

AI Acknowledgement

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and the creation of this assignment.

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I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence (Although this is my only draft, physical noters of resources and thoughts I was using alongside my writing are available to view) .

Vital Gaze

Word count:1,404 + Bibliography

This exhibit is structured around key theories which link together topics of identity, power relationships and respect. Inspired by the proposals of John Berger (Berger J., 2008, pgs 24-27) and Roberta Sassatelli (Sassatelli, R., pg 124), the exhibition dissects the role of the viewer in relation to each work. The exhibit aims to ignite feelings of discomfort and admiration alike; as a direct response to the modern-day, normalized, passive outlook that viewers hold. The recent introduction of fast-paced entertainment as the most common form of media has caused an increase in a phenomenon referred to as “Continuous Partial Attention” (Stone, L.,2007). The relationship one holds with individual works become tainted with the growing lack of reflection and attention span. The exhibit challenges the historic, and reoccurring norm of the passive viewer and confronts us with the dynamics of the personal relationships formed upon viewing the work.

The exhibition brings together works by Berthe Morisot, Cindy Sherman, Carrie May Weems; with modernity upheld by Kehinde Wiley and Zanele Muholi. With a focus on photography, the paintings feature key impressionist, feminist history and a challenge to archaic, post-colonial attitudes towards minority subjects in art. To simplify the method of placement the works have been grouped according to emotions intended to be evoked.

The following page includes a floorplan of the gallery, for reference to description. A labelled map is present at the end.

elysiumgallery

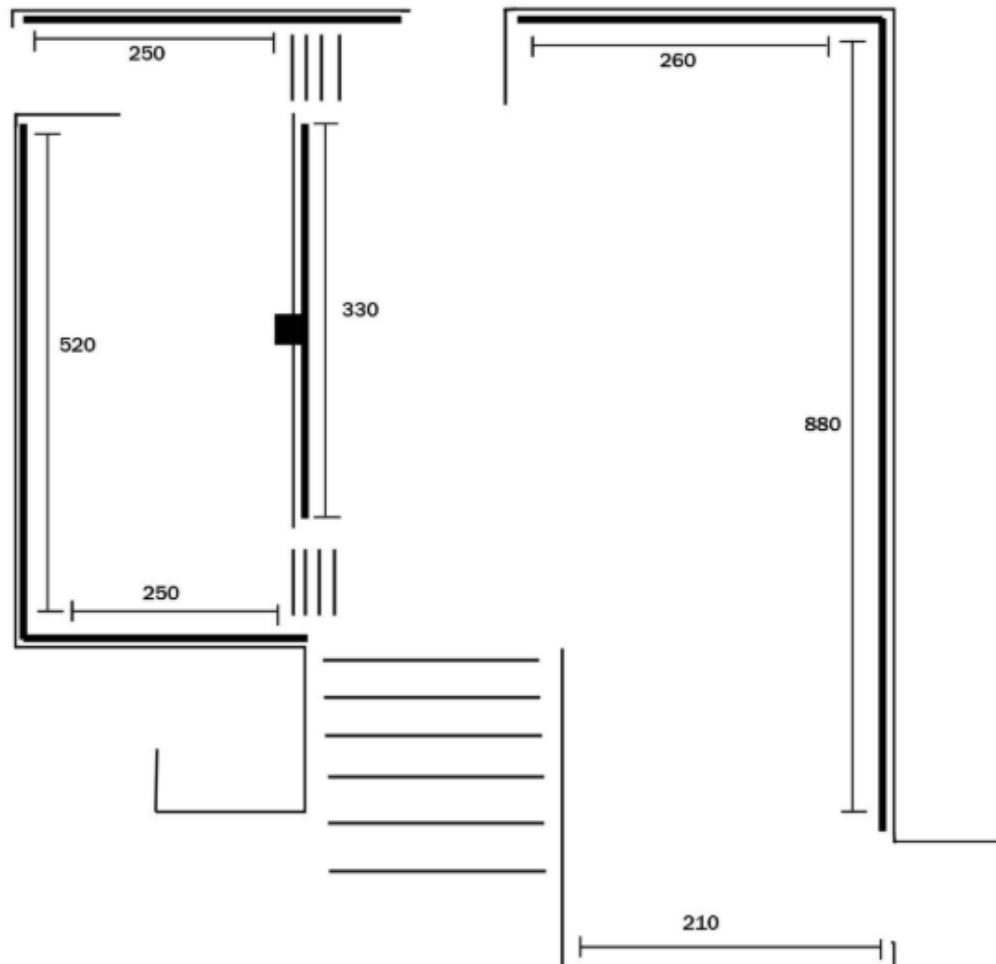


Figure 1: A map of the new Elysium Gallery, unlabelled

Upon entrance through the stairs, the viewer will find themselves facing Zanele Muholi's work, credited, "Somnyama Ngonyama". The gaze of the figure is unmoving and powerful, the eye contact and the camera suggesting that the viewer had now become the subject. Muholi's work intersects judgement and intimacy. It does not allow for the viewer to feel welcome (although reactions may vary). A feeling of surveillance will be felt by the visitors, with the opposing wall featuring another Zanele Muholi portrait.

