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How photography can discuss age

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Introduction

In this thesis, I will be discussing my chosen topic of 'Ageing', specifically how photography can express ageing. Ageing appears in almost everything such as the ageing of nature, humans and animals. With all of this in mind, I will be specifically researching the ageing of the human body. I will be extensively researching into specific artists and photographers and how they express 'age' within their work. I am interested in the many ways artists depict aging and how it differs to how it's presented in the media and our society, and stereotyping of the older generation. I will also be discussing how the media plays a big part in portraying elders in negative ways and how their views differ once people age. A lot of my research will stem from photographic books in which I have narrowed down to fit my thesis title, along with articles and advertisement images.

My initial interest into this particular topic stemmed from my many bodies of work featuring my grandparents. Slowly seeing them deteriorating with age, I realized they are in their last stage of life and that I only have a short space of time with them. Capturing images of my family allows me to have some sort of control, even though I cannot control their aging and mortality, I will have photos that will live on when they are no longer here. My many projects with them have captivated many of their illnesses and have become very sentimental to me. I have also created a project entitled 'Dementia' which depicted my great aunt's battle with dementia. It's a documentary style series of images which lets you look into a daily day of her life, candidly. These projects lead me to develop ideas and research more on the wider topic of aging. I created work of the ageing of nature, specifically a dilapidated building area overtaken by nature near me. With all these projects combined, it strengthened my interest in this topic and led to further research and essay work into discrimination of the aging female body and how we have unrealistic views on specifically older women.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will be researching photographers and artists of interest. These include Melanie Manchot, Elinor Carucci, John Coplans, and Larry Salton. These particular artists were chosen for their specific way of depicting age within their books and images.

Chapter 1

Melanie Manchot

Melanie Manchot is a photographer and videographer who is based in London. The visual artist creates bodies of work exploring identities and different communities. She is most famous for her work involving her mother.

Melanie Manchot created 'Look at you loving me' in 2000. It began in 1995 when she first asked her mother if she could photograph her naked. Over a four year period, they had produced many bodies of work together. This particular project involved using photographic light sensitive emulsion, then drawn on using materials such as charcoal and chalk. The subject in these images, Manchot's Mother was shot in different gestures and expressions spanning many years which showed the slow process of aging. Over those years, an extensive body of work was created depicting raw and vulnerable women, also exploring their close relationship as mother and daughter. One image in particular that I think is the best of the series is 'Mrs Manchot, Bending Backwards' (Frontal), 1996. It expresses the subject's confidence whilst posing for this taboo topic.



8.

"Our collaboration began when we were on a trip to Vienna together. Melanie was searching for new ideas about how to represent women – and in fact not young, beautiful women but aging ones. In the beginning, it was difficult for me to be displayed publicly, but over time I got used to it – and even started to identify with the whole process and its results" Margret Manchot (2007) persimmon tree article.

You can sense a hint of uncomfortableness within these portraits which contrast with Marget Manchot's confidence. From a viewer's perspective, I feel the awkwardness was the unknowing of how she was going to be preserved by others rather than her comfort in her own naked body.

"The aim of this work is complex, but the project initially arose out of the desire to make images with a woman who through the sheer process of getting older was considered beyond such categories as beauty, sensuality, attractiveness, and who, along with a vast majority of women of her generation, was now at the margins of visibility" (Melanie Manchot, 2007, persimmon tree article)

I picked out this quote from Melanie Manchot talking about her project as it sums up her work perfectly. It brings up a very taboo subject within our society and shows the aging body for what it really is and not what the media deems it to be. These images go beyond attractiveness and what society sees as 'beauty'. For example, the older generation are mostly portrayed in adverts etc as being youthful and 'fit', never commenting on the truths of aging and the natural process of the aging female body.

The main reason as to why this body of work was chosen as part of my research for my thesis was my initial shock at the visuals of this project. In this current age, the aging body isn't always portrayed in its natural form. There is something truthful about this project in how it presents her mother. Not only shown truthfully, the expressions and gestures from the subject are bold and powerful. Although in a vulnerable state, her mother seems comfortable and confident in herself to be on camera. In conclusion, this is why it initially interested me and the reason I wanted to include it in my research.

