

Research in Context

Question 3 : Outline a pair of opposites discussed in the lecture series. For example 'weight and light' ; 'silence and noise' ; 'ephemeral and permanent'. Showing examples of two artists and one writer who have explored these opposites in their work.

Masculine and Feminine

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Looking at gender roles, now and in history, masculinity and femininity are often shown as polar opposites. Men are seen to hold characteristics such as aggression, being rational and task orientated while women are seen as passive, being irrational and emotionally driven. (Hentschel et al, 2019) This essay aims to explore this, looking at where these views came about, if there is a biological reason (the so-called 'male' or 'female' brain), how and why these stereotypes have been upheld through time and how artists explore this 'opposite' thinking of the sexes.

In 1797, Thomas Gisborne, an English Clergyman wrote a conduct manual stating that the female sex has a more empathic and nurturing mind and thus are best suited to the strict gender roles of the time. While that thought may seem outdated, Simon Baron-Cohen states over two hundred years later "*The female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy. The male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building system.*" (2003, pg.1) Baron-Cohen cites many research studies in his book *The Essential Difference*. However, Cordelia Fine argues against these studies in her 2010 book *Delusion of Gender*, claiming that there is no sex difference except those that society has put on us, and if there is any brain difference it is the effect of that rather than the cause. She states : "*Our minds, society and neurosexism create difference. Together, they wire gender. But the wiring is soft, not hard. It is flexible, malleable and changeable.*" (2010, pg.162) There have been scientific studies that have proved that the male brain is 8% - 13% bigger than the female brain, though this does not impact intelligence between the two sexes. (Vincent, 2014) However studies looking into whether there is a difference in the structure and matter show contradictory results. In 2014 (Ingallhalikar et al) a study reported that the brain structure was different between males and females, however in 2001 (Raz et al) and 2005 (Salat et al) two different studies found that there was no significant difference. Paul Burnett claims that the obsession of trying to prove men and women have different brains is an attempt to "*affirm gender stereotypes, not explain them.*" (2018), and the studies are taken with a bias to prove that they are used to keep women in line with what is expected of them, rather than allow the greater understanding to help people break out of these societal expectations. This is what Fine meant when she coined the term 'neurosexism'. In her book,

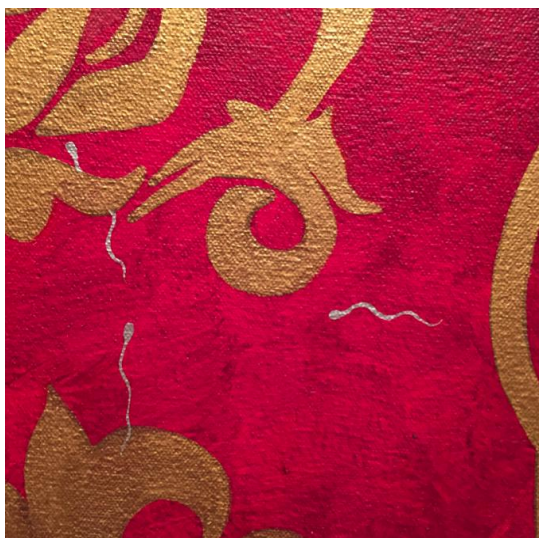
Fine then explores, if it is not because of the brain, why do men and women act differently? Her answer is because of the roles society puts on us. A baby girl, for instance, does not come out of the womb with a preference for pink, nor does a baby boy come out with a preference for blue, and yet it is expected of them. She also critically looks at attempts of gender-neutral parenting, showing how it is impossible to truly raise a child without society getting in the way. It is taught to child by their peers and by the media they consume. (2010, pg.148) (430)

These gender roles are also shown, and historically used to reinforce, in art work around the world. Renaissance paintings were '*representative of the societal values and ideas at the time rather than the norm and realities.*' (Zhao, 2018) Men were often portrayed with an aggressive masculinity, shown to be military like with signs of their valour and political commitment. Women however were often portrayed as passive and nurturing, showing their status of being the legal object of their father or husband. '*Generally speaking, men and women were understood to be humoral opposites... These perceived differences were used to justify men's and women's social roles: a man's hot-dryness gave him the constancy necessary for public social and political life; a woman's cold-wetness made her inconstant, accounted for her timidity, and explained menstruation and the pains of childbirth.*' (Graham, 2020) However more modern art begins to explore these stereotypes of the sexes, where the 'masculine' and 'feminine' collide, and whether they are truly opposites at all.



