

# LOUPE

MORE THAN PHOTOGRAPHY

# PLAY

Play is how we learn about the world, engage with others, create, develop, and enjoy ourselves. In this issue we explore different expressions of play.



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LOUPE

PLAY

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**Mitchell Moreno creates imaginative worlds of alternate characters inspired by requests found on gay and queer hook up sites. Through performance Moreno explores self-portraiture as a therapeutic tool for self acceptance. I spoke virtually with Moreno to discuss *BODY COPY*, as well as their background in performance, their approach to embodying different personas, and the process behind creating the different scenes.**

# ***BODY* COPY**

**Interviewer** Megan Wilson-De La Mare  
**Photography** Mitchell Moreno



**LOOKING FOR A LIVING DOLL**



**FAGS/FEMS/QUEENS**

**Megan Wilson-De La Mare** What initially interested you to make *BODY COPY* and focus on gay and queer hook up sites?

**Mitchell Moreno** There were two key triggers. First, I'm interested in why gay and queer sexual identities are so much more tribal and atomised than their cisnet counterparts. Second, I used to suffer from body dysmorphia and disordered eating, and for a long time I didn't want to be photographed or to see myself in photographs. This series has been very much about confronting that crisis.

**MWDLM** Performance plays a big part in the series. How has your background in theatre informed your approach to photography?

**MM** I was lucky enough to work across several different disciplines – theatre, circus, opera, puppetry, and stage illusion. This gave me an understanding of how the medium is just a vehicle, which can never fulfil its full potential unless informed by interesting questions and ideas. I brought that with me to photography, so my approach has always been conceptual whereas I think a lot of photographers come to it as a descriptive tool. Technically, when I'm behind the camera I'm often drawing on formal skills learned in live arts, such as understanding the effects of light, the role of colour, how bodies operate in space, the visual construction of narrative, and so on. And then if I'm in front of the camera being the subject, as in *BODY COPY*, I'm very attentive to the character's gesture, expression, and internal thought, just as an actor might be.

**MWDLM** Part of the project comprises a conceptual text piece made up of a thousand requests from adverts found on gay and queer hook up sites. Can you tell us about your experience searching for and selecting the adverts? What were your initial motives in selecting the text?

**MM** I initially approached the gathering of the found text in a very unstrategic and subjective way. I just scrolled through thousands of adverts and wrote down ones that caught my eye – it could be because they were unusual or banal, funny or disturbing. Once I had arranged them alphabetically and started editing them down to a thousand, I began thinking more about rhythm, repetition and juxtaposition, treating the piece almost as a free-verse poem. Finally, from this edit I chose the adverts that I wanted to respond to photographically.

**MWDLM** It's interesting that you mention your interest in gay and queer identities as being tribal and atomised. When I first read the adverts together I felt they had a competitive nature. Have you come to understand these identities more through the research and making of this work?

**MM** The articulation of identity categories through language in these transactional spaces is highly complex. And so inevitably I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I respect anyone's right to define themselves however they choose, and to present in a way that feels to them most aligned with their internal sense of self. Reading someone's description of themselves, or of the type of person they're looking for, is often joyous to me, especially when it's way off the centre of normativity. The digital network can validate marginal identities, build communities, and facilitate connections which previously would have been impossible because they just would have been too niche to reach critical mass in the physical world.

On the other hand, strictly defined subcultural or tribal labels are often by their very nature exclusionary. They can foreclose our potential to inhabit the full scope of our humanity, or to allow it to be expressed in others. And of course they are frequently racist, transphobic, ableist, and homophobic. I've read through tens of thousands of adverts on sites where men want to meet up with other men and I'm always shocked by the prevalence of ideas around 'straightness' and stereotypical masculinity which uncritically reinforce the heteronormative hierarchy. It can be very toxic.

**MWDLM** Was it always obvious to you to explore gay and queer hook up sites through performance?

**MM** I think a lot of the folk on these sites are themselves enacting identity, social and sexual interactions in very self-conscious and constructed ways: performance is already an inherent part of the discourse. My original idea was actually to create an 'ideal' response to an advert very quickly, post it online, arrange to meet with the person if they wanted to, and then document the hook-up. But as you can imagine it would have been logistically and ethically very complicated, and I just didn't feel I could take it on.



