

BODY COPY

In the words of the legendary Ru Paul, “We’re all born naked, and the rest is drag”. Nowhere is this clearer than on apps and websites where men hook-up with other men - a world awash with geeks, leather daddies, otters, sons, businessmen, skinheads and jocks.

Some apps, such as Grindr, have these ‘tribes’ embedded into the way they function. Users who select Bear, for example, are identifying with or searching for the stereotype of a large-build man with a beard and body hair.

The Bear does not appear in my series *BODY COPY*. Nor does the Twink, defined by his youth and skinny body. This is because these types are too big a stretch from my given physical characteristics. I decided early on in the project that while I would use wigs, or change my hairstyle and colour, I would not get involved with prosthetics or special-effects make up. Partly this was due to a lack of money and expertise. Mainly, however, it was because I am fascinated by the way in which the same face and body can look so drastically different from one photograph to another, without trickery or retouching.

Much of this depends on styling, angle, lens length, lighting, and so on. But it also has a lot to do with what we are projecting when the camera shutter goes: what our sense of self and state of mind are, and how these register in our pose, expression, and eyes. So as well as thinking about how a character in the series is dressed and where he lives, I have tried to briefly inhabit his way of being, and in particular to perform masculinity in a way that exposes its arbitrariness.

BODY COPY comprises 37 photos made over a period of two years. This works out at about one every three weeks, which is how long it took me to construct a set in a corner of my flat and assemble props and costumes from charity shops and eBay. The preparation and shooting were done around the edges of full-time work as a builder and decorator.

I was often able to use paint, wallpaper and timber from work; either salvaging that which would otherwise have been thrown away, or else taking it without consent from jobs on rich people’s houses. I therefore think of this project as stolen - being somehow built in stolen time and with stolen materials.

Sometime after I started *BODY COPY* I showed my work-in-progress to my brother. He asked if it was an updating of Hal Fischer’s *Gay Semiotics*. I’d never heard of that project, and when I looked it up I was both delighted and dismayed. Delighted because it is a brilliant series, applying structuralism to the gay vernacular of 1970’s San Francisco. Dismayed because my project treads a very similar path.

Had I known about *Gay Semiotics* I would never have started *BODY COPY*. This raises a question: How much is the right amount of historical knowledge for an artist? Too little and she cannot place her work in context or know if she is repeating what’s gone before; too much and she becomes burdened by the sense that no idea is original enough to pursue.

As I began to show and publish *BODY COPY*, I learned of other projects with which the series shares similarities. The most interesting to me were those of queer artists, including Claude Cahun, Pierre Molinier, and April Dawn Alison. My work stands on the shoulders of these and countless other LGBTQIA+ folk who have used photography - both publicly and privately - to inhabit multiple identities, often beyond the constraints of their physical and social realities.

It is a common experience among queers that we have to hide aspects of our authentic selves and pretend to be things that we are not in order to get by in the world. I was aware of this from a young age - growing up gender non-conforming on a sink estate in Leicester - and I am still aware of it now, particularly in certain work situations. I am practised at passing in ways which often contradict my internal sense of my sexuality, class, gender, and (dis)ability.

A lifetime of this can take its toll, and a while ago I suffered an extended bout of mental illness which included body dysmorphia and disordered eating. For about two years I could not allow myself to be photographed. I started *BODY COPY* while in recovery from this crisis: dressing up and acting out gave me licence to see myself, and be seen by others, while

hiding behind a kind of mask. (I explore the use of the mask as it relates to identity and mental health more fully in my recent lockdown project, *PANDEMANIAC*.)

The starting point for the series, therefore, was a kind of art-as-therapy exercise in self-identity/identities. From this introspective place I then began to consider the broader scope of the work through the situational and, beyond that, the universal.

The situational is the subculture of men-for-men hook-up adverts. While the language and aesthetics of these adverts sometimes challenge the cis-heteropatriarchy, they more often than not reinforce it, betraying highly problematic attitudes towards race, standards of desirability, non-normative bodies, and so on.

The universal interests of the series extend to the construction of masculinities, the nature of photographic representation, and the relationship between new digital technologies and capitalism. The apps which connect people for sex and romance are driven by profit objectives; and the performance of tribal identity usually requires specific and repeated patterns of consumption. A key feature of neoliberal capitalism is its reach into ever more “private” and hitherto non-transactional areas of life. Digital hook-up culture is a preeminent example of this, enabling the male body and male sexuality to become sites of value creation for capitalist interests in ways not previously possible.

I’m aware this all sounds quite heavy, so I’d like to stress that as well as inviting you to consider with me some of these questions and themes, I hope that you will also be entertained. To this end I’ve tried hard to make the series visually rewarding and playful.

It is a great privilege to be able to share my work with you here at Photofusion. Thank you very much for visiting this exhibition. I’d love to hear your thoughts and responses via email or Instagram.

Warm wishes,

Mitchell Moreno
contact@mitchellmoreno.com
IG @ _mitchell_moreno