

Passing to *Be* Noticed: An Interview with Christopher Smith

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This special edition of *Fashion Theory* explores the theme of Passing, a term generally used to designate an individual's ability to enter a new group, by employing performative techniques that enable him, her or them to pass as a member of the crowd. It is a performance that invariably applies dress—referred to here in its broadest possible sense as “all body modifications and/or supplements” (Eicher 1995, 5)—to disguise elements of identity previously presumed to be “natural” or “essential.” The act of passing underlines the transformative potential of the

representation and power.
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Christopher Smith is a 25-year-old South African photographer born and raised in the coastal city of Port Elizabeth. At age 16, still closeted and with no prior photographic training, Smith began using self-portraiture as a way of learning photographic technique and expressing his inner-most fantasies. After coming out at the age of 21 in 2016, Smith began sharing his work on the Instagram account @mechrissmith. Still working from his childhood bedroom in Port Elizabeth using only a point-and-shoot camera and window light or a reading light, Smith's self-portraiture now deals primarily with personal fantasies of glamor, gender and violence.

All images from @mechrissmith and courtesy of the artist.

fashioned body which, through deliberate alterations of physical appearance, enables the wearer to go unnoticed as a certain race, nationality, sexuality, ethnicity or social class. However complex or ambiguous the motivation behind passing may be, the process is, ultimately, all about self-invention. And social media artist Christopher Smith is highly adept at reinventing himself. What his images make palpably clear is that identity is fluid and performative, neither static nor fixed (Figure 1).

From the confines of his bedroom in Port Elizabeth, a major seaport situated in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province, the 25-year old photographer creates evocative self-portraits that tantalize a global audience through his increasingly-popular Instagram account @mechrissmith. By donning different outfits to enact new personas online, Smith exposes the social, cultural and political anxieties surrounding identity construction in an increasingly connected world. It is a sartorial presentation that uses fashion to frustrate the boundaries of identity politics, which has attracted the attention of a host of contemporary magazines from *Another Man* (Blanks 2018) to the *New Yorker* (Orbey 2019). His meticulously-crafted posts underline the mercurial power of fashion and its visual iterations, which showcase Smith intermittently passing in various guises—one day as a choirboy, the next as a detective, a flapper, a gladiator, or a skater, the list is seemingly never-ending. The pared-back, uniform caption—"self-portrait"—that accompanies each image, regardless of its subject matter, rejects the view that identity can be contained as an inherent and unalterable essence. His images articulate Valerie Rohy's understanding that passing is "a performance in which one presents oneself as what one is not" (Rohy 1996, 219). Yet his cosmopolitan sampling of different identities displays no attempt to go unnoticed, to be accepted, nor to fit seamlessly within a certain group. Smith's oeuvre is less about moving from one racial, social or cultural group to another, so much as it is a rumination on the loss of identity in the online sphere, and the options that this transnational, transcultural space offers up to construct it anew. It is really the liminality of Instagram that provides the ultimate setting to render possible Smith's flexible process of passing, and where the contingencies of identity can be played out beneath the cover of anonymity. All we are ever told, after all, is that this is "Me in my bedroom" (Figure 2).

Lecturer in Cultural Studies at Central Saint Martins, Elizabeth Kutesko, interviewed Christopher Smith to learn more about the person whose identity has been so extensively fashioned by the photographer, and to explore the motivations behind this interdisciplinary practice of passing (Figure 3).

How did you begin and how do you hope that people will perceive your images?

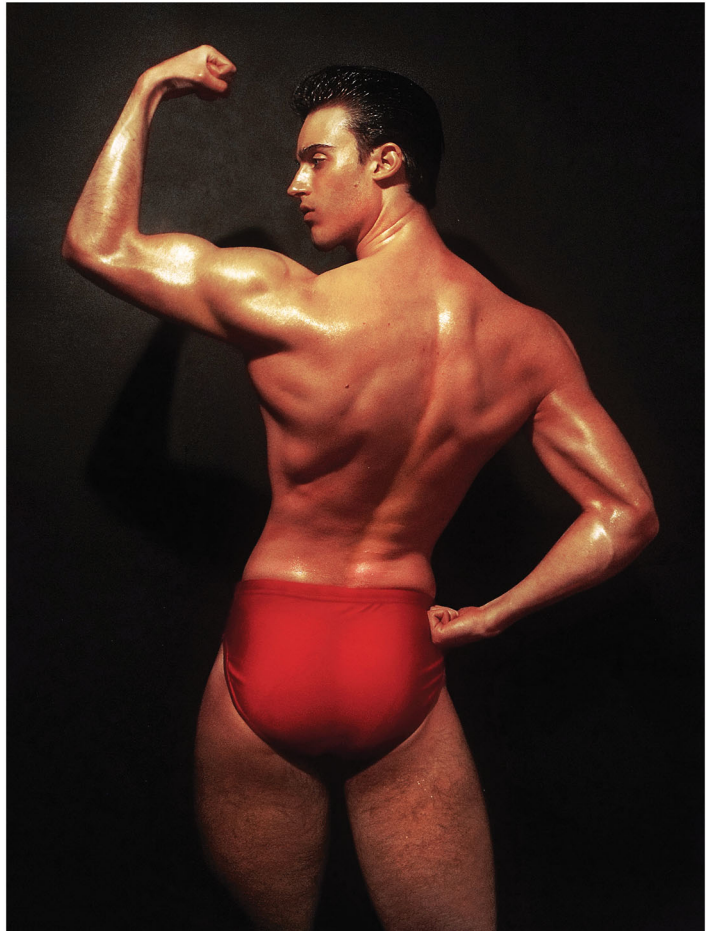
Well, I started taking pictures of myself on a cellphone in my bedroom in 2009 when I was 15. At the time, I was a closeted gay teenager who

