

The expression of feminism in photography after the 1970s

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of second and third wave feminism on photography, highlighting the shift towards a mature and open expression within the medium facilitated by the integration of feminist perspectives. The analysis focuses on key photographic projects from the 1970s to the 2010s by Duane Michals, Laurie Simmons, Shirin Neshat, Carrie Mae Weems, and John Dugdale. These projects are explored in the context of their response to feminist ideologies and their reflection of social issues. The article traces the evolution from the second wave's critique of systemic gender biases to the third wave's emphasis on diversity and intersectionality. It concludes that feminism has significantly influenced photographic art, both in narrative style and in the portrayal of gender and social roles, enhancing the medium's capacity for social commentary and artistic expression.

Keywords

Feminism, Photography, Second-wave of feminist, Third-Wave Feminism, Feminism photography.

1. Introduction

Photography is a record of social change, but is impacted by new ideas in society. Photography has experienced a long process from simple to mature, from conservatism to openness, from limitation to freedom. Female photographers and the female subject are also become indispensable factors for this art.

Second and Third Wave Feminism has had a significant impact upon the recent history of photography. This essay will discuss how the second and third wave feminist movements have influenced five important photographic projects, two by Duane Michals and Laurie Simmons in the 1970s, two series by Shirin Neshat and Carrie Mae Weems in the 1990s and one by John Dugdale in the 2010s. The essay will examine how these various photographers reflected and incorporated feminism and the social problems that they addressed.

2. Feminism After the 1970s

The second wave of feminism started about 1960s and lasted until the 1980s. Linda Nochlin's article "Why have there been no great women artists?" has been seen important to the second wave. This article points out that the whole society systematically excludes women from art training and careers, but the basic reason for the small number of female artists is the lack of resources and gender discrimination suffered by women for a long time[1]. Nochlin's article received a lot of responses from society. An increase on female employment has become a fact, and no longer a focus of debate. Since then people began to pay attention to how women balance family and work, and whether women should imitate male lifestyles or turn to a new way of life for women themselves. The campaign lasted until the 1980s. The key is to oppose the stereotype that the naturalness of the division of labor between men and women, moreover, to

eliminate the phenomenon of different pay for the same work. To make the sexes equal requires people to ignore the illusion that the difference between the two sexes is the basis of the attachment of women to men in social relations, and to be open to men and women working in the same field.

Perhaps the third wave began when Rebecca Walker published an article in a 1992 *Ms.* magazine called "Becoming the Third Wave", in which she proclaimed: " I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave[2]." The third wave of feminism, with its distinctive features of post-structuralism and post-colonialism, aims to deconstruct the mainstream theories of the second wave of feminism to a certain extent and shift the focus to the problems ignored by it. Specifically, it emphasizes that women's issues involve various obstacles such as, multi-religious beliefs, multi-ethnic customs, multi-cultural, multi-sexual orientation, multi-value, etc.; it advocates jumping out of the original feminist thinking framework and calls for the elimination of gender roles and prejudices.

3. The Definition of Feminist Photography

In the article "Heroines of Feminist Photography We Admire" Angie kordic states that "by tackling the ideals of the female beauty, feminist photography tried to change general consciousness on the objectification of women, their role within domestic life, their own views of self[3]." In this case, feminist photography refers to the use of women's perspectives to interpret photography works on female issues.

Women in photography, women as photographers, and feminist photography are all different. Although they may show women's experience, feminist photography is a call for female self-awareness and liberation, which some of the photographs taken by women are not. And there are also works that advocate feminism, but the artists themselves are not feminists or men create a situation that belongs to feminism photography from the perspective and experience of women. So, the most important thing is to see the ideological connotation contained in the works.

4. The Influence of The Second Wave of Feminism on Photographic Creation

Things Are Queer (Fig 1) was made by Duane Michals in 1973. His pictures break from convention in narration, which is not only to give people a visual feeling, but also a visual experience. This series requires the audience to carefully look at each of the photos. The first photo is the same as the last one, but when viewed in order, the two photos express totally different meanings. In the second picture, viewers can see the unusual proportion, but by continuing to observe, the audience will be attracted by the narration between the pictures and forget about it. After viewing the whole series, it is easy to find that the setting of the story is a surreal environment, and the text in the fourth close-up also implies the connection between this group of works and fairy tales. When the setting is unusual, it is not so important whether the setting of proportion is in line with common sense.

