

# **Ways of Perceiving**

## **Curation Essay**

**Jessica Ellen Hurlow**

Student number: 1802291

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## Identity

The show I am curating is about identity politics and within this, the subgroups of gender, sexuality and race. Identity politics is important within the world we live in, more so now than ever before with movements like LGBTQ+ rights and Black Lives Matter. It is vital that we understand and learn about different forms of identity and how it is important in the rights for these people as their lives are valid. Within my essay, I am going to explore in more detail what identity politics is and why it is important for artists to make work around this topic. I am also going to talk about the different subgroups in identity politics, in terms of how artists have shed more light from their own experiences and how they bring attention to it within the artworld. I feel it is important to talk about the lack of diversity in the art we look at and the racism rooted in the art world.

Identity politics looks at the marginalised groups of our society such as, black people, women and LGBTQ+ people and brings awareness to the struggles that they have to go through (Power, 2019). The people who challenge the idea of identity politics are, for the most part, white men. Hadley Freeman put it in her article for the Guardian that the majority of the time the

*“Identity politics sceptics are white men whose articles are filled with quotes from other white men.”* (Freeman, 2016).

This is true and unfortunately a large part of the UK is governed by white men, for example 68% of Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s cabinet are white males and 71% of the Tory party are white males (Lambert, 2020). This reflects within the art world of today. A study that was produced examining the diversity of 40,000 art works in 18 of the U.S museum’s online

catalogues showed 85% of them were white and even more so 87% were male (Solly, 2019).

The sad reality of the lack of diversity within museums is shocking, not only if you're not male but if you're not white, you are less likely to be represented. Seeing these figures shows how people of colour and women have to struggle more to become successful artists, which should not be the case.

In 2015 the Rijksmuseum changed over one hundred of their artworks names that are considered offensive and rightfully so, a painting by Simon Maris which was called 'Young Negro Girl' has been changed to 'Young Girl Holding a Fan' (Jones, 2015). However, the museum was met with a lot of criticism from people who wanted to keep names such as 'Mohammedan' that refer to Muslims in a derogatory used in the Victorian period. Unfortunately, this was not the case at the Tate museums. Sir Nicholas Serota, the director of the Tate said at the time they had no intentions to go down "this trendy road" (Jones, 2015). This just shows white privilege in the art world and the fact that they do not have to face the racist history of the UK. The words are racist and hold a lot of hatred so why is it that one of the top museums in the world, with 5.7 million visitors a year to the Tate Modern, will not change its offensive language? (Halvanti-Stringer, 2017) One of the main goals within my exhibition is to educate on these issues as I feel it is very important. The four artists that I have chosen really tackle the ideas of identity and what it is like for them to be a part of this society today.

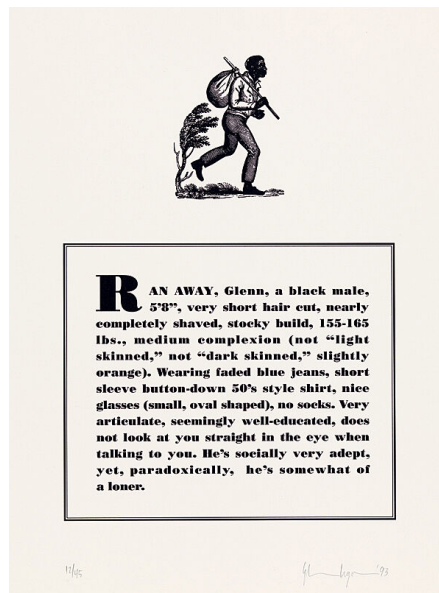


*Fig. 1 Runaways, 1993*

The first piece I will be talking about is 'Runaways' 1993 by Glenn Ligon. The piece consisted of 10 lithographs that mimicked the form of a runaway slave advertisement from around the 1850s. They also included an image that was in the original advertisements from the abolitionist newspaper. Ligon asked his friends to describe him as if he had gotten lost, so the text includes a physical description similar to a police report but also some include more of their relationship with Ligon (Copeland, 2011). Looking more into the context of the work, Ligon wanted to show an insight into an institution where black people were considered property and were classed as subhuman but would risk their lives for the chance to be free and this shows their humanity completely contradicts the system that oppresses them (Higinbotham, 2017). Identity plays a big part within the work too, for example Ligon said in an interview with Thelma Golden in 1997,

