

Capturing Chrysalis - gender, sexuality and identity through the lens of Diana Blok

***I Challenge You To Love Me*, artist and photographer Diana Blok's retrospective exhibition closes in Amsterdam**

"He who robs us of our dreams robs us of our life", proclaims Virginia Woolf's androgynous time-travelling protagonist in the eponymously-titled *Orlando* (1928). Stepping into *I Challenge You to Love Me*, the provocatively-titled retrospective exhibition of artist and photographer Diana Blok (b. Uruguay, 1952), Orlando's *joie de vivre*, shifting gender scripts and sharp wit surges through the portraits, stills and landscapes wired into the gallery walls. The exhibition, curated by Blok along with Hripsime Visser, former photography curator of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, traces fifty years of rattling gender norms and expectations, and to communicate contemporary topics of gender violence, women's rights, sexual identity and racial discrimination.

Revealing the porous borders of identity through the stories of others

For the past fifty years, the Amsterdam-based visual artist and photographer has been peeling away the chrysalis of gender, identity and sexuality through retelling the stories of others in herself, and communities often on the margins of society, to better understand gender, identity and sexual diversity. Inspired by mythology, historical archetypes and a desire to probe deeper into her aerial roots and cross-cultural identity, Blok began as a self-taught portrait photographer, embracing herself as a model before turning her lens onto the stories of others. Her practice involves photographing the lives of individuals and communities for whom gender, sexuality and identity are not fixed states, but in flux and susceptible to shifting. She captures chrysalis.

Bricolage identity through masquerade, surrealism and spectacle

Since the late 1970s, Blok has used her distinctly autobiographical style to communicate global messages, as we see in the early black and white portraits of herself and companions. Like the master of bricolage identity and mutating appearances, Claude Cahun, who was already refusing to prescribe to prescriptive gender codes two centuries ago as the darling of the French avant-garde, Blok relishes in shadow play and visage trickery to carve new playgrounds to explore in. In *Self-portrait with lilies* (1976), we struggle to decipher the boundaries of the artist's face and the painted mask, as props, lighting and composition become mechanisms for plying the binaries of nature and artifice, reality and masquerade. As Cahun once stated, "Under this mask, another mask; I will never finish removing all these faces." Marvelling at this early self-portrait, alongside the haunting *Flashback in the mist* (1976) and surrealist *Speak memory* (1976), we can note the starting points of Blok's later unquenchable thirst for questioning the parameters of identity.

Rewriting the arts canon through the carnal feminine

By the 1980s, Blok had already cemented herself on the arts circuit of Amsterdam, and her black and white portraiture series *Invisible Forces*, shot with ex-partner Marlo Broekmans, signalled a breakthrough moment in the artist's career. An instant hit, Blok and her lover usurp and rewrite mythological and historical archetypes through their writhing spines, contorting torsos and languid limbs – from a statuesque Venus frozen in San Sebastian's ecstatic pose to the seraphic wings of demon angels fluttering in long exposure and deft chiaroscuro in *The Bite* (1980). Elsewhere Blok's self-deprecating humour reveals itself to us in *The Huntress* (1981) – the artist's spin on her Roman goddess namesake, the deity of the hunt. Yet, lo and behold: here, the hunter becomes the hunted, giving over to the whims and mercy of her female lover. Sensual and cerebral, these carnal compositions rewrite the canon of arts history, framing women's sexual desire at the forefront. Blok and Broekmans series was printed and sold as postcards, disseminated through Amsterdam's queer and feminist circles, thus cementing the artist's status as a maverick of gender play, performativity and identity. Its arrival in Paris brought international attention on Blok, as the series took her from Japan to Buenos Aires, and beyond.

Navigating the exhibition, I too, transition and transform, reassessing my relation to the subjects which unfold before me. Absorbing the sweeping black and white series, *Blood ties and other Bonds* (1985-1990), a kaleidoscope of familial relations unfurl before me, challenging inherent assumptions of what constitutes family, while inverting the trope of the white-picket fence nuclear family model.

