

## ‘EXPLORATIONS OF LIBERATION THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY’

### INTRODUCTION

What I seek to depict in my photography is not perfection nor technical brilliance, the picturesque for me is a distant and irrelevant concept because I believe that photography is obliged to tell a story, to evoke sublimity from the simple and to expose people, places and nature in the most subtle yet explorative ways. The intention of a photograph is to be more than the surface interpretation and become something that speaks of time, space and humanity. In my photography I am trying to find ways of allowing what is already there, the richness of what is there to be seen again, through the irritation of the new presence of a photograph. To invent new ways of seeing, feeling and invention in art while recognising traditional influence and defining modernity, my work and the work of the photographers/ artists/ creators that influence it empower the immediate and make it the universal. I firmly believe that the best photographers are not reporters, but authors. What I want to explore primarily in this essay is liberation, beginning with a focus on the landscape, from political, social and natural perspectives. The job of one who photographs landscape is to examine unknown immensities in exact and intimate detail, deciphering meaning from an expanse of human activity and consider man as a protagonist within it, this is exactly what the first two photographers in this study demonstrate with work relying as much on the landscape around the subject for the photograph to be the portrait of life it is. The landscape is forged by the politics, relationships and desires of man, hence a focus of liberation. Liberation allows me to consider landscape as an indexical structure for humanity while reflection upon my own perspective on the world, which is often shaped by the attainability of liberation. Photographers/ movements that I shall explore include Kitra Cahana, Mike Brodie, ‘Provoke’ and Robert Mapplethorpe. Each have provocations for their work embedded in modernity and the concepts of political and personal liberation by depicting perspectives that are deeply personal of both the subject, photographer and their environment. Creating such a relationship within the photograph, the intrigue becomes multi-faceted and telling of the photographers intentions. I ultimately want this essay to have explored the anthropology- culture, history, ideology of humanity behind the photographers and their work with a scope of liberation.

I shall begin this essay with the photographers Kitra Cahana and Mike Brodie, who both explore sub-culture and alternative ways of life in their work, from projects about cults in the suburbs of America to picturing freight-hopping nomads, they document the depths of society, uniquely. The second two studies shall dive more into the immediate metropolitan and social climate of modernity that informs my work. First is a study on Japanese photography collective ‘Provoke’ which explores photography as a means of political significance, directly channelling a liberal yet aggressive attitudes to the role of the image in society, featuring photos of protests, nudity and rioting in gritty black and white. I shall then move on to Robert Mapplethorpe, his work embodies the more immediate human, figurative style of photography that I am drawn to while still dealing with themes of liberation through his focus on homosexuality and masculinity in 60/70’s America, his inclusion shall fulfil a desire for this project to consider the different approaches to photography that define what liberation is.

### KITRA CAHANA

Kitra Cahana (b.1987) is a freelance documentary photographer, videographer, a photo/video artist and a TED speaker. She is a contributing photographer to National Geographic Magazine. She has a B.A. in philosophy from McGill University and a M.A. in Visual and Media anthropology from the Freie Universitat in Berlin. I like the way Cahana’s work captures life, real life, it’s raw and beautifully real. Evoking a sense of sentiment, the subjects are affectionately portrayed with equal justice for the surroundings, with them having the most effect on the overall opinion on the image. It’s one thing to take a photo of the life of a teenager in America, it is another to do it with abstraction and complete understanding with Cahana being a young person in America surrounded by the issues faced by the majority of her peers, therefore enhancing her analysis and relevance to capturing pure unedited snapshots of that segment of life. There’s a flow across all of her work with each photo having its own unique features but maintaining a separated form as if the subject and the surroundings have their own different story, subsequently leading to unlimited conclusions to her work. There is a connection between the subjects and the viewer, with the mix of human emotion that comes across vividly and the reality that it is not staged, helping it speak messages of integrated belief and struggle. I feel as if her photos were taken with a sense of liberation and denial of it, since her photos detailing poverty, faith and subculture encounter the troubling subjects of modernity such as illegality, doctrine and denied freedom. Her projects range from documenting religious festivals such as Falash Mura, a



single father living in the suburbs who has to make his way to a food bank pushing a pram along a highway to a shoot for National Geographic about the cult of Maria Lionza- who's followers believe their chosen saint will possess the body of the medium who entices the follower into a trance in which they often speak in tongues or harm themselves, Maria Lionza is known by members of the cult as 'La Reina' - the queen. The in-depth perspective of such a specific and unorthodox community in her work documenting the cult sums up the relevance and explorative approach to photography Cahana possesses while maintaining an artistic relevance in a wider context. Speaking volumes in empathy, her work relates to what many of us search for in life; it connects loss, value and salvage to the point in which her photography can be inferred as a reflection on either the fulfilment or lack of sympathy in the world. Ultimately, her work epitomises the job visual anthropology has in the world- to develop a universal understanding of human complexity and The use of light, shadow and the lack of technical specification in some of her work, for example 'American Teen' where the composition is usually darker or less clear, shows the lack of superficial elements and further assumes a un-photographically conscious vibe, this concedes to be an unapologetic portrayal of how teenagers live in American society. This way of shooting situation is carried through to when she was tasked by National Geographic to take photos of food insecurity in America. An incredibly venerable portrayal of what it actually means in the world's richest country, Cahana showed what most people are afraid to talk about, or even notice when their head is above the water. I like how she has addressed this assignment because instead of being just a photographer, she has herself empathised with the issues the people in her photos face, meaning a greater connection and meaning to the reasoning behind why the issue is relevant. With it not being all about the photograph, but the documentation and emotionally humanized value of what's going on, the photos speak of a greater and more powerful hurt that effects more than what would be originally perceived. When looking at her photos collectively, they are a rebellion against a dysfunctional society of hate and loss, the range of themes and locations in her work, featuring everyone from the venerable to the foolish, are accepting, raw and a speak of collective livelihoods that transpire to be heard.

