination” (Mulvey, L. 2009, p.713). The male gaze operates because society is already structured around patriarchal ideas that objectify women. Women in film “are not there to participate in the narrative so much as to adorn it” (Jackson, L.M. 2023). Although she originally focussed on the male gaze in relation to Hollywood cinema, Mulvey's male gaze theory has been applied in a wider sense, and has been used to critique how female figures are framed to appeal to heterosexual male viewers. This means that consequently, women are sexually objectified, and stripped of their power, independence and status. Mulvey's work has been recognised as a “groundbreaking essay”, as her ideas hold weight and continue to influence “a host of other thinkers and makers” (Another Gaze, 2018). In a society where patriarchy has “used images of women to contain and limit them”, where these archetypes still persist, Mulvey's ideas remain very much relevant in and applicable to contemporary visual culture (McCormack, C. 2021, p.12). However, her theory has been criticised due to questions surrounding its relevance to contemporary society, as it was published “at the crest of feminism's second wave”, and therefore fails to acknowledge elements of contemporary society. For example, her theory lacks recognition of the female gaze or same sex gaze (Boyle, K. 2015, p.885). Based on this, the relevance of her theory to contemporary society can be questioned. Despite this, the influence of her theory on the work of

contemporary artists is unquestionable. Although Mulvey coined the term 'male gaze', her theory has been drawn to and built on by numerous other writers, critics and artists, including John Berger who extensively drew on this theory in *Ways of Seeing*.

However, towards the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, photography became a more accessible medium. Consequently, more women were able to create work and challenge the pre-existing narratives surrounding female representation. This led to the Feminist Art Movement; a social, political and artistic movement that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, which sought to address gender inequality within the art world. The theory of the male gaze was at the centre of the Feminist Art Movement, as it represented everything the movement aimed to challenge. Female photographers applied the theory of the male gaze to their photographic work in an attempt to reclaim agency over their own representation, by subverting the male gaze, thus using it to their advantage in their work. Interpreting the male gaze for the benefit of women created a strong message around female empowerment.

Artist Martha Rosler, who is regarded as a prominent figure in the Feminist Art Movement, used the male gaze as a subject for much of her work, for example in *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966-1972), a collection of photomontage work created from popular media sources. By reworking magazine images, particularly those from men's magazines, Rosler critiques the societal pressures and expectations imposed on women by a patriarchal culture. She strategically manipulates visual codes and context in a way that allows her to transform objectification into an act of critique and empowerment, by interrogating the historical representation of women and offering potential for new interpretations of female identity.

