

"Flesh for fantasy: Articulation of identities in Robert Mapplethorpe's portraits"

1)The genre of self-portrait was the essence of Robert Mapplethorpe photography since he hold the camera in his hands for the first time. He was his first model and even when he had a successful career as a fashion photographer he never stopped posing for himself. For Mapplethorpe, as his biographer Patricia Morrisroe writes, "his art and his sexuality" were stuck together into "the Gordian knot that no one could untangle". In his self-portraits, he was discovering his identity by experimenting with gender norms and challenging sexual taboos of his time. Mapplethorpe's construction of his identity through photography is the topic of my M1 work.

I decided to focus mostly on his early polaroids published in a book *Robert Mapplethorpe: Polaroids* (2013) selected by Sylvia Woolf because they are not widely known and studied although it was his first photography medium. The other important reason is that in my work I suggest to regard some of the early polaroids as prototypes for Mapplethorpe's further works shot with a professional Hasselblad medium-format camera. Alongside, I also write about repetition of the same subject throughout his photography. To reflect on the meaning of repetition for the construction of identity, I use contemporary queer theory's essay *Imitation and gender insubordination* (1993) by Judith Butler which can be applied to visual art field.

Furthermore, to give another example of possible identity projection, I will comment on an album *Lady Lisa Lyon* (1983) which is also not studied deeply and is usually considered as just a fashion editorial . I will use a book *Female Perversions* (1991) by Louise Kaplan to

reflect on making of this album. In my conclusion, I will summarise all the information above.

The goal of my research is to reflect on self-fetishisation and its meaning for the gender binary in my first chapter and in the second to try to find answers on questions: To what extent does Mapplethorpe repeat the gender stereotypes? Did he manage to escape the binary opposition?

2) Coming from a religious family, Mapplethorpe tried to left behind his background. He chose a radical way: he got interested in cultic symbolic and fulfilled his flat with sacred objects. Nevertheless he tried to erase everything connected to his past — and especially to his father — he admitted that religion influenced his art in many ways: for instance, he said he would have never got his ability "to organise things in order" if not for Catholicism. He remembered the images of the tortures and torments of the christian martyrs seen in his childhood; that is why when he came across BDSM culture and joined the community it seemed familiar to him.

Belonging to BDSM meant a lot for a gay man in a time. For those who tried to focus on this previously hidden S&M subculture, it was protest against the stereotype of "effeminate gayness",. The base for this alternative type of a "butch" gay man became the style: black leather, military uniform, cowboy boots, biker's jackets and caps. Mapplethorpe biographer, Patricia Morrisroe, explained his passion to S&M community by his teenage desire to run away from "the sissy stereotype". Also, BDSM scene gave him a chance to reverse the reality by taking a role of "the punitive priest — or parent". Reversing things, taking them

from one extreme to another was a common practice for Mapplethorpe. This pattern of his behavior will find a reflection in his art which I demonstrate further.

3) Mapplethorpe's early polaroid portraits might be divided in several categories due to their subject: self-portraits with S&M attributes mostly with his faced covered, depiction of his body parts, objects and portraits of models (which were shot later than all the others). The polaroids I demonstrate here are two typical examples of his fetish content. Mapplethorpe wears a mask on both pictures so the focus is on his body, ropes and latex costume.

One more category is Mapplethorpe's intimate self-portraits where he does not crop his head and the viewer can see his face expression which often reveals some kind of vulnerability and emotions. These type of pictures are the rarest.

The portraits of his first models, mostly of David Croland his lover at a time, combine two types of self-portraits: brutal and more effeminate. During his interview for the HBO documentary about Mapplethorpe (2016), Croland wears a black robe in memory of Robert who loved this type of gaunt and made Croland wear it on many photographs. Croland remarks that when his partner became fascinated with S&M culture, their images "started to get not me... at all ... and more him". Mapplethorpe "covered him in leather jackets, handcuffs" and other subculture items, asking him "to go further" but his sitter refused.

Croland's case may be the first time when Mapplethorpe transformed a model into himself by dressing him the same way, using same objects in a shot and demanding the same behavior.

Here I need to address to Judith Butler's essay where she writes about her identity, questioning: "how can I both be a lesbian and yet endeavour to be one at the same time?". She reflects that her "I" does not play its lesbianism as a role but reconstitutes as a gay "I"

every time when repeats a play of this sexuality. She emphasises that the repetition of that play paradoxically establishes the instability of her queer identity. In this sense, this "I" is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it", it is losing or acquiring new features thus it is changing. Applying this statement to Mapplethorpe, may show that projecting himself on Croland and other models was his way of accepting his queer identity and understanding who he really was as it was a time period of his first affairs with men and then his first experience of S&M practices which later he claimed "his form of sex".

