

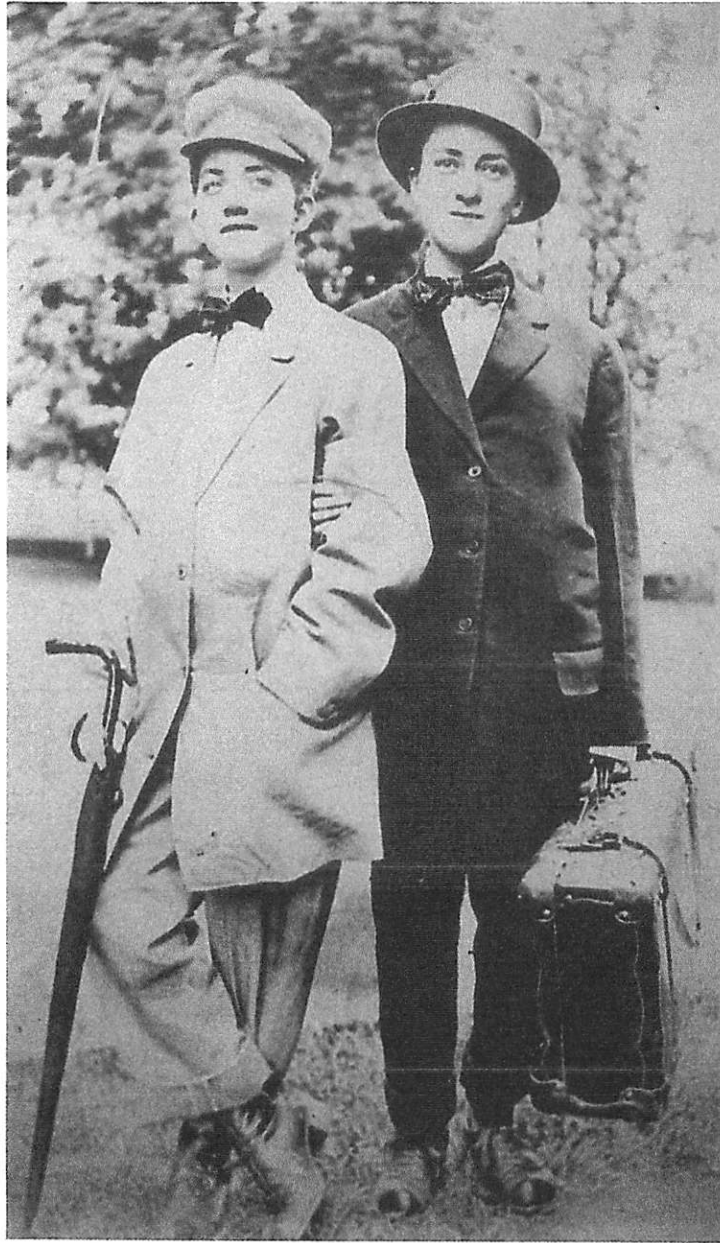
m a r g a r e t m o r g a n

this portrait which is not one

IN THIS LAST DECADE OF THE twentieth century, many of the hallmarks of modernity have been called into question: the grand narratives of rationalism, colonialism, nationalism, progress, revolution, and the dialectics these terms once entailed are no longer black and white. Of colonisation; my students, were they old enough, might have thought of a former US president, his intestinal polyp and its infection of the entire US media. Of nationalism; 'Well,' they'd shrug, 'Who cares? We all live in Australia'. Of revolution; that's something they'd never call the third track on side two from the *White Album*, which only proves I'm really getting old. What some of them do let slip, on occasion, however, is a kind of truculence produced by what they see as the rhetoric of the politically correct and, no less, a hankering after what they might see as the forbidden fruit of modernism: a yearning for the abstract, the universal, the essential and – perish the thought – the authentic. What is very disturbing to me is that this phenomenon might reasonably be seen as a product of the internal inconsistencies of the most conspicuous claims made by post-modern cultural practice. What seems to have happened in the name of the post-modern is that strategies such as appropriation, quotation, irony and so on, have now become devices played out, performatively, within the conventions of a still modernist commodity form in which nothing else is at stake. The dominant and repressed terms in any such binary equation: original/copy, centre/periphery, masculine/feminine, natural/artificial, soul/body and so on, have never been as discreet as the discourses of modernism or post-modernism would have us believe: a championing of one ineluctably points to the other.

It is in the light of this argument that I want to consider the work of Millie Wilson and Cathy Opie, two contemporary artists working in Los Angeles. The work of such artists might provide a way out of the impasse my students unwittingly perceive in the nullifying effects of contemporary post-modern debate. Formally quite different, the work of both artists confound the categories of marked and unmarked terms upon which the arguments I have outlined rest. Yet, while antithetical to the universalist constructs of modernism and to their essential subjecthoods, the queerness of the identities engendered in their fictions, and in their truths stranger than, bespeak something that also belies the disingenuousness of much of the rhetoric of post-modernism.

