Name: Niamh O'Dobhain

Student Number: 1904839

Course: Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Lecturer: Paul Duerinckx

Word Count: 2,786

Dissertation Proposal

Keywords: Beauty, The Subject and Representation

Dissertation Proposal

Keywords: Beauty, The Subject and Representation

In my Dissertation Proposal, I explore themes of *beauty, the subject* and *representation*. I aim to explore the connections between these keywords and delve into theories, as well as how artists have explored these themes in their work. I mostly cover women artists' work and how women have been represented, the need for correct representation and further explore the necessity of positive representation of black and non-binary and other LGBTQIA+ people. Looking at beauty and its influence on the representation of women, black and LGBTQIA+ people, and the importance of representing the subject but also how artists have used the subject to create their own entities.

Frances Borzello states in Seeing Ourselves, Women's Self-Portraits that

> "As more information has found its way into print, it is now possible to present a history of female self-portraiture as to argue for its existence as a genre in its own right."
> (2018)

Borzello explores how women have represented themselves through their self-portraits over six centuries and how different and varied their work is compared to men's: men's self-portraits as well as the male representation of women. Women's self-portraits offer a different way of being read due to their different experiences and positions in society. Women produced self-portraits with no male equivalent with Borzello referring to Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting (1639)*. (2018)

Figure 1: Gentileschi, A. (1639) *Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting.*

The mere depiction of a female face by a woman completely changes the narrative and how the piece is read due to their place in a patriarchal society. (Borzello, 2018) They present a different kind of representation for women, that men are simply unable to produce. As John Berger notes in *Ways of Seeing*, "According to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome, the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man." (1972)

Women's fascination with self-portraiture grew more prevalent with the rise in women artists throughout the centuries. It is a fascination, as women "seem to have been reaching for some kind

of inner reality." (Borzello, 2018) Women sought a deeper sense of being, different from how they have been represented before. As Borzello states "The mirror becomes a symbol of this search for the truth behind the surface. Finally throwing off its link with vanity, it is now used to suggest the complexity of being human." (2018) Women got to look at themselves with it not seen for vanity but for self-discovery and self-representation. Previously women were depicted as beautiful objects. John Berger wrote when referring to Tintoretto's *Susannah and the Elders (1555)*, "[the] function for the mirror […] was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight." (1972)

Figure 2: Tintoretto. (1555) *Susannah and the Elders.*

Women were presented as being passive beauties, these representations were formed through and to appease the male gaze. Women have also been conditioned to see themselves through this male gaze. "[…] The feminist critique of beauty is typically a critique of how the social status of women is codified in and maintained by beauty; the argument stemming from Theodor Adorno for the *Crisis of Beauty*" (Beech, 2009)

Theories of beauty have been debated for centuries with two primary interpretations that beauty is subjective and purely individual and that it is “inevitably socially inscribed.” (Beech, 2009) Paul Ricoeur coined the term ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ to describe the combination of the individual and society’s ideas of beauty. (Beech, 2009) This became the modern theory of beauty. The modern 20th century society was able to influence people more than ever before and with trends and ideals constantly changing our ideas of beauty changed too. With this new theory, modernist artists questioned the link between art and beauty and beauty’s place in art. “[…] Modernism introduced the politics of beauty”. (Beech, 2009) Beauty became controversial and a concept to debate within art. I find myself questioning aesthetics in my art and what they are for. The beauty and aesthetics of the work determine how it is read due to its pollical nature. The work’s beauty or lack of it can be read as a political statement.

With beauty being questioned and challenged in art throughout the 20th century, women artists explored the representation of women and challenged their relationship with beauty. Fuelled by the second-wave feminist movement, a need to represent themselves and use their bodies in performance work with a sense of power and control. (Borzello, 2018) Women artists used their work to acknowledge the male gaze and women’s relationship with beauty and society. They challenged these representations of women past and present exploring mass media images, developing theories and challenging how women were portrayed. (Church Gibson, 2018) Artist, Cindy Sherman produced a series of *Untitled Film Stills (1977-80)* “[…] her representations of femininity were not a return, but a re-representation, a making strange.” (Mulvey, 1991) With a backdrop of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, it is seen as a feminist commentary on the representation of women in film. Stereotyped women from B-movies are often there for beauty to appease the male gaze. By concentrating on just these women in these photos, the representation is

emphasised. Sherman is quoted as saying “I wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it.” (MoMA, 2022)

