

At the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art: Roni Horn *The Detour of Identity*

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In 1990, the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres encountered a work made by Roni Horn at her exhibition in Los Angeles. Torres, so moved by the work, began exchanging letters with Horn up until his death six years later. Commenting on her piece *The Gold Field*, a rectangular sheet of pure annealed gold, he stated, “The act of looking at an object is transfixed by gender, race, class, and sexual orientation.”¹ I return to this statement over a decade later as Horn has just opened a solo exhibition at the Louisiana Art Museum in Denmark, entitled ‘The Detour of Identity.’²

Throughout Horn’s career, she has sought to trace identity and gender. Horn was born in New York City in 1955. She enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design at just 16 years old and graduated shortly after at 19 with a BFA in 1975. Three years later she received her MFA in Sculpture from Yale University. Since receiving her MFA, her work has been intimately involved with the topography and geology of Iceland. She has made various trips to Iceland over the years, photographing the land and its people. However, in this body of work, I would like to discuss her photography as a mechanism for transforming identity and gender between viewer and object.

The monograph for the Louisiana Museum exhibition ‘The Detour of Identity’ commands attention, with its substantial form and striking cover. The black-and-white cover image, a still from the film *Joan of Arc*, depicts French actress Maria Falconetti gazing directly at the viewer; a single tear runs down her cheek. This image sets the tone for a 470-page exploration of identity in the monograph. For Horn, gender is not a unified or fixed concept but rather a liminal space—one that allows for movement and transformation across identities. This monograph, like Horn’s work, invites readers to reconsider identity as something dynamic, shaped by the freedom to inhabit multiple states of being. This brings to

¹ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 1990: *L.A., 'The Gold Field'*. (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1996).

² Roni Horn, ‘The Detour of Identity.’ February 5, 2024 - January 9, 2025. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Humblebaek, Denmark.

mind the writing of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, which Virginia Woolf cited in her 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*. Coleridge wrote, "The best mind is one that is androgynous." Woolf argued that perhaps, "a mind that is purely masculine cannot create any more than a mind that is purely feminine...therefore Coleridge did not mean when he said that a great mind is androgynous, that the mind has any special sympathy with women...but rather a mind that devotes itself to interpretation. Perhaps the androgynous mind is resonant and proud that it transmits emotion without impeding upon natural creativity."³ Androgyny provides the foundation for Horn's work. Through the use of sculptural doubles, water, and text, Horn enters into this liminal space of gender, thereby allowing viewers (regardless of their own identity) to join her in a stream of consciousness that is free from gendered norms.

In her photographs, especially in the series *You are the Weather* (1994) and *Still Water* (*The River Thames, for example*) (1999), Horn merges reality and fiction. One of Horn's most celebrated curatorial approaches is that by which she utilizes the notion of repeating or doubling through the duality of space. In the Louisiana exhibition for example, as you progress from room to room you take notice of her sculptures on the floor. You immediately recognize these objects due to their eye-capturing material or by the weight they hold in the room, denoting a sense of memorability. As you progress deeper into the exhibition you meet the first sculpture's double. Viewing the preceding sculpture is influenced by the memory of its double.⁴ In moving beyond Horn's sculptural forms we see her apply this curatorial approach directly to her photographs, enabling the viewer to enter into a fluid experience of self and gender.

³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. (Penguin Books, 2004), p. 114.

⁴ Barbra Garrie. *Roni Horn's Watery Surfaces: Identity, Excess and the Sublime*. (Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art, 2018), p. 447.



Installation. Roni Horn, *You are the Weather* (1994) Louisiana Museum of Art. 2024

This process of transformation in Horn's photography can only be realized through water. Water provides Horn's subjects with the experience of excess and transition. In *You are the Weather* (1994), water assumes a transformative power, allowing a single person to appear as multiple versions of themselves—or even as reflections of the viewer. For this work, Horn took 100 close-up portraits of a young model, Marget, emerging from hot springs across Iceland. With her blonde hair, fair skin, and blue eyes, Marget embodies the stereotypically Nordic appearance. At first glance, her gaze appears identical in each image, but it subtly shifts: seductive becomes delicate, apprehensive turns sullen, and womanly blends into boyish. Through these nuanced expressions, Horn conjures a sense of visual uncertainty, reminding us of water's potential to both reveal and engulf.

By presenting the photographs of Marget repeatedly within an exhibition space, Horn establishes a path for questions between viewer and subject—a dialogue between the object and ourselves. This doubling of image and of sculpture invites doubt, as viewers begin to question whether they are truly identical, or what differences distinguish them. The serial repetition introduces a dynamic resemblance: the more one compares them, the more they seem to transform, altering perception with each glance. There is a certain blankness to the

faces of Horn's sitters that enables us to consider how we approach each image through our own gender expression.



Roni Horn, *Still Water* (The River Thames, for Example), 1999. Fifteen offset lithographs on uncoated paper (photographs and text)

In the series *Still Water* (*The River Thames, for example*) Horn initiates a dialogue through immersive encounters with water and text. In the exhibition, a series of four large-scale photographs of water are displayed in the third gallery space. Beneath each image is a layer of text that invites viewers to engage in a dual experience of seeing and reading, drawing them into a contemplative space where the surface of the water mirrors the surface of the text. As visitors move through the exhibition, the presence of both water and words creates a shared space that blends visual and textual engagement. Just as one might skim a rock over the water's surface, viewers may skim or choose to dive into the accompanying text. This interaction brings them into close proximity with the photographs and others in the

gallery, each following their own course and subtly influencing the atmosphere, as if creating ripples within the space. “To truly engage with the works,” states art historian Barbara Garrie, “is to pour oneself into them, becoming absorbed by both the surface of the water and its textual annotations.”⁵ In Garrie’s 2018 article, ‘Roni Horn's Watery Surfaces: Identity Excess and the Sublime’, she argues that the concept of identity, place, and embodiment become meaningful in Horn’s work through aesthetic and conceptual mechanisms that operate throughout her practice. Horn is constantly reconfiguring; transforming the space in which we occupy while viewing her work. The readers of Horn's work recognize themselves in drawing upon the relationship between being, memory, and the body in a public space. In Horn’s world, nothing is certain and she’s not afraid to tell us why. “Going into water is going into yourself. Water is a mirror. When you see your reflection in water, do you recognize the water in you?”⁶

⁵ Garrie, Barbara. ‘Roni Horn's Watery Surfaces: Identity Excess and the Sublime’ (*Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 2018), p. 195.

⁶ Horn, Roni. Excerpt from *Still Water (The River Thames, for example)*. 1999.

Sources

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