Figure 1



was really insecure about the way that I looked. I never thought about being any sort of artist or photographer when I started, I just enjoyed being able to create images. It felt like I was making a little movie, I loved the illusion of it. Looking back, as the pictures became more elaborately staged (even while taken on my phone), they became a way for me to see myself in ways that I didn't at the time. In them, I could express all that I wasn't. In 2011, I got my first camera, and that's when I really started actively trying to learn about photographic technique and the history of photography, using the self-portraits as my testing ground for new techniques. By 2016, after coming out, I finally felt confident enough in what I was doing to share the images publicly and that's when I got an Instagram account. Not much has changed from the early years to be honest, I still do all the images alone in my bedroom at home (Figure 4).

Figure 2



As for how I want people to perceive my images, I suppose I'm just happy if they like them to be honest. I don't have any strong feelings on how people *should* interpret the images. I think that the person who thinks they are "cool" is just as valid as the person who sees a deeper meaning or intent in the work. I do love the references that people see in the images, sometimes they're spot on and other times I think "wow, I never even thought of that, but that's interesting" (Figure 5).

What then is the intention behind your practice?

I think it's pretty much the same as when I first started. I'm looking for the range of possibilities through which I can express myself while at the same time, I'm learning more about my practice with each new picture I do (Figure 6).

Figure 3



One of the Central tropes of passing is really the displacement of identity. Can you say a bit more about the role that identity plays within your work?

It's central to be honest, though it's not something that I consciously think about while I'm working. Part of the reason why the images had such an allure when I started was that they gave me the freedom to play and experiment with my own identity as a teenager who wasn't quite sure where he fit in the world. When I look at the images as a body of work now, they are all reflections of everything that occupies (or once occupied) my mind. They are a patchwork of my fears, my desires, my insecurities and all that I love and all that I hate (Figure 7).

Figure 4



What is the significance of being located in a very specific geographic location—Port Elizabeth—yet able to communicate to people all over the world through Instagram?

Well, it's wonderful to have work that is created in a small bubble that happens to resonate, interest or inspire people from around the world. I have complete freedom here. I do what I want, when I want and how I want and I don't answer to anyone about anything. I think that's maybe what resonates the most with people, it's all completely free and self-initiated and away from the "noise" that many creative people in larger cities tend to face (Figure 8).

Figure 5



Were you already using dress and makeup to explore a sense of who you are before you started your Instagram account?

Yes, to a certain extent. A lot of the earlier pictures, even some of the ones on Instagram, tended to be about just one thing. It was about doing a picture with a particular hairstyle, or makeup or a new expression or a piece of clothing. They were all focused on one element of the transformation process, but I think as I've grown, the images and the transformations have become much more fully realized. Now it's really about how I can use all of the individual stylistic and technical elements; the hair, the makeup, the clothes, the expression, the lighting, the

Figure 6



composition; to transform the person (me) in the pictures and create a more fully realized “character” (Figure 9).

How has the medium of Instagram developed what you do?

I don't think it has had a significant impact on what or how I do what I do. What it has done is given me a space to showcase what I've always been doing and in doing so has connected me to people I find interesting or who inspire me in some way (Figure 10).

Figure 7



Although surely what Instagram has provided is this cover of anonymity, which enables you to construct your identity in new ways. Where then do you find inspiration for the work that you present online?

I'm very inspired by history, particularly the history of dress. I'm always looking at things too. Images of course, in books, online, on TV and movies and music videos, but also just walking around with my eyes open. Shops inspire me very much. I love looking at the toy sections in some shops because I think that there are so many imaginative possibilities in toys. You get toy guns and toy swords and toy hair dryers, I really love seeing all of these things. Clothes shops are also very inspiring places, especially places that sell really cheap clothes, because they

Figure 8



are always imaginative in terms of the types of garments they sell and how they are styled on the mannequins. I can also be inspired by items I see in antique shops or old book shops. I suppose I look all over for inspiration, it really depends on the week and how I'm feeling though.

When I view your images, I see not only this array of different influences but also a continual tension between beauty and horror. Is that intentional?