Figure 3: Sherman, C. (1978) *Untitled Film Still #13*

It is debated whether Sherman’s work is self-portraiture as she is “her own model, she is not her own muse.” (‘Mistress of self-effacement; Cindy Sherman at MoMA’, 2012) Her work features her body as a model, but it is not her. Each photograph is a character of sorts played by Sherman. Her work also makes me question our everyday relationship with performance. How much do we perform to meet societal standards of beauty? Judith Butler theorises in *Gender Trouble* that we perform gender to fit into society’s imposed binary system. (Butler, 1999) We can see beauty in the same way as Butler’s theory on performed gender. Dave Beech suggests that if aesthetics are performed similarly to gender “then beauty exists at the tense intersection of the individual and

society, with the individual neither fully subsumed nor fully free from social norms and cultural hierarchies." (Beech, 2009) Sherman's work shows us how we are influenced by society's beauty standards including the artist herself in her more recent work, "admitting to a more "personal aspect" in her images of ageing stars: "I, as an older woman, am struggling with the idea of being an older woman."" (Gopnik, 2016) Her later work shows how women are responding to ageing which brings forwards the traditional ideal of the young beautiful woman. These photos show beauty standards' effect on ageing women with the struggle to live up to those ideals and how they attempt to keep ageing at bay. (Church Gibson, 2018) Sherman's *The Socialites series (2007-8)* shows "Their dignity in the face of faded glamour reveals both the empathy and brutality of the artist's eye." ('Mistress of self-effacement; Cindy Sherman at MoMA', 2012)

Figure 4: Sherman, C. (2007-8) *Untitled #470 (The Socialites' series)*

The work shows women posed and performing beauty and could be seen as well as Sherman performing in the work herself. I find Sherman as a woman performing these ideals and these stereotyped women are seen as ironic. The pressures of how women are meant to perform for the male gaze show how idealised representations of women have been.

Similar to Sherman, Marlene Dumas creates work of a representation, of a representation basing her paintings on found images from magazines, film and advertising mixing iconic imagery and the famous faces with the unknown. (Coelewij and Toibin and Vischer, 2014) Dumas explores the role of the model in her paintings. (Steiner, 2001) “Dumas thinks it is time to hear from the model, from women in general. ‘I did not paint Freud’, she asserts; ‘instead I painted his wife’.” (Steiner, 2001)

Figure 5: Dumas, M. (1994) *Models*

Dumas’ *Models (1994)* series focuses on bringing life back into the person who has just been previously used for aesthetics/ their beauty to appease the male gaze. Her models meet and challenge our gaze. They have power and assert their sense of being. She works on capturing a consciousness of a person, not a passive beauty, in doing so taking the model’s viewpoint. (Steiner,

2001) Dumas explores art history and how women have been represented and give power back to them in her artwork. As Wendy Steiner writes,

> "She [the model] is all too aware of the roles prescribed for her. In *The Model Imitates the Dead* she takes a pose identical to that of the naked corpse above her – horizontal, exposed, passive. After all, this passivity is what people expect of her. But by deliberately taking the pose, she undermines its passivity, and Dumas includes her point of view by inserting her words in the picture: 'The model disapproves. The model won't obey the rules. […]'" (2001)

Figure 6: Dumas, M. (1988) *Waiting (for Meaning)*

Dumas does not work with live models and even when painting people close to her she photographs them to capture their direct connection. This gives her time to reflect on their relationship without the person. (Dumas, 1997) She creates a distance between her subjects/models and presents experiences, emotions and states via another's face. "Second-hand images, first-hand experiences." (Dumas, 1997) I find she creates new entities separate from the original models' identity while

retaining a sense of being. Marlene Dumas' work presents the human condition and a collective feeling. Maybe more of a representation of all of us, not just one individual. Dumas likens an artist and her models to a girl with her dolls. (Coelewij and Toibin and Vischer, 2014) She sees a bit of herself in her models. There is beauty in the respect she has for the model in capturing emotions and states of being and so respect for the art. (Steiner, 2001) Dumas states, "There's no right way to portray or to understand someone. It's just an acknowledgement, not a denial of reality." (IMDb, 2022) Dumas often represents people not by individual identity but by capturing a presence of an emotive state. Richard L. Anderson categorises theories of capturing a subject by showing different ways of representing someone or something. Mimetic theory refers to the artist 'imitating' something in the real world exploring a connection between the artist and the subject. However to explore the psychology of the artist and the subject is referred to as Emotionalist theory. (Anderson, 1990) I think both of these can exist individually and together creating an expressive image which is what Dumas' work primarily is. As well as these, Anderson writes of Pragmatic theory referring to the art creating something positive and political, benefitting society. The stylistic side and exploring materials and mediums to create something emotionally stirring are known as Formalist theory. (Anderson, 1990)

