



THE DIVIDED Female

A young woman emerges naked from behind a black photographic backdrop, and stands, arms crossed and visibly uncomfortable, in front of a group of six male amateur photographers. The men look as nervous as their model: checking the film in their cameras, fiddling with their f-stops, and doing everything possible not to notice the nakedness of the naked woman standing in front of them.

Eventually one of the men walks over to the model, holds a light-meter by her cheek, looks at his reading, and then stands back. 'I'd like you to show me some emotion,' he says. 'Try looking a bit coy'.

The model attempts to pull a demure expression, but her uneasiness and rising irritation are leaking through every pore in her face. The man takes a few shots and then stands back again, frustrated. 'Perhaps you could "do" sadness,' he says.

The model bows her head and pulls the corners of her mouth down, but there is a smouldering resentment in her eyes which can not disguise her contempt and anger at being manipulated in this way. A few unsuccessful tries later, the man's time is up. He retires to the safety of the group, relieved, but somewhat bemused by the model's undisguisable rage.

Had this been the kind of 'glamour' photography workshop advertised in the back pages of *Amateur Photographer*, the man would have been reimbursed, the woman sacked, and the whole exchange put down to the model's distinct

***Mick Cooper looks at
how men divide women
into either sexual objects
or complex non-sexual
human beings, and
explores ways to mend
that divide.***

unprofessionalism. As it was, however, the grating uneasiness and friction between objectifying photographer and objectified model was exactly the sort of experience we had come to expect, and to use as the starting-point for our one-day photographic workshop: 'Re-Viewing Women'.

Run in collaboration with Grace Lau of the women's photographic collective, Exposures, Re-Viewing Women offered, 'A unique opportunity for men to create original and challenging images of women that go beyond the traditional "glamour" stereotypes'. But by 'original and challenging', we didn't mean images that push the boundaries of pornographic explicitness, nor did we mean images infused with a politically correct moralising.

What we meant, what we hoped for, was images that would go beyond the cellulite-free, personality-free fantasy women of the porn magazines and advertising billboards and reflect something of men's real experiences of, and relationships towards, women. What's more, through the creative, photographic exploration of men's feelings and attitudes towards women, we were hoping that both the participants and ourselves would gain some valuable insights into the male-female dynamic.

The workshop

The workshop began with introductions, check-ins and ground rules, and then the participants were thrown straight into the deep end: each man was given five minutes to photograph Mary, our model, in any way they wished (provided, of course, that it had Mary's agreement).

Some of the men would just chat to Mary, take a few shots of her arms or face, and try out different lighting arrangements. But others would ask her to undress, and it was when Mary re-emerged naked from behind the photographic backdrop that the most striking thing happened over-and-over-and-over again: WHOMP!!! It was like a shutter came down.

Suddenly, no-one would look Mary in the eye. No-one communicated with her, except to issue instructions. The relationship between photographer and photographed became completely 'professional': no intimacy, no exchange of feelings, no attempt at relating. What was

once I-Thou had become decidedly I-It.

The workshop had intended to encourage men to create images of real women; and yet, when the men had a real, naked, flesh-and-blood woman in front of them, they seemed to purposefully transform her into something non-real: an object, a mannequin, a something-to-be-photographed. It was as if her humanity had somehow been stripped off with her clothes.

The increasing emotional de-humanisation that occurred as Mary's appearance became increasingly denuded and sexual, revealed something which would seem to be absolutely fundamental to many men's perceptions of women: an inability to see women as both sexual and real at the same time. It's as if we split them, we dissociate them, we divide women into either sex-objects or complex, non-sexual human beings.

And whilst the same woman can be one, the other, or both, she can't be both at the same time. So a man might fantasise about a female work-colleague, but the work-colleague of his sexual fantasies will be entirely different to the work-colleague he stands around the photocopier drinking cups of tea with.

In non-sexualised form, he may experience her as an intelligent, multi-skilled human being; but in sexualised form, she becomes a pastiche of breasts, genitals, skin, lips, and lust, a receptacle for his own sexual desire. And whilst, in sexualised form, he may be dissociated from the woman's complex humanity; in non-sexualised form, he may be so dissociated from her sexuality that the very thought of eroticising her would seem abhorrent.

De-humanising women

The way that men split women would seem to be even more apparent in the bedroom. For so many men, they can be loving, warm and tender towards their partners, but the moment the lights go off... WHOMP!!!... it's just like the shutter coming down when Mary takes her clothes off.

Suddenly, he stops looking her in the eye. He stops communicating with her. It all becomes very 'professional': no intimacy, no exchange of feelings, no attempt at relating. What was once I-Thou becomes I-It, because it's as if he's stripped her very humanity off with her clothes. He's no longer with her, but with a

sexualised version of her, a pastiche of breasts, genitals, skin, lips and lust, a receptacle for his own sexual desire.

In the relatively non-directive space of the Re-Viewing Women workshop, it seemed that these divided perceptions of women were being unconsciously projected onto Mary. But, in contrast to 'glamour' photography – which serves to fuel and encourage this splitting – the Re-Viewing Women workshop offered men a structure in which these dissociations could be made conscious, and in which the participants could begin to creatively explore means of re-integration.

The first stage, as we discovered, was communication. One of the things that allows men to maintain divided perceptions of women is because they don't hear – or don't want to hear – otherwise. Pornographic models don't talk back, and few women talk to men about their experiences of feeling sexually objectified – most probably because they're not aware that that's how they're sometimes being perceived.

