

Research in context
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Fine Art
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**Q: EXPLORE HOW ARTISTS HAVE EXPRESSED GENDER IN ART PRACTISE
PROVIDING EVIDENCE FROM AT LEAST TWO ARTISTS AND THINKERS.**

Art has always been a way of presenting and documenting the ideal gendered body throughout different periods of time, portraying clear distinctions between males and females, through both gender roles and physical appearance. Masculinity itself has many “layers of emotion” that “coexist and contradict each other” (Connell, 2005, pg.10), however it has always been depicted as someone who has a certain authority over others and who’s “presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies” (Berger, 1972, pg.56).



Figure .1- Giovanni Battista Moroni 'Portrait of Gian Gerolamo Grumelli (The Gentleman in Pink) (1555-1560)

During the 16th century, painters of the late renaissance era, such as Giovanni Battista Moroni, often painted men with little muscle and fair skin (shown in figure.1) as both are an indication that they need not carry out any form of labour, therefore suggesting high class

and wealth, greatly contrasting the muscular, towering sculptures of Ancient Greece that also exude power, however it is through their physical dominance rather than the material substance favoured later on. Despite the varying portrayals of the male ideal, they are almost always differing to that of their female counterparts, however more recent research surrounding masculinity states that it “never exists in a pure state” and that “femininity is always part of a man’s character” (Connell, 2005, pg.10). After carrying out extensive studies on gender development, Sigmund Freud stated that “in human beings’ pure masculinity or femininity is not to be found either in a psychological or a biological sense” (1905, pg.219) suggesting that every individual has both masculine and feminine qualities that come together to form one’s personality. Despite this relating to both men and women, the rise of feminist art in the 1960’s led to a much less regimented presentation of the female ideal within art; with artists such as Paula Rego and Valie Export breaking down typical stereotypes that had been embedded within society for centuries and highlighting issues that have previously been overlooked, indicating that the expression of gender through art isn’t as linear as it has once been. In this essay I wish to look at how the male gender has been explored in art through enhancing one’s masculinity with more typically feminine qualities, specifically focusing on the artists Paul McDonald and Robert Mapplethorpe, who have both challenged typical masculine ideals through the means of photography.

The first artist I want to focus on is Paul McDonald, in particular his series ‘The Study of Self’ (2021) which emphasises the effects of rigid gender divides and stereotypes on real life men, and how they have been made to feel as though they had to adjust their personality to fit society’s ideal. Over the course of ten years, McDonald photographed himself alongside friends and other people he felt drawn towards, already creating a divide between McDonald’s work and depictions of the male gender historically as the subject would usually be of a mythical status, such as ancient Greek gods or biblical characters, a famous example of this being Michelangelo’s ‘David’ (1501-1504), or of high class and wealth as described previously and shown in figure.1. McDonald’s understated use of subject and the unrefined natural environments in which they are photographed, particularly in the nude depictions, brings a sense of reality to something that is often overly romanticised through art, allowing the viewer to reassess their preconceptions on the topic of masculinity. Within his research, McDonald recalled several quotes from French author Marguerite Yourcenar, including one in which she stated that there are “three means of evaluating human existence: the study of

self, which is the most difficult and most dangerous method, but also the most fruitful” (Yourcenar, 1955, pg.27), suggesting a sense of struggle within the series. Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung states that man “despises his femininity” (2009, pg.263) which may be a cause of the difficulty surrounding finding a sense of self, as one as a male has to accept the feminine qualities within themselves to fully engage with their masculinity.



Figure. 2 – Paul McDonald ‘The Swan’ (2016)