Theories of two selves; an outer and an inner more private self, have become more prevalent in recent years with more support and openness to self-expression to reveal the inner self. The exterior self is more performative, aware and influenced by societal pressures. "Sigmund Freud […] posited that the "public self is a conditioned construct of the inner psychological self."" (Sobieszek, 1994) The exterior often gives a hint at the inner self, with the inner self believed to be the 'true self'. Representations believed to be the representation of another's inner self can be problematic and can lead to complete misrepresentations. Self-portraits can offer a point where the inner and outer self meets. More vulnerable and true to a person. As John Tagg states, "The portrait is, therefore, a

sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and the inscription of social identity" (Tagg, 1988) I believe that being in control of your own representation and self-creation makes more of a true representation. Women have been neglected of this inner representation and therefore searching "for some kind of inner reality." (Borzello, 2018) in their self-portraits to gain a deeper truer representation of themselves, with now artists like Zanele Muholi, ethnic minorities and LGBTQIA+ artists are eagerly searching for the same representation. Muholi's work shows how important representation is, and most of all a positive representation so people have a positive response to these people.

> "[There is a] need to capture images of ourselves, of our lives is not necessarily about beauty per se but it's about the need of documenting realities of people who deserve to be heard, who deserve to be seen and whose lives are often excluded as a part of the canon." (Tate, 2020a)

Figure 7: Muholi, Z. (2011) *Tash Dowell, Harare, Zimbabwe. (Faces and Phases, 2006-)*

Figure 8: Muholi, Z. (2021) *Amanda Mahlaba, Mt. Moriah, Edgecome, Durban. (Faces and Phases, 2006-)*

Muholi documents members of the black LGBTQIA+ community in South Africa. Black members of the LGBTQIA+ community are often excluded more than white members due to the predominantly white representation of beauty and even just representation at all. Muholi's view on beauty is about an experience, it is personal, "it's the kindness and what comes from within - that is beautiful. It's not the outer layer". (Tate, 2020a) Ethical beauty as "Elaine Scarry, […] argues that beauty is etymologically and conceptually linked to kindness and justice" (Beech, 2009) I believe that the inner self and the expression of the true self are more important and beautiful than traditional aesthetic values. "[…] Do not limit my beauty standards to your own" (Paris Photo, 2020) Muholi states. We need to change what we deem to be beautiful and find our own ideas as our own are more subjective than society's. At the very least our concept of beauty must be based on reality if we still value beauty.

