Julia Margret Cameron, Dorothea Lange And Claude Cahun: The Pioneers Of New Styles Of Photography

The 19th and 20th century was a pivotal moment in art history as it saw the invention of the photograph and the development of relatively cheap and accessible cameras through mass production. While the invention of photography was revolutionary in itself, the mass production of cameras fundamentally changed the way people view and interact with art as now more people than ever had access to image making and documentation. Because of the fight for photography to be viewed as a fine art in the years prior and now this accessibility many new and unlikely voices were heard within the art community. People such as Julia Margret Cameron, Dorothea Lange and Claude Cahun helped to shape movements within art such as pictorialism, documentary and surrealist photography. Their use of portraiture and character to tell a story through their photography illuminates the idea that the mass production of cameras aided in sharing stories that would never have been told otherwise.

In an early photography world where images are scientific and objective Julia Margret Cameron made an impact with her soft, intentionally staged illustration like images. Like many artists her work was marginally unrecognised or even disliked during her life, the photographic journal even wrote that in her work “all that is good in photography has been neglected and the shortcomings of the art are prominently exhibited.” However since the mid 20th century her work has been recognised and renowned for not only her striking portraits of celebrities but also her depiction of her own creative characters and story, particularly ones inspired by poetry and fiction such as Parting of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere (1874). Mirjam Brusius writes that “The truth of Cameron's images lies not in their precision but in the allusion they make to the sitters' characters by blurring their physical form” which is a contrast to how her work was received at the time likely as the use soft focus and acceptance of imperfections in the image are an example of pictorialism which was not a readily known style till after the 1880’s. The characters she depicts through the use of this style allowed her to communicate her personal vision and create these illustration-like photographs which would have never been done without a camera.

Despite Dorothea Lange’s work being created much later, photography was still linked with a sense of objectivity and fact which became problematic with the growing use of documentary photography in the media and the advancements in technology to alter images. Lange is the photographer behind Migrant Mother (1936), one of the most recognisable images of the great depression and despite its simple documentary appearance, there is controversy surrounding the image. This is due to the nature of the work being a commissioned by the Farm Security Administration, which labelled itself as an object view of life throughout the great depression. The idea that the image was stagged is widely known, Linda Gordon writes how “it is clear that Lange asked the mother and children to move into several different positions” due to the compassion throughout the other photos she took of the family. Even more controversy arises through the details of her conversation with Florence Owen Thompson which can make the work appear as an exploitation of the family, the name of the mother in the work is not recorded and lost for many years and her story told by Lange allegedly incorrectly reported details from the encounter, creating a story that suited the objectives of the FSA. Lange never denies her manipulation of scenarios to create an image that she desires, even stating in regard to it being

considered propaganda that “everything is propaganda for what you believe in”. Propaganda or not it is clear that similarly to Cameron she is creating a character to convey her story, the woman in this photo is no longer Florence Owens Thompson but rather a nameless story of the great depression that Lange has created through pose and framing.

Where pictorialism and documentary photography are movements that developed in photography many artists adapted from what was going on around them in other art movements, Claude Cahun is an example of an artist who does this through their surrealist photography. Born Lucy Schwob, they stated that they never identified with male or female saying in their autobiography that “neuter is the only gender that always suits me”. They began to use photography as a way to express how they were feeling Jennifer Shaw speaks on this saying “Cahun refused to accept cultural standards of femineity, instead Cahun began to take photographs… where she actively refuses to appear feminine.” In their work they began to use portraiture and the creation of character to tell a story similarly to the process of Cameron and Lange, however different through the use of self-portraiture and the creation of gender roll defying characters. Their series of photographs titled I am in training don’t kiss me (1927) depicts bold symbolism both traditionally masculine and feminine, creating a juxtaposed character showing similarities to a strong man combined with feminine features. This was just one of the characters they designed as a way to offer insight into their unconventional relationship with gender, recording many others though photography as well.

Photographers such as Cameron, Lange and Cahun’s work are examples of how the mass production of cameras gave significantly more people a chance to capture and publish images, leading to a broader range of ideologies within art making communities. While their ideas often revolutionary such as of Cahun’s views on gender, they were also vital in forming the visual styles that helped to make photography a fine art such as Cameron’s work in pictorial photography. This idea of the camera being an accessible tool only increased after the 20th century, as technology got cheaper and today photography is embedded in art works, more people than ever have access to image making though photography as a way to express ideas and beliefs just as Julia Margret Cameron, Dorothea Lange and Claude Cahun did.

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