"Vintage wine is savored. Vintage cars exclaimed over. Vintage clothes coveted. Yet the vintage woman remains uncelebrated" (huffpost, page deleted)

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/taboo-aging-woman_b_6716386

I find it fascinating that in our current era, there is such an obsession with materialistic vintage items, people find joy in finding these items and take something like vintage clothing, trendy. Why can't the actual people of this past be represented and celebrated as the same.

Society is obsessed with youth, specifically in women, however once they have hit a certain age, society seems to neglect them as they no longer fit the requirements. Society does not tend to celebrate older women for living long lives or their strength, it centres around physical appearances over anything. The media sometimes 'plays nicely' depicting older women in graceful, youthful demeanors, however generally hand pick people who fit their desired look. What I'm trying to express is that 'The Norm' ageing female body is not presented truthfully and positively in the media. I really respect Melanie Manchot for creating these very real images of her mother.

Colin Gray

Colin Gray is a British photographer born in Hull. He studied at The Royal College in London and graduated in 1982. I will be analysing his photographic project entitled 'Restaging the parents' 1990. It is an editorial style series of images of Gray's parents. These images are carefully constructed, posed in almost humorous ways and have very little in common with your average family album. Gray's work wasn't the most socially acceptable during the time it was published in the 1980s. Many would state it was inappropriate as it was uncommon to showcase family dynamics, it was a more private affair.

Colin Gray's equipment of choice was the Hasselblad camera, a square format which was a slow process to create images. Due to this, he would have to restage images. After a period of time the restaging of events turned into his parents inventing scenarios. You can really tell in these images how involved the parents are and it brings out the humorous side to it.

In the year 2000, Gray started a new series entitled 'In sickness and in health'. It takes on a more serious and non-playful subject. Retired and aging, Gray's parents subsequently developed ailments. One particular image that affected me was 'No.47' Ron, Gray's father standing over Rene's ashes. The contrast between the youthful and funny series 'Restaging the parents' through to this image in the later series is sad to witness. I like how Gray used taboo issues and subjects in both works, the non formal family photos but also death, mourning and ageing.

“It was very difficult, but photography really helped make sense of what was happening to my mother. I find taking pictures detaches me so I can look at a situation objectively. The process of taking a picture held me together, so I wasn’t breaking down. As time went on the pictures evolved into a body of work, then I looked at how to construct a narrative from all the images I had.” (Colin gray, image source)

It is clear that Gray used the documentary images of his parent’s as a coping mechanism throughout the project, especially when things got serious. He wanted to complete the series of work and create a narrative of their life. It shows that when he was snap shooting images of difficult, sensitive scenes, he was just doing a job and wasn't emotionally involved for a brief moment.

“The photograph is often a by-product of putting my family in challenging situations; it helps us start to talk about the difficult things...Taking a picture helps me understand life” (colin gray, 2020, talking pictures magazine)

The first reason I chose these two series from Colin Gray was I could relate it to my relationship with my grandparents and elderly family members. Also creating work with my family, these images have made me think outside of the box and see the humorous side to things. From the first series of bizarre images to the dilapidation and then death of his parents gave me a reality check and I realized it's important to me to keep working with family members to create work before it is no longer possible. Linking Colin Gray’s work back to my chosen essay title on how photography discusses aging, Gray has expressed aging, illness and death whilst going through the emotions of happy, funny and saddening. He has used a mix of truthful, relatable images with carefully choreographed images, which I think makes such an intriguing bazaar book.

Gray ‘heaven and Hull’ 1990



Elinor Carucci

Another artist I have chosen to research is Elinor Carucci, originally from Israel, now working in New York. Her work involves themes of ageing, our relationships with our bodies and our families. Carucci's images are straight to the point, raw and sometimes uncomfortable to look at from a viewer's perspective. Her sensitive and personal issues she expresses in her images make a viewer question if they should be viewing such private images. One project in particular that I will be looking at is her book entitled 'Midlife'. It was created over a seven year period which takes you through her personal journey with marriage, parenthood, ageing and illness. The book is a mix of candid and restaged images with also paintings, painted out of Carucci's own blood. The project is overall about intimacy within her family dynamics and her desire for connection. An image entitled 'My Uterus' situated towards the end of the book shows Carucci's uterus sitting on a cloth which was removed because of a hysteroscopy in 2015. For me, this is a key image that expresses ageing in women, her ailments over the years and presented throughout the book. It represents what it means to be a woman and shows the sensitive topic of fertility and specifically how she is no longer fertile. To me, the uterus is not only vital biologically, but is vital to express femininity. It is what makes women so special that we can reproduce.