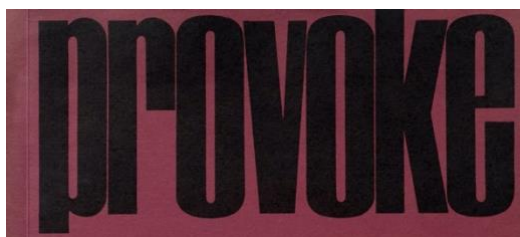


## MIKE BRODIE



Described as “unashamedly romantic and warm toned” by photographers Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, the first photo book by American photographer Mike Brodie entitled “a period of Juvenile Prosperity” spread like wildfire in the photographic community, alighting attention due to its unorthodox becoming and un- challenged beauty. Shot entirely on a polaroid camera whilst Brodie, 18 at the time, freight-hopped across America, it brilliantly summarises wonder and discovery among nomadic perspectives. The photographs, real and un-refined, expose fragments of what it means to be liberated in American society. Encountering themes such as a beauty, connection and human spirit, it represents a voice rarely heard when it comes to youth. It is a true documentation of a perspective away from the orthodox, one that speaks of wonder. The entire motive, or lack of one, surrounding Brodie's work, is what attracts me to him. Brodie says that he never really wanted to be an artist. But he's travelled over fifty thousand miles by train, lived with an underground rock band in Philadelphia and with vegans in Portland, while documenting it all on a polaroid camera then a Nikon F3 35mm. His images of trains with the earth flying by, of a tender sleeping embrace are touching and terrifying, exciting and raw. What becomes of the inferences sprouted from his art encompass freedom- something that has had a very personal effect on myself as a youth in a world of increasing complexity. Freedom in itself has many meanings whether realistically or metaphorically, but I simply see it is something that can epitomise everything

I want to do, and everything I want to be, whether it be aspiration or emotional change, it has a substantial effect on how I go about every day. With the definition constantly evolving, relating to current political trends and cultural changes, evolving anthropological definition suggests freedom and discovery to be the main category. Applied to Brodie's work, I can infer themes of rebellion, challenging authority, and questioning society's expectations in general. The fact that he is immersed in this capsule of rebellion with his subjects is why the photographs he has taken are so beautifully real. They have a conscience that co-ordinate with youth and finely categorises elements of him, the photographer and the collective ideology of those he is with. It is by abandoning a specific regard for convention that creates this oasis of photographic freedom in the form of “a period of juvenile prosperity”.



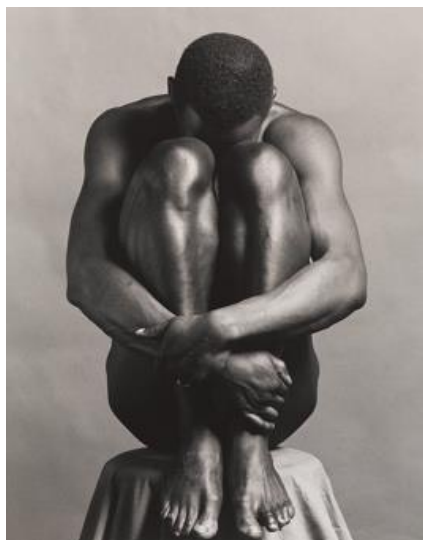
In 1968, a young group of radical Japanese photographers and writers joined forces to create 'Provoke', an anti-establishment magazine that would come to define an entire era of Japanese post-war avant-garde photography. Lasting just three issues, its gritty pages opened onto an urban darkroom of youthful rebellion where brazen snapshots of Tokyo met with bold texts on the subversive power of the photographic medium. It catches the eye- its abrupt presentation of a radically important time in Japanese history, this is why I feel for an exploration into rebellion and freedom through photography this is perfect. Emphasizing chaos, reaction and fight through its images it endorses inquisition while leaving the photographs with no explanation, making way for fresh perspectives, immortalising them and subjecting them to modernity eternally. When first researching this movement I thought how globally significant can a Japanese photographic magazine really be? But with its anti-establishment motifs, it reflects political movements and reactions both then and now, causing it to become relevant in subject matter and ideology to those seeking similar objectives today. Considering this, what could be more relevant today with Donald Trump as president of the United States, Britain leaving the European Union in undemocratic chaos and ecosystems failing because of political ignorance, than a photographic catalogue on the relationship between image and protest? My original question was frequently asked as the magazine made its way on a two-year exhibition tour in the US, yet as it came to a close on its last date at the Art Institute of Chicago, it was just eight days before Donald Trump's inauguration. Quite the irony and further evidence towards it being a catalogue of impulse, rebellion and the reality that speaks of decades, not just one moment in time. What draws me to it primarily is how it almost invents a different way of seeing, just like all artistic revolutions in history, it has taken a common practice and by changing the subject has created radically important catalogue of life.

