



On Show

Curated by Joanna Craddock and Dawn Woolley

There is a long history of debates and conflicting opinions in relation to the display of the female body. For example, many world religions require female worshippers to show modesty by covering their hair and body. In the late twentieth century academics in fields such as gender and media studies responded to the campaigns of second wave feminism, developing and debating ideas about the power relationships at play in looking, being seen and the representation of the female body. Contemporary discussions on this topic also consider female visibility through nudity to be a form of empowerment, and way of taking back control over the female body and its representations. However, this idea continues to be fiercely debated.

In 1975, Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, a feminist interpretation of the representation of actresses and actors in Hollywood cinema, was published and continues to be taught widely in art schools. It raises issues of gendered looking and coined the phrase the 'male gaze'.¹ This influential text seems to be experiencing a resurgence of interest amongst a younger generation of female artists, partly because the ideas resonate with recent changes in technology. Thanks to smart phones with cameras and social networking sites we can self-author our images in selfies, leading to questions about what is being posed, performed, or presented, and for whom?

There are two sides to looking: we look and we are looked at. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-ponty describes this as 'my body simultaneously sees and is seen'. Being seen is 'the "other side" of [my body's] power of looking. It sees itself seeing...it is visible and sensitive for itself'.² This suggests that there is an imbalance of power in looking, in that I can control what I look at but I can't control what looks at me. Jacques Lacan, a psychoanalyst, describes this as, 'it is quite clear that I see outside, that perception is not in me, that it is on the objects that it apprehends. The privilege of the subject [the person looking] seems to be established here...as soon as I perceive, my representations belong to me.'³ According to Lacan I am not in control of my visible side because it is captured in the look of another. I do not possess the seen side of myself.

Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema uses psychoanalytic concepts such as voyeurism, exhibitionism and fetishism to understand the pleasure and power relations in the act of looking. Mulvey says

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female [...] In their traditional exhibitionist role 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 [...] she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire.'⁴

In the 48 years since the publication of *Visual Pleasure*, artists and writers have built on and challenged these ideas. For example, Rosalind Gill, sociologist and feminist cultural theorist, describes how, in advertising, empowerment is reduced to a type of sexual power over men that is achieved by having a young, slim and beautiful body.⁵ Gill writes that 'today women are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their (implicitly

“liberated”) interests to do so’.⁶ Liberation becomes a ‘new form of tyranny, an obligation to be sexual in a highly specific kind of way’.⁷

Our modes of producing and viewing photographs have also changed significantly since the 1970s. Social media and smart phones enable us to decide how we appear online, giving us greater control over our image. In her study of personal fashion blogs Agnès Rocamora, a social and cultural studies theorist, says women’s desire to represent themselves had been ‘restrained by men’s ownership of the tools of artistic production such as the brush or the camera as well as of the spaces of display such as galleries and museums’.⁸ She says that social media and mobile camera technology are tools of empowerment that women can use for self-representation, ‘thereby appropriating the power of representation that has often eluded them’.⁹ In his article interpreting selfies produced by female artists, Derek Conrad Murray, an interdisciplinary theorist of contemporary art and visual culture, describes selfies as ‘an aggressive reclaiming of the female body.’¹⁰

However, despite the potential to represent the self in any number of ways, selfies tend to conform to a narrow set of gestures and poses that are derived from advertising and reinforce the active male and passive female gender stereotypes. In 1976 Erving Goffman analysed the pose, position of the body, facial expression and clothing of female and male subjects in over 500 adverts. He identified several trends and patterns in how objectification and gender stereotypes are reinforced through gesture and positioning.¹¹ In 2015 Nicola Döring, Anne Reif and Sandra Poeschl conducted content analysis of 500 selfies found on Instagram to determine if selfies conform to the gender stereotypes identified by Goffman. Not only were the same gender stereotypes found in adverts repeated in selfies, but the stereotypical gender display categories are present more frequently in selfies than in adverts, suggesting that an increase in gender stereotypes has taken place.¹²

This curator's choice selection brings together artworks that consider different aspects of looking and self-display. The artworks play with the power relations between the looker and the looked at, disrupting the idea of the passive female object and active male subject.

Alumna of Leeds Arts University BA (Hons) Photography, Naomi Blakeborough reflects upon the impact of social media, the ability to self-represent and the resulting collapse of the divide between the private and the public. She explores ideas of empowerment and objectification from the perspective and experience of being a young woman creating ambiguous photographic works. In *Send Nudes*, she explores the labour involved in self-authoring, the potent and affective nature of the photographic image, and the equivocal pleasures of self-display on social media platforms.





Send Nudes 2017. Digital photo reworked in 2018 as an assemblage with satin drapes, and balloons <https://www.naomiblakeborough.com/home>

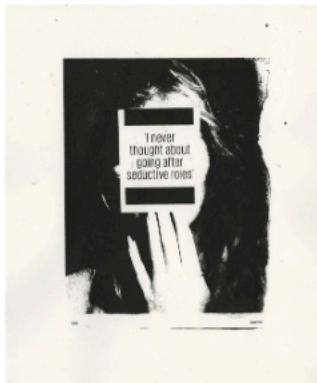
Referring directly to Mulvey's text and quoting from it at length, Alison J. Carr creates an unlikely duet in her video work 'Woman As Image', using the appropriated imagery of Rita Hayworth performing 'Put the Blame on Mame' in 'Gilda' and pairing it with her own performance; a song and dance number using a section of Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' to the tune of Kander and Ebb's 'And All That Jazz'. The words of Laura's famous essay are used as a talisman to ward off the male gaze so that the artist can sing and dance as a star in her own musical, on her own terms. The video is framed by miniature theatre flats, movable free-standing photographs of interiors of theatres and other performance spaces.