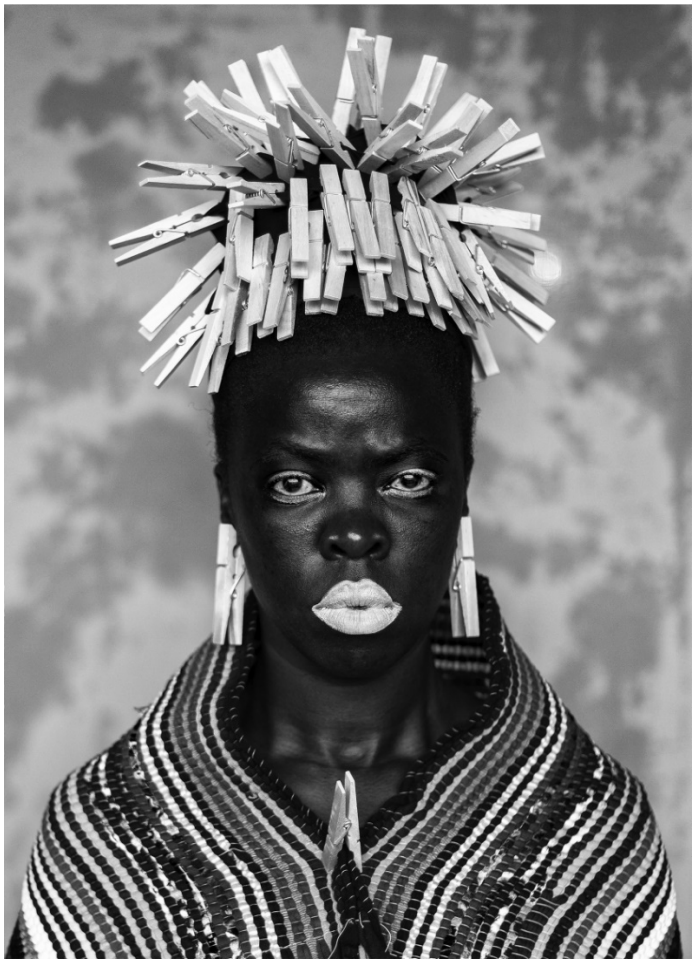

Figure 9: Muholi, Z. (2015) *Bester I (Mayotte) (Somnyama Ngonyama, 2012-)*

Muholi's compassion and understanding of how to represent others come from their experience representing themselves through their ongoing self-portrait series *Somnyama Ngonyama (2012-)*, including everyday objects creating a personal narrative. Muholi also represents others like themselves in the same community with similar experiences. (Allen and Nakori and Osc, 2020) They use the word *participants* rather than *subjects* inviting a more collaborative approach to representation. (Tate, 2020a) Taking their role seriously they understand the responsibility and present their participants "not as queer 'types' but as multifaceted individuals with agency, proudly subverting the camera's power dynamic by returning its gaze." (Allen, 2020) Being in control of your own representation and self-creation is important for yourself as well as others to see yourself positively. Through my work, I have found it empowering to be able to discover and represent my inner self that people don't get to see.

In Jasper Johns' *Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews (1996)*, he introduced the watchman and spy concept. The watchman is merely a capturer of images but the spy is a seeker of revealing a person. Robert A. Sobieszek argues that the artist is both the watchman and spy, with the artist's responsibility "to penetrate beneath the surface of things and adjust whatever secrets of the self are discovered for representation on that surface." (1994)

> "They often say 'another approach is possible'. […] They have done so by telling the story they know best – their own." (Allen, 2020)

Conclusion and Proposing a Question

I have explored the keywords of *beauty*, *the subject* and *representation* and the links between them, and I've found that ideas of beauty and the subject are ultimately caught up in the theme of representation. I have found representation to be very important for the subject as well as being

very interesting for the artist. This proposal has generated other possible keywords to further explore in my dissertation, such as the difference between *model, subject, participant* and even *the muse*; and how they can generate different representations. The relationship between the subject and the artist (whether they are one of the same or separate), I find interesting to explore and want to explore more. The process of representing someone (or yourself) as well as including another's image to represent a part of you, I find creates an interesting narrative in my work and presents a wider context. The politics of beauty and the use of it in work whether bold or subtle I find to be very relevant in contemporary art especially when it comes to portraiture and how performed it is. It can be quite complex to navigate and I think it would be beneficial to explore to aid my own practice.

From this, I propose the question I would like to explore for my dissertation:

'How have artists represented a subject (including themselves) and how have other images contributed to that representation?'

Other potential questions or sub-questions I could explore are: 'How have artists created work inspired by the inner self?'; 'How have artists used second-hand images, other subjects and objects in the representation of themselves?'; 'Explore the relationship between artist and the subject and how have these representations come about?'; 'How does the representation of a subject differ from that of the self and the self via another's image?'

Bibliography:

Allen, S. and Nakori, Y. and Osc, E. D. (2020) *Zanele Muholi.* 1st edn. London: Tate Publishing.

Anderson, R.L. (1990) 'Popular Art and Aesthetic Theory: Why the Muse Is Unembarrassed', *The Journal of aesthetic education*, 24(4), pp. 33–46. doi:10.2307/3333105.

Beech, D. (2009) 'Art and Politics of Beauty', in Beech, D. (ed.) *Beauty | Documents of Contemporary Art.* Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery.

Berger, J. (1972) *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Classics.

Borzello, F. (2018) *Seeing Ourselves| Women's Self-Portraits.* 1st edn. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.