Elinor Carucci (2019) *Midlife*



Elinor Carucci (2019) *My mother wants me to forgive my daughter*

“We can often define ourselves by our ability to birth children and we sometimes fight against it as our definition, and yet it is there. It was a really difficult experience, to the point where I felt that it was hard for me to define myself as a woman and as a mother.” (Elinor Carucci, 2016, lensculture)

In response to this quote I picked out from an interview with Elinor Carucci, I agree, as women we try to fight stereotypes that we are just ‘birth givers’ etc. Once that opportunity is taken away from you from such illnesses and age, it's a difficult subject to understand.

Photography enables Carucci to get closer to her subjects, allowing her to photograph her family and capture their emotions, challenges and development. Carucci has been specifically photographing her mother since she was 15. In this space of time, there's a clear progression of her mother's body and it slowly ages throughout the years.

“You are *taking* pictures; you are taking moments of someone's life. You respect them and don't want to hurt them, but you also don't want to just create pretty, flattering or surface level images” (Elinor carucci, 2016, lensculture)

I have researched many photographers in this thesis who explore themes such as ageing, many who photograph their own families in intimate scenarios. I have questioned if it is sometimes morally wrong to document people deteriorating or in private moments. Elinor Carucci explains this perfectly in this quote above. When she photographs, she fully respects her subjects, simply wanting to feel closer to her family through imagery. It is obvious that her imitate way of working strengthens her connection with those closest to her.

John coplans

John Coplans is a british artist and world war 2 veteran living in America. His artwork expresses his body and progression through the natural ageing process. Coplan first became a painter in which most of his work was influenced by popular abstract expressionists at the time, Willem de Kooning who followed a movement called Tachisme. Coplans had a career change in 1979 when he discovered a liking for photography

‘Tachisme, Term used to describe the non-geometric abstract art that developed in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s characterized by spontaneous brushwork, drips and scribble-like marks’. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/t/tachisme> If you look closely in his self portraits, his skin, hair and other markings almost look like patterns and scribbles that could express his past career as a painter, using this particular style.

His subject in his images is his own body. He photographs contrasty black and white snippets of his body parts. The cropped film images are so close up, you almost see the skin as a surreal object as you can see much texture. Within these images depicting Coplan’s body, he never shows his face. He believes he can still make interesting imagery even in his aged 70 year old body. Coplan explains how he doesn’t feel like his 70 year old self, instead expressing ideas of being in a different place in another person’s body, whether that be male or female. These images allow him to reminisce with his youth and connect him with his past.



Coplan's, hands spread on knees, 1985

“The experience is akin to Alice falling through the looking glass. I use no props; I pose against a neutral, white background, and before I know what has happened, I am lost in a reverie. I am somewhere else, another person, or a woman in another life.” (John Coplan's, 2003, Galerie Nordenhake)

Above is 'hands spread on knees' 1985, a black and white photograph which depicts Coplan's hands covering his knees. His legs and hands cover most of the image, his dark shadowed legs in contrast with the white background. Even details like the veins in his hands and the hair spiraling off his skin show the rawness of this image. Since the image is so large and cropped, the viewer can see all the tiny textures and natural patterns in the skin.

In a world of 'beauty', mortality and aging is sparsely mentioned. Many do not stomach the truth, a process that happens in all humans. Coplan's work goes against stereotypes of the older generation, showing a more truthful representation. Coplan's honesty almost morphs his body into a sort of landscape. Coplan stresses that he feels alive when capturing these shots, 'I have a body'. From this quote, I can guess that he is grateful and shows acceptance of mortality. Linking back to my title question of how photography can discuss age, John Coplan is a really good example of someone who doesn't hold back veracity. He discusses the taboo subject of aging through his own account, his own body.

Larry Salton

'Pictures from home' by Larry Salton is a photographic book published in 1992. What started with Salton wanting to capture simple portraits of his father turned into a personal memoir of his parents in their last stages of life, giving us an understanding of an 'all american family' in this era. In the memoir, Salton uses a mix of stills from old home movies and his own personal film images of his parents in which he shot when he visited. Salton's images are set in a desert community in Palm Springs, a place his parent's retired to, to live out their last chapter of life too. Their property, a perfect cinematic 70s style house, which adds an interesting intriguing visual alongside Salton's artfully choreographed narratives. These glimpses into the family's home showcases a distinctive American interior, decorated by textiles, bright carpets and patterned wallpaper. These visuals reflect the mindset of 'success' as defined by capitalism in that era.



