Bender Evaluation

When presented with the challenge to create a photographic book on whatever we so desire, many different avenues of creative imagination were sparked. However the most prevalent and obvious for me was to continue into my exploration into queer culture and the many different forms it can be found in. After shooting my first self-portrait project in a previous module that then ventured into other queer youth, I felt that the opportunity to continue this exploration to an elevated and polished style in book form was obvious. As someone who is now comfortably traversing their own relationship with queer identity, the prospect of photographing others who identify similarly was exciting.

Jane England

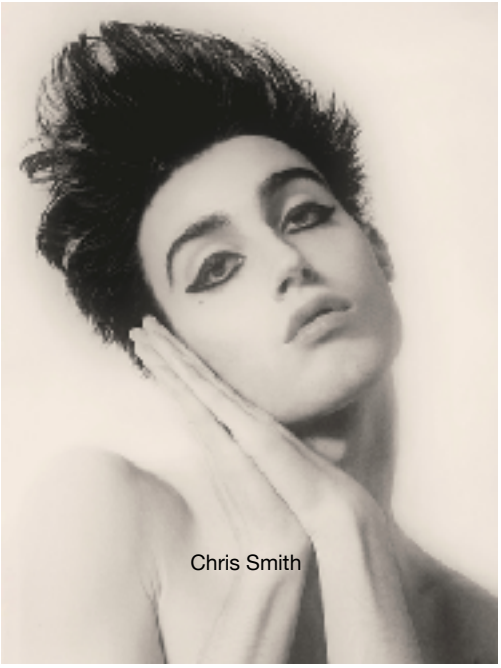
Beginning my research with London based photographer Jane England, more specifically their book “Turn and Face the Strange”. I wanted my book to have a similar aesthetic style found in

their work. The black and white, punk and grunge genres of dressing and personality oozed out England’s book brining each character photographed to life. The idea of people opposing the restrictive binary of gender in images captured by the binary of black and white was intriguing and some what rebellious. Their use of framing, pose and general mise en scene of the images were all large factors within my own inspiration for the book structure and aesthetic style. Furthermore, a quote used in the opening line of my book contains the same quote found in England’s book. “ A photograph is not only an image, an interpretation of the real ; it i also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.” (England, 2016) This quote really resonated with me, being

able to take and image and create a stencil of the real and immortalise my queer peers within this book is almost invigorating. This inspiration is most apparent in the first set of images in my book that features a character similar to Jordan Mooney as pictured above in an image from England's

Silvia Rosi

book. Using the same makeup found in many of Mooney's stylistic choices, my subject features the same. Exuding similar energy to Mooney, the power of the subjects stance, unapologetic presentation of skin complimented by the heavy chains that cover the subjects body raises questions of constraint and capture that is juxtaposed against the freeing nature of the image and book itself. Furthermore, to include an aspect of fine art, photographers such as Silvia Rosi aided my interpretation of these characters through the use of awkward and unique poses that create an aura of contemporary aesthetic to my images preventing the aged look black and white images can present.



Chris Smith

When re-visiting my self portraits for inspiration, I felt that Chris Smith's etherial and mesmerising self portraits that feature a much more invasive and close up camera angle were appropriate. The images captured of myself were intended to be the more explorational compared to my other

images, largely due to the fact that they were self portraits that explored my own relationship with queerness. As subject, stylist, set designer and photographer the images that I could create were completely mine. With this knowledge and the prying nature of lens, the images created in the

second section of my book are extremely personal and intimate. Opting to style myself in a corset with a square neckline to show more traditional feminine features such as collarbone and chest I wanted the images to present conversation of art history. In particularly the discourse around queerness captured within at history. As mentioned in the opening essay of my book : “Gender non-conforming people have been in every aspect of history. One of the most debated and controversial evidences of this is in Leonardo Da Vinci’s ‘The Last Supper’”. (Winbow, 2021) I aimed to re-visit this discourse in the book to not only gain inspiration from the pose style female characters were presented with in art history as well as combining it with the etherial nature of Smith’s images. As well as this the background that lies behind the subject reflects back the harsh flash of the lighting equipment used in the shoot. This gleaming light that shines behind me creates a sense of reflection to the image which really amalgamates the original concept of the shoot which was to be self- reflective on my relationship with gender.

Leonardo Da Vinci’s
“The Last Supper”

Continuing into the book, the third set of images feature the most overt and abrasive example of gender bending. Again taking inspiration from Jane England and her book “Turn and Face the Strange” the use of a grimy setting to photograph a subject was interesting. Allowing discourse of what the background may represent in the images in relation to its subject my own interpretation is that the background represents a perception of queer people to the cis-gender mainstream. Most evident in England’s images capturing their subject named Jasper, featured below, mine is little more subtle. When ‘painting’ the face of the subject, the creative choice to include both sets of eyebrows were intended. One covered by the foundation and another drawn on, the idea of creating new face structure to best express one’s self while still having a little bit of the ‘old’ them retaining is intriguing. As well as this, I wanted this representation of drag to be different from that of the drag we see on shows such as “RuPaul’s Drag Race” in order to represent the many different forms of drag that the mainstream hasn’t embraced yet, such as natural body hair and more masculine forms of body presenting. This complimented by the use of hand gesture and positioning creates a more subversive form of drag. As seen in my image above, the leg hair is at the forefront of the image along with the hair that is captured on the arms forming an X shape over the crotch of the subject. Raising obvious signs of gender play and reference to the constant questions queer people face of what lies between their legs, this pose is an act of rebellion.

Jane England

Naima Green

For the final section of the book, I wanted to combine the fine art aesthetic of some of my beginning images with the art history aesthetic found in my self portraits.Taking inspiration form Naima Green, a queer photographer, and their use of layering in backgrounds as well as posing style, I aimed to create a set similar to Green's. As well as Green's use of posing in their images I also wanted to explore further into Rosi's use of awkward posing. Photographing my subject surrounded by the yonic symbolism of flowers and blossom while covering their chest creates clear juxtapositions of gender. This consistent gender- bending that the entire book displays created the name of the book "Bender". Aimed to shock, 'Bender' takes the pejorative and derogatory insult to heckle queer people and reframes it. Reclaiming the word and using it as a source of power for queer people it flips the original meaning. As well as a reference to gender-bending 'Bender' allows for comfort in a word that's intended purpose was alienation.

In conclusion, 'Bender' is my first book and first exploration of queer culture within my peers and myself. Taking inspiration from queer staples and other photographers, I feel that the book creates a safe space for different forms of queerness to thrive. With each section comes a new character and with every character comes a new and fresh sense of unapologetic queerness. Paired with the tile of the book, the rebellious themes of England's "Turn and Face the Strange" that inspired me have been translated into my book through my artistic language.

Bibliography

England, J. (2016). Turn and Face the Strange. London, Black Dog Publishing.

Winbow, J. (2021). Bender. San Fransisco, Blurb.