PAUL LITHERLAND

ABSOLUTELY FABULOUS

In Absolutely Fabulous, Paul Litherland playfully constructs stereotypical gender identities in himself, only to deconstruct them and raise in viewers' awareness of cultural issues. The work constructs this image evoked from a 1992 performance piece. Our work is a self-portrait in which gendered clothing articles and props are used in their new combinations. This work bridges awareness to the area between the feminine and the masculine. They play with a wide array of gender concepts. Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and transsexuality theories are all incorporated into Litherland's new works.
STRAIGHT QUEERNESS AND ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR MANHOOD

DAYNA MCLEOD

Wearing a bright, hot-pink jersey-knit dress with a scoop neckline that reveals a black pair of cheetah print stilettos, photographer Paul Litherland poses topless for the viewer in a sky-blue-lit studio for half of his self-portrait series, Absolutely Fabulous.1 Performance in nature, this series is in fact a selection of images first shown as part of Litherland’s 1993 storytelling/performance piece, Souvenirs. In this earlier work, viewers chose an image of Litherland from a table of self-portraits onto which he was draped “naked, wanting to be, or had lived,” activating him to respond with a short story to “create a poetic interpretation with the photograph.”2 This performative drive continues within this pared-down selection of images: however, this time, the responsibility for any narrative is left to the viewer. Binary notions of what are masculine/feminine, submissive/dominate, and passive/aggressive are put into a blender and served up by the viewer after being passed under a microscope, but whether this microscope is the viewer’s or Litherland’s is left up to him. His self-portraits invite us to search our own baggage for personal alarms, bombshells, and other incendiary devices that may actually be disguised forms of theoretical discourse, political correctness, or voyeuristic projection—all set to go off at any moment.

With face made up, Litherland stands, leg-angled in stockinged feet, passively posing in the five portraits that are grouped together within this series. In each image, Litherland poses with a single accessory: cigarette, strap-on, make-up palette, or wig. These props accentuate Litherland’s feminine performance despite his unpadded flat chest and the authentic comb wig beneath his clinging pink dress. He seduces us with his eyes in “Cigarette”; he smiles unabashedly into his mirror with his back turned to us in “Mirror Boy”; he confronts us with an unfurling fully on-stage in “Conqueror” – naked except for the transparent pantyhose that covers his hairy legs and flaccid penis. Pondering this, it may seem that he does feminist signifiers while maintaining a masculine base to subvert overtly restrictive intersexual scripts;3 or is he purposefully letting his masculine slip show in his feminine performance to ultimately challenge the viewer’s preconceived notions of what constitutes femininity and masculinity through his use of (incomplete) drag? Appropriating these (feminine) signifiers, Litherland ushers us towards a discussion of how these gendered binaries are constructed, performed, and transcended in our own assumptions of binary sexual codes. He confronts us with semi-transformational representations, but there is something else going on here: there is something else in play. There is a focus on communicating the personal in public, of getting the viewer to see a bigger picture of the artist that exposes an unknown, honest vulnerability that is underscored by quiet humor.

“Hamlet” features Litherland’s pink-clad she-male holding a black wig, true to his Shakespearean namesake, yet subsides a potentially tragic reading of this portrait quintet with humour that relies on the viewer’s familiarity with the infamous Prince of Denmark. This naming and action echoes past divisions of gender politics, theoretical rhetoric, and any biases that the viewer may bring to their reading—humanizing Litherland’s Hamlet while allowing the viewer to pose problematic questions about identity, gender, and representation. Similarly, “Dressed Queen,” an image that in name alone is an obvious play on queer culture’s notion of a drag queen, Litherland’s self-portrait as a Lesbian-Butch/Transsexual hybrid that combines lipstick, a fashion saucy, Daisy Duke frayiveness, and other stereotypical signifiers of queer culture to create an impenetrable construction that indulges our general fascination with queerness.