Larry salton (1984) *Untitled (Mom Posing in Front of a Green Wall)*

This book serves two purposes, to first show the idea of this 'all American family' but to secondly explore Salton's personal home life and the dynamics between them. The images express our society at large, depicting the mystery of mundane life behind closed doors, which is often shot in unexpected places within this book. There is a clear contrast in Salton's images, one side showing the idealistic retired couple's lives in a rich neighborhood. Scenes of his mother and father moving swiftly through their everyday life. The other side shows an alternative view of their lives, his fathers emotion about being let off from his job which subsequently created a feeling of being powerless.

"His father is tan, but he is also old, his body clearly heading toward its twilight, and he looks somewhat melancholy—despairing, even—as if the empty pool in front of him were a reservoir of regrets." Chris Wiley (2019) *The New Yorker*

Salton often created narratives around his father and regularly used him as a subject. Using his father in such ways helped Salton's confusion with what it was like being a man in that culture, but always felt guilty for doing so. In conclusion, I think Salton wanted to represent aging in such ways that his parents couldn't comprehend.

The exact meaning of these images remains unclear however, we as viewers create ideas and our own understandings. Salton expresses his child-like desire for his parents to live forever. Maybe his image taking allows him to stop time, giving him some mental control. Salton not accepting the natural life process of death has allowed him to create such a personal piece of work that immortalizes this individual family through the book. How Larry Salton discusses aging through his images is different to artists I have already looked at such as John Coplans or Melanie Manchot. Although there are not raw, intense images of just the aging body, instead you see a slow progression of aging through the cinematic imagery.

The artful images show the intimate day to day activities of his parents in a time where they were retired. It doesn't just represent one particular meaning, its confusing and each image can be viewed as different scenarios depending on the way the viewer sees it.

Chapter 2

After compiling together my research about how certain photographers discuss and express aging, I have learnt that most artists and creators have a more positive, accepting perception of aging. They represent the aging human body for what it is, creating truthful visuals that we don't argue with. Many photographers and artists I researched aren't afraid of publishing uncomfortable, raw memoirs of their private lives.

I am interested in the opposing side of how aging is represented through the media and within our society. Our society has a negative view on the older generation with outdated attitudes, making elders feel a burden among other negative impacts. 'Ageism' is a term for stereotyping and the discrimination of people on the basis of their age. Ageism can be manifested in many ways in society and the media. An example of this is the stereotyping on TV and advertising companies.

There are both negative and 'positive' stereotyping of the older generation which both have negative impacts. Negative stereotyping of the older generation could be that they are lonely, dependent and ill, the other stereotype is that they are wiser, youthful and wealthy. The media and our society has a mix of these two perceptions, never a neutral state.

An article written by Rebecca Steward for The Drum breaks down some statistics about how the older generation is portrayed by big beauty companies such as Dove, L'Oréal and Misguided.

'Two-thirds of older Brits feel stereotyped in ads' Rebecca Steward, (2018) *The Drum*

Despite the attempts by these big companies, the majority of British women especially feel they aren't being portrayed fairly and are still being stereotyped in advertisements. Upon my research, there seems to be two different ways in which the older generation are being stereotyped within the media. The first being that the older generation have 'lost their beauty' and physical appearances, in result swept under the carpet and expressed as dilapidated beings who are no longer useful to society. The second way that they are being stereotyped is within brand ads such as Nivea and Dove who hand-pick models that do not represent what the natural aging body is really like.



Nivea advertisement

Age stereotypes reflect generalized beliefs about the physical, social, and psychological characteristics of younger, middle-aged, and older people including desirable (gains) and undesirable (losses) characteristics ([Chan et al., 2012](#); [Grühn et al., 2011](#); [Löckenhoff et al., 2009](#); [Weiss & Weiss, 2019](#)).

These large companies don't seem to understand that many of the older generation struggle to connect and relate to these glamorized, photoshopped models who are supposedly portraying their age bracket.