From theatre and play to the lived everyday

Yet it is Blok's series *Adventures in Cross-Casting* (1996-), in which the artist cast her net wide across the world of theatre, to invite an international pool of professionals to transform themselves into a cultural-historical figure of the opposite sex of their choice, which undoubtedly became the starting point of her meatier investigations and synonymous with her now signature style. The humour which began seasoning her earlier black and white endeavours, or what Blok tells me in passing she terms, *the wink*, emerges full force in the serpentine pose of Dutch photographer Kors Van Bennekom, dressed as the infamous Mata Hari, emulating one of her expressive 'tableau vivants'. This whirlwind escapade through the shelves of history books led to the artist turning away from embodying the other, to revisiting her South-American heritage and photographing communities on the brinks of society. From *See Through Us* (2007-2010) documenting gender nonconforming, trans and nonbinary people in Turkey to *I Challenge You To Love Me* (2011-2014), focusing on the trans communities of Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, Blok's desire to photograph lesbian, gay trans and queer people not only brought her closer to the community, but also let the people within it discover beauty and social acceptance within their politically contentious bodies. Like her former series *Blood Ties and Other Bonds*, *Adventures in Cross-Casting* travelled internationally, mutating and shifting with every new relation and connection.

Beyond the fixed image and ever towards an ‘ethics of seeing’

Arriving in the penultimate room of Blok’s monumental exhibition, we come face-to-face with *Gender Monologues* (2016- onwards), an interactive-video media installation, which comments on the historical and cultural understanding of race and gender through cross-dressing and performativity. Born out of the earlier series *Adventures in Cross-Casting*, it continues in Blok’s vein of performance, as she invites actors to take on the roles of their chosen cultural-historical archetypes of the opposite sex, rewriting our understanding of gender stereotypes. Archetypes of religion, pop culture and political activism interact with each other through the framing of the video. Consuming both at once the spoken word and the subtle gestures, shuffles and nods, the audience is integrated into the work, becoming the seventh ‘portrait’. I sit and listen to Black Orpheus’ sweet melancholic ode to Eurydice serenade me entirely with her clear tone. In the golden age of reels and a lightning speed of image consumption, this multi-sensory approach to the photographic image enables a slowing down and looking within ourselves. As Susan Sontag reminds us in her seminal text *On Photography*, photographs are “an ethics of seeing.” As we become increasingly caught up in the addictive fanfare of scrolling, symptomatic of our day-to-day lives, *I Challenge You to Love Me*, could not have arrived at a more pertinent moment in time. Sitting down beside Blok and a circle of new friends, all united on a serendipitous Sunday in support of the final week of her retrospective, I reflect upon how *Gender Monologues* was in fact my first encounter with Diana’s work, at the CCCC (Centre for Contemporary Culture Carmen) in Valencia, Spain in the summer of 2022. A pang of nostalgia momentarily seizes me, yet then I settle and breathe, remember where I am. As Orlando states, “The earth we walk on is a parched cinder. It is marl we tread and fiery cobbles scorch our feet. By the truth we are undone. Life is a dream.” After all, we are all chrysalides, floating through space and time.

Words by Maggie Kuzan

***I Challenge You To Love Me* closed Sunday 29 September 2024 at the Cobra Museum, Amstelveen, Amsterdam.**

As part of the finissage, cellist Frances-Marie Uitti performed five compositions, inspired by Blok’s work and using grammatical, structural and emotional elements.

Performance time: 15:00-15:30

More information on the Museum website:

<https://cobra-museum.nl/activiteiten/visual-sounds/?lang=en>

More about Diana Blok: <http://www.dianablok.com/>

Read more about Diana Blok’s work here:

<https://contemporarylynx.co.uk/re-reading-mythology-to-cross-cultures-gender-and-identity>