



Quiet

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...awareness of sexual difference has generally been registered through special attention being given to the feminine side of the equation. Woman is seen as other and as relative to man. Where the male is the norm, the female constitutes the deviation. There is a good deal in such assertions, which can readily be backed up with examples drawn from Western philosophy of virtually any period beginning with the classical era. But there is also a partial truth here. [...] If we start with a strong commitment to 'gender' rather than 'women' as the key analytical term, we find that not only should both men and women, their experience, representation and their visual culture be considered, but also that masculinity is a contested term, in ways that are inevitably entangled with the ways in which femininity is contested. (Ludmilla Jordanova)

Each tightly cropped, cut and sharp. We slice and frame the continuum of the world the better to control it. We define beginnings and endings, borders and limits. Having thus imposed a conceptual (and essentially spatial) order upon experience, we are then convinced that this scheme is part of a natural order and are fearful of its contradiction. Men are strong, women gentle. We are secure and content in our belief that the world itself suggests these self-evident truths. We do not need to be constantly alert to the intellectual or conceptual aspects of this regulatory system because, finally, this is how the world is pictured, this is how it looks, this is how it appears to be. Men produce, women consume. We may be dealing with mythological structures here, but they are pervasive. It is difficult, if not impossible, to live beyond their reach. They provide the conceptual and moral foundations for legal and educational systems, the mass media, culture, sports; etc. And there is no beyond to the ideological universe they define. To imagine ourselves free of this ideological universe is mere wishful thinking. Nevertheless, this universe contains contradictions, fault lines and inconsistencies to be explored by those with a critical will.

The artist is crucial here. It is often thought that the purpose of art is to reflect reality. This presumes, however, that reality is a given - part of the natural order rather than an ideological construct of the kind suggested here. It presupposes, moreover, that art has a passive relation to any such 'given' reality. Better, perhaps, to recognise that: "Representation...is not...neutral; it is an act...of power in our culture."

1. Speaking of advertisements (although her comments can be extended to cover all visual imagery), Gillian Dyer notes that we may easily assume that there is a simple and better reality with which to replace the stereotypes and myths that we find within them. To do so, however, would be to ignore "the fact that ads themselves are a kind of reality which have an effect. In this sense ads are not secondary to 'real life' nor copied or derived from it. [They are] 'specific representational practices' and produce meanings which cannot be found in reality. There is no simple reality with which to replace the falseness of ads, and there are no simple alternatives to stereotypes."
2. The more we consider Webster's images with Eagleton's critique in mind, the more aware we become of the very fragility of that masculinity which first appeared so unproblematic. This is not simply a question of the palpable sense of physical duress evident in these images of men - of the sweat, the exhaustion, the slumped look of defeat. Nor is it simply a matter of the isolation of these male figures, their silent, solitary suffering in a black and placeless void.

All that we can know about these anonymous male figures derives from what we can see. We see a fragment of their bodies. To us, who know them only by these images, they are their bodies: muscled and battered. These are worked bodies, bodies defined through exertion. To an extent, at least, we are looking at unclothed muscle and therefore at a kind of naked power. But this is a strange kind of power. Power is a force exerted in order to transform and produce, yet these figures are not doing anything productive. They may be, as suggested earlier, boxers, their faces thickened by blows received, their shoulders strengthened by blows delivered. Such men work hard, hour after hour in the gymnasium, mile upon mile on the road. And the object of this relentless effort, all this gruelling labour, is their own body. They are their own product; their physical exertions only increases their capacity for physical exertion. We might go so far as to say that their enterprise is fuelled by a narcissistic drive, as they address themselves (their bodies) to themselves (their bodies). These men are subjects (they are each an "I"), but, through physical training, they also treat themselves as objects (they also appear to themselves as a "you"). Their selfhood, in fact, is divided. They prepare themselves to meet opponents who are caught within the same circular routine, each developing similar power and skills for the sake of athletic superiority.

Such narcissism - such self-directed endeavour - is conventionally associated with the feminine. The feminine, it is widely believed, has no essence, has no core of truth: it resides primarily in appearance, in what some have termed "looked-at-ness." Thus the task of femininity is the maintenance of the appearance of femininity. "The reader may ask," the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere wrote in her 1929 essay 'Womanliness as Masquerade', "how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing."

