Unmasking Claude Cahun: Self-portraiture and the Androgynous Image

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

Signed: _________________________________

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Under this mask, another mask. I will never finish lifting up all these faces.

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All that can be found anywhere, can be found in Paris.

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We may not know exactly what sex is; but we do know that it is mutable.

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The past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable...

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Never interested in making self-portraits, she adapted a variety of personas.

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A novel is not a place one passes through; it is a place one inhabits.

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To plunge into the depths of the abyss...

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‘What does your conscience say? – “You shall become the person you are.”’.

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Abstract

This research is the result of my numerous journeys following the discovery of the French photographer, Claude Cahun, and the many similarities found between her work and that of my own. Included are many other women who were integral to my journey, though I focus on only a few of these women. They are Djuna Barnes, Romaine Brooks and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Searching through public archives, located in Washington D.C, USA, Maryland, USA and in Jersey, Channel Islands, I am looking for any evidence to suggest if they knew of Claude Cahun or if their individual works influenced one another in any way. They all moved in different circles though had many of the same acquaintances and all lived in relatively close proximity to one another whilst in Paris in the 1910s and 1920s.

The androgynous person dominates my self-portraits. It is the use of the androgynous being in their respective works which led to my research, from the monochrome androgynous portraits of Romaine Brooks, the ribaldry written imagery of androgynous characters in Barnes’ writing, the eccentricity gender crossing of the Baroness to the gender confusing self-portraits of Claude Cahun. A brief history of androgyny is given as it has had many transformations through the ages in religion and mythology which has manifested itself in the art and literature of those respective periods. I focus briefly on the use of androgyny in the art and literature in the period before Cahuns self-portraits and when Brooks, Barnes and the Baroness produced their works.

This leads to my own photographic self-portraits and to the work of contemporary photographers, including the photographer, Cindy Sherman and lesser known artists such as Tina Bara. The androgynous image, whether major or minor, is an aspect in all these photographers works, especially my own. I discuss these works and their relevance to Cahun, and of Cahuns influence on them. The use of text and the book as an art form is discussed and the methods used to produce these. Working with a camera and a typewriter from the period of which I write is an integral aspect of my art making process and is also discussed.
A ‘return home’ was also ascertained whilst undertaking this research. This manifested itself into the black and white photographs which are presented in bookform and contain a nostalgic aspect. Nostalgia for a place or time is discussed in relevance to my photographs and chosen art medium.

All of these elements meet together in an exhibition where the handmade book sits alongside twenty-four photographs, which are made up of twelve self-portraits and twelve photographs of significant places visited. They are shown along with material from Cahun and Barnes relevant archives which is both personal and pertinent to my journey. The result is another journey, this one involving not only myself, but also the viewer.