

The “Spectacular” Male Body: A Photo Essay

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Keywords

circus artist performance masculinity athleticism social conventions working-class

The ‘Spectacular’ Male Body is a photo essay that considers and interpenetrates the themes of maleness and performance in ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces. The photographs of this essay contemplate the fantasies and aspirations in the staging of manliness: as a manifestation of the materiality of the male body, and the production of desire through the observation of this body in performance.

By focusing on the circus as a site of dynamic artistic and cultural exchanges, and the self-fashioning of young circus performers as emblems of masculine prowess, the essay pays attention to the impact of documentary genre conventions on the audience’s emotional and intellectual reception of photographic narrative, and the genre’s ambivalence around ‘fantasy’ (where that term is opposed to ‘reality’). The photographs pick up where the previous photographic project *Yassin* (Doron, 2006) left off, telling the story of Yassin El Messoudi and his two younger brothers that together form a troupe of hand-balancing acrobats. Three years after the initial photographic session, the Messoudi brothers are captured inside their trailer and the circus tent when they are training and getting ready for the evening show, centering

on their corporeal presence, and how it is enhanced by stage costumes, makeup and facial expressions. The photographs reveal the boys in the process of engaging in a dual performance in front of the camera lens, materializing on both an individual level – as teenagers growing up and shaping their own masculine sensibilities within the often-stereotyped nomadic circus community and culture – and an artistic level – as youthful athletes who devote significant time and effort to the pursuit of what is considered the ‘perfect body’ for their profession as acrobats – arguably, the emblematic heroes of circus acts.

The depiction of circus performers as social outsiders, or lovable relics of a bygone era, forms a favorite subject for numerous documentary and fashion photographers; visually constructing the circus tent as a site of physical confidence, gender ambiguity, fantasy and myth. In the summer of 2006, a chance encounter on a London street with an 18-year-old boy named Yassin Massoudi resulted in a series of black-and-white photographs depicting the daily lives of this skilled circus acrobat, his younger brothers Soffien and Karim, and their dog Tyson.

The Massoudi brothers form a troupe of hand-balancing acrobats, and at the time relished in the excitement of new experiences provided by their nomadic lifestyle. The portraits were set mainly in and around their caravan home with its modest emblems of strength such as boxing gloves and a knife collection. A year later, the photographs, which were taken over the course of one summer, were collected and compiled into a book whose cover bore the protagonist’s name: Yassin.

The following pages feature subsequent photographs I took between 2009 and 2011, three years after the initial photographic session, on circus grounds in Madrid and Fuerteventura. These photographs were taken inside the boys’ trailer and the circus tent when they were training and getting ready for the evening show. The setting of the images evokes the transnational circus experience and its imagery that transcends more historic and geographic cultural specificity. This time, when I photographed the three Massoudi brothers, I centered more on their corporeal presence, and how it is enhanced by stage costumes, makeup and facial expressions, drawing focus to their body language. The special camaraderie and competitive dynamic between the three brothers is evidenced by the way they employ their youthful bodies to signal the evolution of their roles within the troupe.

21 years old Yassin, who previously occupied the troupe’s leading role, was now adopting an older, wiser artistic director position, having taken over from their retired father - himself a circus acrobat who methodically trained his sons from an early age. 18-year-old Soffien preserved his spot as a charmingly goofy, eternal adolescent, and the circus Casanova. Whereas 16 years old Karim, whose first photo I had taken in London when he was 13 years old, had now moved to center stage, through a spectacular display of athleticism and swagger.

While Yassin’s stage charisma lay in the fact that his shy and gentle demeanor conflicted with the unrestrained spirit of his circus performance, Karim, dressed in various stage costumes which were made by his mom, and that displayed his stronger-than-the-strongest body, acted like a walking advertisement for a turn-of-the-century circus. He nonchalantly paraded himself in front of my lens and an invisible audience, engulfed in imaginary stage lights and personifying old-school circus showmanship. His physical allure not much different from that of Feral Benga performing on stage at the Folies Bergères in 1930s Paris, as well as other stage performers-of-color of the era, engaged in transcendent performances that thrived on the public appetite for an exoticism of the artistic experience.

In these images I tried to avoid looking at spectacle, magic and whimsy, or the quirkiness of it all as the very essence of the circus, as in work on the subject by photographers Diane Arbus (*Albino Sword Swallower at A Carnival, Md.*, 1970), Bruce Davidson (*Circus [The Dwarf, Jimmy with Cigarette and Flowers]*, 1958) or Mary Ellen Mark (*Contortionist with Sweetie the Puppy, Great Raj Kamal Circus, Upleta, India*, 1989). Instead, I opt to take a critical examination at how the circus can become a site to observe a world of teenage maleness, shaped by nonconformity, dislocation, and existence on the fringes of community life. The images are ultimately about performance in public and private spaces, and the role it plays in the male teenager's quest for identity and self-esteem. In the case of the three Messoudi siblings, the performance is a testament to their showmanship, which ultimately becomes a manifestation of their freedom, transition and transformation.

By focusing on the circus as a site of dynamic artistic and cultural exchanges, and the self-fashioning of young circus performers as emblems of masculine prowess, the photographs of this essay pay attention to the impact of documentary genre conventions on the audience's emotional and intellectual reception of photographic narrative, and the genre's ambivalence around fantasy (where that term is opposed to reality). The images contemplate the fantasies and aspirations in the staging of manliness; as a manifestation of the materiality of the male body, and the production of desire through the observation of this body in performance. By looking at aspects of body politics in the context of formalist and social documentary photography, and considering the role of the portrait within this kind of enquiry, the photographs investigate how identity and community are constructed out of marginality, and the ethical ambivalence that surrounds the approach of documenting the lives of displaced people within the context of contemporary art. The photographs reveal the boys in the process of engaging in dual performance in front of the camera lens, materializing on both an individual level – as teenagers growing up and shaping their own masculine sensibilities within the often-stereotyped nomadic circus community and culture, and an artistic level – as youthful athletes who devote significant time and effort to the pursuit of what is considered the 'perfect body' for their profession as acrobats – arguably, the emblematic heroes of circus acts.



















