

Dreams and Reveries of a Quiet Man

Self-taught Dutch photographer Casper Kofi imbues his portraits of young men with a sense of playfulness and longing. He initially began by photographing friends, many of whom were dancers, capturing a particular lyrical, graceful confidence. Kofi focuses on men as a way of being able to capture an innocence and disconnect that comes from not being constantly under a critical gaze, as women often are, so being less body conscious. Kofi uses a fashion photography approach in order to understand and express young, male identity and the range of ways this can exhibit itself. When discussing the expanded idea of who is included in fashion shoots, he says 'there's a lot of different people who weren't usually expected to be in work like this, which is powerful.'

The role of gender is taking on greater importance in the fashion sphere as the dominant aesthetic shifts in response to audience desires, and the idea of masculinity also begins to take on a new shape. There is an inherent time pressure in the fashion industry of trends being quickly superseded and becoming old or unfashionable. In working both within and alongside the fashion world, Kofi is able to achieve both a timely and timeless feel to his works.

When photographing, Kofi has a natural, flowing way of moving around the model, without giving strict direction or instruction. This easy, unaffected way of being is key in capturing these slightly awkward but thoroughly endearing poses and expressions.

Some of the boys in the portraits are on the cusp of adulthood. These portraits mark a point in their journey of discovering who they will be as adults. There is often a spirited nature paired with a more introspective manner, which can be neatly seen in the second spread. In one image, the boys are lively and unselfconscious. In the second, they are ponderous and deep in thought.

The title of the work *Dreams and Reveries of a Quiet Man* is taken from a book of the same name, published in 1832 by Theodore S. Fay. Consisting of a number of essays, the book delves into thoughts on boyhood and daydreaming. There is certainly a dreamy quality reflected in the work, further emphasised by the romantic hues, colouring and saturation of the images.

The blending in of still life images and landscapes gives a feeling of pause and lends a storytelling quality to this search for manhood. This term could be used as

a way of understanding what it means to determine an identity for yourself by drawing on visual references to gather inspiration. This portfolio is a manifestation of one type of manhood, sparking ideas and various avenues for others to pursue their own particular version and vision.

The spread of a car with an image of a young boy layered over its edge could easily tell the story of daydreaming about a future journey, or thinking more broadly about the journey of life, and forming an identity as a young man. As Kofi expresses, 'I think there is room in fashion to find your own stories and create your own little worlds.'

— Text by MA

ARTI- CULATING MAGIC

SHONAGH
MARSHALL

The relationship between the photographer and the sitter is so intimate; when the layers are peeled away it can be pure alchemy. CHARLOTTE COTTON's seminal book *Photography is Magic* sets up the photographic protagonists as sorcerers, alerting us to the active role of the voyeur. COTTON states 'A magic trick, like all performative art forms played well, creates the conditions for us to explore imaginative possibilities, whilst sharing in a slice of the real.' Referencing VILÉM FLUSSER's text *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* a footnote cites, 'The space and time peculiar to the image is none other than the world of *magic*, a world in which everything is repeated and in which everything participates in a significant context. Such a world is structurally different from that of the linear world of history in which everything has causes and will have consequences.'

I first experienced this mystic connection to photography when I saw CORINNE DAY's pivotal photo book *Diary*. As I turned the pages, I was transported. I could feel the dirt engrained into the carpet under Georgina's knees as she contorted in lingerie. I recognised the hot tears running down Tara's cheeks in the aftermath of a fight with her boyfriend. I imagined the music pump at Jess' New Year's Eve party. I had never seen images that were so raw, tender and intimate. They were magic.

Diary was published in 2000 and signaled DAY's move from fashion image making to a focus on her personal work. In the wake of 'heroin chic' the decade that followed heralded a shift, with fashion magazines presenting editorial shoots that were disconnected from reality. A depiction of sheer fantasy, they portrayed glamorous women with oversized props in sprawling country mansions, women in surreal overblown scenes of domesticity, glossy and sexualised; this was an unattainable perfection. Centered on an axis of selling it ran parallel to a rise in celebrity culture, yet in recent years we have seen a return to the 'DAY' style of looking. CORINNE DAY and her contemporaries were inspired by the work of NAN GOLDIN's ever-evolving documentation of downtown New York in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, and in turn, this new group of contemporary photographers are taking note from both. NAN GOLDIN's images were recently printed onto skateboard decks and sold by cult streetwear label SUPREME. Adhering to fashion's cyclical system of referencing; simply put this aesthetic has once again become fashionable.

New works blur the lines between documentary and fashion. Upon encountering these photographs you find yourself looking again in the hope of untangling whether it was staged or if what you are looking at is indeed a snapshot into a private world. Embarking on personal projects depicting family, friends and lovers the clothing featured feels incidental and holds a sense of authenticity. In an interview, photographer HANNA MOON explains 'I was always taking pictures of people, and the fashion was included there.' MOON entered the fashion industry with her magazine A NICE MAGAZINE; it poked fun at the system by which she has now been embraced. Featuring photographs taken of her friends, and by her friends, each page holds an insight into her world. Her voice as a South Korean woman who had studied in London was distinct in the fashion landscape.