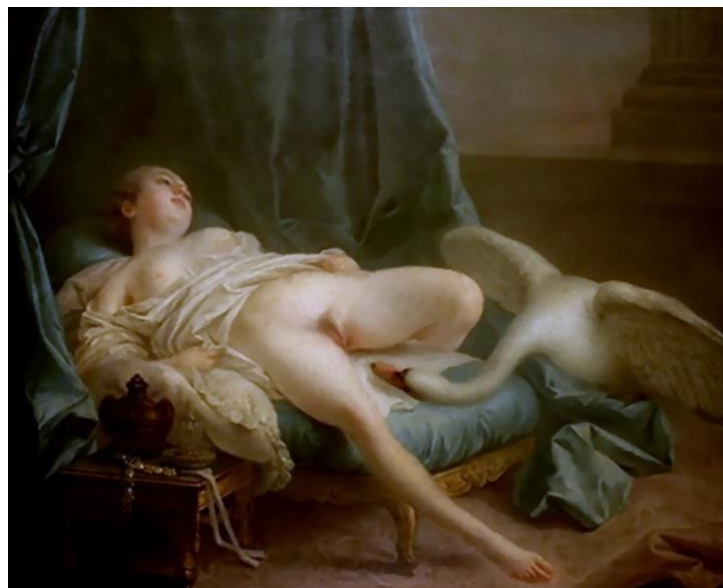


Figure. 3 – François Boucher ‘Leda and the Swan’ (1741)

One piece from the series that I wish to draw attention to is 'The Swan' (2016) (see figure. 2) which depicts a nude male laying down in what appears to be a field or some form of farmland, with one arm outstretched and the other softly draped across the body. From McDonald's research and the title of the piece, it is evident that this image was based upon François Boucher's 1741 painting 'Leda and the Swan' (see figure.3) in which a nude female is seen to be laying down surrounded by an abundance of lavish looking fabrics and a swan to her right. 'Leda and the swan' is a classic story originating from Greek mythology in which Leda, the Spartan queen, is raped by Zeus, who took the form of a swan in order to seduce and impregnate her. By comparing his subject to Leda, McDonald has created a sense of submission and weakness; neither of these attributes corresponding to societies typical view on masculinity. This is also prominent as Leda was taken advantage of by a man, suggesting that this may have also occurred to the subject in figure.2 in one way or another, highlighting a more sensitive side to the figure. Another aspect of the image that suggests femininity within the male form is the position in which he is occupying, as typically female nudes are in a reclining pose, similar to that expressed by the subject in the image and directly contrasting the typical male upright stance displayed in many sculptures and paintings. Lying down in that classic reclining pose instantly reduces the power that the subject has over anyone who is standing above them, again suggesting a submissive nature to the figure, linking to Berger's idea that "The surveyor of a woman in herself is male: the surveyed female" (1972, pg.58-59). This is due to the fact that the positioning of the female nude (lying down in an open bodied manner) allows others to observe them more readily. By applying that sense of being surveyed to a male body it changes the way one may view the image as it almost reduces the anticipated power and authority expected of the male body to a more feminine figure. Berger also stated that if one were to take "an image of a traditional nude. Transform the woman into a man. Either in your mind's eye or by drawing on the reproduction. Then notice the violence which that transformation does. Not to the image but to the assumptions of a likely viewer." (1972, pg.104), the word 'violence' highlighting the effects that strongly reinforced gender stereotypes can have on assuming one's character, as Berger doesn't refer to any violent acts caused by the male gender but rather the promise of this aggression in the mind of the viewer. McDonald, in a way, carries out this experiment by replacing the character of Leda with a man, however the figure in

'The Swan' (2016) doesn't seem violent or come across as aggressive in any way, but rather the subject seems to be calmer. This may be as McDonald has managed to highlight the feminine qualities within the male that present the subject in a very different way to many other presentations of the male gender in art; breaking down preconceptions that a viewer may have of masculinity as a whole.

The second artist that explores the representation of masculinity is Robert Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe is a queer photographer who highlights the divide between masculinity and femininity within his work, producing striking black and white images that focus predominantly on the body and what it represents in terms of sexuality and gender. In an essay on Mapplethorpe and his work, Germano Celant states that "Mapplethorpe always attempts, consciously or unconsciously, to resolve the dichotomies between opposites ... He works with the latent power of their bond and reconciliation, aiming for the final result that would achieve a simultaneity of masculine and feminine, man and woman." (2004, pg.37-38), suggesting that within his work there is no separation between the two and they work together as a whole.



