

Q. How is the work of Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman questioning the politics of gender and female stereotypes?

“Feminist. A person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes.”

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie -

Feminist. Somehow it has become a dirty word, one that most people do not want to identify with. We tend to see it as a term for ‘man hater’ or something that only women can be. This twisted notion is wrong and belittles the fight and the struggles that women have faced throughout history for the battle still being fought to this day. From the Suffragette movement starting in 1903 to modern day protests with groups such as Femen, women are still facing inequalities. Feminists have been around for centuries, the only difference being that now there is a name for us and now our voices are starting to get heard. Through my work I aim to show gender stereotypes, mainly facing women, in the Western world. I am focusing on my mother and what is expected of her and her role within the household. I will be making reference to the work of Cindy Sherman and Claude Cahun, taking inspiration for my own work, with their unique styles. In my work I will use the videos I have created of my mum to mimic them and create staged images that almost glamorise her role to make it clear to my spectator that I am parodying her role, this will be easy for my spectator to understand and get their heads around.

Gender defines everyone and, at times, is limiting and making us feel that we need to belong and conform to the expectations put on us at birth solely on whether we were born male or female. However this did not face photographer Claude Cahun. Cahun was a Jewish woman who lived during the Second World War and when in 1937 Cahun and her partner, stepsister, Suzanne Malherbe moved to Jersey, her true activism grew stronger. Cahun challenged authority and the occupation in Jersey where she would slip little drawings and anti-Nazi propaganda into German soldiers pockets as a way of revolt. This can be linked to the Suffragette movement founded in 1903 in Britain by Emmeline Pankhurst, an organisation of protestors who fought for women’s right to vote. Without this movement Cahun would not have been able to work as she did and she would have been less likely to have a creative career as an activist, which was already extremely rare for women to follow.

Throughout history women have faced unequal standards of living without having the same opportunities as men and the Suffragette movement went against this by becoming more radical and militant in order to ever get noticed. These women were constantly silenced by police brutality and little media coverage was allowed to be shared on the topic of the movement to avoid a rise in their following. The two compliment one another, bringing more to the movement of feminism, in that both the Suffragettes and Claude Cahun were challenging authority and wanted to change society. Cahun protested against the Nazi occupation and fought for change through misleading letters in the pockets of Nazi soldiers while the Suffragettes used a violent approach, smashing windows and rebelling against the British government. Neither Cahun nor the Suffragettes cared whether they died for their cause, in fact Cahun wanted to become a martyr during the war for her work to be seen as an uprising against society norms and the flow of political injustice. These women created a gateway for change with second and third wave feminism emerging in the 1960s and early 1990s. Here women across the world saw their oppression and rose up against it via peaceful protest. This has influenced 21st century feminists including Femen, a Ukrainian activist group, who believe that women are the owners of their own bodies and protest topless with strong political

messages covering their bare skin. I believe that the activism of today has been greatly inspired by the activism of the early 1900s and the photographic world of feminism has been greatly influenced by the work of Claude Cahun.

Furthermore, Cahun dared to be different and did not dwell on the sacrifice that she might have to pay for her actions. Cahun challenged the politics of gender in photographs made in Jersey during the occupation. She wore male clothing and had quite masculine features, looking more like her father than her mother. Growing up Cahun always looked more towards her father rather than her mother and identified with him. Cahun challenged the way our society sees gender, she *“considered femininity to be one of many masks”*¹. She experimented with how people see gender and what females should look like. Cahun’s photographs challenged gender norms and she shifted into an in-between of the male and female persona that often confused spectators and made them slightly uncomfortable. Our society works by putting people in boxes and defining them yet Cahun did not fit into any existing boxes. Cahun’s work really does question the politics of gender and what men and women are expected to identify with; this is shown through her controversial images and she *“rejected all conventions... regarding sexuality and the performance of it”*². Cahun was completely adjacent to what was expected of her gender and turned gender norms on its head. She became an enigma to many and was an unconventional woman.



Claude Cahun photography, Jersey Channel Islands

Cahun was already an unconventional woman in the sense that she was a Jewish lesbian in a relationship with her stepsister in the early 1930s; you would not think that she could be any more different. This was until she created her surrealist images in Jersey with a shaved head and wearing male clothing, making her work even more unique. One image that particularly intrigues me is one where Cahun is stood at a mirror looking into the camera and wearing a checked jacket. Cahun looks like a man in this image and if I saw this image without the context behind it I would have thought she was a man and she becomes *“one of the most curious spirits of our time”*³. In this image Cahun looks nothing like what society expects women to look like and I find this so creative as she is completely challenging the way we think as a society and how we should never conform to a set of expectations just because other people think it should be so. Cahun wanted to challenge the way people saw men and women and I think she would have seen our current world as a successful step in the right direction. At the time

these images would have been so radical and outrageous as women were not often seen as being able to creatively express themselves, unlike nowadays where men and women go against societal norms and do whatever they please, to an extent. Especially through social media giving people the opportunity to connect with other social misfits, being able to share more intimate images and no