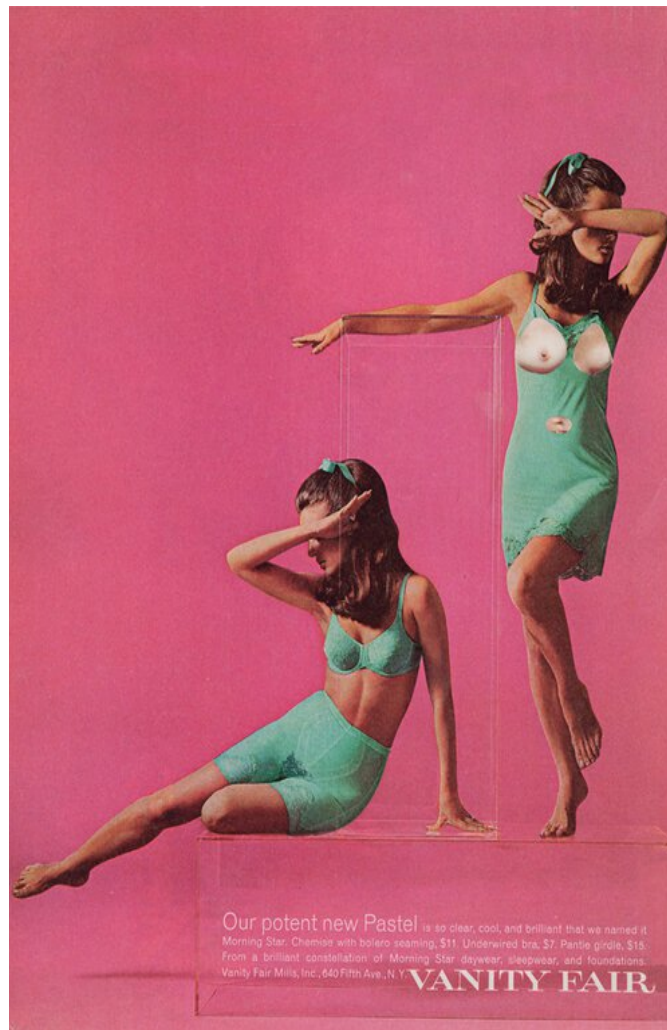


Figure 1

Figure 1 is an example of a piece from *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain*, which uses advertising images for women's lingerie. The montage shows two women in lingerie stood on a transparent box, both using their arms to shield their faces, posed against a pink background. The woman on the right has an image of breasts cut and pasted on top of the garments. The use of an image of breasts from a male magazine in this piece reframes and reclaims control over how women are represented. By using the same imagery that objectifies women, Rosler is acknowledging the reality of representation whilst transforming it into a tool for critique. As the image disrupts the usual passive role women are assigned in visual culture, it becomes a commentary that actively forces the

audience to reflect on the power dynamics at play rather than passively consume the image, as it was originally intended to be. The combination of the women shielding their faces, hiding their identities, and standing on a transparent box presented and packaged a product whilst wearing lingerie, breasts exposed, feeds into the male gaze and the idea that women are objectified within a patriarchal society. Rosler's version of the image suggests that it is advertising and selling the women's bodies, in a sexual respect, rather than the lingerie itself. Through her work, she is explicitly presenting the ideas behind the original advertisement. Rosler is subverting the passive objectification that has been inherent in advertising. In this way, Rosler is a strong example of how artists have used and subverted the male gaze to fit their own agenda.

Jo Spence is another strong example of an influential artist who made work as part of the feminist art movement. Using autobiographical photography, Spence became a key figure in the feminist art movement, and continued to make work that sat within the themes of the movement until her passing in 1992 (Tate, 2014). Spence's project *A Picture of Health* (1982) is a notable example of how she challenged traditional representations of female identity in her work. Through a politicised approach, Spence documented her journey with breast cancer, to subvert the notions of an idealised female form (Tate, 2014).



Figure 2

Figure 2, *Property of Jo Spence* (1982), shows Spence before a mastectomy with the words “property of Jo Spence?” written on her breast, which is supported by medical tape. Spence's direct gaze, which is a recurring motif used by feminist artists to challenge the male gaze, is a powerful element of this image. It challenges the viewer directly, in a way that breaks the traditional dynamic of women as passive individuals. She demands the audience to engage with the message in a way that signifies she takes an average role in

her story, and is not a passive participant. In choosing to express herself this vulnerable way, she reclaims agency over her own image. She forces an audience to confront their views of female bodies. Reversing the power dynamic between the subject and observer, rather than being objectified she asserts herself in an authoritative way, deciding her own image. The inscription 'Property of Jo Spence?' alludes to a central motive of the feminist art movement: for women to reclaim agency over their own bodies and appearance. What should be a statement, that her body is her own property, becomes a question within a patriarchal society and institutional systems, in this case the medical field. Spence's self-authorship, and her claims of control over the male gaze, make this image a powerful social commentary that connects to female empowerment.

