Masculinity: Liberation Through Photography

Body of Work

(Can be used for Independent Oral Presentation or HL Essay)
Masculinities: Liberation through Photography was an exhibition of film and photography at The Barbican Art Gallery in London. It ran from June – August, 2020. The exhibition explores the ways in which masculinity is variously experienced, performed, coded and socially constructed, as expressed and documented through photography and film from the 1960s to the present day. The exhibition was curated by Jane Alison, Head of Visual Arts, and Alona Pardo, Curator, both of the Barbican Art Gallery.

‘Masculinities’ can be explored from a range of disciplines and viewpoints with thought provoking intersections between Art and Design, Photography and Film, PSHE and RSE, English, History, Sociology and Gender Studies. The fact that the photographs in this exhibition are from the 1960s onwards, means we can view them in the context of the sexual revolution, civil rights, women’s and gay rights movements. These images are a product of, and a response to, a time of huge societal changes and the loosening of tight definitions of masculinity. Looking at the images prompts the question: what does it mean to be male? This is a question with a plethora of answers, particularly in our ever-changing times.

Consider the title, ‘Masculinities’, and the choice of the plural over the singular. Compare expectations and perceptions of masculinity through time, society and place – where are we now and where have we come from? Look at the variety of masculine identities encompassed, often complex or even contradictory, shaped by culture and society.

While studying these images, it may be useful to use the following focus areas and questions either individually or in groups as springboards into enquiry, discussion and further work:

- In what ways is ‘masculinity variously experienced, performed, coded and socially constructed’ both in reference to the works in the exhibition and in life around us?

- Are we getting closer to dissolving boundaries between masculine and feminine – closer to a non-binary, gender non-conforming age?

- Would you agree that masculinity and femininity are fluid concepts that are not purely reducible to gender?

- What defines one’s identity and how can this multifaceted identity shift or even contradict itself? How do sexual, gender and cultural identities overlap?

- Do you think photography such as that seen in the exhibition can help to pave the way for new attitudes and choices? Discuss any examples you find in the images.
What overarching themes do you associate with the words masculine, masculinities or male? What would you classify as hegemonic (ruling) masculine values or traits?

What would you say are the assumed norms of masculinity today? Think of examples of what breaks or subverts these norms and find examples in the images.

How much are we conditioned by the society or culture in which we live, in terms of our gender identities? Consider gender expectations from birth onwards – what messages do we receive about who we are or are supposed to be?

Do you feel there is still pressure put on young boys to be a certain way or to conform to some perceived gender norm?

Photograph: Catherine Opie
Untitled, from the series Soldiers, 1999.

Photograph: Adi Nes
Newspapers are no longer ironed, Coins no longer boiled. So far have Standards fallen.

Dad on Bed, 1984. From the series Pictures from Home,

Photograph: Larry Sultan
Untitled 22 from the series Christopher Street, 1976.

Photograph: Sunil Gupta.
Smokin’ Joe Ain’t J’Mama, 2006. from the series Unbranded: Reflections in Black

Photograph: Hank Willis Thomas,
The Ideal Man, 1978

Photograph: Hans Eijkelboom,
Self-portrait from the series 70s Lifestyle, 1975–78.

Photograph: Samuel Fosso.
David Brintzenhofe Applying Makeup (II), 1982.

Photograph: Peter Hujar
Appendix: Reading Photographs

Some ideas for consideration and questions to ask or use to generate discussion and debate:

• Consider your own preferences and reactions to the works you see and what effect they have on you, what they communicate to you, how they make you think and feel – and why?

• In what ways has the digital age changed how we communicate and understand the lives of other people?

• How have photos been used to communicate information or beliefs or make a statement?

• Why do you think the photographer has chosen to photograph this – what do you think was the photographer’s motivation/intention?

• What do you think was the photographer’s attitude or relationship to their subject?

• Where does the intention of the photographer end and the interpretation of the viewer start?

• What do you see and notice in the photograph – what is happening?

• Where and when do you think it was taken, what is the wider context – what clues are there?

• What do we learn about the people in the photograph? What story does it tell? What is the mood or feeling of the image and how is that communicated?

• Is the subject turned towards the photographer or away? Natural or posed? What effect does this have?

• What does the image reveal and what does it not reveal? Do you think there is anything the photographer has chosen not to include?

• How does the context we see a photograph in impact its interpretation?