Kehinde Wiley, an African-American painter, often paints young black men in the style of historic Western portraits. Above is *Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps* painted in 2005 (above left), the posing identical to Jacques-Louis David's 1801 *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (above right). David's painting was commissioned by King Charles IV who saw Napoleon as the new hero of Europe. (Lacaille, 2013). The Napoleon in the painting was not only a likeness, but a way of showing the man's status, wealth and power. (Brooklyn, 2020). The black man in Wiley's painting was not powerful or privileged, in fact Wiley had approached him on the street as a part of his 'street-casting process', most of his models are in fact every day people whom he talks with and includes their ideas on what they should wear, pose and which historical paintings he should mimic. (Clemans, 2016) Not only do these paintings critique Western traditions which has widely ignored Black contributions, but also questions masculinity both today and in history. As Fine notes, in children's books the words describing males were 'more powerful, active and masculine than those used for females', as well as it being 'easier to find an adventurous girl than a sissy boy.' (2003, pg. 151-152) We are still pressuring young boys to be strong, powerful and dominant, ('boys don't cry') these lessons they learn as children will affect the rest of their life. This is back-upped with the study of 'brain plasticity'

which scientists have only been aware of for the last 30 years, a theory which states the brain is not set, but rather constantly changing due to the environment around it. (Rippon, 2019) This ridged belief of males not showing as much emotion and being strong and the bread-provider for his family is thought to contribute to the reason why more men successfully commit suicide each year than woman and why their methods of suicide are often more violent. (Schumacher, 2019) In Wiley's painting, the man is wearing camouflage trousers, a bandana and tattoos, all symbols associated with not only with the military but the violence many young black men are exposed to in their everyday life. (North Carolina State University, 2015) These symbols, along with the sport wrist bands, also clearly show the man in it is contemporary and belongs in the 21st century while the horse, cloak and background seem more fitting to the 19th century, giving the feeling of something not being right. In the Western world, from Rome to the David's painting from France, horses are commonly used with political and military leaders to show the power of masculinity and control. (Clemans, 2016) Using historical ways of showing masculinity with a contemporary figure shows just how ridiculous these symbols are, the bar of what is 'masculine' not set, and what makes someone a man will change, not only in time, but with different cultures and races, meaning there is not a definitive correct way. The red patterned background is the biggest difference between Wiley's and David's paintings. It brings thoughts of expensive wallpaper or fabric to the mind of the viewer, the



red colour again bring to mind violence and blood. This along with the fancy frame also highlights the extravagance of historical portraits. But if you look closer at the background pattern (right) there had also been small sperm painted carefully between the gold pattern. These are here to once again show the masculinity is often infused into the art world, highlighting how male lineage is valued, and an man's

sexual prowess is seen as something to be admired.



'According to this traditional and highly familiar arrangement, the husband is the breadwinner and works outside the home to provide financial resources for the family. In return, his wife is responsible for both the emotional and household labour created by the family: keeping everyone happy, the house clean, meals cooked, clothes laundered, and children reared; either by her own hand or by

proxy.' (Fine, 2010, pg 65) Roxanna Halls is a British artist and her painting often show woman at home, however this domestic scene is disruptive as the painting leaves the viewer feeling disturbed. She wants the viewer to question social factors that exist in society such as gender, class, sexuality and spectatorship. (McNay, 2015) One way she does this is by painting the women with open mouths, which is rare in portrait. (Millington, 2019) The uncomfortable feeling the viewer gets when looking at these paintings bring questions to mind about the stereotypical house wife. Halls' oil on linen painting titled *Laughing While Eating Strawberries* made in 2015 is above. The act it is depicting on its own is a common occurrence. However from the colours to the pose the painting instead gives the impression of it being a sinister act. The bra strap falling out of the shoulder and being on view gives the feeling that the woman is in a state of madness, instead of just cheerfully enjoying food. The plates in the background show this is a domestic scene, and from the clearly decorative nature of the crockery the viewer knows it is a middle-class household. Except for the bra strap, the woman is clearly well made up, the dress style is one to be expected in a domestic setting, her hair tied back and her make-up done perfectly. Halls often looks at spectatorship in her work, and is asking the viewer to question the side of women that would not normally be seen by the outside world. This directly goes against the idealism that was sought for in Renaissance paintings. This allows the viewer to question how femininity - make-up, clothes and personality - is in fact a