4) The other case of this kind of "identity projection" happens shortly after Mapplethorpe finishes his notorious X Portfolio (1978) — an album which is a result of his passion for fetish culture. In the beginning of the 80s, he comes up with an idea to shoot a series about modern woman's roles. During that time he meets Lisa Lyon who was one of the first female bodybuilders and decides to create this project with her. Mapplethorpe was amazed by her body shape and called her "a new animal" because he had never met anyone like her before as he said. The album *Lady: Lisa Lyon* was published in 1983. On the images she posed naked or wearing fashionable gowns, playing roles of bride, prostitute, dyke, hunter, sportsman and many other. However, the main concern of Mapplethorpe, as it is mentioned by Cuneyt Cakirlar in his work was his "artistic obsession with the body as an ambivalent surface, the photographic exposure of which contains queerly sculptural possibilities". He argues that "the interchangeability of codes of masculinity and femininity, possible fusions in-between" was the key idea for the *Lady: Lisa Lyon* project.

To analyse the album and its concept, I need to quote a book *Female Perversions* (1991) by Louise Kaplan where she claims "that many of the men who work in fashion industry have transvestite tendencies" and that this "preoccupation" allows them to find a way "to take a

raw medium of a woman's body and to transform it into a beguiling image of femininity". She claims this tendency to be a fetish and calls those men "Pygmalions" who "abandon their puppet-woman as soon as they have finished fixing her". In fact, Mapplethorpe and Lyon never worked together ever again after their work on the album was over, so it could be said that Mapplethorpe lost his interest in her after those shootings. Kaplan describes ideal "material" for Pygmalion fetishist as a "slightly bedraggled... unfashionably plump creature" and this is, of course, cannot be applied to Lyon. However, we should take into account Mapplethorpe's queer identity and to analyse his choice of Lyon as a model from this perspective: her "hermaphroditic build" as it was remarked by critics became perfect material for Mapplethorpe's goals of creating "the whole notion of a new woman" as he called her.

The crucial notion in Pygmalion fantasy and the reason why men enjoying this role, according to Kaplan, is "his (fetishist) transformation of the chosen girl into a highly valued, sexually exciting woman is his creation of the ideal phallic woman he wishes he could be". Thus, Kaplan claims that this new woman created by a Pygmalion man is a representation of his ideal self. Amanda Fernbach in her book "Fantasies of Fetishism" develops this statement by saying that in this kind of fetishistic fantasy "there are no sexual differences... as this all-powerful mother, the woman the Pygmalion wishes he could be also has a phallus".

Mapplethorpe uses costumes, settings and other "masquerades" (Cakirlar) to transform Lyon from one role to another — the same way he used to do with Croland while shooting on Polaroid. Also, Mapplethorpe avoids showing Lyon's face, she rarely looks directly at the

camera, sometimes her face is cropped or covered with hair or fabric, especially in her nude depictions — again he uses the common pattern for his own Polaroid self-portraits.

Mentioning them, I would like to show several examples of Mapplethorpe's direct or partial quotations of his own early art: sometimes they come in doubles or even triples. Almost every time, he produces a copy with himself as a model.

Conclusion

Applying theory written by Butler and Kaplan to Mapplethorpe's works, several observations could be made. His repetitive subjects, according to Butler, may be interpreted as a repetition of "I" which he projected on his models to explore his queer identity and gender binary. In my work, I illustrated this tendency with two examples which are Mapplethorpe's polaroids and Lisa Lyon series. The latter can be regarded as another fetish project by the artist where instead of S&M practices he becomes a Pygmalion fetishist according to Kaplan. Nevertheless, "the interchangeability of codes of masculinity and femininity" was an important part of Mapplethorpe's art. It is hard to tell if he managed to escape the binary opposition which was also reflected in other spheres of his life (Catholicism/demonic cult; effeminacy/S&M culture). Lyon series might be seen as an attempt to break through the binary circle but Mapplethorpe again mostly repeated female stereotypes using a masculine-looking model, possibly in order to see a woman "he wished he could be".

As I am still working on this research which is gonna be my M2 subject as well, I may say that the construction of identity in Mapplethorpe's works can be also studied through colonial studies and critical race theory. In future, I hope to cover Mapplethorpe's Z Portfolio as race and gender are equally important for identity analysis.

Sources:

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