But in the Re-Viewing Women workshops, the participants were challenged to see and hear exactly what it was like for a woman to feel sexually objectified. So if a participant tried to de-humanise or manipulate Mary, we didn't expect her to bite her lip and play dumb; we wanted her to tell them precisely what it was like for her: how it felt to be treated like a 'body' or a Rodin sculpture.

By consistently re-humanising herself, Mary refused to let the participants split her humanity off from her sexuality; and in hearing her experience, they stopped wanting to. Not because they felt it was 'naughty', but simply because their humanity, in being reminded of her humanity, could no longer allow themselves to do so.

In the afternoon, each workshop participant had half an hour to work with Mary on their own photographic project. For some of the men, the challenge had become too challenging. Having spent the morning photographing Mary, talking about their experience, and hearing Mary's, the group's and the facilitators' feedback, they were more than happy to slip back into the I-It world of 'glamour' photography: fiddling with the lights, taking a few shots of Mary's calves to try and salvage something from the day, and then making their excuses and whisking

off long before the closing round.

Other participants, however, picked up on the morning's exploration of objectification, relationships and splitting, and were eager to explore ways in which they could create images of Mary which combined the humanised and the sexualised.

Over the workshops, two strategies tended to evolve. First, the participants realised that it was essential to have a collaborative, two-way relationship with Mary: a relationship which related as much to the multi-skilled Mary as it did to her sexualised alter ego. So, instead of dictating poses to her – as many of them had tended to do in the morning – they discussed with her a series of possibilities, chose one or two, and then allowed the photographic session to develop through a spontaneous, mutually organic, process.

The resulting images were always evocative, and the process fascinating to watch. One participant asked Mary to interact with a mannequin as if it was 'the ideal female form'. As Mary discarded, battered, embraced, and finally sat on top of the mannequin, the participant did little more than offer words of support and photographically record the event. His lens no longer had the appearance of a penetrating, invasive paparazzi phallus; but had a gentle, 'holding' quality to it, as if it was circumscribing the boundaries within which Mary could express herself.

Other participants attempted to break down the objectifier-objectified hierarchy by entering the picture themselves. One man gave his camera to Grace, dug out a few feather boas from the props' box, and ended up being photographed having 'tickling fights' with Mary.

Another man chose near-identical clothes for Mary and himself to dress up in, asked Mary to imitate his pose as the pictures were being taken, and then requested that Mary choose two new sets of clothes and poses. Two other participants took the notion of reciprocity to its extreme: stripping off, giving Mary the camera, and asking her to take photographs of them!

Mending the split

The second strategy that a number of participants used to de-dissociate their experience of Mary was to 'stay with the process', to make every step of the sexu-

alisation process as explicit as possible, and to incorporate an awareness of it into their photographic images.

In the mornings, when the dressed Mary-as-human-being had gone behind the black photographic backdrop and re-emerged as the naked Mary-as-sexual-object, the process of sexualisation had remained unseen and unspoken about. But by staying with the process, by witnessing the transformation, by seeing that the dressed Mary was the same woman as the naked Mary, the ability to split women into sexual and non-sexual aspects becomes less viable.

What is more, by consciously and deliberately moving through the sexualisation process, the participants began to experience what it is that kept these two modes of experiencing women apart: fear – a fear that, within a society that degrades, vulgarises and pornographises sex, we are degrading, vulgarising and pornographising the women we respect and love.

So one participant did nothing more than to stand next to Mary, dressed, and talk to her, whilst Grace photographed the encounter. It seemed simple enough, but that project was one of the most anxiety-provoking and electric we ever saw – because it was real, a real relationship evolving over real time, which didn't cut off into flights of sexualised fantasy. And it made us realise that, had Mary been asked to undress within that session, it would have been excruciatingly unbearable to watch, because the de-humanised sexualisation of women is unbearable, it's only by cutting off from the process that men can bear it.

Another participant reversed the process, first asking Mary to undress, and then asking her to dress and express herself in whatever ways felt appropriate. Her initial expressions were of vulnerability and exposedness, but by the time she had completely dressed herself in leather jacket, leather jeans and dark glasses, her face bore a fearsome expression. Mary had expressed to us something of how she felt to be stripped of her humanness, and the process through which she could re-assert her sense of confidence and self-respect.

After half-a-dozen Re-Viewing Women workshops, Grace's files have become stuffed with challenging, vulnerable, human – and not so human – images

RESOURCES

Organisations

Exposures (photography workshops for both men and women): 0181 341-6620; PO Box 3702, London N6 4JE.

Men and Porn Group (for men who would like to explore their relationship towards pornography in a supportive and challenging environment): 0181-690 7512; PO Box 3677, London N15 6SQ.

Reading

Achilles Heel, The Radical Men's Magazine, £2.50/issue, six-monthly, available from 22 Cliff Villas, Camden Park Rd., London NW1 9AT. Tel. 01273-734079.

Cooper, Mick and Baker, Peter, *The MANual: The Complete Man's Guide to Life* (Thorsons, 1996).

Hite, Shere, *The Hite Report on Male Sexuality* (Optima, 1981).

of Mary. But perhaps the most significant outcome of the workshops has been an increased understanding of how men might begin to re-integrate their experiences of women.

Through listening to women's experience of being sexually objectified, through letting go of some of the power and control within sexual relationships, and through developing an awareness of their own experience of splitting women, men may begin to bridge the divide.

And perhaps, most importantly, men need to allow themselves to feel some of the fear inherent in re-integrating women. To be with a woman, to make love to a woman, and to say to a woman, 'I'm here, I'm inside you, and I feel ecstatic, afraid, confused, etc.' can be so much more terrifying than switching the woman off with the lights. And yet, it may only be through confronting that fear that men can begin to re-view and re-integrate their experience of women, to make love to the women they love.

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