Figure. 4 – Robert Mapplethorpe 'Self Portrait' (1980)



Figure.5 – Robert Mapplethorpe ‘Self Portrait’ (1980)

I would firstly like to look at two of Mapplethorpe’s self-portraits from 1980, the first (seen in figure.4) depicts Mapplethorpe adopting a typically male persona, with a sturdy leather jacket, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth and a slight turn to his eyebrows that causes a particularly stern gaze into the camera lens. All of these things combining to create a strong sense of what people would consider masculine, which is completely contradicted within the second self-portrait (see figure.5) which shows Mapplethorpe bare chested with makeup on his face and hair styled into an almost blowout. The contrasting ways Mapplethorpe has presented himself connect to his wide exploration of sexuality and the gender divide, showing how one individual can have both masculine and feminine traits within them as “humankind is masculine and feminine, not just man or woman” (Jung, 2009, pg.263). A sense of exposure and nervousness is conveyed through figure.5 due to the lack of clothing and the pinned back positioning of his arms, as if to try and make himself smaller and more streamlined in order to almost hide, despite the head on gaze that creates a

strong sense of connection with the viewer. This could be due to the lack of exposure that things such as drag and males presenting themselves in a primarily feminine way, creating almost a sense of discomfort for the viewer. Seeing the two portraits side by side solidifies the notion that every individual has both elements of masculinity and femininity within them, and both can be expressed in many different ways despite the gender of the individual.

Mapplethorpe also created lots of explicit sexual imagery that explored sexuality, in particular homosexuality which was something that Mapplethorpe himself was a part of, that shocked viewers and in turn allowed people to express themselves more freely.



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

Figure. 6 – Robert Mapplethorpe ‘Orchid’ 1982

This however was greatly contrasted by his delicate depictions of flowers which provided a more subtle imagery of sexuality, presenting it as beautiful and quite frail as if to suggest peoples sexuality at the time wasn't as strong due to the lack of acceptance surrounding masculinity and femininity as a whole. Despite being very different objects, there is a desire

and a want for both human genitals and flowers as described by Celant "The desired object is thus consumed on the flower, through the extremely rich sensuality of its exposure. And yet the cutaneous softness of its petals, of its pistil, of its bulb evokes the heat of flesh: Mapplethorpe's flowers can be experienced erotically." (1992, pg.42). Mapplethorpe himself also described the comparison stating "My approach to photographing a flower is not much different than photographing a cock. Basically it's the same thing." (1992, pg.43), forcing the viewer to see male genitals, which are often portrayed as a powerful thing, as a very delicate, soft object being compared to something that is usually considered to be feminine. The juxtaposition between the masculinity of the male genitals and the femininity of a flower forces one to explore the gentler side to the male gender as a whole. Overall Mapplethorpe expresses gender in many different ways but always suggests that there is a sense of femininity to the male gender as well as just masculine traits.

To conclude, the male gender has rarely been expressed to have any form of female traits within art as "it is bitter for the most masculine man to accept his femininity, since it appears ridiculous to him, powerless and tawdry." (Jung, 2009, pg.263). As previously mentioned, male presence is often thought to be based upon the "power which he exercises on others" (Berger, 1972, pg.57), which often leads to the complete disregard of any feminine qualities as they would be seen to reduce said power. However, as new theories came to light, by psychologists such as Freud and Jung, suggesting that masculinity and femininity coexist, and each gender must explore the qualities of the other to find a complete sense of self. Both Paul McDonald and Robert Mapplethorpe have questioned previous depictions of gender, particularly the male gender, within their work, expressing what they feel is a true sense of masculinity, which for both includes feminine qualities, unlike previous artists. McDonald and Mapplethorpe both call upon personal experiences with how they have found genders to be highly restricting due to pressures from society and things such as gender norms and stereotypes, leading them to want to share their opinions and experiences through their artwork. Comparison between female figures and male figures is something that was really powerful in McDonald's images as the male figure was completely reimagined into a completely different role and position than what is usually depicted of the male gender, making the viewer question how that influences their views on masculinity, questioning their previous thoughts on the topic that may have been heavily influenced by cultural norms. Overall, the regimented ideals of gendered bodies and qualities are still

around today, however the masculinity and the male gender as a whole has been shown to have lots of aspects of femininity within it which is now being explored more commonly within art.

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