It is argued in Frantz Fanon's, "Black Faces White Masks", that the gaze of "The Other", is what builds one's identity (Fanon, F., 2007) (a gaze meaning judgement from "the Other"). Fanon recognizes that the "Other" is never equal.

The gaze is equal to power and ownership by the dominating person; within Fanon's context-making the black man inferior, to the white "Other". He states that "the black man on his home territory is oblivious of the moment when his inferiority is determined by the Other" (Fanon, 2007, pg. 90). Edward Said's theory of Orientalism provides necessary historical context to Fanon's statement in regards to power; he explains that Orientalism functions on "positional superiority", which results in the Westerner to never lose the "upper hand" to the "Orient" (Said, 1979). When combining these key theories with John Berger's theory of gender and surveillance, "men act and women appear" (Berger, 2008, pg 25); an expectation forms.

Zanele Muholi's portrait reverses the roles. It confronts the viewer with the feeling of subservience and powerlessness; the slight raise of the brows also suggesting disapproval-disturbing the roles described by Fanon, Berger and Said alike.



Figure 2: Photo credited "Zanele Muholi, *Somnyama Ngonyama*"

The opposing wall will hang the work “*Zazi II, ISGM, Boston, 2019*”.



Figure 3: *Zazi II, ISGM, Boston, 2019*

The mirror held by the figure, doubles her presence, rather than reducing her to its “symbol of vanity “(Berger, 2008, pg26). The placement across from the first portrait uses reflection, highlighted by the mirror, as a visual tactic to increase the sense of vulnerability opposed onto the viewer.



Figure 4: Image © Kehinde Wiley Studio / *Sleep* © Kehinde Wiley 2008

Kehinde Wiley will occupy the biggest wall onto the right of the floorplan. When gazing at the work, the viewer is forced to set aside the expectation of the subject; historically, women. The reclined, relaxed figure, instead a challenge rather than a form of subservency to the viewer. It upholds aesthetics while avoiding blatant eroticism, falling closer to the sophistication of renaissance-period figures. Although written under the guise of cinema, Laura Mulvey highlights the effects of the male gaze; as either “voyeuristic (Which sees the rebel women as temptress and prostitute) or fetishist (The docile and redeeming women represented as the Virgin Mary)” (Mulvey, pg24). Portraying the male figure under the assumed male gaze denies the conventions set by consumed media, caused by the quiet authority. This forces the viewers to confront their individual ways of seeing, this may be received as comforting to some, however confusing to most, as they question the environment.

Continuing to employ the mirroring technique, “A Woman at her Toilette”, by Berthe Morisot and “Untitled Film Still #81” by Cindy Sherman will hang opposed.



Figure 5: *Untitled film still 81*, 1980, Cindy Sherman



Figure 6: *A Woman at Her Toilette*, 1875, Berthe Morisot

Both works depict similar actions, while facing crucial differing circumstances based upon the time period they are set. Berthe Morisot, the only founding female member of the Impressionists, depicted women throughout all stages of their lives. Although radical in approach, she lacked the societal support to attend art schools- which were all male in foundation. Her female standpoint allowed her to understand and better depict women's private relations. These images were created strictly through the female gaze, granting her subjects autonomy and power. Her brush strokes, short and spontaneous, in complimentary hues, suggests a fleeting moment of wondered intimacy.

Created a decade apart, Cindy Sherman produced endless, film-inspired, photos depicting the many faces of femininity. They hold within them the awareness of being gazed upon. Morisot preserves within her work a sense of womanly solitude, reflecting the lived inferiority enforced upon women. In comparison Sherman's work is exaggerated, created without most of the hurdles posed before Morisot.

Judith Butler summarizes this point in her feminist work, "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler, 2006)

Gender has shifted from being viewed as somewhat of a destiny, to a constructed performance. Exaggeration enables Sherman to loudly experiment with modern time expectations and depictions of women in film and media, compared to the quiet lived experiences of Morisot. The similarity of the works, divided by their circumstances allows the viewer a moment of self-reflection, directing conversation towards how gender and femininity is shaped, by a female lead gaze.

Carrie May Weems, who will occupy the final wall with her Kitchen Table Series, employs the technique of staging, to perform lived experiences, tying the space between the works of Berthe Morisot and Cindy Sherman fluently.



