

Show Me as I Want to be Seen @ CJM

Written by: Tirza True Latimer

May 7, 2019



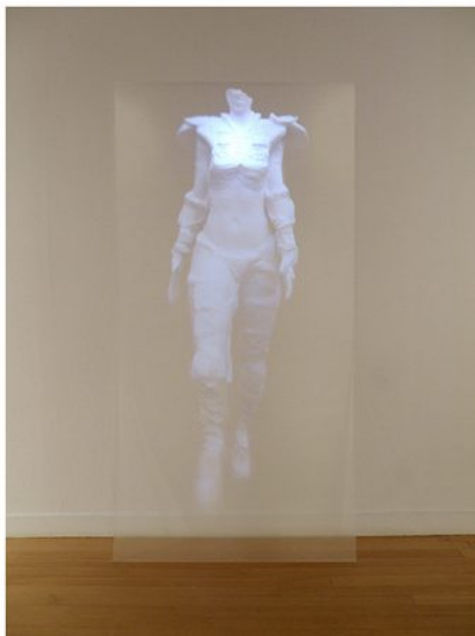
Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe) Illustration from *Aveux non Avenus*. Paris Editions du Carrefour, 1930

This major exhibition presents ten contemporary artists –Nicole Eisenman, Rhonda Holberton, Hiwa K, Young Joon Kwak, Zanele Muholi, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Gabby Rosenberg, Tschabalala Self, Davina Semo, and Isabel Yellin—whose work in a range of mediums interrogates identity. But first, it introduces a pair of predecessors, Claude Cahun (1894–1954) and Marcel Moore (1892–1972), who Natasha Matteson, the exhibition’s curator, identifies as “pioneers” in the representation of “fluid,” “complex” and “constructed” notions of the self.

At the entrance to the galleries where *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen* unfolds, visitors encounter eight high-resolution scans of collages conceived by Cahun and Moore for the magnum opus *Aveux non Avenus (Disavowals)* published in 1930. The bookplates reassemble images from the couple’s photographic oeuvre, original drawings and reproductions clipped from art-historical and popular cultural sources.

Some of the collages also bear hand-written inscriptions. One of them reads “under this mask, another mask. I will never be finished removing all these faces.” The formulation affirms the contention of the book, and of this exhibition: the mutability of what we call “the self.”

The exhibition title, *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen*, doesn’t quite drive this point home, but the artworks selected for inclusion – both from Cahun and Moore and the others – do the job well, the former serving as guideposts, strategically interspersed throughout the exhibition. For example, Rhonda Holberton’s digital animation *The Ground Was Never Stable in the First Place*(2015) features a faceless avatar striding forward into a virtual abyss without milestones or landmarks. Like Cahun and Moore, Holberton avows the self by “disavowing” what Matteson calls “its constancy.”



Rhonda Holberton, *The Ground was Never Stable in the First Place*, 2015, single channel HD color digital animation (looping), acrylic sheet 48 x 96 inches

Since *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen* presents the Cahun/Moore duo as progenitors, some background on their life and work together is indispensable for understanding the show's ambitions. Born to a prominent Jewish publishing family from Nantes and the niece of the Symbolist author Marcel Schwob, Claude Cahun (née Lucy Schwob), was well connected to the French literary world. Marcel Moore (family name: Suzanne Malherbe) was the daughter of a well-off Protestant family. Moore studied at the fine arts academy in Nantes where she showed early promise as a visual artist and designer.

The lives of Cahun and Moore became inextricably entwined when they were still schoolgirls. They were already lovers when Cahun's father married Moore's widowed mother, making them stepsisters. The family relationship enabled them to live openly together from the very start of their relationship.

Moore regularly contributed fashion illustrations to the Schwob family newspaper *Phare de la Loire*, where Cahun's earliest writings also appeared. Moore later illustrated Cahun's books—the first, a Symbolist-inspired book of verses, *Vues et visions* (Views and Visions), was published in 1919.

In Paris, where the couple took up residence in 1921, they participated in various avant-garde theatrical ventures (Cahun performed, Moore designed sets and costumes); volunteered at Sylvia Beach's bookstore, Shakespeare and Co.; hosted cultural salons and political meetings in their Montparnasse studio; and became active contributors to the Surrealist movement.



Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe, *Untitled [I am in training don't kiss me]*, 1927. Gelatin silver print.

Throughout the 1920s, Cahun and Moore pursued a project of staged photos that yielded hundreds of images, mostly featuring Cahun in a variety of roles that intervened visually into the established repertoire of gender stereotypes. In 1930, Moore integrated these photographs into in the series of collages published in *Aveux non avenue*. The book bears Cahun's signature, but Moore's crucial participation is also acknowledged.

During the period of the book's gestation, the late 1920s, the couple's collaborations with the Théâtre Esotérique, Salle Adar, and with Pierre Albert-Birot's innovative Théâtre du Plateau brought them into contact with André Breton and his Paris Surrealist circle. In dialog with Surrealists, Cahun and Moore's work became increasingly political. They participated in Surrealist exhibitions and demonstrations, signed Surrealist tracts, and found, for a time, a community of kindred spirits.

By the late 1930s, however, they perceived their life and work in Paris as unsustainable. The Surrealist movement split into bitter factions; anti-Semitic manifestations became increasingly commonplace; war with Germany seemed likely if not inevitable. Disillusioned and anxious, the couple relocated to their summer retreat on the Channel Isle of Jersey. They were not safe there for long.

