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Hide/Seek: Sexual Identity in American Portraits

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Today in California, the ban on same-sex marriage was ruled unconstitutional by a federal appeals court. The news reminded us of “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture,” the current exhibition up at the Brooklyn Museum. The show, on view through February 12th, explores the role of sexual identity in modern art through a variety of media, including photography. (On March 17th, “Hide/Seek” moves to the Tacoma Art Museum, in Washington—the next state where gay marriage is likely to become legal.) Here’s a selection of photographs, along with captions from the exhibition.

When Walt Whitman first published “Leaves of Grass” in 1855, he found the source for American vitality in a democracy rooted in the connection between its people and nature. Whitman’s refusal to accept the existence of boundaries and limits on the body, as well as the mind, is the most radical statement ever of American individualism. Expansively omnisexual in his writings, Whitman spent the Civil War years and after with his lover, Peter Doyle, a Confederate deserter. Inspired by the comradeship engendered between men under fire, Whitman celebrated love and affection between men in poems he collected under the titles “Drum Taps” and “Calamus.” Just as society’s attitudes were consolidating into rigid division that outlawed the homosexual, Whitman’s poetry and his life proclaimed that the possibilities of desire were not so easily characterized and contained.



Walt Whitman, by Thomas Eakins, 1891.

In 1922, Janet Flanner settled in Paris with her lover, Solita Solano. She would spend the next fifty years writing her “Letter from Paris,” a column that appeared regularly in *The New Yorker*. Flanner and Solano became fixtures in the salon life of the city, their homosexuality providing a crucial entrée into the most fashionable literary groups, which were then dominated by wealthy expatriate lesbians. Flanner signed her column with the decorously French and sexually ambiguous pseudonym “Genêt.” She used “Genêt” to hide her identity, but like most masks, the name revealed as much as it hid. With her campy prose and focus on known gay and lesbian personalities, Flanner provided a knowing glimpse of the Paris “in” crowd. In this portrait by Berenice Abbott, Flanner wears two masks, which—like her pseudonym—suggest her multiple layers.



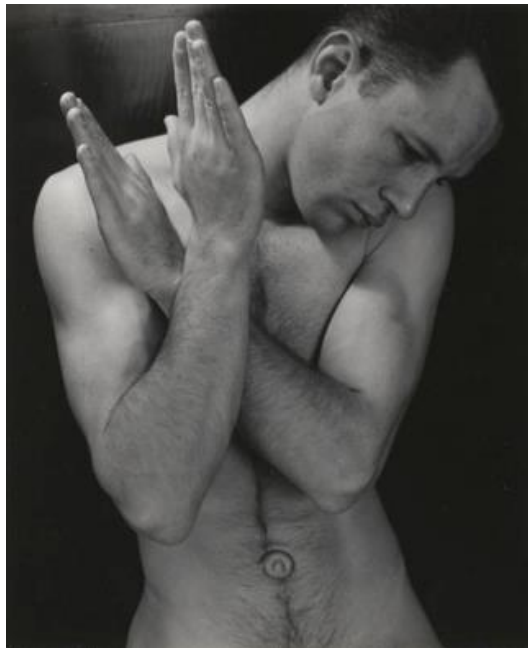
Janet Flanner, by Berenice Abbott, 1927

Marsden Hartley died the year after this photograph was taken, and this portrait of the artist is full of abstract themes of death and loss, both for the subject and the photographer, George Platt Lynes. Hartley sits slumped and exhausted, a condition heightened by his mourning the recent death of a young man in Maine to whom he was attracted. Lynes alludes to Hartley's earlier loss of Karl von Freyburg in World War I in the shadowy figure of the young man in uniform projected on the back wall. This memorial to lost youth had a poignant double meaning, since Lynes's assistant, George Tichenor, to whom he was deeply and unsuccessfully attracted, had just been killed in World War II. Lynes posed an assistant—quite possibly Tichenor's brother Jonathan—in Tichenor's uniform as an abstract representation of the losses that shadowed both his and the aged Hartley's lives.



Marsden Hartley, by George Platt Lynes, 1942.

Cypress Grove Trail, Point Lobos, California, 1951. After Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Secessionists in the early twentieth century, Minor White's influential photographs helped create the next generation of American photographers. Because his aesthetics were based on sublimating both the artist's and subject's emotions, White tried to keep his personal life out of his photography. Many of his images of male nudes were published only after his death, yet the connection between landscape and desire is shown in this paid of photographs that uncannily echo each other. The delicacy of Tom Murphy's hands is reminiscent of a Balinese dancer, and his demure posture counters the muscular presentation of his body that makes him seem available. The stripped-down cypress branches, against a spectacular ocean view, reference the earlier work, creating a landscape that recalls Murphy's body.



Tom Murphy (San Francisco), by Minor White

“Depending on your proclivity, the first thing you noticed about Susan Sontag was her intelligence—or her striking good looks. A prodigy, Sontag graduated from the University of Chicago as a teenager; studied at Harvard, Oxford and the Sorbonne; and published *Against Interpretation* (1966) with a glamorous photograph of herself on the dust jacket. Wide-ranging and eclectic, she published *On Photography* (1977), an important reconsideration of the ideology of the photographic image, and two studies of illness as metaphor. Sontag had an early marriage to the sociologist Philip Reiff but always admitted her attraction to women. She later regretted that she had not spoken more publicly about her lesbianism, but that kind of personal revelation was at odds with her cool, analytical tendency. In her later years, Sontag had a committed relationship with the photographer Annie Leibovitz.



Susan Sontag, by Peter Hujar, 1975.

Through her photographs, Cass Bird asserts the positive existence of people who push the perceived boundaries of gender. In this way she suggests a world that is Whitmanesque in rejecting society’s restrictions. In this photograph, taken on a rooftop in Brooklyn, Bird’s friend Macaulay stares out from under a cap emblazoned with the words “I Look Just Like My Daddy.” Macaulay’s gender is ambiguous. Her cap’s proclamation is likewise ambiguous—perhaps it is true, or perhaps it is ironic statement of an expectation that will never be realized.



“I Look Just Like My Daddy,” by Cass Bird, 2004.

All photographs courtesy the Brooklyn Museum.

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