

NUDITY IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND WHY IT MATTERS

Inspired by Self Evidence - Mapplethorpe, Woodman and Arbus exhibition at Scottish National Portrait Gallery

Let's be honest – every time Mapplethorpe is exhibited there's always a quiet murmur of disgust that rumbles beneath it all. Or an audible blush from some of the more delicate viewers. Some would argue that, in some instances, there may be cause for both of those reactions. But in terms of content this time round, there was nothing that could really be described as shocking. Not from Mapplethorpe nor from Arbus nor Woodman either. Yet fast forward to SNAPCHATS, the section of the exhibition that brought young people together to make photographs and to discuss the themes of the work by these three photographers and you may find me mistaken. One young person was 'taken aback' at the images that they'd come to see and one commented that the images held 'shock factor', whilst concurrently commenting that we had more freedom of expression than 30 or 40 years ago and that 'nudity is mainstream'. I was confused. How could the work be both shocking and mainstream to them? The disparity between these viewpoints made me really think about the place of nudity in photography and, subsequently, why exhibitions like this are so important.

I'd first like to tackle the idea that 'nudity is mainstream'. To use the term 'mainstream' infers that at one point it was anomalous when surely the opposite is true? Nudity in art – whether it be in paintings or photos, has been pretty commonplace throughout the ages. 'Mainstream' suggests it was once underground like Punk or Blues or some other subculture that lost its edge when it became a commodity. And that there, I realise, is the crux of my argument. It's not that nudity has become 'mainstream' it's that nudity has become mainstream in the right context. And that context is selling. Wardrobe malfunctions to sell magazines has become mainstream. Nudity as porn has become mainstream. Nudity being utilised to sell and to convince us of what are bodies and lives really need has become mainstream. Nudity as a commodity has become mainstream.

I can almost 100% guarantee that these young people have seen way more graphic nudity whilst absent mindedly scrolling through Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. In fact I reckon I saw more flesh on the side of a can of Tennents when I was a child! So how then, from the same people that think that 'nudity is mainstream' could images that contain a small amount of exposed flesh have 'shock factor?' Why the apparent ambivalence to porn everywhere but be 'taken aback' by photographs exploring a woman's psyche or a man exploring his own sexuality. I'll accept that a man with a whip up his own arse is maybe pushing the boundaries a little but having seen that photo before in a previous exhibition it wasn't something I found shocking. And the reason? I was more concerned about the narrative contained within the image. The whip and the nudity are signifiers to help understand the signified.

And it was then that I started to wonder if the reason some people viewed these images as shocking was not because of the content but because of the narrative themselves. Not so much Arbus but the work of Woodman and Mapplethorpe held within them a personal narrative that guides the viewer through periods of intense self expression and reflection, right the way through to their dying days. With all 3 photographers leaving this world in what many would consider 'tragic circumstances' – Arbus and Woodman by suicide and Mapplethorpe as a result of AIDS related illness - is it their story more than their images that are causing the discomfort?

Simply put, nudity to sell magazines and beer is okay. Nudity to highlight mental health issues or the catastrophic results of the AIDS epidemic on a community is shocking and, as many instances have proven, need to be censored. And it's not just history that will attest to that. We just need to look at the amount of artists and organisations that are battling to stop the female nipple consistently being removed from social media platforms for 'breaking community guidelines'. And by 'breaking community guidelines' of course what they really mean is that these images don't garner enough followers for them to data-mine information to sell more advertising space.

Photography as fine art is being banned left, right and centre when pornographic imagery disguised as advertising is absolutely fair game. For more information on that please look at the work of Jannica Honey, the Free The Nipple movement or Tomorrow's Nipple (a past exhibition at The Photographers Gallery) to name but a few. My god, even breast feeding in public is often still considered shameful – for more insight into that please read the work of the fantastic poet Hollie McNish.

What the SNAPCHATS section highlighted for me was the importance of understanding the impact of a visual diet and how it's affecting our understanding of what is and isn't acceptable. Our visual diet is being controlled by massive companies who are teaching young people that gratuitous nudity with no message and very little agency is fine but using it to explore important narratives of womanhood, sexual orientation and gender is not. In my opinion, what's shocking is not images of female nudity or a man dying of AIDS and their journey to that point, it's that young people are growing up in a world that polarises these images and attitudes making them unsure as to what is 'normal' and what it not. And when it comes to self representation those are dangerous lines to blur.

When asked 'when is a photo art?' one of the young people commented -
'Photography is art when it has a message or has something to say but it just takes a mind to see that'
And that is why exhibitions of this ilk are so important. It's not that they fetishize nudity or, inversely, make it mainstream, it's that they remind the viewer that flesh and skin and body and the stories they tell are real. One of the contributors also commented 'I feel like they were dealing with the same ideas that we are now.'
And they're right. And it takes the work of people like Francesca Woodman and Robert Mapplethorpe to remind us of that and remind us that our bodies are not just commodity to sell.