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Module Code: ADAD4019/C

Exhibition Text

Art has the power to shape appearances and perception, and it is because of this that art has played a vital role in shaping our society and bringing about societal change. Artists possess the ability to provide an insight into society, and convey meaning through their work which can inform and bring light to messages they feel are important. They are able to challenge societal beliefs in order to move towards building a better society.

Held at the Glynn Vivian Gallery Swansea, *Redefining Feminism* explores the work of four influential artists who work with representing feminine portrayal, by challenging gender roles and stereotypes. This exhibition includes work by Carrie Mae Weems, Cindy Sherman, Hannah Starkey, and Lois Cohen.

Exhibition Floor Plan



Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*:

Full wall view:



Part One:



Part Two:



Part Three:



A collage of eight film stills from the movie 'The 400 Blows'. The stills are arranged in two rows of four. The top row shows Jean-Pierre L aud in a dark coat walking down a stone staircase, standing in a large, empty stone hall, standing in a field with mountains in the background, and a close-up of his face. The bottom row shows him in a dark coat walking at night, standing on a stone staircase, looking out over a body of water with a bridge in the background, and a close-up of his face.

Part One:



Part Two:



Part Three:



Hannah Starkey's *In Real Life*:



Essay

Redefining Feminism is an imagined collective exhibition, presenting work that acknowledges and challenges female stereotypes and relates to feminism. In this context, feminism is relating to “the movement of women fighting” for political equality (Preciado, P.B, 2020, p.80) and social equality. Feminism and feminist art, particularly from the 1960s and 1970s when feminist art began to emerge more widely, has changed society's perception of women significantly. However, it is still vital to keep pushing for further change, equity and equality. The art in this exhibition aims to challenge and defy female stereotypes in society; the generalised views about women which are misconceptions. This exhibition includes the works: *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) by Cindy Sherman; *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990) by Carrie Mae Weems; *In Real Life* by Hannah Starkey (1997-ongoing) and *Metamorphosis* (2017-2018) by Lois Cohen and stylist Indiana Roma Voss.

In my exhibition *Redefining Feminism*, I aim to present work that relates to and addresses stereotypes about women in society. According to Susan Sontag (2013, p.10-11), “male-female polarisation are perhaps the two leading stereotypes that imprison people”. Whilst challenging the notion of gender, Paul B. Preciado goes beyond this distinction of male and female, and states that we need a new societal model that is “more open, less hierarchical. We need a revolution in the paradigm of bodily representation” (Preciado, P.B, 2020, p.74). This societal belief and distinction between genders has resulted in stereotypes about women, and the divide between genders in society. Art can be utilised as a powerful tool, provoking change and changing the view of women in society, as art represents reality in the sense that it reflects society. Many artists use social issues as

inspiration, and create work with the intention of making a societal point to bring about change. John Berger stated that in art “men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (Berger. J, 1972, p.47). Although this statement was made in relation to the female nude, it can be applied in a wider sense. Berger explained that art perpetuates the unequal relationship between men and women, that is deeply rooted in society; this highlights the role art plays in sustaining societal beliefs. This is supported by Tirza Latimer and Harriet Riches, who said “photography became an important tool of second wave feminism to critique the established visual conventions” through which gender has been constructed (2013). Through artists creating work which challenges these beliefs, it is possible to bring light to issues of gender inequality and uproot the societal belief system surrounding gender stereotypes.

I decided to curate a collective exhibition because I felt that including more artists would offer a variety of viewpoints, strengthening the context of the exhibition. When discussing the Ferus Gallery where he worked as a curator, Walter Hopps Right said that “the solidarity between the artists was very strong” (Obrist, H.U, 2015, p.33). I felt that this solidarity of a collective exhibition would reinforce my message and provide a stronger meaning. When thinking about how to curate Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, I firstly decided that I wanted to include all sixty-nine images. I felt that displaying the body of work as a whole would help enforce the meaning behind the work, relating to the constructed idea of a woman's image, in a more impactful way as an audience would see all images and make connections between them. In the gallery space, I have placed *Untitled Film Stills* on the wall to the left of the doors, as this is the shortest wall and the images are the smallest in the exhibition. I felt that Sherman's work would seem out of place on a longer wall. In terms of presentation, these images are chronological from the left, top to bottom. They are presented in two rows of thirty-five images, with *Untitled Film Still #1* on the left.