*"Runaways is broadly about how an individual's identity is inextricable from the way one is positioned in the culture, from the ways people see you, from historical and political contexts."* (Gupta, 2018)

I feel this quote explains really well how Ligon bring identity into the piece and is the reason why I feel it works so well within my exhibition.



*Fig.2 Five Day Forecast, 1991*

The next piece is 'Five Day Forecast' 1991 by Lorna Simpson. Simpson is known for her combination of photography and words and became popular during the 1980s for her ideas and exploration around the theme of identity politics. Her work challenges conventional ideas around women, race and culture which is why in an exhibition about identity politics Simpson is essential ('Five Day Forecast', Tate, 2021). Firstly, looking at the photos within the piece you can see that she has only slightly moved in each photo, wearing the same white shift dress but her face is not included within the photo and that was intentional. Simpson wanted to deny us that information because "the one thing that people gravitate to in photography is the face and reading the expressions" (Zwart, 2020). Simpson included words that began with 'mis' such as 'mistranslate', and usually when you see 'mis' in front of a word it may suggest a negative meaning. When pronouncing the words, you can hear the play on words of 'mis' and 'miss' and how she uses this to question female identity and gender ('Five Day Forecast', Tate, 2021). A quote by critic Kellie Jones from 2002, describes Simpson's practise very well,

*“creates mysterious work and quietly intriguing works that reflect the silence of a portion of society, (African-American women) that is rarely if ever represented in art.” (Zwart, 2020)*

Simpson gives representation to black women, who like Kellie Jones said are rarely represented, although you could possibly say her work is somewhat well known within the artworld she is still one of a few black women that are in museums like Tate Modern. This is very sad and if we had fewer white men saying that same story over and over again, we would have a more culturally diverse museum.



*Fig.3 Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC, 1991*

The next artwork I will be looking at is ‘Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC’ 1991 by Nan Goldin. Goldin first learned about drag queens in 1972 and loved them, so she started photographing them and her main purpose was to show them how beautiful they were and show them acceptance (‘Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC’, Tate, 2021). Within Goldin’s work she explores gender politics and questioning what it is to be male or female before there was a word to describe it. She grew up during conformism in the 1950s, she saw how it was near to impossible for women to own their own identities (McCord, 2017) which plays a lot into her work at the time. Goldin never wanted to portray the drag

queens as just men dressing up as women, but instead a third gender that were able to express themselves however they felt ('Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC', Tate, 2021). In the introduction of her book 'The Other Side' she wrote,

*"The pictures you see in this book are not of people suffering from gender dysphoria but rather expressing gender euphoria ... The people in these pictures are truly revolutionary."* (McCord, 2017)