¹ Chicago Tribune article on ‘Provocative new exhibit full of self-portraits from Claude Cahun

² Feminist Art Archive review on Claude Cahun

³ Quote from Andre Breton, founder of Surrealism, on Claude Cahun

real restrictions to what we are able to access. Along with society now bringing to light transgender people and seeing them more as humans rather than just ignoring them and trying to stick to the expectations imposed upon us within our society, which would not have been acknowledged during the time Claude Cahun was alive in the 1930s. I think the reasoning behind each of Cahun's images is very powerful and does really reflect the pressures that men and women both have to suffer through within our society. Although her work was made almost 90 years ago, it is still very current and still manages to fit in with contemporary society. That is why I like this work so much because it is still relatable and relevant. Cahun has helped to remold our society's outlook on gender and how it should be, she embodied the social misfits and still does.

Similarly, the photographic work of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* informs her spectators of female stereotypes and their negative connotations. Sherman's work really stands out in the photography world and has really furthered public knowledge and attention on the unrealistic and unfair expectations faced with female stereotypes. Sherman's work mimics stereotypes in film and she creates personas of women in such films as well as those she has come across in real life and exaggerates them to make her staged images come across as more sarcastic and almost a parody of those women. Sherman's work embodies the problems within our society of how we treat women and how we expect them to be. Women are expected to be glamorous all the time, as well as juggle a full-time job with house chores. We live in an unfair patriarchal world that most people ignore purely because they can. Sherman's work almost objectifies herself, she portrays herself as elegant women and creates personas that are soft and would attract men. She does not tend to hold back in her photographic work and in other works she poses in over the top nude photographs creating new personas and making her own props of different parts of the female anatomy. She exaggerates



Picasso, Les Femmes d'Alger

womanly features to impact her spectator and to give a clear message showing what society expects of women and how over the top those expectations are and how damaging they can be. Some of Sherman's work reminds me of the artwork of many male artists including Picasso that objectify women and, especially Picasso, use geometric shapes to dehumanize them and for women to be seen purely as sexual figures that are distorted and only there for male pleasure. Sherman's work takes back the woman's body and she uses hers in whatever way she wants in her work to show that she is in control of her own life and her own body. Sherman "*represents everything that is wrong with the contemporary art world*"⁴ and challenges how society sees women and the way that male artists

and photographers have in the past, and still do, wrongly objectify women making them seem less human than men and only there as sexual objects.

Likewise, an image that truly embodies female stereotypes is one where Sherman is laying down across a blanket wearing her underwear while holding a mirror and looking off into the distant almost in a fixation or trance. I find this image very strong as Sherman reminds me of a Film Noir femme fatale or



Film Noir, Femme Fatale

⁴ Bloomberg Business review on Cindy Sherman

a damsel in distress. Through this image Sherman shows the spectator the expectation of women having to look glamorous constantly and ready to do anything that her man wants her to. This can be linking to the theory of Laura Mulvey and the Male Gaze and that women are shown, in film and photography, as objects for men and that they are simply there for the lead male protagonist as a love interest. Mulvey states that a “woman... stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other”⁵ that she is “bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions”⁵ this suggests that women are there for the visual pleasure of men and are to be looked at and objectified by men because of their social order, they have no other purpose. This image enlightens its spectator of the clichés faced by women and the glamorization of women’s bodies and objectification in film, art and photography. I feel that this image is mocking those women that follow the expectations imposed on them by men and goes against the traditional role of the woman being seen as a damsel in distress. Another element of this image that interests me is what Sherman chose to wear; it somewhat becomes provocative as she is showing a lot of flesh and posing in her underwear with an opened silk dressing gown. She poses in such a way that would raise the question in her spectator’s mind that she was asking for it or looking for male attention. This is obviously not the case and women should not be objectified by men by the way they are sitting or by what they choose to wear on their bodies, which is the message I think Sherman is bringing across through this photograph.



Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #6

Contrary, Sherman has been continuously critiqued by art theorists including Rosalind Krauss who sees her work less as a movement towards feminism but more as a movement almost against it. Krauss talks about the work of Sherman and identifies her work, as ‘slavishness’⁶ as if she becomes a slave in her own images.