When considering *Metamorphosis* by Lois Cohen and Indiana Roma Voss, I chose to include all eleven images in my exhibition because presenting the whole body of work would be more impactful than selected images, as the work would have more presence within the space. I have curated these pieces considering the landscape and portrait formats with two portrait images, then a landscape image. Similarly to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, I felt that it was important to include the whole of Carrie Mae Weems' *The Kitchen Table Series*, twenty photographs and fourteen text panels. This is because when viewed together, the work has a stronger meaning by fully presenting the narrative of one woman's life, relating to stereotypes and the interplay of gender and racial inequality in society. In the gallery space, I have curated Weems' work on the back wall which immediately faces guests as they enter. As Weems' work has a strong narrative, I have organised her work in one straight line across the back wall, so guests can almost read her work from left to right. The images and text panels are displayed in chronological order. Each image is 50.8cm square, and the text panels measure 27.94cm square. Choosing which of Hannah Starkey's images to include proved to be a difficult task. Her body of work is so wide that each image and its relationship and response to female stereotypes can be interpreted individually. I felt the best way to present her work was to select images which have been widely interpreted, and include some of her most well known pieces. Starkey's images are 122cm x 125cm, meaning I could fit six images on the wall. I chose six images that I felt related to female stereotypes most.

Untitled Film Stills is a project created by artist Cindy Sherman, who is regarded as being "among the most significant artists of the Pictures Generation" (MoMA, n.d.). *Untitled Film Stills* is a collection of sixty nine black and white self-portrait images, in which Sherman drew on cinematic conventions by presenting herself as various female archetypes from

1950s/1960s cinema, seemingly drawing inspiration from Hitchcock and Hollywood B picture movies. Although the body of work “stays on the side of enigma”, as it was created between 1977 and 1980, the work has been interpreted in relation to feminism (Mulvey, L 1991), because this was a particularly significant time with regards to feminist photography. Sherman's work is able to address and explore female stereotypes as she “examines and distorts femininity as a social construct” (ArtNet, n.d.) by making use of mass-media techniques, presenting herself as representations of cinematic female stereotypes, and appropriating these archetypes. This raises questions around the male gaze and stereotypical ideas about femininity. Moreover, Sherman plays on the idea of femininity as a performance, making a point of femininity being a social construction.

Metamorphosis, an editorial project by photographer Lois Cohen and stylist Indiana Roma Voss, examines female stereotypes by reimagining female archetypes throughout history and presenting them as empowered role models. Combining both fiction and reality Cohen and Voss have taken, what they believe to be, eleven outdated female icons and archetypes, ranging from the goddess Venus to Barbie and reconstructed the characters with a focus on creating female icons. They have achieved this by contrasting the style associated with each character as they present them in a new, reimagined and empowered light. Cohen and Voss reimagine and empower these characters through diverse casting and by updating style choices to reflect a more contemporary and feminist style. As the work was created in 2017, the style choices reflect fashion at this time and what is seen as a 21st century woman. The stark contrast between well-known icons and the 21st century empowered look forces us to think about the stereotypes the original designs are portraying and enforcing.

Carrie Mae Weems' *The Kitchen Table Series*, created in 1990, consists of twenty black

and white photographs and fourteen text panels. Created at a time when racism was still an integral component of American society (Bell 2018, p.8), Weems aimed to respond to her own “sort of sense of what needed to happen, what needed to be and what would not simple be a voice for African American women but what would be a voice more generally for women” (Valentine. VL, 2020). Weems aimed to create work that would not only address female stereotypes, but address this through a racial lens also. Each image in *The Kitchen Table Series* is taken from the same viewpoint looking at the same setting, but as props and characters change, so do the narratives. Weems casts herself as the mother of the family, with family members taking other roles. As viewers look into the scene, they are given a glimpse of a typical day for a family woman and the stereotypes embedded within this. By depicting stereotypical roles that women play in life, Weems is addressing the collective experiences of women.

In Real Life by Hannah Starkey is an ongoing body of photographic work, which focusses on portraying women in their everyday lives. Although Starkey's style of working echoes street photography, her images are planned and crafted with consideration; her work lies on the border between documentary and fiction. Addressing female stereotypes by subverting them, Starkey connects to ideas of modern femininity, redefining the representation of women. As her work is so vast and the style and subject of each image is so different, each image and the way in which it responds to stereotypes and the female experience can be interpreted individually. As a whole, Starkey aims to break stereotypes through portraying the shared female experience, and documenting womanhood over time. Starkey has said that her “images are not necessarily about the woman in the picture, rather “the character or experience that she represents”, and “they're icons rather than individual life stories” (Browne. A, 2023). Starkey's work relates to the female gaze, and how women view women, consequently meaning her work has a familiar and relatable

dimension to it.

Word Count: 1646

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