Millie Wilson's *Fauve Semblant: Peter (A Young English Girl)* constructs a phantasmic portrait with too many nodes for the mere balancing along one axis of the character portrayed. Peter and h/er story are far too complex for that. S/he can be discerned only by the objects remaindered, documented in h/er absence, in one to one



1916-1917
Paul Strand, Peter of Young
English Girls 1916
detail
Two women
gelatin silver print
51 x 30.5
Collection Courtesy the artist and
Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica

scale with, but inevitably removed from, as Marvin Gaye would say, 'the real thing'. We see photographs, as if from the archive, that establish a history, a stretching back into the past of our protagonist. We learn that Peter by any other name would smell as sweet: s/he is 'painter' and 'bulldagger', the framing of neither of which adequately contains the term as written on the wall, nor the narratives to be constructed from the evidence at hand. Certainly they are part of the story but not, like a photograph of a palette, the complete picture. We make h/er up as we gather the evidence of h/er existence, like anthropologists or sleuths or forensic scientists or indeed historians, but to ends far flung from empirical science. For this is as much about making a space for lesbian desire as anything else.

It is interesting to me that this lesbian body and this desire for her body, as much pointedly absented from Peter, is as much absolutely and unequivocally present in the slightly later work of Cathy Opie. Cathy Opie's *Being and Having* is a series of apparently conventional portraits, so straight they're queer, in which the faces of her friends and peers are cropped close by the picture frame, each figure staring sullenly out to return the viewer's gaze. Drawing as much upon the traditions of Northern Renaissance portraiture as upon the conventions of documentary photography and post-modernist notions of subjectivity, her photographs serve as a kind of social or family record; albeit of a non-biological family, in which the social position of each sitter is expressed in a system of knowingly codified gestures, stances and signs.

Yet *Being and Having* never recuperates the burgeoning individualism celebrated in Renaissance portraiture. Here there is no essential form, true self or drive toward individual expressivity. Rather, it denies, as does Peter, subjectivity as so stable or predetermined. But this is beside the point: if a portrait offers no window to the soul, and a collection of fragments bespeak their status as faux finishes in which to dress oneself: cheater, leotard, *trompe l'oeil* to fool us, then all that's left is for us to be seduced, to let curiosity draw us in.

In Wilson's *Peter...*, clothes make the (wo)man and Peter's identity accrues from a rebus of incomplete component parts – objects as substitutes, the insistent tallying of which sometimes totals Two Women, (one piece). In *Being and Having*, each portrait is additive, decorated and adorned equally by earring, facial hair, cigarette, cap, hat, tattoo, piercing, stare, gesture and skin blemish. These portraits are a hybrid admixture of flesh and ornament and flesh as ornament. These figures are true artifice, contrary to the notion of a simple, unadorned and pure body about which the great modernist, Adolf Loos, said: "To seek beauty only in form and not in ornament is the goal toward which all humanity is striving."¹ This 'natural body' to which Loos subscribed is confounded in each face in Opie's series: each sports a fake moustache, worn as much as an ornament as a mask or disguise or simulation, and which, as surface, tells as much about the 'nature' of masculinity as about the sitters' gender or their appropriation of that guise. For each portrait depicts a woman, were her upper lip naked, whose gestures and trappings would signal 'butch' or 'lesbian' but whose portrait, with the addition of that hairpiece, becomes at once a parody of homophobic responses to lesbianism and a claiming of that most sacrosanct of unmarked territories, (if you'll excuse the colonialist metaphor), the turf that would be masculinity. But there is something else here, too: inflected with the desires of sitter, photographer, viewer, the either/or of this scenario is moot. These portraits are sexy as all fuck. And as Judith Butler argues:

Drag is not the putting on of a gender that belongs properly to some other group,

i.e. an act of expropriation or appropriation that assumes that gender is the rightful property of sex, that "masculine" belongs to "male" and "feminine" belongs to "female". There is no "proper" gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex's cultural property. Where that notion of the proper operates, it is always and only improperly installed as the effect of a compulsory system. Drag constitutes the mundane way in which gender is appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of imitation itself.²



Catherine Opie
Ligi, from the series
Being and Having 1991
chromogenic print, 38
43 x 56
Collection: courtesy Regen
Projects, Los Angeles

This drag, this appropriation, only levels meaning as far as making the masculine as much a masquerade as the feminine, or as the shining texture of a chromogenic or silver gelatin photograph. On the surface of that most fetishisable of objects, the photograph, dance these fluid and porous sets of fetishisable surface effects, for which there is no authentic state. They be and they have and in answer to the Freudian question, 'What does a woman want?', they answer, 'Everything'. This is the point at which both *Being and Having* and *Faune Semblant: Peter (A Young English Girl)* part company from conventional post-modernist appropriation, for there is much at stake in these works outside the monoculture that a critique of representation has become. In a sense they document, but it is a documentation that doesn't posit a truth, for such things are thoroughly constructed, but neither do they deny a place of record for the people they depict and the histories they imply. In this is implied a disavowal of the disavowal of documentary traditions. By whom and at what point was the edict proclaimed that there was nothing left to be documented and that meaning had completely evacuated the sign? The works in *Being and Having* and in *Faune Semblant: Peter (A Young English Girl)* generate meaning – contradictory, complicated, credible meaning. It accrues to them like so many genders in an Octavia Butler sci fi.

NOTES

- 1 Adolf Loos, 'The Luxury Vehicle', *Spoken Into the Void*, Cambridge, Mass, Oppositions Books, MIT Press, 1982, p. 40.
- 2 Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", in ed., Diana Fuss, *Inside/out, Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* New York: Routledge, 1991, p.21.