

THE OPPOSITIONAL GAZE:
CONTEMPORARY IMAGE-
MAKING PRACTICE AND THE
IMPLICATIONS OF SKIN COLOUR
IDEALS

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Abstract

The thesis explores the uneven distribution of power between and of the black/white female dichotomy and, while using them as a strategic tool within the visual work, questions the implications of skin colour in constructions of femininity within visual representations.

Historically as a marker of skin colour, white women and those with a lighter skin complexion have taken the role of the feminine, in comparison to the black woman and those with darker skin tones, who traditionally occupy a space of the non- feminine. Within the thesis, this privileging of lighter and white skin, based on white aesthetics and beauty value judgments, has been named as *colourism*. The body of practice based work, produced as an intrinsic part of the thesis, will attempt to develop and explore this issue and develop a particularly black aesthetic response to the cultural construct of the 'feminine'.

Through researching contextual material made up of other artist's images and films, that challenge traditions of the gaze, the thesis develops visual strategies to help re-position black, and thereby white, women's place in visual representations, and further questions gender and identity. In approaching these questions, the thesis draws from various discourses, such as cultural studies, feminist film theory, visual cultures and fine art practice and theory.

The thesis argues for new ways of constructing visual pleasures within looking relations, which go beyond the visual, which call for a conscious process of breaking away from a representational language based on the phallogentric. The presented image-making strategies aim to destroy the normative understandings of visual pleasure, using colour and the belief in the power of the erotic (Audre Lorde 1984), to enable new ways of thinking through black and white women's positions within these debates.

This thesis uses the processes of personal image-making practice within a body of original artworks using video and photography, to direct towards the theoretical fields in which this research is positioned. It uses a practice leading the theory methodology.