Rosler and Spence are just two examples of a range of artists who created work as part of the feminist art movement. This movement was instrumental in shaping how contemporary photographers and artists utilise visual narratives to explore female identity and empowerment. Within the context of this thesis, Juno Calypso and Petra Collins are relevant because of their unique approaches to representing female identity. The two artists play with, and blur, the line between reinforcing stereotypes and subverting them, offering layered and multifaceted portrayals of femininity. Depending on the audience's interpretation, their work either critiques societal issues around female identity, or works to craft newly defined versions of femininity, within their respective artistic practices. Within their work, both Calypso and Collins often allude to the uncanny, working with themes of unease by making an image that works with the juxtaposition between familiar and unsettling. Through applying a blend of beauty and discomfort to their work, these artists complicate the representation of female identity. This quality within their work encourages an audience to reflect on their own perceptions of identity and representation, and whether

these are a product of a patriarchal society or have been crafted by their own interpretations. They are both able to address female identity and empowerment by illustrating the difficulties that often come as part of the female experience. In addressing this, Calypso and Collins address and critique traditional narratives, whilst creating an opportunity for new ideas around identity, empowerment and self-representation.

### **Case Study: Juno Calypso**

Often using herself as a central subject, British artist Juno Calypso offers a complex commentary on female identity in contemporary visual culture. Calypso is known for her surreal self-portraits, where she depicts her own fictional character Joyce, “a lonely woman whose dreams have failed to materialise”. Using this character to present a carefully curated, and somewhat exaggerated, version of femininity, Calypso's work blurs the line between self-representation and staged narrative (Spicer, E. 2017). She explained that when she started making this work, “it was a way to show how exhausted women like [her] are by the laboured construct of femininity” (The British Journal of Photography, 2015, p.18). By placing herself in staged hyperfeminine environments, Calypso blurs the boundaries between self-representation and performance, raising critical questions about whether her portrayals reflect an authentic femininity or a staged critique of it. In this way, her work embodies the tension inherent in the portrayal of womanhood in contemporary visual culture.

Calypso conveys this message in her work, by addressing key themes around the exploration of female identity. Her work explores the construction of female identity, both

through individual meals and by society, as she critiques the pressures and complexities faced by women. Calypso expressed caution around her work, explaining that she portrays femininity in a way that employs stereotypes with a satirical edge. She acknowledges that “even though they're satirical, some people might see them as the real thing” (Spicer, E. 2017). This awareness emphasises the ambiguity in her images, where empowerment and objectification coexist, challenging viewers to reflect on their own interpretations.

Calypso's work can be understood through the lens of what Susan Best calls a 'reparative approach', a framework that allows art to engage with discomfort and trauma in a way that encourages reflection, understanding and healing. In her book *Reparative Aesthetics: Witnessing in Contemporary Art Photography*, Best advocates for art that exposes difficult issues, while providing space for emotional engagement rather than seeking immediate solutions. She describes this approach as one that “attenuates shame while also brightening to light difficult and disturbing issues” (Best, S. 2016, p.2).

Best contrasts the reparative approach with paranoid suspicion, a critical practice typical of the anti-aesthetic tradition and identity politics art, which “favour critique and the exposure of wrongdoing” (Best, S. 2016, p.3). Best argues that Martha Rosler “is a particularly good example to consider here as she combines conceptual anti-aesthetic allegiances with feminist politics” (Best, S. 2016, p.3). She explains how in her work, Rosler exposes the oppressive classification of women's bodies, questioning the function of this exposure and arguing that no woman would be surprised by this. In this way, the role of paranoid suspicion becomes to avoid any kind of surprise, therefore it would trigger shame in those who may be surprised by the message. As Best explains “such works preach to the converted, while potentially alienating perpetrators” (Best, S. 2016, p.4). In contrast, Best

advocates for a compassionate, reflective engagement that allows viewers to witness difficult issues without the pressure to resolve them.

Calypso's work aligns with this reparative aesthetic by creating a space for women to reflect on the complexities and pressures of femininity, without offering easy solutions. Instead, her art invites emotional engagement with the struggles of objectification and societal beauty standards, allowing viewers to process these issues in a reflective, rather than corrective, manner.