performance act. Judith Butler states in her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* : *'Gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.'* (1990, pg. 227) Fine also notes that the opposite is true as well : women who work in STEM fields often make a point to deliberately not act feminine. *'For the easiest solution to the problem of being female in a setting in which women are made to feel that they are inferior and do not belong is to become as unfeminine as possible. At the most superficial level, makeup, jewellery and skirts – icons of femininity that draw attention to their wearer's femininity – were rarely in evidence'* (2010, pg 50) Sometimes these women in these fields would in fact go one step further : *'also took up antifemale attitudes, denigrating other women as emotional, and 'heaped scorn' on women-focused programmes and any work-related gatherings dominated by women.'* This as well is a performance, a way to show the men that they work with that they are 'not like other women' to fit into these masculine settings where being female is seen as a liability. (Fine, pg 50-51)



While both artists above explore the problems with stereotypes, some artists have gone even further to explore what happens when the masculine and feminine collide. Gender non-conforming women and men are still often seen as strange in our modern day society. On the left is Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant)* made in 1972, and was made in the time the artist was looking at body modifications. It made the viewer feel slightly uneasy - the thought of sticking someone else's body hair on oneself is disturbing - as well as the beard being clearly fake and not a natural

state for her body. She raises questions on gender, and the variations on how one presents

themselves to the world if they do not fit into those strict gender rules and go against what is expected - whether by biology or choice. For instance it is seemed as fact that women do not grow facial hair, yet - while not the same extent as in the photograph - it is not uncommon for some women to have darker/more upper lip hair. In modern times, it is also possible for females to go on hormones that give them more masculine secondary sexual characteristics, including lower voices and more body hair - thus blurring the lines between a man and a woman even further. (Souter, 1994). By changing her appearance she also questions behaviour and rules of strict gender restrictions, as well as the stereotypical beauty standards women are held to in our society.

The artists takes stereotypical attributes of the sexes and portrays them in an absurd manner. Wiley does this by contrasting modern masculinity with historical masculinity and shows how, while the symbols change, what is portrayed is not, along with the background sperm showing how when it boils down to it, the main symbol of masculinity stays the same. Halls does this before highlighting the performative nature of womanhood, and how much what is expected is not natural. Mendieta questions why we see people who do not fit into these strict rules of the sexes as strange and Fine's book also points out how absurd it is that we are still enforcing these gender roles, going as far doing scientific research to back these up.

Gender roles are reinforced by the media and everyday life, starting as soon as we are born. Even science is affected by these stereotypes, such as brain scans which results are being framed as proof of why women are more nurturing and men are more aggressive, while evidence suggests these differences are not as stark and obvious as they like us to believe and are using 'neurosexism' to keep the status quo. Art, historically, has also encouraged these stereotypes, however more and more artists are using their work to question these differences, and show that one does not have to perform their sex in a certain way to be seen as a 'woman' or a 'man'. Butler states *'If the 'reality' of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized 'sex' or 'gender' which gender performances ostensibly express.'* (1990, pg. 278) Gender is

not a natural because the way we perform it did not come from nature, but rather society. As long as these strict gender stereotypes are being upheld 'masculine' and 'feminine' will be opposites, however they do not have to stay in this state.

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Image

(Left) Kehinde Wiley (2005). *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*. Available : <http://www.theartwolf.com/exhibitions/david-wiley-brooklyn-2020.htm> (Accessed 08/12/2020)

(Right) Jacques-Louis David (1800-1) *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps (Bonaparte franchissant le Grand-Saint-Bernard)*. Available : <http://www.theartwolf.com/exhibitions/david-wiley-brooklyn-2020.htm> (Accessed 08/12/2020)

(Close up) Kehinde Wiley (2005). *Leading the Army over the Alps*. Available : <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-history-for-teachers/xeaa3470a:teaching-with-images/xeaa3470a:go-deeper-oppression-and-resistance/a/kehinde-wiley-napoleon-leading-the-army-over-the-alps> (Accessed : 08/12/2020)

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