Soon German soldiers invaded the Channel Islands. Over half of the population of Jersey fled to the English mainland. This time, Cahun and Moore chose to stay and make a stand. There would be no retreat.



Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), untitled [Portrait of Claude with Nazi badge between her teeth], 1945

The “sisters” (as they were locally known) distinguished themselves with ingenious resistance activities. Masterminding a two-woman counter-propaganda campaign, they covertly distributed anti-fascist tracts for years, but were ultimately apprehended and imprisoned. After their arrest, German military authorities requisitioned their house and used it as a barracks and base of occupation operations. Soldiers rifled through their possessions, appropriating what they pleased, and destroying books and artworks they considered “perverted.”

The couple very narrowly escaped deportation, thanks to a sympathetic bailiff who procrastinated in processing their paperwork. They were released when the island was liberated on May 8, 1945.

When Cahun and Moore returned to their ransacked house, they discovered that many of their favorite photographs and artworks had not survived the occupation. Cahun never fully recovered from the war, their two-year imprisonment, the estrangement from Paris, the defilement of their home, the destruction of their work, and the travails of the war’s aftermath. She died at the age of 60 in 1954. Moore buried her in the cemetery next door to their home.

Moore lived on in Jersey for nearly 20 more years, taking her own life in 1972 at the age of 80. Both are buried together in the churchyard next door to where they had taken many photographs. They share a tombstone bearing an inscription from Revelations 1:21 “and I saw new heavens and a new earth.” The headstone is etched with both of their names and two Stars of David. Although Moore had never converted, and Cahun avowed secularism and agnosticism, the symbols on the gravestone marked their solidarity with all those oppressed and imperiled under the Nazi regime—Jews, homosexuals, free-thinking intellectuals, modern artists, modern women.



Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malhere), Untitled, 1928

This history of anti-fascist resistance is not the only thing that makes Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, and by extension the exhibition *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen*, a fit for the Contemporary Jewish Museum. In the exhibition catalog, CJM's Executive Director Lori Starr makes the claim, "To be Jewish is to be queer." She cites an observation made by Rabbi Benay Lappe, another contributor to the catalog: "What it means to be queer is to embody a profound sense of otherness, the insights from which you walk through the world as a critique of the mainstream."

All of the artists in the show could be said to do exactly that.

Although Matteson, the curator, describes Cahun and Moore's work as "prescient," this is not the first time photographs by Cahun/Moore have been juxtaposed with works by contemporary artists (e.g. Cindy Sherman, Maya Deren, Tacita Dean, and Francesca Woodman among them). However, she does identify a fresh set of resonances in contemporary feminist (and mostly queer) artistic practices. "The exhibition, she writes, "links Cahun and Moore's revolutionary work to the work of ...contemporary artists who conjure, validate, and update their earlier tactics for the current moment." With these 21st century artists, Cahun and Moore have in common the reclamation of agency through the disavowal of classifying systems that serve and preserve dominant interests.



Rhonda Holberton, Foil, 2014, unique fragrance in glass atomizer

Jessica Silverman Gallery
488 Ellis Street, San Francisco, CA 94102
415.255.9508 • jessicasilvermangallery.com

FOIL, one of my favorite pieces (again by Holberton), takes aim at state sponsored systems of surveillance and control. Research conducted by the CIA in the early 1990s acknowledges human scent as a highly accurate biometric, more failsafe than fingerprinting, facial recognition or retinal scanning. Holberton created *FOIL*, a fragrance line distilled from smelly T-shirts donated by friends. She bottled the fragrances in atomizers, which can serve to mask a person's signature scent and foil this form of olfactory surveillance.

Although it can be misleading to call historical figures "prescient"—to define them, that is, by what came later—Matteson adroitly avoids the pitfalls of prolepsis (foremost, the erasure of generative historical conditions). She acknowledges the pertinence of Cahun and Moore's self-imaging experiments today while situating the artists carefully within their own social and political environment. That environment was, needless to say, very different than our own.

Yes, Zanele Muholi may share with Cahun/Moore an awareness of historical portrait conventions and the self-framing potential of photography. Like Cahun/Moore, Muholi mobilizes pose, make-up, costume and coiffure. But queer life for a woman of color in contemporary South Africa has little in common with the experience of well-to-do European lesbians living in Paris between the two World Wars. Nevertheless, Muholi's fierce embrace of Otherness, in and through portraiture, makes the juxtaposition with Cahun/Moore visually powerful and conceptually justifiable.



Zanele Muholi, *Somnyama Ngonyama II*, Oslo, 2015, gelatin silver print

Show Me as I Want to Be Seen, by staging such comparisons, does not so much posit artistic influence as it raises awareness of the proliferation, in our times, of interventions by artists into the image-making technologies where discourses (thus ideologies) of social subjectivity, and the individual "self," take shape.

We see how ten contemporary artists adopting a range of materials and expressive modes (Isabel Yellin's stuffed leatherettes, Tschabalala Self's larger-than-life fabric-collaged portraits; Young Joon Kwak's anthropomorphic abstractions cast in resin; Davina Semo's mosaics of shattered auto glass) have re-invented the creative strategies innovated by subversives of Cahun and Moore's generation. All of the artists contributing to this show, like Cahun/Moore, re-cast existing visual vocabularies and technologies of reproduction to create new spaces of possibility, new ways of seeing and being seen.