Roy Lichtenstein artwork

Her images remind me of the artwork created by Roy Lichtenstein where he creates unrealistic looking blonde women and makes them damsels in distress. His work almost patronizes women and makes them see as though they need male attention and their whole lives revolve around men. Sherman’s work uses this, damsel in distress, and exaggerates it making it seem less offensive and more like a fantasy. Another art critic brought to light the link between Sherman and Douglas Sirk. This critic compares the work of Sherman to a still from one of Sirk’s films and how both are focusing their work on a ‘remembered fantasy’⁵. This



Still from a Douglas Sirk film

⁵ Laura Mulvey extract from Visual And Other Pleasures

⁶ Extract from Bachelors book by Rosalind Krauss

is interesting to me as it brings in another dimension to Sherman's work and how she came up with her ideas from watching old B films and Film Noir style films, this does suggest that Sherman has dreamt of envisioned her situation before hand and then worked based off of memory in her images. However, Sherman has stated that she does not envision any particular scene but she does it all there and then. She stated *'some people have told me they remember the film that one of my images is derived from, but in fact I had no film in mind at all'*⁷. I like this quote as it shows that Sherman really does make it all up when she gets to her studio and works with what looks good in front of the camera and does not solely depend on a memory or having to perfectly re-stage an image from a still that she took from an old film. I believe that through Sherman's images she is creating a new persona and is questioning the way society sees women and stereotypes that women are faced with.

Moreover, my own photographic work embraces that of Sherman's in the sense of staged, exaggerated perceptions of women and the stereotypes that women are faced with. This study is very personal to me as I delve into my own life and that of my mothers. I wanted to find out more about her role in the household and what she really thinks about it. I tend to get annoyed by how accepting of her role my mother is and believe that women should not be expected to just take on this role without ever asking for help from her male counterpart. I truly believe that *"as long as women aren't free, men won't be either"*⁸. Women become trapped inside a box where they face stereotypes and unfair expectations, where they are told who they are and what they should become. Cahun challenged this role and this is what I want my work to embrace. I want to make a clear sarcastic dig at the traditional role of the women within our Western society, much like the work of Sherman. After creating the short film of my mother I wanted to challenge her assumed role by parodying her in a short series of images. I wanted to create images where the subject almost seems robotic and is not enjoying what she is doing, it becomes a routine that women often do without even thinking about it. This is where I too challenge the politics of the female role and stereotypes that women suffer. My mother belongs to the matriarchal world of house chores and being a mother accepting this role as her duty. Yet I do not aim to follow this tradition and want to live differently. I want to live a household where my partner and I work in harmony with one another and do equal amounts of house chores, not one outweighing the other. I created videos of my mother doing house chores as a source material to further investigate into her role as a woman in Western society. This project has helped me to understand further my mother's role and how she conforms to a female stereotype of being a housewife and living to serve the family. I identify as a feminist and believe that women deserve equal rights to men politically, socially and economically. I feel that male privilege is something that all too clearly dominates our society yet we overlook it and have allowed it to become the norm. As a young woman in the 21st century I feel that I have more opportunity than women did during second and third wave feminism because now more people are understanding feminism and as a whole our society has become more accepting of different people and those that do not fit inside the traditional boxes created centuries ago. My role does not need to be the same as my mother's role and I do not want it to be the same. I do not want my role within society to be defined because of my sex; I want my role to be determined by me and no one else. My aspiration is to be acknowledged for my work not as 'great for a woman' but just as great.

⁷ Extract from Cindy Sherman: Characters | ART21 "Exclusive" interview

⁸ Extract from an interview with Noah Berlatsky on feminism

Similarly, women across the world are being singled out purely because of their sex. Feminism is forever growing and more people are becoming aware of this. I do feel that "*exhibitions held together purely by gender may be inadequate, even distasteful*"⁹ and although they are attempts to bring up women in the art world, it seemingly belittles their work as only being good enough for a woman as if they cannot stand against or alongside men. These kinds of exhibitions are almost offensive and in some ways single women out rather than putting them at the same level as men. We need to realize that both men and women are equally capable of making great art and we should not be looked for our sex. I want people to look at me as a photographer/filmmaker without having the label 'female' in front of it. I understand that these exhibitions are highlighting the success of women and somewhat empowering women showing that we are good enough to have our own work exhibited and it does bring light to female artists yet I do think that it defeats the purpose and the aim that women want to achieve. I really want to get the message across that we should not be defined by our sex in any form of work.

To conclude, the work of Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman challenges the politics of gender and female stereotypes by exaggerating it and going against generic conventions created by society. Cahun challenges the way our society sees gender and becomes very masculine in her photographs making the spectator uncomfortable yet leaves room for them to question whether they should stick to their given role based on their sex. I believe that this work has really encouraged the social misfits of today and allowed those that are different to be who they want to be without worrying about what society expects them to be. Contrary to the work of Cahun, Sherman's work embraces femininity in a sarcastic way and exaggerates the expectations opposed on women by creating personas and staging images to influence spectators to reevaluate the way they see women and the role and expectations that they face. I believe that, although Cahun and Sherman's work could not be any more different, they compliment one another by challenging the role of women and the beauty myth that has followed women throughout history. Cahun embraces masculinity and Sherman exaggerates femininity creating a new ideal that women can be whatever they choose to be and shouldn't be brought down just because of their sex.

⁹ Newspaper article | Women in Art by Rachel Spence