Figure 3

Calypso's *Slendertone I* (2015) (figure 3) embodies the principles of the reparative aesthetic. While Rosler's work, the example given by Best, directly critiques societal issues Calypso offers an alternative that creates an unsettling yet introspective space where she is able to critique and reconstruct traditional notions of femininity. Figure 3 shows Calypso, posed as her character Joyce, stood in a sterile blue bathroom wearing tight garments, clinging to her figure, along with a Slendertone toning belt. Her face is concealed by a white mask, her hair wrapped up in a towel. The seductively posed figure, contrasted with the sterile blue bathroom and white mask, intensifies the unsettling nature of the image. The glamour of the scene is disrupted by the harsh, clinical lighting and the constricting tight garments, emphasizing the discomfort of performing an idealized femininity. This tension between visual allure and emotional discomfort critiques the labor inherent in maintaining societal beauty standards."

Best draws attention to the importance of creating a space for difficult emotions whilst offering a compassionate approach, something that Calypso is able to achieve by creating an image that does not offer a solution to issues around societal beauty standards, but instead draws attention to them in an unnerving and uncomfortable way. Calypso acknowledges and draws attention to the unrealistic beauty standards, in a way that would bring about shame to those who were unaware of this. She achieves this through her pose, which whilst aesthetically ideal, highlights how this standard is painful for those performing. In this way, in line with Best's concept, Calypso witnesses the trauma of objectification while offering viewers a space to engage with its emotional and psychological impact. This approach reflects Best's emphasis on witnessing rather than solving discomfort, encouraging the audience to reflect on, rather than resolve, these societal pressures. Her work makes the exhaustion tied to the performative element of

femininity visible, offering a reparative space where women can reflect on and engage with the emotional weight of these societal demands. Her careful use of satirical stereotypes encourages women to question these constructs, and acknowledge the struggle that accompanies them. The tension between aesthetic ideals and their emotional cost enables audiences to process discomfort and shame and empowering them to defy the societal expectations that are attached to femininity. Calypso's work fulfils the reparative aesthetic, as she works in a way that, as Best outlined in her definition, witnesses and processes the impact of patriarchal views on women in society, and the societal construction of ideas surrounding feminine identity.

Furthermore, Calypso's work delves deeply into the complexities of female identity, focussing on the tension between empowerment and objectification as a central theme. Calypso's work invites multiple interpretations, leaving it open to the audience to decide whether her work empowers women, or perpetuates objectification in a way that criticises female stereotypes. Calypso has acknowledged the ambiguity in her work, explaining she feels she needs to be careful when playing with satirical stereotypes, as her work blurs the line between critique and reinforcement of stereotypes. Her work explores how visual tropes of femininity that can be seen as empowering can simultaneously, within a specific context, perpetuate objectification. For example, self-presentation emerges as a key motif, highlighting the duality of the feminine identity and presentation. This duality and interplay forms a central component to her work, as she explores the ways that women's bodies and identities are controlled and released by the representations that surround them.



Figure 4

Figure 4 effectively illustrates the ambiguity within Calypso's work, offering a complex exploration of femininity, alternating between empowerment and critique. Calypso explained that her work is "about her body in relation to the surroundings" (Cresswell, J. 2016). Posed naked in a pink hot tub filled with bubbles, Calypso poses as her fictional character 'Joyce' with bright red, curly hair in an elaborate updo. She is sat in front of a mirrored wall, which multiplies her reflection, surrounding her. Everything from the lighting to the colour palette evokes a sense of artificiality and staged reality, creating an atmosphere which feels both intimate yet performative. This image simultaneously critiques and reclaims traditional notions of femininity, giving the image a different meaning depending on audience perspective, and how they interpret it. In one sense, the image empowers women and female identity. The hyper-feminine setting of a pink room with a

pink hot tub, the character Joyce sat looking at her reflection create an image that perpetuates traditional ideas of femininity, linked to beauty, and self care. The image shows Calypso's character allowing herself to indulge in her femininity, enjoying a traditional depiction of femininity. She is autonomous and unapologetic in a private and feminine space, which she reclaims as her own. The way in which Calypso presents her character Joyce embracing this aesthetic, allowing herself to fully embody traditional feminine roles suggests a sense of empowerment. Alone in a private space, she indulges in her own femininity at her own accord, playing this role for herself.

