The Androgynous Gaze

If a photographer can create gender, she can transform it.
For my class on digital portraiture, I created an image of a bare human back, torso to shoulders. Photographed in a studio, I had used harsh lighting to emphasize shadows, thus drawing attention to the subject’s muscles. The body took up most of the frame, making it large and imposing to the viewer.

Giddy to present the image, I revealed to my peers that it was a self-portrait – that the masculine, rippling muscles belonged to me, a woman.

Throughout history, men who controlled the camera took voyeuristic pleasure from viewing the female gender. Women on film were “objects of desire,” and visual distortions often made them look sexier, softer, and more feminine. Today, how we portray the body hasn’t changed drastically although the person behind the camera has. Photographers, regardless of gender, will concede that the soft, full glow of special lights called “beauty lamps” are usually positioned in front of their female subjects, while men appear stronger and more angular beneath the harsh focused fresnels.

Light, composition, posing and post-processing create filters that amplify a subject’s gender. But what if the common photography conventions were subverted? As these images demonstrate, it’s not impossible to make a woman look strong or to make a man look soft. Lighting is a cross-dresser’s best makeup. During post-processing, simple manipulations to the pixels can smooth the skin or intensify the exoskeleton. And then there are the poses – a woman crossing her arms, posing in full frontal nudity without displaying her sex, and a man reclining as his hand traces his supple skin. A few reversed conventions produce images that muddle gender in an attempt to make the photographic body androgynous.

Haley Johnson is a senior cinema and media studies major from Golden Valley, Minnesota.