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Dissertation Proposal:

Gender, Beauty, Sexuality

Throughout my dissertation proposal I will look at and explore three different keywords which I find are relevant to my own photographic practice and involve topics that I am very passionate about within my day to day life as well as my photographic practice. My chosen keywords to look at throughout my dissertation proposal are; *Gender*, *Beauty* and *Sexuality*, all of which are related to identity, which I find a very fascinating topic on a whole. Throughout this proposal I will look at linking all of my keywords to relevant artists, artworks and theories within my exploration of them, to then connecting them all to decide on a question within a conclusion, that I will then later explore in further detail throughout my dissertation during the next academic year.

“When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one and a *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female



one.” (Butler, 1990). Throughout my photographic practice, particularly within the past year, I have primarily looked at exploring gender and how people, including myself, express their gender because it is something that I have always found very fascinating in the sense of how people express it so differently to one another. A particular music video which I find quite eye opening in regards to gender stereotypes and which looks at the exploration of how gender is portrayed differently within the media, is Queen’s *I Want to Break Free* (1984) which looks at the band members playing with different gender stereotypes, from the 80s, and showing to people that they did not take themselves seriously, though this did cause some controversy as some Americans claimed that the video promoted cross dressing (Unnamed, 2018). Though this video was made in the 80s and is showing the gender stereotypes of the time, I find that it is still quite eye opening watching it now in the 2020s, since it is showing that not much has changed and that there are still some very outdated gender stereotypes around today (housewives, man of the house). I found this video quite inspirational with my photographic practice, making me want to create work that break the gender stereotypes to make people more comfortable with who they are and expressing themselves the way that they want to.

Fig. 2



In 2020, when I first started looking at gender stereotypes, in more depth, within my photographic practice, I was highly inspired by

Nan Goldin and how she looked at and documented the



Fig. 3

portrayal of gender, gender identity and gender expression mainly within her close friendship group. The image that mainly inspired my 2020 work (shown in figure 3) was *Jimmy Paulette and Misty in a taxi, NYC, 1991* because I found it very interesting how she was able to document their experiences as drag queens in the 90s. This piece influenced me to think about how the art of drag has changed from the 1990s to the 2020s, so I decided to look at a friend who loves the art of drag and often experiments with make-up as well as experimenting with how he portrays his own gender, so I created this piece of work in a similar style as Goldin's work in an attempt to show how the art of drag has changed, as well as how it is the same, in a sense of how even though a lot more people are accepting of it, there is still a lot of homophobia around even now in the 2020s, which I hope to make an impact within society by people viewing my photographic practice, and hopefully making a change. Throughout the entirety of last semester I focussed primarily on gender stereotypes within my work, mainly looking at the use of self portraiture in an attempt to make people more aware on how the different stereotypes that are created by different aspects of the media (outlets and social) do not define someone and their identity,

Fig. 4



as well as showing how damaging the stereotypes can actually be to someone's mental health. During this previous piece of work I was fascinated and inspired by Rion Sabeen's 2011 series titled *Men-ups* that look at men recreating traditional pin-ups, his reason behind doing this photo series was how he has always been interested by how certain things like poses are "acceptable (and even provocative) for one, and not the other" (Gray, 2011), I

found that I related to his reasoning behind his *men-ups* series as I find that I, just like many other people, get frustrated with how certain things that men do are seen as normal, though if a woman did the exact same thing it would be seen as sexual or not ladylike. Something I found very inspirational for my ongoing work was how Sabeen used self portraiture within his work for the *men-ups* series, this made me want to include self portraiture within my own work to get my message across since I feel like as it is a topic that I can relate to, it would work well with getting the message across to the viewers of my work.

“..Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle... plays to and signifies male desire.” (Mulvey, 1975). Growing up as a young female with access to social media, I began to notice more and more the sexualisation of women and men. As I have gotten older and my passion for photography has grown, I decided to look at the topics that I am passionate about and want to make people more aware about them and since I have personally been affected by the male gaze and feel like it can be relatable for a lot of other people, I decided to focus on that within my more recent practice, since I felt like I could make a lot of work that fit this topic quite well.

Social media has played a massive part of people’s expectations of beauty and how their bodies should look, with filters being applied to photos that digitally