By focusing upon the aestheticisation of male labour (looking at the signs of that labour, and suggesting that those signs are also its principal products), Webster unsettles one of the age-old stereotypes of masculinity. She performs a similar act in her treatment of the signs of femininity. Where the labour of men has been conventionally associated with construction and production, that of women has been associated with embellishment and consumption (the decoration of surfaces, embroidery, shopping, cooking, etc.). Embroidery, in particular, is/was often thought to embody such characteristically feminine traits as patience and the possession of delicate hand skills. Through embroidery the female personalizes the domestic space and her personal In Quiet, Christine Webster's recent series of photographic works, we can observe some of the ways in which the image may be critically turned upon itself to destabilise the function of the stereotype. We may be struck initially, for example, by the diptych format employed by Webster. Each work in the series comprises two juxtaposed images: a close-up detail of decorated fabric, and a dramatically lit shot of the face and bare shoulders of a male figure. We immediately apprehend something about the nature of these different yet related images: habit suggests that they represent "femininity" and "masculinity." The male figures, we notice, appear rugged, athletic and 'hard'. Something suggests that they may be boxers. Not only are they images of particular men, they are also images of a certain kind of generalised 'manhood'.

By contrast, there is no female presence in the accompanying images. In reading these images of embroidered fabric as 'feminine', we are reliant solely upon a chain of conventional associations that links such concepts as decoration, domesticity and malleability to the 'feminine'. In reading the images this way we are reliant upon an unexamined assumption that masculinity is somehow predicated upon "presence", whereas femininity may be identified as a form of "absence". The laws of a binary logic are in operation whereby masculinity and femininity are seen to stand in a relation of mutual definition through paired sets of oppositions and differences. But, as Terry Eagleton demonstrates, things may not be so straightforward:

[F]or male-dominated society, man is the founding principle and woman the excluded opposite of this; and as long as such a distinction is tightly held in place the whole system can function effectively. 'Deconstruction' is the name given to the critical operation by which such oppositions can be partly undermined, or by which they can be shown to undermine each other [...]. Woman is the opposite, the 'other' of man: she is non-man, defective man, assigned a chiefly negative value in relation to the male first principle. But equally man is what he is only by virtue of ceaselessly shutting out this other or opposite, defining himself in antithesis to it, and his whole identity is therefore caught up and put at risk in the very gesture by which he seeks to assert his unique, autonomous existence. Woman is not just an other in the sense of something beyond his ken, but an other intimately related to him as the image of what he is not, and therefore as an essential reminder of what he is. Man therefore needs this other even as he spurns it, is constrained to give a positive identity to what he regards as nothing. Not only is his own being parasitically dependent upon the woman, and upon the act of excluding and subordinating her, but one reason why such exclusion is necessary is because she may not be quite so other after all. Perhaps she stands as a sign of something in man himself which he needs to repress, expel beyond his own being, relegate to a securely alien region beyond his own definitive limits. Perhaps what is outside is also somehow inside, what is alien also intimate - so that man needs to police the absolute frontier between the two realms as vigilantly as he does just because it may always be transgressed, has always been transgressed already, and is much less absolute than it appears."

3. appearance. Its repetitive and painstaking techniques were regarded as an ideal, non-taxing way for a woman to occupy her mind. Absorbed in the private process of embroidery, the woman was 'protected' from those harsh realities that were man's concern alone. What is immediately apparent in the embroidered patterns that appear in Webster's images, however, is that they have been mass-produced by means of machine technology. The nature of the labour involved in producing these decorative items is far removed from that which tied the female to her domestic introspection. The decorative crafts (coded as feminine) and industrial production (coded as masculine) are now intermingled in such a way as to become inseparable, no longer capable of mutual definition through binary opposition.

"The body," according to Michel Foucault, "...is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."⁴ Now, Webster seems to suggest, the disciplinary powers exerted on the male body come not from some external source, but internally, so to speak, from within a divided self. Masculinity is as subject to those same processes as traditionally employed to define and control the feminine. The demand for muscle-backed physical labour - whilst not disappearing entirely - has fallen dramatically. The post-industrial age is the age of information and of the image. Largely divorced from its connection to economic productivity, the physical power invested in a man's body diverts itself into the image. Musculature is now developed as much for its aesthetic potential and spectacular display as for its economic value as a productive energy source. This culture of the spectacular body (the cult of the gymnasium) coincides with that historical moment where the male body itself as a site of production has been left stranded. The toned and muscled male body is now conceived of as an image-product and, therefore, as an object of consumption, thereby entering that territory conventionally associated with the feminine. The emptied signs of feminine labour, meanwhile, drift quietly into the masculine territory of industrial production, ghostly reminders of a fading past.