Duane Michals opened a new picture discourse system, allowing the creator to create a context by himself. He also calls for an open and inclusive environment. His idea echoes Hegel's thought "What is reasonable is real; that which is real is reasonable[4]." This kind of equal and inclusive attitude coincides with the Feminist Trend of thought in the 1970s. Although Duane Michals did not express it in a fierce and clear way, this artistic expression is more attractive and convincing than a simple statement.

Another very important feminist work is Laurie Simmons' *EARLY COLOR INTERIORS* (Fig 2) made during 1978- 1979. In 1972, she found some dolls and mini furniture in a vintage shop.

In the second feminist wave of thought, female dolls play a very sensitive role in the family education of girls, so Laurie Simmons decided to use photos to show the characteristics of these dolls. She made it very clear that this is “certainly doing it in some sort of defiance of, or reaction to, a male-dominated world of painting[5].”



Figure 1 Duane Michals, *Things Are Queer*, 1973, Nine gelatin silver prints with hand-applied text, 3 3/8 x 5 inches, DC Moore Gallery, NY, <http://www.dcmooregallery.com/artists/duane-michals>



Figure 2: Laurie Simmons, *New Kitchen/ Aerial View/ Seated*, 1979, Amanda Wilkinson Gallery, NY, February 15, 2020, <http://www.lauriesimmons.net/>

One of the important part is liberal feminism, their advocations are as follows: gender psychological differences are caused by unequal educational opportunities, so women's right to education is particularly emphasized; it opposes the emphasis on gender differences, and liberal feminism holds that women have the same ability as men in aggression, ambition, strength, and rationality, opposes gender differences, and emphasizes gender similarity; it advocates rationality and human life and equality[6].

The thoughts of liberal feminism correspond directly to the theme shown by Laurie Simmons. In Laurie Simmons' work, she used toys and dolls to simulate the scene in the family. Female dolls are placed indoors, surrounded by a variety of household objects. She expresses a kind of exhausted feeling by adjusting the doll's posture. Her theme clearly expresses her dissatisfaction with women's loss of personal life and the complaint of women's low social status because they undertake most of the housework in the family. She describes the situation of women in a patriarchal society through pictures and calls on women to fight for rights instead

of being accessories to their families or husbands. Her idea is completely in line with the second wave feminist thought on women's economic freedom and class equality.

These two photographers have created corresponding works under the trend of feminism, although their shooting methods and subjects are different, and their expression focuses are different. But through the narrative and visual communication of images, ordinary can also understand the message. Their appeal for a more open and inclusive social environment and their pursuit of a fair political environment also spoke for the second wave feminist movement.

5. The Influence of The Third Wave Feminist Movement on Feminist Photography

One of the stream feminist theory is postcolonial feminism, it pointed out that although western white feminism is also a patriarchal hegemonic system against the dominance of men, its background is the western discourse system, which cannot escape the ideology of Western imperialism. Postcolonial feminism believes that white women should be aware that the background of their feminism is the developed material basis and the pursuit of freedom of thought and personality, while the western developed material basis is based on the exploitation and oppression of developing countries. This means that the western white feminists not only resist patriarchal oppression but also participate in the oppression of the third world women[7]. So postcolonial feminism emphasizes that white feminism cannot impose its own experience and needs on women of color, but also pay attention to the existence of racism, colonialism, imperialism and other oppression.

Carrie Mae Weems' *Colored People* (1987-1990) pointed out the ethnic problems that existed in her community. She has done more than 30 years of photography and video work. She often combines words with African and African American images to explore the complex history of black identity in the United States, racism, gender relations, politics and personal identity. She was very clear about her concerns about the unequal treatment of people of color in the community and society. Weems photographed her models at an age, as she describes, "when issues of race really begin to affect you, at the point of an innocence beginning to be disrupted[8]." Carrie Mae Weems' artistic career is inextricably related to postcolonial feminism, and her works also reflect the problems raised by postcolonial feminism.

When Weems photographed black children, she used a lot of colors to cover the whole picture, so as to weaken their original skin color in the visual prominent position (Fig 3). And in the later installation art, eleven children are irregularly arranged in the high saturation color plate. In this way, she hopes to weaken the sense of difference brought by color, so that black children can be integrated into society without being treated differently. Although in terms of time, her works are not the product of the third feminist movement, throughout her whole career, her focus is on racism and the black people's search for identity. She is definitely a feminist artist, and her works also meet the demands of the third wave feminism.

Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* (1993-1997) is series of works about Islamic women, through which photographers explore the changes experienced by Islamic women living in Iran after the 1979 Iranian revolution[9]. And it explores the oppression of women by religious culture and social traditional culture (Fig 4).