However, the exaggerated and highly stylised environment adds a layer of critique and leaves room for an alternative exploration of femininity. The artificiality of the hyper-feminine space and exaggerated styling, combined with the surreal repetition of Joyce's reflection, highlights the constructed and performative nature of femininity. By presenting such amplified depictions of femininity, this image can be interpreted as Calypso playing with and perpetuating feminine stereotypes, in a way that critiques them. The exaggerated execution of a feminine space subverts the meaning of stereotypes, exposing their constructed nature and the societal pressures and expectations imposed on women by a patriarchal society. This tension reflects the contradictions of femininity: while Joyce appears to reclaim the space for herself, the oppressive symmetry of her reflections hints at the societal pressures and expectations she cannot escape. The motel, a site of marital conventions, becomes a stage where Joyce simultaneously embodies and critiques the role of the bride. Calypso's comment that her work may convey "a woman's right to be selfish" (Cardona, G. 2016) adds another layer of complexity, suggesting that the act of reclaiming feminine spaces can also serve as a form of empowerment. Through this lens, Calypso challenges audiences to rethink societal narratives. The duality of interpretation

within this image challenges viewers to rethink ingrained narratives surrounding femininity, pushing them to question both origins and implications. *The Honeymoon* becomes a powerful depiction and commentary on the tension between societal norms and individual identity.

Moreover, through working with themes of desire and sexuality, Calypso is able to explore female identity on a deeper level. By portraying scenarios that blur the lines between intimacy and loneliness, she interrogates female desire and sexuality. By photographing herself in stylised artificial environments, her work often evokes feelings of isolation and alienation. Once again playing with duality and juxtaposition, she sets a scene that creates both a sense of comfort and discomfort. This speaks to the female experience many women relate to, of feeling trapped yet distanced from traditional gender stereotypes. This sense of isolation is heightened by the exaggerated styling Calypso applies in her work, which is suggested of women feeling disconnected from themselves while conforming to societal standards. This isolation is juxtaposed with the elements of desire and sexuality that Calypso plays with in her imagery, linking back to Laura Mulvey's idea of femininity being a performance and women being presented as an object for viewing. Calypso's images push an audience to ask who the performance is for: the character of Joyce herself, or for society and the audience viewing her.



Figure 5

Figure 5 speaks to the themes of desire and sexuality. Once again posed as her character Joyce, Calypso stands in the same hot tub with the mirrored wall that appears in figure 4. This time painted green, she stands naked in the empty hot tub, looking at herself and her body in her multiple reflections. A lot more of Joyce's body can be seen in this image, as she is not covered by bubbles as she previously has been; the image looks at her from behind, whilst the mirrors reflect the front of her body. Her seductive pose blurs the lines between intimacy and loneliness, as she poses seductively whilst isolated. Once again, this raises questions around why she is posing: to indulge in her own feminine desire for herself, or to comply with the male gaze for an audience. This is another example of Calypso's playfulness within her images leaving her work being open to interpretation. Joyce being painted green in this image is a significant detail, as this is the only image in

which she is this way. The semiotics of the colour green have connections with jealousy and envy. Joyce analysing her reflection, whilst painted green, could be interpreted as a symbol for the jealousy that women experience when their image and appearance is compared to another. In a patriarchal society where men have “near total control” over the way women's bodies appear and women “could only be depicted as they were seen by others”, patriarchy pushes competition between women around appearance (McCormack, C. 2021, p.8-11). Although posed seductively, there is an element of unease and discomfort within Joyce's body. This could stem from the uncanny, symmetrical environment where the image is set, but the artificiality creates a jarring atmosphere. The tension and juxtaposition between the attraction of the image and the underlying sense of discomfort speak to how women's desires and desirability is both celebrated and forced within a patriarchal society.

