

On Being Seen - John Siddique

There is not much dialogue on beauty in popular culture. There is a lot of marketing, and branding which we adopt styles and fashions from, but there is little discussion of actual beauty. When it comes to the idea of male beauty there is even less so, and the representations through the usual channels tend to fall into one of two depicted types. On the one hand you have the very skinny but ultimately de-sexed image, a paedophilic representation held up as what we should be. Girly men from which there is little to fear, they are girlfriends in another guise. Even people who would speak out against this type of imaging for women such as Germaine Greer fall into the guilty category for selling us this view. Greer's photo-book *Boy* makes for uneasy viewing. She argues that unless women allow themselves to be open in their views of boys and young men they are losing out. The Guardian review lets her off the hook easily saying that the book is 'giving us more refined and interesting ways to interpret the complexity of those feelings that are already being expressed.'

The other view which is peddled of course is the he-man 'muscle' type, a more traditional representation, perhaps a bloated extension of the golden ratio ideal, but ramped up so that really we could be at a farmer's auction choosing bulls for breeding stock. You will often hear women say, when talking about their tastes in men things like 'He has to be tall,' or 'He has to have no body hair.' This is part of the auction house mentality. Imagine taking the tall thing to any kind of logical

conclusion; tallness as the only virtue of male value.

There is also a third representation of the male in popular media which is of the useless male, fat, or handsome but unable to cope, or not in touch with emotion, or faulted in so many other ways. What you rarely will see is a decent man lit with the light of his own beauty. Of course all that has been said so far applies to representations of women as well, no one comes out of this well unfortunately.

While we may not want to believe in the images touted at us, they soak into our views of the world. Women and men talk disparagingly about each other. In reaction to the end of the paragraph above someone is bound to reply that there are no decent men. The newspapers both middle-class and low brow, even Radio 4 and things we may consider to be better media, buy into these myths; and so it is that we don't see each other. We walk around with images burnt into us which we believe be to our own tastes and desires. They drive us to stupidity, hurtfulness and stop us from actually meeting. We end up with a world of sexual imagery, and no sexuality or sensuality. We end up with sexism, and worse still, we feel ugly about ourselves.

When Victoria from Wild Women's Press got in touch with me to ask if I would consider being photographed for her calendar project, I was very taken a aback. Her outright approach was quite simply 'I find you very beautiful, and would you be willing to share your beauty through our project to help raise funds for a

diabetes charity.’ How can you say no to such an approach? I have never thought of the word beauty when it came to myself. I have certain vanities as we all do, but beauty? I am not what you see on television, I am not what you will find in any media. I am certainly not tall or young or skinny, I am not a bull, nor am I stupid, incapable or out of touch with my emotions. Perhaps even worse I feel a lot, love deeply, think a lot, and I don’t believe in the battle of the sexes, but love the differences between us. I love being a man. I am brown-skinned and have a hairy body. I am sexual and sensual and am endlessly curious about humanity and our world; I don’t fit into the pictures we are fed of men at all. Nor am I the exception, most of my male friends are intelligent, feeling, people in their own ways, and they also fall out of the media represented body norms.

I have always known that body and soul are part of each other, not separate as taught at the lower ends of the Abrahamic or the ascetic faiths. The genuine artist, writer, photographer tries to see without the layers of secondhand thought getting in the way. My own work has always been based on the principle of finding beauty where others don’t see it and returning it to the light, so for me there was nothing to fear in being photographed naked at all.

I am in Leonie Hampton’s studio. There is a pool of sunlight on the white floor. At first my nerves come up when the moment comes to remove my robe. Leonie is funny and quiet; her gaze is very loving. Her assistant Claire is busy making a pot of tea. Removing my coverings is a bit like plunging into water, just an intake of breath and then I am naked. Leonie invites me to sit in the pool of light. The first

shots, I don't know what to do with my hands. I look at the camera think about how she is using it, a simple 50mm lens, everything set to manual; she is easy with her working tools. We move around and the most important thing in the room is the artist's love for her subject; she lets me in so I let her in. We stop for tea and do not discuss the images at all. Back into the shoot - the space is cut out from the rest of the world. Leonie's music system spins out Roy Harper's Stormcock and Eno's Another Green World, and I lie down in the light and let body and soul be. We all fall to silence for what feels like hours.

Not one person in the world really knows what they look like, as we are the sum of our reflections in each other's eyes. To be found beautiful for who you are, to be gazed upon with openness and basic human love, which is the truth behind all great art. To be held in a perfect moment of intimacy, to be truly naked like this is humbling. Not just to be without clothes, but to be; how wonderful a chance this is in a life.

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