This authenticity is a product of our times where seismic shifts are occurring across the globe politically, economically and socially, and fashion, as ever, acts as a mirror. In the wake of social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too alongside increased globalisation there has been a rise in individualistic perspectives in the space of fashion to redefine identity, resulting in new ways of approaching race, gender, sexuality and body politics. Fashion historian REBECCA ARNOLD reminds us that 'Fashion is always a product of the culture that spawns it, embodying the concerns of the wider society in its myriad styles.' She goes on to outline the resulting frictions, 'fashion constructs a realm which is ambiguous, able to bear the weight of the varied meanings which flicker across the body of the wearer. The contradictory nature of fashion relates to our unease about the body and its representation, we are fascinated by and yet uncertain of the responses dress provokes: its juxtapositions can be protective, shielding the wearer from those outside their group, who are unable to read the complex signifiers that are pulled around the body. It can also explore the wearer, excavating hidden desires and fears, and unsettling the onlooker with ambivalent messages that confront taboos and challenge notions of the acceptable.'

This explorative tone is part of a wider culture of image-makers developing their voices through publications and exhibitions, for example THEO WHITE's THEOWHITEZINE (2017). A call for optimism, he subsequently produced a series of images with London gallery Soft Opening entitled *Oh Freedom!*, a reference to the American artist CHARLES WHITE. They challenged the black caricatures of early cartoon illustrations giving them a new context to operate within. Other examples include designer GRACE WALES BONNER curating the exhibition *A Time for New Dreams* (2019) at the Serpentine Gallery in London which took a similar stance of looking forward, whilst acknowledging the past. JOYCE NG's work blurs symbols from her native Hong Kong with those from around the globe, and the work of stylist IBRAHIM KAMARA, originally from Sierra Leone, seeks to redefine black masculinity. All mining personal cultural heritage, these projects become touching portrayals of an exploration of biography. This is also true of RUTH OSSAI's images; in her instagram bio she lists 'Yorkshire/Nigeria' immediately alerting us to a dual heritage. Her photograph *Catia, Brixton, London* (2012) captures a woman dressed in all blue, seated in a bus shelter, while she strokes her face tenderly with a long acrylic nail. I see so much of OSSAI in that image

In amongst all the noise young artists have been redefining identity and shifting our ways of looking

though we have never met. The spectre of London is fully present in the red bus that acts as the backdrop. The shot bulges with signs and symbols of Nigerian lineage in the hair, nails and slashed fabric on the crop top's sleeves. This ownership of personal cultural tradition within the space of fashion accompanies the rise of identity politics, heralding a move away from voting based on the economy to an alignment with the political party that represents the social group you identify with. This results in spotlights being shone on groups that have been previously marginalised in mainstream and fashion culture.

Other images that hold signs and symbols of lives lived are clearly personal explorations of sexuality. The images HANNA MOON takes of women can be viewed as steeped in desire. Growing up questioning her sexuality in South Korea, a very traditional country, her lens scrutinises the women she captures and through them we see so much of MOON'S own investigation.

Looking inwards also encompasses family, and within this group there are a number who have shot their mothers. An example is CHARLIE ENGMAN's personal project exploring his mother, KATHLEEN McCAIN ENGMAN, which began in 2009 when he found he 'couldn't recognize the person in the picture'. Of the on-going series, his mother said 'Some of my girlfriends take one look at this work, and say, "Why does he see you like that?" I don't think he's seeing me. I don't think he's telling a story about his mom. Even someone you think you see, like your mother, is actually material for looking at the world in a new way.' The potency held within the exploration of these personal relationships within the context of clothing further interrogates fashion as a tool to define identity. BRIANNA CAPOZZI, whose work is one long investigation of female camaraderie, has often shot her mother. The result is a documentation of their closeness, in which comedic tongue and cheek scenes play out. The power of persuasion to cajole their subjects to participate, and dress in clothing they would not perhaps pick to be photographed in, is sheer testament to the mother/child relationship.

Meanwhile working amongst a backdrop of rising fractures in the United Kingdom, with the Brexit vote signalling the break from the European Union, and the hard right politics of United States President DONALD TRUMP, there has been an increase in using the space of contemporary image-making practice to look outwards and make social observations. British photographer ROSIE MARKS uses sartorial signifiers to craft a personal commentary, drawing our gaze to something in the everyday that we may have ordinarily missed. In one picture she captures a tattooed belly that reads 'Made in the UK. Destroyed in Magaluf. Reborn in Sheffield'. In another, a man with greying hair has his back to the voyeur, he wears a hoody that reads 'Art is Truth'. This construction of character enables questions to arise around contemporary Western culture and its current state of flux globally. SAM ROCK shot a sprawling portfolio for the Winter 2018 issues of *i-D* where he travelled from Dover to Liverpool, the two closest points in Britain to Europe, 'to chronicle the beauty and diversity of today'. The first image in the series features a billboard with a Halifax banking adver-

tisement stating 'There's no place like home' next to an image of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. This so clearly lays the groundwork that from the perspective of *i-D* and *ROCK*, Britain is in the midst of a severe identity crisis.

The lack of self-consciousness in their approach is rife throughout this emergent group and it's this instinctive and explorative lens that makes the work so irresistible. Making observations on the world around them, these individuals are delving deep into themselves to garner a strong point of view and in the resultant photography there is a stark honesty. Today, there is plentiful chatter around the amount of images we consume in our everyday lives and the impact this might have. In amongst all that noise young artists have been redefining identity and shifting our ways of looking. I feel emboldened to keep going back to these images. I wonder which ones will surpass the ephemerality of a fashion image and hold magic to stand the test of time as GOLDIN and DAY's have before them.

SHONAGH MARSHALL is a contemporary curator, writer and arts consultant with a specialism in fashion. In 2018, she co-edited the book *Posturing* (2018) published by SPBH and has curated multiple exhibitions including *Isabella Blow: Fashion Galore!* (2013), *Posturing: Photographing the Body in Fashion* (2017) and *English as a Second Language* (2019), which remains on view at Somerset House in London until 28 April, 2019.