In Shirin Neshat's photos, women are veiled, some point guns at the camera, some put guns aside, and some write words on the photos. When she left Iran to study in Los Angeles, Iranian leaders encouraged women to be educated, but after the Islamic revolution, she returned to her homeland discover everything had changed. Women had been recognized by religion because of their participation in the Islamic revolution, and their religious status had been improved, but they had to masked[10]. Neshat swayed between the two periods and the positioning of her own identity. Women are very mysterious and powerful in the pictures, but

on the other hand, the veil hides the personal characteristics of women, replacing individuality with religion, showing a kind of religious oppression. At the same time, the stipulation that only women are required to wear the veil is also the embodiment of the oppression of women under the patriarchy. Neshat's concern is very extensive. In addition to the most basic issue of women's freedom and right to education, it also involves the reflection of religious culture and social traditional culture, which is completely consistent with the center of the third wave feminist movement. It also made her the mainstay of the third wave feminist movement.

John Dugdale, is one of the important artists in the queer movement. Queer theory was born in the early 1990s. It is supported by postmodernism and deconstruction and also influenced by Anglo-American cultures in the HIV/AIDS activism of the 1980s and contemporary feminism in the early 1990s[11]. Queer's theory states sexual fluidity and opposes simple differentiation of gender and sexual orientation. The queer theory provides support for marginalized people so that minority people can integrate into the movement for equal rights. After John Dugdale almost lost his eyesight in the 1990s because of AIDS, he created with a large picture camera and used the 19th-century cyanotype process to develop his own photos (Fig 5). This antique technique washes out the modern elements in the picture.



Figure 3: Carrie Mae Weems, *Colored People*, 1989- 1990, Installation view, Center of Contemporary Art, Seville, Spain, 2010, Feb 15 2020,
<http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/colored-people.html#header>



Figure 4: Shirin Neshat, "Faceless", *Women of Allah series*, 1994, B&W RC print & ink, photo by Cynthia Preston ©Shirin Neshat (courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussel)



Figure 5: John Dugdale, *Thick Star Firmament*, 2012, Cyanotype, 8x10 inches, Morton Street, NYC, February 15, 2020, <http://johndugdalestudio.com/titles>

John Dugdale's works express his delicate feelings for the people around him, which makes the pictures very soft and beautiful. The contact and interaction between naked men and women in his photos is as beautiful as oil painting, and his photos with his mother also reveal the understanding and deep feelings between mother and son. His works are different from many direct and incisive expressions of feminism. His way is implicit and introverted. The blue color shows the melancholy temperament. The national flag in his works is also a way of reconstructing the typical symbol in a new context. These pictures show sexual fluidity and opposes simple differentiation of gender and sexual orientation.

6. Aspects of photographic creations which were influenced by feminism

The use of the human body in early photography is usually as a subject, a materialized prop, or a tool to express the meaning. But in feminist photography, the body, as a weapon for artists to declare their ideas to the world, is an active and aggressive subject. According to Susan Sontag's description, photography satisfies the photographer's desire for collection. At the same time, photography is also an artist's acquiescence to what is going on[12]. From this point of view, feminist photography changes the body from a passive object to be photographed and invaded into the subject of self-expression.

The theme of the photography works also changed, and the image expresses political opinion. Early photography was a record of scientific research, as a substitute for painting or as a record of social literature[13]. However, after the combination with feminism, the purpose of photography began to turn to the propaganda of pairs of ideas, the support of ideas and the demand for rights and interests. This clear direction has improved the position of photography as a media; the combination and promotion of art and political movement has also inspired a

large number of artists' creative passion and inspired many non-art professionals to express themselves through photography.

In feminist photography, we can also clearly see the role of photographic technique in the expression of feminism. Examples include the use of color temperature and filter in photography to express the oppression of racism on the people of color; through the cyanotype process to render the picture into blue to eliminate the sense of modernity; through the group of pictures to change the audience's viewing habits and common narrative methods to appeal for a more inclusive social environment. When the techniques are combined with feminism thought, not only are the techniques more attractive, the feminist theory is also more accessible.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, feminism plays an important role in the development of photography, by changing the expression of the body in photography; providing more possibilities for photography creation on the theme and enabling more people to participate in the creation of photography. Artists use photography technology for more accurate expression to make their theme more prominent. The feminist movement uses photography as the medium of propaganda and expression, and photography absorbs nutrition from the Feminist Trend of thought to enrich its own artistic value, which is a very successful combination.

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