

# i-D

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## MARY MANNING'S PHOTOGRAPHY SHOWS US WHAT LIFE CAN LOOK LIKE AFTER PATRIARCHY COLLAPSES

**FOR THE POST TRUTH TRUTH ISSUE, THE ARTIST SITS DOWN WITH CHARLIE PORTER TO DISCUSS ART, EMOTION AND HER CREATIVE PROCESS**



I love Mary Manning. We met in the spring of 2017, introduced by friends. We were in New York, a city that has been Mary's home for 12 years now. She was born in Alton, a city on the Mississippi in Illinois. That spring of 2017, I was visiting NY with the man who would become my husband. Rich and I had only met five weeks before. A year later, we married at City Hall in New York. The witness at our wedding was Mary.

She is an exemplary human who has taught us both much about how to live queer life. She believes in radicalism and community and emotion and creativity and love. She is optimistic for a better way of being. She is well aware of the threat that comes with being queer and female and compassionate in Trump's America. Still, she pushes on.

Mary is an artist whose work is centred around photography, which has long been part of her life. Her art is also in how she collages her images and the materials she chooses to arrange with them. Mary has taken photographs for decades, but only in the past few years has she felt able to call herself what she is: an artist. I am obsessed with her work, with what her eye sees, by what she allows me to see. Mary and I have had many conversations about the practicalities of her work, her studio, how much time she gets to dedicate to her work – but we had never spoken about the work itself.



Mary was in London this spring, so we sat down to talk. As I was preparing for the conversation, I realised that the obvious questions were all the wrong questions. Photography is dominated by patriarchy. To ask obvious questions about photography is to accept this patriarchal status quo. Mary's work is all about showing how life should be when patriarchy finally collapses. And so there are no questions. I love to do interviews where there are no questions. That is how we begin. We were in Leila's Cafe in Shoreditch, by the way, and caffeinated.

Charlie Porter [as the recorder is turned on]: I'm trying to kind of think of a starting point.

Mary Manning: Well I'll tell you about recently finding an interview with a well-regarded photography professor in the UK. He was Wolfgang Tillmans's professor – I found it looking through old issues of Purple. There's this passage in this conversation they are having where he's talking about asking his students what their photography is about, but then never wanting an answer.

Right. It was so cool, because you know if you got an answer it was too... that there couldn't be one really. It just has to be an almost inexplicable thing.

I was just thinking about the presumption that photography has an answer. Exactly. I guess painters get asked what kind of painting they do. I find the question, "What do you take pictures of?" really hard to answer, because it's just this extension of being

inside my head, or just seeing the world and not necessarily trying to present a story. It's just some pleasing quality of something I'm looking at, and then just deciding to record it, but also feeling somewhat sure that there's a humanistic quality in it, or maybe something that maybe somebody else is going to enjoy too. It's so hard to say what photography's job is.

Do you enjoy how hard it is to answer? I'm starting to enjoy it more. It used to shut me down and it felt like it was part of this other insecurity, like I didn't have the qualification to be doing photography. I'm self-taught, and most people in my life have gone through some sort of course or encouragement. Until about six years ago I wouldn't even allow myself to be called an artist. It used to really stress me out but now I feel I can handle it, I can feel I can be more playful with the answer.

And actually the inability to answer opens up a whole new field. I feel like it's been easier, especially having more conversations with people who have nuanced ideas about art, being a human, and those two things at the same time.

It seems to me we're living in a time when photography has started to reveal itself. It seems like there's all these prescribed notions of what it is and what it can do, mostly prescribed by white men. But those walls can fall away and photography can reveal itself as something other. Totally. This something "other" I guess is what I finally got comfortable with. When I started to have exhibitions in New York, that was such a shift in my perception. I stopped trying to think about how I thought photography had to be and just started being. You



have this eye, this is your work, and then actually that is photography. It doesn't have to be about a technical set up. I just had this real strange panic that what I was doing wasn't photography somehow. I was like, I'm just taking snapshots. But then there are so many photographers whose work I love that is similar — they're recording their life through where they're at, what's going on in their lives and the lives around them.

And also losing people. Getting to another adult stage where you lose people you love, through relationships or death, and that photography and art can be about those relationships. It feels important to start to make work that is witnessing something. It's going to bring that emotion or feel relatable to other people.

Your work is a recorder of emotion. It's like it's a way for you to explore pure emotion in adulthood, when for many adults it's the norm to temper or shut down emotion. I was just talking to your husband, Rich [Porter, an artist] about this idea that sentimentality in work is something looked down upon, that there's this idea that emotional work is uninteresting. Emotional work is something I feel so much more drawn to in any medium. I think it's actually just finding a way to put those images together in these compact poems that can be really aesthetic, or really emotional and personal.

It's actually magic that what you and other queer humans are doing is so radical and so emotional and so undefined. It feels interesting even just thinking about being in New York and all the different degrees of styles and shapes and genders and identities of photography that's around me, and being like, oh yeah! It's a very small field of like-minded humans. It's cool! That's a good thought.