Banned Advert

“Banned, Nivea ad that made model of 62 look younger: Watchdog bans advert after it misled customers over effects of using anti-ageing cream” (article by sean Poulter, 2013, daily mail)

In 2013, an advert for Nivea’s cream, which they claim is formulated for the older generation was banned for being overly photoshopped and retouched. The model, who was 62 at the time, was so edited, she looked 30 years younger. It was banned by the Advertising Standards Authority for the advertisement and products misleading information. The pack stated: ‘Reduces all major signs of mature skin aging’ and ‘Gives mature skin the extra care it deserves’. All the model’s lines and wrinkles were dramatically removed, revealing a creepishly smooth appearance. A Nivea spokesman said: ‘We regret the fact that this image has been considered misleading, as this was never our intention.’

On how this piece of research relates back to my title question, Nivea discussed age in an unfaithful, false way. It led women in, believing that if they were to purchase the product, they would be a replica of the visuals they saw on their advertisements. Instead, it created pressure among older women along with many other negative impacts on their mental health. This key piece of research really shows how detrimental it is to discuss age falsey in our society.

Above I researched how the older generation is often glamorized and portrayed as youthful in beauty type ads. I will now be diving into the opposite side of how seniors are represented.

I had a good thing when I had seen a person over the age of lets say, 55 in a decent, non stereotypical advertisement. When they aren’t being photoshopped in beauty commercials, they are being targeted in sometimes expensive items for their home, funeral and life insurance ads.

‘Stereotypes are unchallenged myths or overstated beliefs associated with a category which are widespread and entrenched in verbal, written, and visual contexts within society [2]. Stereotypes of aging include assumptions and generalizations about how people at or over a certain age *should* behave, and what they are likely to experience, without regard for individual differences or unique circumstances’ <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/jger/2015/954027/>

"Advertising that stereotypes older adults and reinforces negative biases is not harmless," says Paul Irving, chairman of the Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging. "Imagine this ad portraying women, people of color or LGBTQ individuals in the same way. The response would be angry, and rightly so. It's high time to call out ageism in advertising."

<https://www.aarp.org/work/working-at-50-plus/info-2021/ageism-in-advertising.html>

This quote from Paul Irving speaks volumes on how people are treated within the media due to trends. If you were to exclude groups of people for their ethnicity or orientation, there would be uproar in our current time. Discrimination of the older generation is accepted to a certain extent in our society and does not raise eyebrows.

"A [2021 AARP survey](#) showed that most consumers aged 50-plus want marketing campaigns to grow up. Some 62 percent agreed with the statement "I wish ads had more realistic images of people my age." And nearly half (47 percent) concurred that "ads of people my age reinforce outdated stereotypes." Yet some advertisers still ignore or show little respect for older people — a remarkably shortsighted attitude."

<https://www.aarp.org/work/working-at-50-plus/info-2021/ageism-in-advertising.html>

Conclusion

After all my research into my chosen title of 'How photography can discuss age', I have established an understanding that there are many representations of age depending where you look. You can choose to explore a more truthful insight with documentary style photographers, portraying harsh realities that our society tends to ignore. Things I have absorbed about the ways these photographers work is that being vulnerable and truthful can create bold and powerful images. Their works go beyond categories such as beauty and attractiveness or what is stereotyped in the media, such scenes within their books are shown for what they really are. I believe I have used a good range of artists and photographers who all express and discuss age in varied and individual ways.

On the opposing side of 'how photography can discuss age', investigating how the media and our society represents aging, specifically how they choose to express ideas of the aging female body has been compelling but also sad. Within this opposing topic, I have learnt that it also splits into two segments of stereotypes. Stereotype A. that older people are too dependent, ill and lonely. They tend to be of the opinion that the older generation aren't as useful to society as the younger generation. With this mindset, they are not well and positively presented visually in the media. Stereotype B. elder people, especially women are expressed as youthful, with no visible signs of natural aging such as wrinkles etc. Both of these stereotypes combined is not a relatable, truthful portrayal of the older generation.

In conclusion to both sides of my research, I am in favor of supporting how documentary style and portrait photographers discuss aging through their works. The way in which they work and the topics expressed has inspired me for my future works. When documenting age, I think it's important to capture true, raw images instead of restaging to a point where it isn't authentic anymore. Taking photos for what your life really is, is a visual diary which shouldn't be altered because of aesthetics.

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