This queer culture quoting continues in “Bigger Than Life” and “Tied Up,” in which Litherland reveals the gendered power of the phallic “Bigger Than Life” features his pink-clad she-male in a blend and erect pink strap-on over her dress, gazing down at her phallic with a passively consumptive look on her face. Similarly empowering because his performative femininity trumps his own masculinity, the strap-on represents a borrowed masculinity for Litherland’s female subject. However, in “Tied Up” the semiotics of the strap-on are complicated by its own emasculating potency. Here, Litherland is blindfolded, naked, and tied to a pole in St. Sebastian pose wearing the same pink strap-on. But in the midst of strict binary gender codes, in which heteronormativity is defined by the binary model, is, “not being compliant, dependent, or submissive,” “not feminine and not homosexual,” “being not female”—the act of adding borrowed masculinity to existing masculinity implies that the original masculinity is somehow lacking,false, or impotent—negatively impacting on the heterosexual male subject. However, these strict gender codes start to fall apart within the series, as do-queer codes of straight males performing queerness; as viewers recognize that they are surrounded by Litherland’s masculine/feminine personas, a recognition that, in turn, contributes to the deconstruction of other hegemonic binary systems for viewers. Here, Litherland illustrates “the boundary between queer and heterosexual is permeable and blurry” while breaking down the assumed association between male
femininity (or the absence of masculinity) and homosexuality, further challenging commonly accepted beliefs of what constitutes heterosexual masculinity. He is subverting heteronormativity — not inventing gender, but constructing portraits of his own that are imbued with his own personality, fragility, and fantasy. He does not simply put on a disguise and create a caricature; he thoughtfully forms characters. There is an earnest vulnerability here that challenges our biases and political correctness. Letherland underscores his “right” to ask these questions, to subvert his own masculinity, simply because he is a heterosexual white male artist.

Letherland challenges the viewers to explore their biases as much as he explores the boundaries of his own masculinity/femininity identities by attempting to disrupt traditional heteronormative binary codes, and by “highlighting the ambiguity of gender and deconstructing the association between man and masculinity and women and femininity.” "Masculine" portraits within this series and context borrow narratives from the surrounding images and provide the viewer with a multi-faceted portrait of the artist, as do the “masculine” portraits of him drenched in masculine and decaying wear in the original series, Sistemas. Further confusing the readings of these portraits is how feminised heteronormative masculinity has now the way we see gender construction and, in turn, the way we now view Letherland’s work. His penchant for gender play and self-portraiture reveals his intention of communicating difficult complicit by awkward questions and vulnerability.

Feminist, cultural, queer, and trans politics have evolved since 1993, when Sturken was originally performed, and likewise, the theoretical baggage that we carry with us now has changed, changing the Absolutely Fabulous collection with a new vigour. Teasing us with binary signifiers, Letherland dares us to acknowledge our subjective biases while infusing a quiet humour into the work, leaving us to question the theoretical structures in which we choose to live, and the codes by which we think.

1. "Absolutely Fabulous" was exhibited at the Whitney Donn Gallery from August to September 2006.

Résulté

La vulnerabilité et l’inconfort sont au cœur de la pratique artistique de Paul Letherland. Il s’est associé à une approche nouvelle aux structures linéaires et un sens inégal de la conception de soi. Cela produit des œuvres qui sont à la fois ouvertes, démonstratives et humaines. A travers des gestes transgressifs d’hétérosexualité masculine féminisée, ses ouvrages soulignent l’intérêt pour les théories culturelles, homophobiques, féministes et transsexuelles contemporaines. Certains éléments photographiques de sa série de performances de 1993, intitulée Sistemas, remanent dans sa série de 2006 intitulée Absolutely Fabulous. Dans cette dernière, Letherland offre aux spectateurs une relecture de la femme et de la femme de son travail. Aujourd’hui, avec l’âge venu, nous sommes de plus en plus conscients de l’importance de la photographie et de sa capacité à nous montrer un autre visage du monde. Le choix de cette exposition n’est pas une simple décision, mais un défi visuel.

Alain Declercq

Exhibitions

Centre Pompidou

Alain Declercq

Embodied versus Student

Centre Pompidou

Le travail recent d’Alain Declercq a cause bien des débats à son retour. Divers d’abord qu’il montre clairement le climat de paranoïa et de suspicion qui règne encore sur le monde occidental depuis le 11 septembre 2001. Cet artiste a créé une fusion qui s’entrelace au moyen des questions liées à l’image, à la politique et à la tension de son travail. Aujourd’hui, avec l’âge venu, nous sommes de plus en plus conscients de l’importance de la photographie et de sa capacité à nous montrer un autre visage du monde. Le choix de cette exposition n’est pas une simple décision, mais un défi visuel.

En conclusion, l’artiste nous présente des fois nouvelles à des perspectives différentes. Il nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contemporain. Le travail d’Alain Declercq nous invite à réfléchir sur le climat qui règne dans notre monde contempor