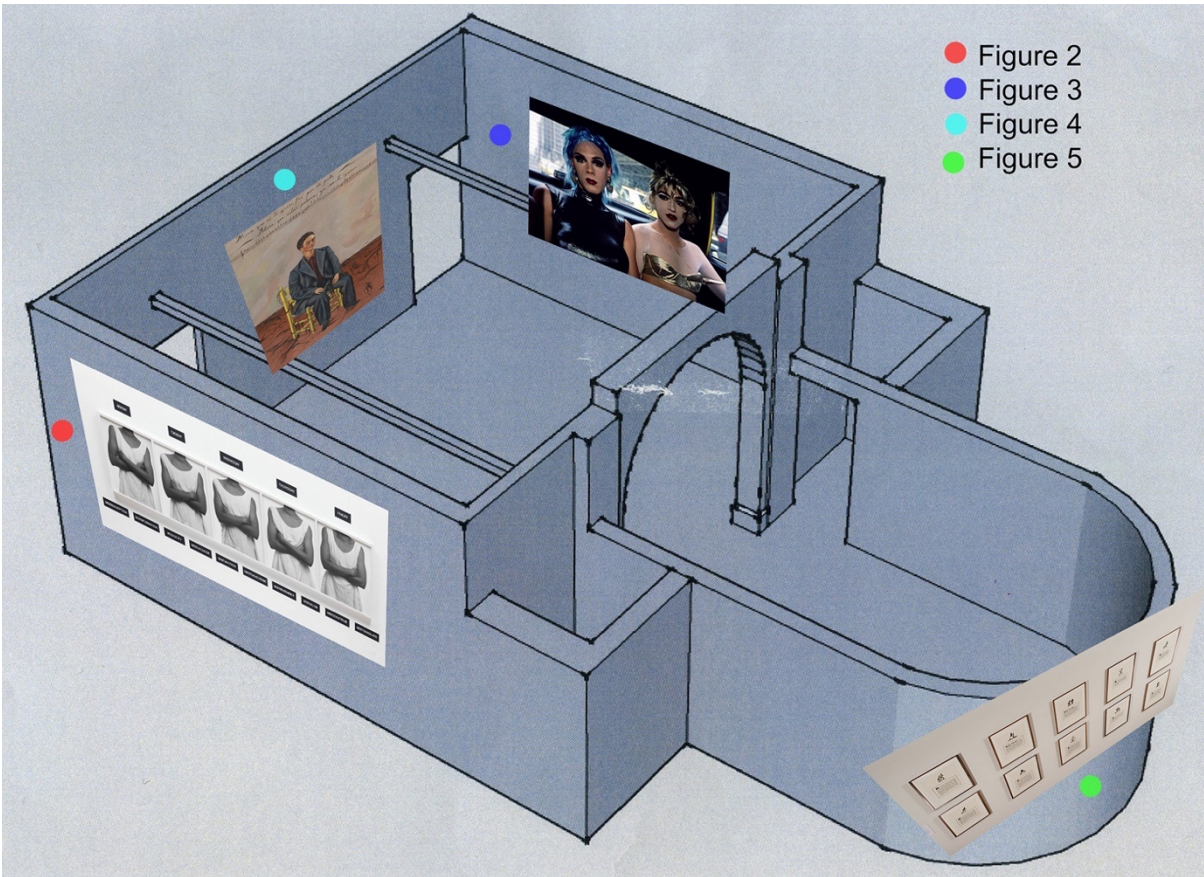
Goldin fully embraced the queer culture of the 90s and is one of the reasons I wanted her in the show. She says these are people just expressing themselves and it should be completely okay, which is an important way to see identity in the LGBTQ+ community.



*Fig. 4 Self-portrait with Cropped Hair, 1940*

The last artwork that I will be including in my exhibition is 'Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair' 1940 by Frida Kahlo. This self-portrait is very different to Kahlo's other paintings, she swapped her traditional embroidered Tehuana dress for a loose fitted suit and she has cut

her hair giving her more of a masculine appearance (Frida Kahlo, 'Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair', 1940, MoMA, 2021). Kahlo is a strong feminist icon for many people and this painting shows why, after divorce with then husband Diego Rivera she wanted to change everything he loved about her. He loved her vibrant dresses, so she wore suits, he loved her hair and she cut it all off (Fridakahlo.org, 2021). Kahlo wanted to reclaim her identity back from being what Rivera loved to who she wanted to be, she wanted to be independent and not have to rely on a man for financial help or rely on him for anything. Her androgynous look shows that she is playing with gender norms which is one of the reasons why this piece would work well within my exhibition 'Identity'.



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