It's not intentional, no. That said, I do notice that tension. Often when I do more violent images, I am not feeling my best and want to escape seeing my own face in the pictures. It's a kind of boredom with the beauty. I think sometimes you need something to contrast that beauty with, something that shakes you a bit. Outer beauty isn't permanent

Figure 9



and certainly in my images, it isn't even real. The violence isn't either, but I like to show both extremes to remind people that it's all an illusion at the end of the day.

That's very interesting. In terms of other influences, whose creative work in the sphere of photography, film and fashion has been most influential upon the development of your practice?

Well, there are so many great artists who inspire me. I love what was happening in in film and photography during the 1920s and the 1930s

Figure 10



a lot. Fashion imagery is probably my greatest inspiration, I sometimes think that people don't realize what a massive influence fashion imagery has had on me. To me, the best fashion images are all fantasies of transformation. They show the power that clothing, makeup, hair and attitude have in shaping our perceptions of identity. Photographers like Nadar, Baron De Meyer and Edward Steichen, are all brilliant and certainly I take a great bit of inspiration from all of them. Horst is probably my favorite photographer, I adore his longevity and the scope and adaptability that his vision had over the decades. But as I said before, the places I draw inspiration from depends on the type of image or the "character" that I have in mind at a particular time.

Yes, Horst is a favorite photographer of mine too. I admire the precision and clarity of his images. I can see that a similar level of detail and appreciation for fashioned body permeates your work too. How do you set up for a shoot and how long does it usually take?

Well, it's a process that begins before the actual shoot. First, I have to think of an idea and become inspired, and that's something that can happen over days, or weeks, or months or years in some cases. And then I have to set about trying to create that image in my mind by gathering the right clothes, the right accessories and wigs, thinking of every detail including the makeup, the pose, the best type of light and its direction and the color of the background. After all that, I set-up for the shot. I use either daylight from my window or a reading light for light, and I use either my wall or large sheets of paper to create the background. I then put my camera on a tripod and begin taking the pictures, using a 10 s self-timer each time. Depending on the image I'm after and the complexity or simplicity of it, the whole thing can take half an hour, an hour or two hours at the most. Of course, I'm not rapidly shooting during all this, because each time I take a picture I have to wait for the 10 s timer. There aren't many variations in pose, I have the image in mind and do quite a few in the same exact pose, slightly adjusting the angles of my body and the expression on my face.

Can you reflect in a bit more detail about the possibilities that fashion and make-up provide for altering your identity?

Well the possibilities are endless, just look at the history of fashion imagery. There's always a new look and each new decade provides a different perspective on ways of dressing from the past. I mean, fashion is such a powerful tool of self-expression and so much of how we perceive people is based on how they present themselves. Our choice of clothing, hairstyle, and makeup can reveal so much about us, whether we want it to or not. You see this in the "makeover" scenes in movies where the character is trying on different outfits. Each outfit the character tries on has a different personality, each one is a costume. That is why fashion, hair and makeup and probably most importantly, *history* play such a critical role in a lot of my imagery. All of these things allow me to create a character with a very specific personality, from a particular decade or era. I draw from a rudimentary knowledge of each one as much as I can.

This special edition of *Fashion Theory* speaks specifically to the theme of passing, which seems so key within your work. How do you use fashion and the body to pass in new guises?

Well, I think that my work stemmed from a place of insecurity. I didn't like how I looked and I didn't feel that I really knew who I was. The pictures became a way for me to try on different identities, to see myself in ways that I hadn't before, to play dress-up. I think my work uses dress and the body to highlight the artifice and transience of appearance and identity. Things like clothes, hair, makeup and images in general are all used to create illusions. There are pictures where I appear to be very traditionally masculine and others where I am especially feminine, though neither of those two things is the truth. I think the truth lies somewhere in the middle of those two extremes. And that's precisely why I like to show and contrast the extremes, because neither is real, neither will ever be fully attainable. My work allows me to choose how I want people to perceive me on any given day through the use dress and the body. None of the images truly reveals or defines my identity, because it would be impossible to reveal who I am in a mediated image, particularly a still, but they do reveal the power that appearance has in shaping our perceptions of people. I think there's a certain liberation in realizing that appearance and identity is constantly in flux and that the pressures that come from ideals of beauty, of masculinity and femininity etc. dictated to us by society or the media are all linked to a particular moment in time and that they too will adapt and change so there's really no point in chasing any of them. They're not inherently bad or good, but I think it's important to see them for what they are: fantasies.

I like this idea, that we are constantly performing in society, whether to fit within preconceived ideas of gender or to explicitly challenge stereotypical notions of how we should look or behave. To conclude, could you tell me where you see the future for Christopher Smith?

I'd love to try my hand at photographing other people. The self-portraits have always been photographic experiments and as I get to a point where I'm comfortable with them, I'd love to expand my practice by photographing other people using all the same tools of hair, and makeup and dress to transform others as I do to myself. I've always seen this as the logical next step for me and my work, but we'll see.

Disclosure statement

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