**BORED UP FOR SOMETHING  
DIFFERENT SURPRISE ME**



**MASTER SEEKS YOUNG SLIM  
SLAVE 4 MUMMIFICATION**





**STR8 CHAV TRACKY  
LAD 4 SAME**



**FIT TWINK WANTS HAIRY  
LATIN LOVER - REGULAR**

**MWDLM** To what extent do you embody the characters when you're in front of the camera?

**MM** I try to inhabit the imaginative world of each character as fully as possible. Sometimes the character has a clear objective towards the camera or viewer – for example to seduce, to intimidate, etc – so this gives me something to 'play'. I'd also point out that some of the pictures are very close to facets of my authentic self and are therefore easier to access, whereas others are a much bigger stretch.

**MWDLM** Has playing out the characters benefited you personally? Have you learnt or gained anything from the experience?

**MM** The process has definitely been therapeutic. Celebrating my femmeness; being shown in unflattering ways; exposing my body: these are steps that I couldn't have taken even just a few years ago. I've also come to understand another dynamic that is at play. I work as a builder and decorator, and I'm often angry at how physical labour is exploited and undervalued within the capitalist economy. But going home and putting those same skills to use in the service of art has felt healing. Also, sometimes I've been able to pilfer wallpaper or paint from jobs to use in my sets - a petty infraction which is very gratifying.

**It's brilliant pretending to be other people, everyone should have a dressing-up box and a large selection of wigs at home**

**MWDLM** Do you find that channelling various personas through the characters enables you to access different aspects of yourself?

**MM** It's brilliant pretending to be other people – everyone should have a dressing-up box and a large selection of wigs at home! But on a serious note, I think most of us have multiple and sometimes contradictory facets to our personalities. Certainly, it's something I've been aware of in myself since I was very young, and I think this has to do with the dynamic frictions I've experienced throughout my life: growing up feeling alien from my homophobic and violent family; being a working-class student at an elitist university; being queer while working as a builder, and so on. You become well practised in dialling up or dialling down aspects of yourself depending on context. It's an experience shared by lots of queer and other marginalised folks, and it's often driven by shame. Thankfully I'm past most of that now, so I feel able to be my authentic self almost all of the time.

**MWDLM** Throughout the series the sets are very well executed, from the furniture and decor to the small details with the pictures on the wall and your tattoos - I now see how your background in building might have influenced this. Can you tell us a bit about your aesthetic approach to making the series?

**MM** Well on a basic level it's been very much defined by practical considerations – every image is made on a shoe-string budget, in a corner of my flat, with me having to do everything myself. So there's a kind of DIY quality to the series which you wouldn't see if you were working on location, or with better resources. Beyond that, ideally I'm trying to construct the elements in the frame so that they're both visually pleasing and operate on a functional level - for example in communicating something about class or character. Obviously I think a lot about colour, working as I do in this series with an extremely restricted palette.

Sometimes I'm drawing on art-historical references and the tradition of pictorial portraiture. Other times I'm thinking about camp, by which I don't mean effeminacy, but rather a knowing excess or an over-investment in the performance of person and place. I'm interested in this interplay of registers and how it can result in a kind of tonal awkwardness.



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**MWDLM** Looking through your series initially I was in stitches; there are some great subtly crafted elements throughout. With the 'awkwardness' you describe, has it been your intention to create a comic effect, and have you enjoyed the playful approach to photography?

**MM** Absolutely, and that's very much its appeal for me. I love it when people laugh at my photos.

**MWDLM** Also I'm really intrigued to know, who's been your favourite persona/character to play out so far?

**MM** I love all my children equally! [Laughs] Actually that's not true, there are definitely men in the series who I wouldn't want to meet in real life. The more playful, queerer, non-normative characters tend to be my favourites. And thinking about them now, it occurs to me that they tend to be the ones who are smiling, which is in itself telling. I'll confess that I do have a soft spot for 'kinky geek', who is sitting on a single bed in frilly pink knickers surrounded by his Star Wars Lego. He doesn't look like he has any agenda apart from having a nice time.

**MWDLM** I'll end on that note and thank you very much for sharing your series with us! I've thoroughly enjoyed talking about it with you. Do you have any upcoming plans for the project that you would like to direct our readers to?

**MM** All being well, I'll have a solo show of the series at the wonderful Photofusion in Brixton, London, this autumn. I'll be combining photographs, text, installation and performance. Please come visit if you can! 🍷





**LOVE A KINKY GEEK**