Calypso's work addresses feminine identity by navigating the tension between staged femininity and authentic self-representation, leaving her images open to multiple interpretations. By placing her character Joyce in hyperfeminine and culturally charged settings, she critiques societal norms while offering a space for women to reflect on their own experiences. The interplay between empowerment and objectification, intimacy and isolation, and critique and reclamation underlines the profound ambiguity in her work. Ultimately, Calypso's art invites viewers to question the constructed nature of feminine identity and its implications for identity, autonomy, and representation in contemporary visual culture.

## Case Study: Petra Collins

Recognised for her “dreamy, hyper-feminine approach”, Canadian photographer Petra Collins is a leading figure in the contemporary visual art world. As Collins' career “straddles the worlds of art, fashion, and advertising”, she is able to offer a unique, interconnected representation of female identity, and navigate different cultural spaces whilst influencing diverse audiences (Widdicome, L. 2016). Applying a soft, ethereal, dreamlike aesthetic to her imagery, Collins is widely recognised for her depictions and representations of femininity, through the lens of the female gaze. Her early work was “immediately read as an intimate, authentic exploration of girlhood”, and since then Collins' work has alluded to exploration of feminine identity more broadly (Kreutter, M. 2023). Her work is a strong example of how visual narratives can interrogate and reshape female identity, and how they hold the ability to empower women. Collins' work has strong societal messages, it is “art that demands a reaction, forcing viewers to confront their perceptions of femininity” (Rendon, S.M. 2024). She explained that “women are inherently told their bodies are objects”, and women “don't really learn how to be in” their body, which is something she hopes she can help teach other girls (Robertson, E. 2016). Her style and aesthetic choices are what makes her work so recognisable and impactful. Often saturated with hazy lighting, Collins work has a vintage style that adds a timeless quality to her work, showing willingness to resist the hyper-realism of digital media. She shoots in a way that creates a sense of intimacy between her subjects and audience, giving space for the juxtaposition of vulnerability and strength of her subjects.



Figure 6

Figure 6 is an image from Collins' body of work titled *OMG I'm Being Killed #2*. This is a sequel to *OMG I'm Being Killed* (2019), Collins' dream publication which is regarded her "ultimate fashion magazine" and one that she "feels is a good representation of the truth about the age we live in" (The Photographers Gallery Bookshop, 2019). In the sequel edition, Collins plays with femininity as a performance, echoing how social constructs of gender shape women's identities. Working in a way that is similar to Juno Calypso, Collins examines female identity as a performance playing with the duality of femininity in a way that is traditional, yet empowering. Much like Calypso, Collins makes work that walks the fine line between conforming to stereotypes, and subverting stereotypes as a form of empowerment. The subject of figure 6 is a group of four blonde women, standing back to back in a ritualistic circle, holding hands. Their posture seems stiff, which combined with

the dimly lit, enclosed setting creates an eerie and somewhat uncomfortable atmosphere. Each is wearing a pink top paired with a mini skirt, almost as if they are dressed in uniform. One interesting detail is the woman who is directly facing the camera wears a denim mini skirt, whilst the other three women wear white skirts. The subtle differentiation of one woman in a denim skirt and the stiff, ritualistic pose creates a tension between conformity and individuality, offering a commentary on individuality and collective identity within the constraints of gendered expectations. The familiar domestic setting, a space typically associated with comfort, is disrupted by an underlying eeriness. The women's still poses and the use of surreal lighting creates an uncanny atmosphere, suggesting that what should feel natural for these subjects is artificial and performative. This unease begins to question the authenticity of the roles that women are expected to play, alluding to the psychological cost of conforming to societal standards of beauty and femininity in a similar way to Calypso in figure 3. Through playing with the juxtaposition between the familiarity of a domestic setting and the strange quality of the setting, Collins has created a subtly uneasy image, tapping into the uncanny. Calypso, in figure 3, was able to use her pose to force an audience to recognise and question the psychological impact beauty standards have. The stiff pose, along with the pink form fitting clothes, can be interpreted as a critical representation of the construction of feminine identity. The clothing choice evokes a tension between idealised beauty standards and the performance of gender. Collins' use of pink, a colour with stereotypical links to femininity, is contrasted by the stiff, almost mechanical, poses of the women. This disrupts the comfort typically associated with the colour. As they are dressed in the same way, this could be interpreted as a statement about how women are depicted as one in the same. However, the duality of interpretation of this image stems from the way in which the figure also could be seen as posing confidently, with a direct gaze that confronts an audience as she reclaims agency over her