Figure 7: 1990 *kitchen table series*, Carrie May Weems (no.1)



Figure 8: 1990 *kitchen table series*, Carrie May Weems (no.2)



Figure 9: 1990 *kitchen table series*, Carrie May Weems (no.3)



Figure 10: 1990 *kitchen table series*, Carrie May Weems (no.4)

I have only selected a portion of her series, as the venue is small and the intention is considerable. The choice of images purposefully avoids the direct eye contact of the woman within the photos, forcing the viewer to be a bystander, not an active participant in the scene. Weems orchestrates these scenes around the kitchen table as a symbol of the everyday, private, familiar scene. The viewer becomes witness to the power dynamics surrounding the family pictured, with different photos suggesting differences in standpoint. It is up to the

viewer how the power relations are negotiated, giving partial narrative control to the viewer, while encouraging discomfort from the bystander effect.

To conclude, the exhibition “Vital Gaze”, invites the viewer to fully experience their role as such. The knowledge of the theories of the gaze is not necessary to fully experience and deepen the understanding of them. The exposure to the combination of artists, in the order of Zanele Muholi, Kehinde Wiley, Cindy Sherman, Berthe Morisot and Carrie May Weems builds a disjointed yet crucial narrative of art history and its problematic, entangled past, how some have been overcome and how some continue to bloom under the current trends of media. The Vital Gaze, most importantly, encourages the abandoning of a passive gaze by highlighting the importance of the active.

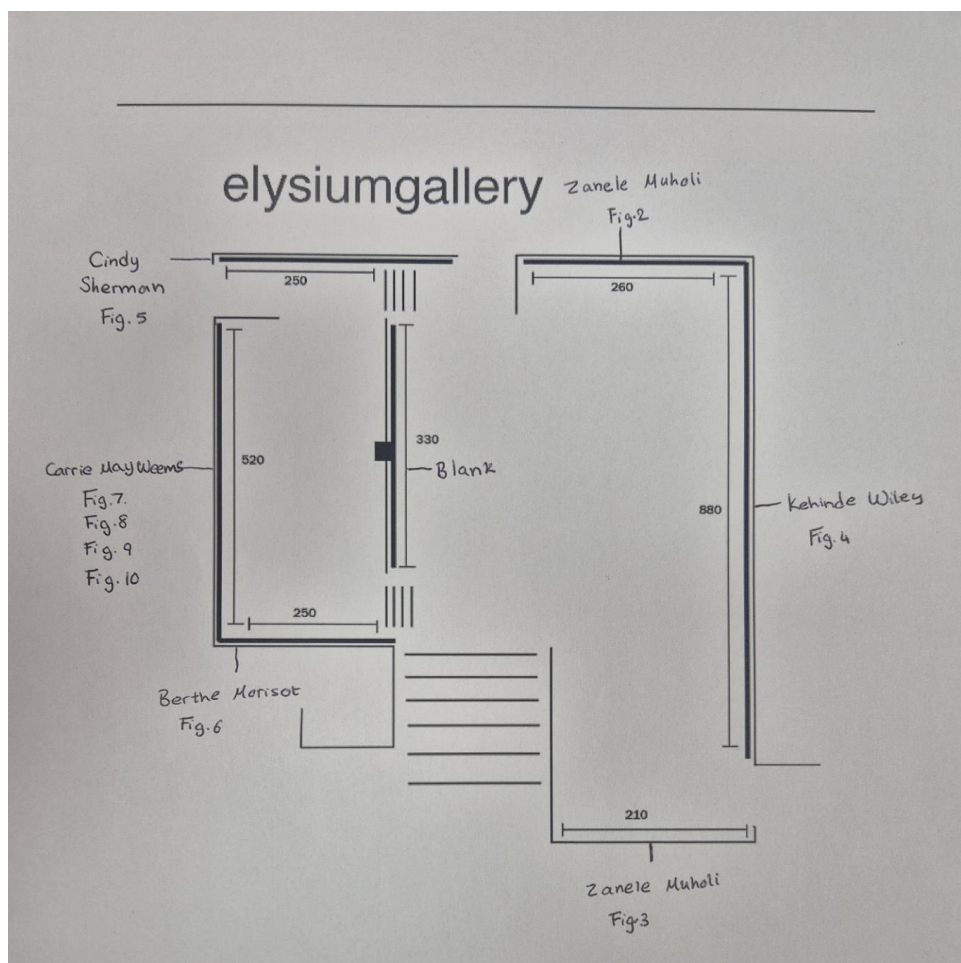


Figure 11: A map of the new Elysium Gallery, labelled

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