

DANIEL MONK

Self-Isolation/Self Portraits

DRESSING-UP IS A serious business. To write that, places one immediately in a certain light, invites suspicion and risks exposure to occasional disdain: “superficial,” “consumerist,” “materialistic,” “repressed,” and, of course, “camp.” This has long been the fate of both drag queens and feminist scholars writing about fashion. No wonder the dressing-up box is firmly located in the nursery – a performance with a limited run, something to “grow out of.” Finger-wagging directive injunctions to “settle down” and “grow up” cohere with those that urge us therapeutically – pityingly, head tilted to one side – to “do the work,” to find our true authentic selves. A tough cop/soft cop governance routine. They get you one way or another. During lockdown, left to my own devices, my closet became my playroom: an escape, an adventure, a memory box – and an act of defiance against those real and imagined external voices and internal terrors. In a way, the pictures are the footnotes for a half-century of the promiscuous pleasures of arrested development. It is never too late to have a happy childhood.



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I want to acknowledge and pay homage to *Mr Benn*. An animated UK children's TV series from the early 1970s, created by David McKee. Mr Benn lives on his own in a nondescript street full of families with children. He wears a dark suit and tie and a bowler hat. In each episode, he visits a fancy-dress shop and, exiting the changing room through a secret door, embarks on an adventure: "Just like magic," is the narrator's refrain. Returning to his normal life – just as gently – he always finds a souvenir of his adventure in his suit pocket. Neither a dream nor a fantasy – more a secret – all you need is to dress up, and the world is your oyster.

I was transfixed. Je suis Mr Benn (and indeed we are both now in our fifties). In a quietly moral, kind, brightly illustrated, and slightly anarchic 1970s fashion, *Mr Benn* avoided any form of didactic reductionism. It left you to figure it out for yourself. You never know where Mr Benn is going, who he might be next, or whom he is going to meet. Or why. Costumes become a licence, a passport, a disguise, a liberation. You try something on. It fits, it doesn't fit. Sometimes all you need is an alteration. Sometimes it is a glorious failure.

The suit uniform never quite worked for me. But my grandfather's bowler hat fits, and I am wearing one of his ties here too (two of his more material legacies). I never became exactly the respectable bourgeois lawyer he imagined. Generations dream of different things. Yet, quite unintentionally, I seem to have ended up more August Sander *Bürgerlich* than 1970s counterculture cartoon here. Sander was also urging me on, alongside Mr Benn, so I want to thank him too. His vast, almost anthropological project of portraits across the classes captured a different, more formal and regimented age – images from the past, a sociological album. Yet the types, tribes, castes, and classes seem just as entrenched now.



There is always someone to clean up the shit – the people who kept everything going while I played in my closet. And who knows what else lurked in the closet of Sander’s young professional?

Suits were always a drag for me when I had to wear one. Now, when wearing them is optional, they feel like Drag: a suit of armour to cover up the fag: “Please let me pass!” And Country Tweeds and Café Bohemia – I wish I were as versatile as my suits. Costumes, not fancy dress. There is a difference.



My grandmother’s Hermès scarf came in handy too – a treasured legacy, and much more versatile than her husband’s bowler hat. The women had to be. She always wore a hat – she would never have worn a scarf this way. But I don’t think she would mind.

And yes, casually over the shoulder is Real Fur. I come from a long line of furriers – the end of the line. The first generation for which a trade was not automatically handed down. Early memory: taking my clothes off and rolling around in glorious mink coats in a dark storeroom. I wanted to feel the pelts against my naked skin, get closer to the scent. I knew I must not get caught, though. Aged 7. And why were they only for women? For my grandmothers and my great-aunts to enjoy? I never asked that question. Pelts Pedagogy.



There are lots of great-aunts lurking in that pose. “Is it Smart or Casual?” I used to ask my mother as a child when getting ready for a family event – a distinction I had been successfully trained to comprehend as almost as essential as the difference between night and day. But their Casual was always Really Smart. Status, reputation, being unmasked: there was a lot at stake. And a well-cut outfit – and never forget the accessories – could go a long way in covering up the East End, the ghetto, the immigrant accents, the memories of having very little. The shame of failure. There is defiance and pride in caring so very much.