Without direction and wildly abstract in presentation, Provoke redefined Japanese photography and created new forms of expression disparate to previous artistic movements. I am inspired by its flare, the spirit of the movement created not just artistic revolution but gave the powerless a state of mind to escape to under the oppression that it faced. The magazine has described as being greatly important in freeing Japanese photography from 'subservient' means to it being as artistically liberating as words. With the majority of subjects in the magazine being scenes of youths, it speaks of protest, emotion and chaos. Provoke(s) philosophies are critical and discriminative of normality; whilst most campaigns and movements are granted recognition because of this ideology, rightfully so, provoke becomes outstanding in how it dramatically led Japanese photography into new perspective and stance among the world. Everything from the foundations to the ultimate philosophy of the movement introduce the concept of liberation as a political, personal and relevant subject to modernity and artistic expression. In response to oppression and force, it defines the spirit of a population and re-invented a reality for youth in Japan. It is a beacon of light for contemporary Japanese culture, which is why I take so much influence from it, since from both an anthropological and artistic viewpoint I can use it as a means of defining my intentions with my own work.

## ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

Robert Mapplethorpe was born November 4, 1946, in Floral Park, New York. He left home in 1962 and enrolled at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, in 1963, where he studied painting and sculpture and received his B.F.A. in 1970. During this time, he met artist, poet, and musician Patti Smith. She encouraged his work and posed for numerous portraits when they lived together in Brooklyn and in the Chelsea Hotel in Manhattan, a gathering place for artists, writers, and musicians in the early 1970s.

Mapplethorpe was a radical. In brash, fearless photographs from the 1970s and '80s he found an outlet for queer desires that were widely considered lethal to the American way of life. In 1990, shortly after his death from AIDS-related complications, curators at the Contemporary Arts Centre in Cincinnati were charged with obscenity for displaying his work. The same year, the head of the American Family Association called Mapplethorpe's photography 'nothing more than the sensational presentation of potentially obscene material'. More than a quarter of a century later, the New York Times declines to reproduce his raciest images, even for editorials celebrating his





genius. His focus upon homosexuality and the male form through sensational photography obviously made him unpopular in the 60/70's, which is a large reason why I am drawn to his art. There is no art without opposition, a piece of art is successful not when people like it but when people hate it, in its provocation Mapplethorpe gained notoriety and so forth became part of the cult of underground artists, authors and photographers of 70's New York who defied convention and through art sought liberation for their identities in society. At his most inventive, Mapplethorpe treated shock as a jumping-off point rather than a goal. Working within the constraints of the most literal art form ever devised, he found ways of transcending literalism, producing images for which labels like 'radical' and 'conservative' are beside the point.

All photographs of the body are potentially 'political', inasmuch as they are used to sway our opinions or influence our actions. An image, the supposedly autonomous art object, represents many of our fundamental attitudes and values. Mapplethorpe works with the body in a way that liberates the true values of its intentions, taking it beyond commonality and exposing truth with poetic, natural intention. His inner desires, emotions and thoughts are broadcast through his photography, exploring the figure and its place in time, ignoring the many societal labels that may be cast upon it and encountering personal liberation where the photographs tell a story of the subject and the photographer. In photos such as *Dennis With Flowers* and *Dennis with thorns*, this is clearly evident in the exposure and general fragility of the images. Looking at them politically or not, they have paralleled undertones of racial and homosexual liberation and entrapment with the flowers and thorns being held by the subject. Presenting a contrast between, simply, life and death or peace and war in unrestrained yet elegantly minimalist fashion. The parallels between the two, simple in difference speak beyond the aesthetic and takes the photographs into a daring, political realm. Mapplethorpe essentially uses the nude as a canvas for political projection while questioning the limits of fashion photography. Unlike the other photographers in this study Mapplethorpe focuses on the internal and emotional, reflecting on reality introspectively and with cultural significance. Instead of using the landscape, he uses people in pure interrogative circumstances to represent the concept of liberation.



## CONCLUSION

Within this study, I have focused upon the theme of liberation from personal, political and social perspectives in an attempt to try and gain further insight into what inspires my own work. I began with photographers that focused their work on subculture, freedom and religion in a documentary-esque style as a way of exploring the importance of anthropology by means of understanding human complexities. Kitra Cahana and Mike Brodie show that the role of the photographer is to not just be the person behind the camera but the person who is within the photograph, evoking a relationship through it between the subject, viewer and photographer.

The latter part of the essay then focuses on liberation through the unexpected, in Provoke and Robert Mapplethorpe's daring political provocations. Using shock as a jumping off point rather than a goal, they encapsulated the perspectives of their societies and invented

END

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