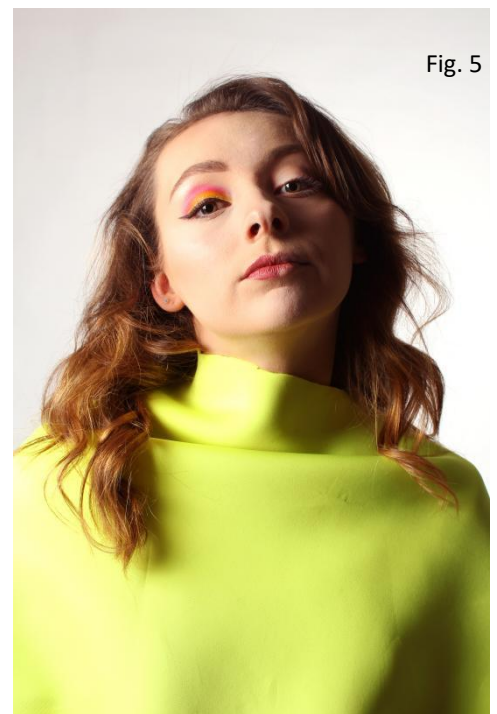


Fig. 6



modify how someone looks in different ways, people increasingly posting their views on their own and others bodies, both positive and negative. Being able to have access to social media as a young teenager and witnessing the beauty standards that were, and still are, being set by different media outlets and celebrities has been quite damaging to my confidence (as well as a load of other people), causing me to not wear certain clothes because it showed off a part of my body that I did not like because the media trained me to believe I was not pretty, or not pretty enough, because of it, or never leaving my house without make-up on because it is what the media said I had to do because I was a young girl. This frustration caused by the pressure put on people by the media gave me the idea of a piece of work that I previously created (shown in figure 5) which looked at showing how the media has influenced young women to wear make-up and modify themselves, comparing it to how we, as young women, look naturally. Someone who inspired me massively for the photo shown in figure 5 was Jeff Tse, who focuses on experimenting with light and form whilst exploring fashion and make-up within his photography. Tse aims to create work that instead of fitting in with trends, fits within multiple different genres of photography (Tse, undated). I personally love the image that is shown in figure 6, since I feel like the pose that the model is doing, with their chin up and looking away from the camera, is implying power. The ideology that different aspects of the media can have such a big impact on how people perceive their own body image is supported by Naomi Wolf's 1991 *The Beauty Myth*, "The quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it." Though these

expectations and beliefs are quite damaging, I found that they inspired me to look at creating work that would make people realise that the media does not define beauty, and that there is a much wider diversity of body shapes and sizes than the media puts out to be.

A piece of work that I find quite inspirational in the sense of looking at body and

Fig. 7



beauty is Kelsey Higley's *Body Image* from 2014 which looks at people's least and most favourite feature of themselves (Higley, undated). This piece, I believe is quite eye opening to people because it shows that people's insecurities can be something small but can seem so much more bigger to the individual.

I really like Higley's use of close-ups within the *Body Image* series because I feel like it works really well with creating a metaphor to show how people feel that their insecurities are so much more bigger than they actually are. I also really like the use of black and white within this series because I feel like it works really well with showing how low insecurities can make people feel.

Throughout my photographic practice, particularly over the past year, I have increasingly become more and more interested in how people express their sexuality,

because similar to gender identity, some people are still so nervous and not confident with expressing themselves and their love for certain people, and I would like to use my photography to help people be more open with themselves.

One of the main things that I have recently come across and have become intrigued by was the theory that certain colours are more affiliated with a particular gender. Originally pink was seen as a colour for boys as it was thought to be a 'stronger' colour, which people felt suited boys more because they stereotypically are stronger than girls. The colour blue was then seen as a more feminine colour since it was thought to be quite delicate and dainty, which girls stereotypically are (Hartmann,

Fig. 8



2011). This ideology later changed when people saw that because pink was close to red which is seen as quite a romantic and sexual colour, and girls are stereotypically more romantic than boys, so people felt that pink fit girls more so than boys

(Michael, 2018).

Since I first found my interest in photography, I have always loved experimenting with different colours, particularly within a studio setting, so recently I looked at using bilighting which is a particular lighting using the colours of the bisexual flag, mainly used within television and cinema to symbolize how the character within the scene is bisexual. During the book project last semester I looked at gender

Fig. 9



stereotypes and I then photographed a model who is bisexual so I experimented with magenta and blue gels on the lights in a studio setting to create the bilighting effect on my model, which I was very happy with the outcome as I managed to get the effect I had aimed to achieve.

A photographer I find very inspirational in regards to photographing members of the LGBTQ+ community is Hao Nguyen, whose use of lights and colour help them tell stories from the LGBTQ+ community (Darwin Studio, undated). I love the use of colours that Nguyen includes within their work, and the composition that they use within each of their images, I find help them create the atmosphere. I find their photos very empowering, especially for young members of the LGBTQ+ community, providing them with confidence and a sense of community, which is what I would like to do with my own work- allow people to realise that they are not alone and that there are other people that are like them. I love the photo shown in figure 9 as I believe that it is suggesting that the model is bisexual, which is implied by the bilighting that Nguyen uses, and that they are nervous about being open which is suggested by how they are looking over their shoulder quite shyly.

After researching each of my three chosen keywords, I have come to the conclusion that my keywords are all related in the sense with how media has a massive impact on people's feelings in regards to the topics.

Looking back at my three chosen keywords of *gender, beauty and sexuality*, all that relate to an individual's identity, I have come to the conclusion that though my keywords are all different in regards to the topics and discussions that they can cause, I have found through research that they are all massively impacted by the

media in some way or another and can all be somewhat damaging to people's mental health. The media can have a massive impact on people's views and opinions on each of these topics, linking them all together. I also found during my research for this proposal, that each of the artists and theories that I explored for my keywords could work well in relation to all of my keywords.

After thorough thought and research, I have come to the conclusion of focusing my dissertation next academic year on the question; *Does the media have more of a positive or negative effect on people's thoughts and views on their own identity?*

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