Brand, P. Z. et al. (2000) *Beauty Matters*. Indiana University Press.

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Church Gibson, P. (2018) 'Cindy Sherman in a New Millennium: Fashion, Feminism, Art and Ageing', *Australian feminist studies*, 33(98), pp. 481–497. doi:10.1080/08164649.2019.1567256.

Coelewij, L. and Toibin, C. and Vischer, T. (2014) *Marlene Dumas The Image as Burden.* 2nd edn. London: Tate Publishing

Cruz, A. (1997) *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective.* 1st edn. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.

Dumas, M. (1997) *Miss Interpreted* [video]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veexrm7BLxQ&t=1688s&ab (Accessed: 26 April 2022).

Gopnik, B. (2016) 'Cindy Sherman Takes On Aging (Her Own)', *New York Times Company (Online),* 21st April.

IMDb (2022) *Miss Interpreted.* Available at: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0131486/ (Accessed: 26 April 2022)

'Mistress of self-effacement; Cindy Sherman at MoMA', (2012) *The Economist (London)*, 402(8773), p. 99–.

MoMA (2022) *Cindy Sherman.* Available: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/50744 (Accessed: 5 April 2022).

Mulvey, L. (1991) 'Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: the Work of Cindy Sherman', *New Left Review*. 188 : 137 - 150.

Paris Photo (2020) *Zanele Muholi - Interview 2019.* [video] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xO-o9x_XNM&ab_channel=ParisPhoto (Accessed: 14 April 2022)

Sherman, C. (2003) *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills.* 1st edn. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Sobieszek, R. A. (1994) *The Camera I*. Los Angeles County Museums of Art.

Steiner, W. (2001) 'On Marlene Dumas', in Beech, D. (ed.) *Beauty | Documents of Contemporary Art.* Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery.

Tagg, J. (1988) *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and History*. Palgrave Macmillan

Tate (2020a) *Zanele Muholi – 'In My World, Every Human Is Beautiful' | Tate* [video]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEgf1XmtWCo&t=266s&ab_channel=Tate (Accessed: 14 April 2022)

Tate (2020b) *Zanele Muholi | Tate Modern Exhibition.* Available at: https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/zanele-muholi Accessed: 14 April 2022)

List of Figures:

Figure 1: Gentileschi, A. (1639) *Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting.* Available at: https://www.rct.uk/collection/405551/self-portrait-as-the-allegory-of-painting-la-pittura (Accessed: 28 April 2022)

Figure 2: Tintoretto. (1555) *Susannah and the Elders.* Available at: http://www.mheu.org/en/timeline/susanna-tintoret-02.htm (Accessed: 28 April 2022)

Figure 3: Sherman, C. (1978) *Untitled Film Still #13.* Available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56576 (Accessed: 28 April 2022)

Figure 4: Sherman, C. (2007-8) *Untitled #470 (The Socialites' series).* Available at: https://www.phillips.com/detail/cindy-sherman/NY010315/8 (Accessed: 28 April 2022)

Figure 5: Dumas, M. (1994) *Models.* Available at: https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/collection/details/collection/?lookup%5B1673%5D%5Bfilter%5D%5B0%5D=id%3AC2230#:~:text=Description,coloured%20in%20with%20pastel%20crayons. (Accessed: 28 April 2022)

Figure 6: Dumas, M. (1988) *Waiting (for Meaning).* Available at: https://www.phillips.com/article/44094741/marlene-dumas-losing-her-meaning (Accessed: 28 April 2022)

Figure 7: Muholi, Z. (2011) *Tash Dowell, Harare, Zimababwe. (Faces and Phases, 2006-)* Available at: https://www.yanceyrichardson.com/exhibitions/zanele-muholi2 (Accessed: 29 April 2022)

Figure 8: Muholi, Z. (2021) *Amanda Mahlaba, Mt. Moriah, Edgecome, Durban. (Faces and Phases, 2006-)* Available at: https://www.yanceyrichardson.com/exhibitions/zanele-muholi2 (Accessed: 29 April 2022)

Figure 9: Muholi, Z. (2015) *Bester I (Mayotte) (Somnyama Ngonyama, 2012-)* Available at: https://www.yanceyrichardson.com/artists/zanele-muholi?view=slider#28 (Accessed: 29 April 2022)