Alison, J. Carr, *Woman as Image*, [12min 6 sec single channel video] 2009

Megan McLatchie, an alumna of Leeds Arts University BA (Hons) Fine Art, appropriates photographs from magazines and social networking sites and transforms them into paintings or prints. *Seductive Roles* explores ideas of perfection regarding the representation of women. She juxtaposes photographic imagery and text taken from Cosmopolitan Magazine: a quote by Scarlet Johansson is used to mask the face of a model. *Seductive Roles* questions the value of appearance and visibility, the roles that women are asked to perform and the ways in which they are perceived.

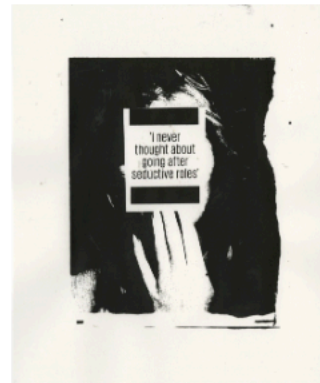




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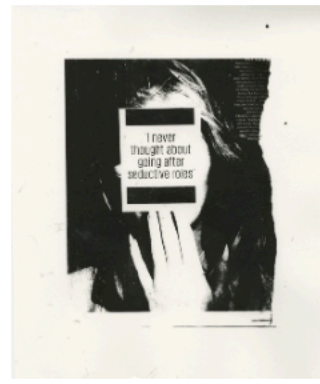
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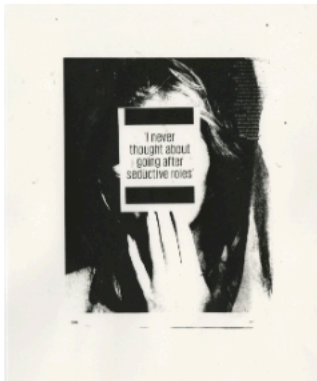
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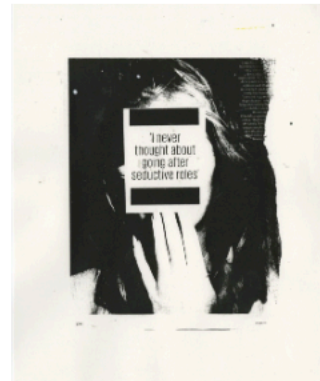
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Megan McLatchie, *Seductive Roles*, [30 x 22cm, ink on cartridge paper] 2016.
<https://meganmclatchieart.com/seductive-roles/>

Drawn from historical sources, Odjanna Dracock subverts condemnations aimed at the mimic actresses of Roman theatre,

which were made by the early 4th Century Church Fathers for their visual appearance when on stage. In *I am Naked, I am Lightly Clad*, she takes the Church Fathers words and allows the female to appropriate them, notionally empowering the actress to describe herself.



Odjanna Dracock, *I am Naked, I am Lightly Clad* [video work] 2018.

In *Wigs* Sarah Eyre uses women's wigs highlight the problematic relationship between appearance and identity. Hair (in natural or artificial form) is linked to and fetishised in relation female sexuality. Women's hairstyles are influenced by and contribute to gender stereotypes. Wigs, because of their detachable nature show how easily these identities or stereotypes can be 'worn', and altered. However, despite wigs allowing women to change the way they look, appearance is still the predominant way identity is perceived, classified and controlled. The identities represented by the different styles of wig in Eyre's work highlight the narrow range of female stereotypes available to women.



Sarah Eyre, Mindy, from the series Wigs 2015 Framed black and white digital photo in an installation with a white velvet curtain <https://saraheyre.co.uk/wigs/>

Dawn Woolley's video, *Interloper*, explores the voyeuristic and fetishistic way we look at the female body. In the video the spectator inhabits the voyeuristic view of the camera. The woman looks at herself in a mirror, seemingly unaware that she is also the object of someone else's gaze. However, the spectator is transformed from voyeur to fetishist as the naked body is revealed to be an inanimate object, a photograph.



Dawn Woolley, Interloper, [1min 11 sec video] 2008. <https://vimeo.com/71958902>

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- 1 Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
 - 2 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Primacy of Perception*, Chapter 5 Eye and Mind, trans. Carleton Dallery, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p126
 - 3 Lacan, Jacques, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, The Hogarth Press Ltd. 1977, p80/1
 - 4 Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 19.
 - 5 Ibid.

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- 6 Gill, 'Empowerment/sexism', p. 42.
 - 7 Ibid., p. 53.
 - 8 Agnès Rocamora, 'Personal fashion blogs: screens and mirrors in digital self-portraits', *Fashion Theory* 15/4 (2011), pp. 407-24, p. 414.
 - 9 Rocamora, 'Personal fashion blogs: screens and mirrors in digital self-portraits', pp. 418-9.
 - 10 Derek Conrad Murray, 'Notes to self: the visual culture of selfies in the age of social media', *Consumption Markets and Culture* 18/6 (2015), pp. 490-516. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967> (accessed 13 August 2015), p. 1.
 - 11 Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper Torchbooks 1976).
 - 12 Nicola Döring, Anne Reif and Sandra Poeschl, 'How gender-stereotypical are selfies? A content analysis and comparison with magazine adverts', *Computers in Human Behaviour* 55 (2016), pp. 955-62.