own representation. The juxtaposition of the traditionally feminine elements, such as the pink outfits, with the confident, direct gaze challenges the typical notion of women as passive objects for male pleasure. By confronting the viewer with their self-awareness, Collins empowers her subjects, reclaiming the visual language traditionally used to objectify women. The multiple figures, each distinct yet unified, also defy the stereotype of the singular feminine identity, illustrating the multidimensionality of women's experiences in a patriarchal world. This duality between fragmented and constructed identity illustrates how female identity is constructed by a mix of internal and external factors. This image explores the tension between societal expectations and personal identity. In a similar way to Juno Calypso's *The Honeymoon Suite* (Figure 5), Collins crafts this image in a way that the figures blurs the lines between empowerment and objectification.



Figure 7

Set in a “world of constructed domestic interiors” Collins' *Baron series* explores emotional realities with a “complicated relationship to intention and perception” (Baron Books, 2019). Figure 7, from this series, presents a surreal scene where three women occupy a soft, intimate room. Dressed in simple white underwear, an aesthetic choice that evokes innocence and purity, one figure sits on the bed in the corner of the image, whilst the other stands in the middle of the room, with the third knelt at her leg, embracing her. This interaction between the characters creates a complex narrative relationship, caught between connection and distance. The physical placement of the figures suggests a layered dynamic, that is reflective of the complexities of female relationships. Collins draws on the idea that empowerment can stem from multifaceted female strength, in this case in a collective form. Another notable detail within this image is in the background, a ring of fire, which is also reflected in the vanity mirror. This fire, although contained in a ring, introduces an element of danger and disruption. This fire can be seen as a subtle reference to the feminist notion that women's emotional and psychological experiences are often shaped by external pressures. The subject, when combined with Collins' signature soft and hazy style, gives the image a dreamlike and surreal quality. The contrast between the soft, calm nature of the setting with the intensity of the fire reference the emotional and psychological experiences women face when confronting societal expectations. Linking to the male gaze theory, the position and stance of the three women suggest they are engaged with each other in a shared, intimate moment. They are not dressed to appeal to the male gaze, nor are they posed in a desirable way. Their body language conveys a feeling of vulnerability. As subjects, they are allowing themselves to be vulnerable for an audience, reclaiming agency over their representation. The women's simple white underwear in *Baron* functions as a rejection of traditional objectification. By presenting themselves in a non-sexual context, they reclaim the gaze and assert control over their

representation, crafting the identities they wish to project. Moreover, within visual culture fire has connotations of destruction and rebirth. The contained nature of the fire, combined with how the innocent presentation of the women is suggestive of how views of a patriarchal society could destroy the women's peace, yet their resistance to the male gaze contains the destruction, protecting them from patriarchal views.



Figure 8

Collins, much like Calypso, plays with the tension between two factors of an image. Figure 8 is an example of this, as Collins juxtaposes soft, pastel tones with suggestive posing, creating a tension between innocence and sexuality. The image focusses on a woman, wearing a pink top and short denim mini skirt, who is framed by the movement of women in the foreground. These women, who are only show from the waist down, are the same women from figure 6, wearing white mini skirts and knee high socks with high heel shoes.