“Aspirational”: an invidious double-edged, top-down judgement just doesn’t cut it. The fragility and conditionality of inclusion. Effortless ease and understatement? Forget it. Maximum effort. Excessive Covering. They were peacocks. This was Drag style. “Too Jewish?” “Too Gay?” Same thing.

Funny how the family provided the lessons and tools for Drag. You can run – or skip or sashay – away, but they are always with you. “The Family” – just like “Fashion” – is an “F-word” for certain strident political traditions and sensibilities. But more and more, I want to dust off, take another look, trouble the crude “normative/anti-normative” binaries that underlie these rejections. Playing with the “profanities” of Family and Fashion is more illuminating than working them to death. Give me Contradictions over Certainties any day.

It was a surprise noticing how much history, how much of the past, how many legacies were hanging in the closet. But then I have always had a thing about cemeteries. And fashion is always like that: deeply personal, always social, and embracing the future – the next thing – while looking backward. All queer closets are archives.

They are all dead now, the generation of grandmothers and great-aunts. Even their names – Esther, Ada, Minnie – are things of the past. With age, generationality takes on a certain piquancy: it comes into a sharper focus. I came out as Gay, dabbled with Queer (until it felt like just another straight jacket), and now Homosexual seems surprisingly comfortable. More syllables to linger with, and I like how “sex” is spit-roasted in the middle. And Greek or Latin, depending on your mood, safely lacking in clarity. Of course, “pathological” and “disciplinary.” But isn’t everything? And surely all the more reason to reclaim it? Language here should pull the rug out from under your feet, not provide a comfortable resting place: a signpost, never a destination. If I grow up, maybe I will become an Invert. I like the backward gaze to all those brilliant, resolute Queens and Outlaws. And the myriad avuncular uncles and aunties from my own past.

Writing wills in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I spent hours at the bedsides of men who were dying from AIDS, listening to them talk about their lives and loves as I drafted their instructions, recording their Last Testaments. A Melancholic Education: militant odes to friendship. “I want my coffin to be carried by [a], [b], [c], and [d] and to arrive to the Triumphal March from Aida.” “I want half my ashes distributed in the canal outside the Night Sauna in Amsterdam and the other half over the cruising ground in Hampstead Heath.” “My diamante earrings to [x], my blonde Marilyn wig to [y].” “My Sioiuxie and the Banshees records to [d].” “My cockrings and double-sided dildo to [z].”

My Leather Jacket was inherited by an old lover of mine in just this way in the mid-1980s. A few years later – after he recklessly put it in the washing machine and it shrank – he gave it to me. It did not fit him anymore. And he liked his leathers more pristine, anyway. I always think of him when I wear it. We lost touch. My relationship with the jacket has been far more enduring. It has aged with me. It has a red lining that makes me think of the film *The Red Shoes*: a magical power that leads me on and out. I have not yet decided who to leave it to. But I want the line to continue. A young hipster/dragster I know cannot wait to get their hands on my Pearls though. Definitely the legitimate rightful heir. And they can call themselves whatever they want.



The leather man wanted me to ride from London to Berlin with him on the back of his motorbike. I got off in the south London suburb of Bromley. He called me an Opera Queen masquerading as a Leather Man. I feigned outrage – which merely confirmed the fact – and told him that, as a mode of transport, I just preferred boats to bikes.



Leather, Opera, Sailor. A Queenly Triptych. Thank you, Mr Benn, for subtly preparing the gay child, for it not being make believe, for the adventures all being Real. Albeit more often without the harsh glare of daylight. And how inherently relational these styles are. Dressing up and wearing them alone brought that to the fore. It's only through display, observation and recognition – the knowing gaze of the other and preferably others – that the costumes function as tools for connection, for the making of kinship.

