Posing Gender

Sydney Snyder is an artist who works in a variety of media to explore issues of gender and identity. She will graduate from Chapman University in May of 2010 with a BA in Art and a minor in English and Comparative Literature. Her most recent project, *Posing Gender,* will premiere at the Guggenheim Gallery from April 26 through April 30, 2010.

The goal of *Posing Gender* is to emphasize the arbitrary nature of socially constructed gender traits by recontextualizing gender-specific poses and expressions in fashion and glamour photography. Glamour, beefcake, fashion advertisement, and fashion editorial photography are all referenced and modified in order to accomplish this. Subjects in these genres serve as putty with which the photographer creates forms and images to his liking. As a result, these photographs depict performers striving to fulfill the desires and ideals of another person rather than portraits of the individuals themselves. Snyder chose poses common to each of the genres that appear particularly "masculine" or "feminine" from fashion magazines, genre-specific photography books, and men's magazines to serve as tear sheets/references to help her direct the seven models who were asked to imitate the poses and expressions of models of the opposite sex.

The models each worked to block out learned gender-specific poses and step into the role of the opposite sex. Girls typically round their shoulders to appear innocent, reserved, or small. Here the female models square their shoulders and stiffen their upper bodies to appear strong and stable, imitating the posturing of typical male poses. The female models also had to work to keep their weight on both hips/legs so as not to pop one hip out, which is considered a feminine trait. The expressions of the female models also had to change. Rather than looking coy, seductive, innocent, or distant, the girls imitate the primarily serious, smug, and strong expressions of the male models in the reference photos.

The male models had to do just the opposite and work on loosening their bodies in order to appear more delicate or tensing their bodies in new ways to emphasize their legs, chests, butts, and slender figures. The male models worked to soften and relax the features on their faces to present serene, seductive, innocent, or distant looks.

This role reversal emphasizes both natural/sexual differences between men and women as well as socially constructed gender differences. As the male models thrust their chests forward and their hips to one side or back, the sexual differences are emphasized. In female glamour photography, the poses call attention to the breasts and hips of the women, aspects of the human body that the male viewer desires but does not have. The emphasis of the photos of the male models becomes what the men lack, which in turn places them in a position of vulnerability and inadequacy. Vulnerability, innocence, and softness are associated with femininity but have nothing to do with sexual differences between men and women. With the female models, the emphasis becomes the lack of bulk and muscles. A broad, rectangular body is unique to the male sex; however, strength, power, and self-sufficiency, which are all linked to masculinity, are not related

to any anatomical difference.

A studio setup consisting of a neutral background, continuous tungsten lighting, and a digital single-lens reflex camera works to eliminate gender-specific cues and allow for continuity between photographs. The models featured in the photographs wear clothing from their own wardrobes in several different styles including casual, dressy, swimwear, and sleepwear. By eliminating props and sticking to recognizable styles of clothing, the focus of each photograph becomes the pose and expression of the model. Color correction, the removal of blemishes, and skin softening were done in Photoshop so the photos appear consistent with glamour and fashion photography. The artist chose not to add any effects, dramatic lighting, or high contrast to the photos. The elimination of these practices, common to glamour and fashion photography, serves to keep the emphasis of the photos the pose and expression of the models and it make it clear that the photos are not actually advertising anything.

All of Snyder's photographs are commercially printed. Three of the photographs—one of a male model, one of a female model, and one of a pair of male and female models—have been printed in poster size (20"x30"). Both the size and commercial printing process of these photographs reference billboards, window displays, and signs used in fashion advertisements. 8"x10" photographs of each of the models are displayed alongside a number of 4"x6" photographs of the same model that depict other poses from the reference photos. This setup reflects the setup of modeling/casting agencies that fill the office walls with photographs of potential models and reference photographs for inspiration. A portfolio of reference photos and contact sheets of the models performing the poses as well as two books on glamour photography that served as inspiration for the project are available for viewing.

Photographer Cindy Sherman's critique of glamour photography in her 1981 "Centerfolds" served as inspiration for Snyder. Sherman subverted the content of mens' magazine centerfolds by appearing fully clothed in her own photographs. Rather than appearing seductive, aroused, or eager, the subject looks troubled, vulnerable, and anxious. The photographs are in landscape format, which is consistent with actual centerfolds, but the overall style of the photographs, which are dark and closely cropped, differs from traditional glamour photography. These photographs, which were commissioned by Artforum Magazine but never actually used, were intended to cause the viewer to question a type of photography in which women act solely as objects of sexual desire. Photographers such as Richard Bastik, Nan Goldin, Inez van Lamsweerde and Vindoodh Matadin, and Catherine Opie whose work focuses on gender identity and gender performance also served as inspiration for *Posing Gender*.