Similarly to Calypso, Collins has styled her subjects in a hyperfeminine way. This serves as a deliberate artistic choice to critique and reclaim societal expectations of feminine identity. Collins' choice to present her female subjects in a hyperfeminine way is an example of empowerment within visual culture as she, as a woman, is deciding how her subjects are presented and tailoring to the female gaze. Although the women are presented in a hyperfeminine way, Collins' work "isn't about conforming to traditional notions of beauty. Instead, she's subverting them" (Rendon, S.M. 2024). By exaggerating tropes of femininity, she draws attention to the way that feminine identity within visual culture has historically been crafted by patriarchal views. In this way, she both reflects and subverts the male gaze. The exaggerated styling becomes satirical, exposing the artificiality of these ideals. This reclamation of feminine elements becomes an act of empowerment. Through intentionally engaging with these visual codes, the women Collins portrays in her imagery assert control over their own appearance, reclaiming hyperfemininity as a source of power, rather than subjugation.

Collins effectively represents feminine identity and creates empowering imagery by exploring a range of these, particularly through her portrayal of the visual aesthetic of femininity. Her use of hyperfeminine symbolism critiques how patriarchal media has historically shaped femininity, while simultaneously reclaiming elements of traditional femininity. By employing hyperfemininity as a form of resistance, Collins reshapes feminine identity within visual culture, empowering women to take control of their own representation. Vulnerability is a recurring theme in her work, which carries significant emotional weight. This vulnerability is juxtaposed with a strong sense of agency, as Collins consciously showcases female vulnerability in a way that reframes it as empowering. By depicting women as active participants in their narratives, she challenges the male gaze

and disrupts its influence, offering a more empowering representation of feminine identity. Collins' approach to continually challenging and redefining feminine identity shares similarities with Juno Calypso's work. Despite differences in their visual styles, both artists explore themes of domestic spaces as part of identity, as illustrated in figure 4 and figure 7. Moreover, Collins addresses cultural wounds associated with feminine identity by reclaiming the visual narratives of girlhood and womanhood. While feminine aesthetics have historically been trivialized or sexualized, Collins reimagines them as complex and multifaceted. This act of reclamation aligns with Best's notion of the reparative aesthetic, which provides space for healing through artistic creation.

## **Conclusion**

The exploration of female identity and empowerment through visual narratives in contemporary photography reveals an ever changing dialogue between tradition, critique and innovation. Photography has served as a platform for challenging societal norms, and as a tool for advocating societal change, an influence particularly evident in the feminist art movement. This movement not only redefined the representation of women, but sparked a widespread societal conversation that continues to shape contemporary art. This meant that as the message became further widespread, reaching more artists and creators, it was able to inspire a new generation of work. The work of Juno Calypso and Petra Collins both reflects and reinterprets the historical contexts from which it draws inspiration.

As Catherine McCormack explained "historical images have lives and histories that go beyond the context of their creation" (McCormack. C, 2021, p.12). Both Calypso and

Collins engage with this idea, as they recontextualise visual motifs from art history and continue to instil them with contemporary meaning and relevance. Through embracing and subverting stereotypes, both artists invite an audience to critically examine their own perceptions of female identity, empowering change around perception of femininity within a societal context. Their works challenge traditional gender boundaries, offering new ways of seeing and being seen, ultimately empowering women and questioning long standing dominant narratives surrounding feminine identity.

Ultimately, contemporary photography, as demonstrated in the case studies of Juno Calypso and Petra Collins, proves to be a powerful tool for reshaping female identity, offering a platform for both empowerment and self-representation. Through their innovative use of visual language, both artists are able to challenge preconceived notions of femininity, providing multifaceted, complex layered portrays of women. Their work highlights the transformative potential that art holds, not only to represent but to reclaim identity and challenge views perpetuated throughout art history.

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