Sailor uniforms were fashionable for British children in the twentieth century. I have treasured miniature portraits of my grandfather and father wearing them – no doubt a practice imbued with colonial narratives. My first sailor's uniform was bought for me when I joined the Sea Scouts as a teenager. We were the only troop in London and would occasionally sleep in boats on the River Thames. I liked posing for the tourists – more troupe than troop. It was, alas, while deeply homosocial, resolutely not a homosexual experience. I failed all the Masculinity Lessons. But I kept the hat and matched it with the new uniform, and that worked better. I found a function for it in the end. It was worth holding on to. You never know.



Accessories really do make all the difference. The Activist requires a costumer as much as the Banker. The “Gays Support the Miners” T-shirt seemed the perfect fit for the Black Lives Matter protest – a call for solidarity between marginalised groups. The Pits and Perverts Benefit Concert in 1984 has become a landmark of queer political folklore, and a private memory too. But I confess I do not remember any of the speeches, only the second-hand green cardigan I wore, and the hot hairstyle of a radical activist I was besotted with and who had urged me to attend.

Solidarity felt in short supply more recently, at a time when anti-semitism on the British Left has created so much pain and made inclusion conditional once again. Physical lockdown went hand in hand with the negotiating and drawing of new boundaries. Political families can be as violent as biological ones. Break-ups – families, lovers, friends, comrades – are sometimes the hardest losses of all. Can these personae coexist? What conflicts lurk beneath the poses? How do we have better arguments with each other? Is post-oppositionality a way forward?



My first leathers were my tefillin – or phylacteries. They were bought for me as a Bar Mitzvah present by a great-grandmother, an indomitable matriarch from Łódź in Poland. From one apocryphal Singer sewing machine, she introduced to Britain “off-the-peg” Bridal Wear. Many decades after her death, I thought of her when publishing a book about same-sex marriage. Maybe the Rag Trade line did not end with me after all. Change and Continuity.

I never followed my dead father into the Freemasons – just inherited his apron. The secrets of my fraternity of choice are of a different form. But he taught me how to keep a Poker Face, although I never mastered Clobyosh – a fiendishly complicated card game that travels under different guises and has been described as “*un jeu de cartes Étrangère.*” It is the only game in which the Jack outranks the King and Queen, gets to topple his parents, the hierarchy, the conventionally more powerful. Perhaps not so strange, then, that in different times and places it was the preferred game of travellers, salesmen, migrants, and prisoners.



“You don’t get to choose the cards you are dealt; you just have to play them as well as you can,” as my old dad told me, dying, while failing to improve my Bridge. Patterns, Runs, Memory, Houses, Aces High and Low – the language and lessons of cards travel well. Some of these portraits are Queens, some are Jacks. But some days I feel like the Two of Clubs.

There was not much travelling in those covid years. New lives further advanced the revolutionary impact of Sports Wear as it continues to trouble old binaries. Corona Costumes.



“Geh Gesund,” they used to say as I unwrapped a gift of new clothes. Wear it and be healthy, was the message. Costumes are always about travelling and journeys. Back to Mr Benn again.

Cycling around a deserted city centre gave new meaning to the joys of being an urban flâneur. Familiar streets taking on a new look – not just because of the occasional bemused goose wandering along a road usually full of cars and fumes. Buildings, corners, and squares I would normally rush past took on the appearance of theatrical stage sets.

In the fog-ridden East End of London – before both the Clean Air Act of 1956 and the widespread affordability of domestic photography – my family’s portraits were carefully staged commercial affairs. Dressed in their best clothes or in costumes provided by the studio, the backdrops were often of rural idylls, arcadian fantasies. The scenery added to the public function of these private portraits, which were always a combination of fantasy and record. Then Kodak became as ubiquitous as Apple is now, and family albums exploded in scale and colour, before seemingly disappearing altogether into the Cloud.





With hindsight, in self-isolation with clothes and accessories as my props, these snaps are an homage to the old-fashioned studio photographers. Posed and costumed, they collectively form a private psychic mapping, albeit with some tropes and tribes more, or less, recognizable to others. At its heart, it is a Family Album – biological, logical, permanent, dreamed, fantasised, fractured, grieved. Remembering and yearning for stories.

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