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## Side by side: Al Freeman's art history

by Taylor Walsh • June 2020

Two colour images sit side by side on facing pages of an open book, free of text so that each seems to make silent comment on the other **FIG. 1**. The eye darts between them, first to identify each picture and then to work out what unites them. With art-historical training, one may recognise the intense swatch of blue as a monochrome painting by Yves Klein, while the anonymous photograph beside it is all the more obscure by comparison: a snapshot of a male figure splayed on a blue bedspread, head unceremoniously cropped out of the frame, his hairy shins that fill the foreground entirely coloured in a similar blue.

This consistency of hue reads as a send-up of Klein's quasi-mythical pursuit of the monochrome, an old form to which he laid claim through his patented use of a supersaturated, custom shade.<sup>1</sup> That ecstatic model of pure colour could not be further from the juvenile prank pictured to its right, although the sight of flesh tinged ultramarine recalls another work by Klein: the *Anthropométries* of 1960 and after **FIG. 2**. Klein set out to transform nude female models into what he called 'living paint brushes', forgoing the artist's traditional tools in favour of works that would 'make themselves', as women doused in his signature blue pressed their wet bodies onto sheets of paper. This was done at Klein's behest at an invitation-only, white-tie soirée, creating an amalgam of painting and performance art that was as sexist as it was spectacular.<sup>2</sup>



FIG. 1 Page spread from *Comparisons*, by Al Freeman. 2017. Artist's book. (Flat Fix Press, Brooklyn).



FIG. 2 Performance photographs of *Anthropométries of the Blue Period*, by Yves Klein. Galerie Internationale d'art Contemporain, Paris, 1960. (Photographs Harry Shunk and Janos Kender).

The photograph of a man's skin stained blue inverts the gender dynamics of the *Anthropométries*, as it appears to be the product of a broadly homosocial environment – a remnant of some fraternity stunt or teenage party gone awry. But the pairing also calls attention to the sordid afterlife of the monochrome, as Klein's utopian aspirations devolved into more vulgar displays, using mark-making to exert control over the bodily autonomy of another. This juxtaposition, then, becomes a feminist barb at an ethically suspect historical precedent, offering the photograph as a non-art, untutored rejoinder to the worst instincts of a well-known painter.<sup>3</sup>

The set of images in question are excerpted from the 2017 book *Comparisons*, published in an edition of one hundred by the Toronto-born, New York-based artist Al Freeman. The series was extended the following year to include standalone collages, fifty-one of which were shown at Bortolami Gallery, New York, in 2018 (see lead image). Each *Comparison* consists of a symmetrical arrangement of two images on a horizontal sheet; the spreads of the book are naturally divided by the indentation where the leaves are bound, while the individual collages have been folded down the centre to mimic a bisected folio. A reproduction of a distinguished artwork on one side opposes a found digital photograph on the other, establishing an implicit hierarchy – a visual grammar of high

and low.

Freeman's unexpected pairings often hinge on felicities of shape and colour: Matisse's *Bonheur de Vivre* (1906) is placed alongside a plastic container of rainbow sushi **FIG. 3**, and the flesh tones of a Josef Albers *Homage to the square* are picked up in the interlocked arms of grappling wrestlers **FIG. 4**. As is visible from the tattered surface of the reproduction of the Albers painting, the works of art in Freeman's collages are clipped from books and magazines or printed out from digital sources, while the found images are drawn entirely from the web: message boards and aggregators that traffic in what Claire Bishop calls the 'endlessly disposable, rapidly mutable ephemera of the virtual age'.<sup>4</sup>



**FIG. 3** *Comparison 2*, by AI Freeman. 2018. Collage on paper, 31.8 by 48 cm. (Courtesy the artist; 56 Henry; and Bortolami, New York).



FIG. 4 *Comparison 40*, by Al Freeman. 2018. Collage on paper, 31.8 by 48 cm. (Courtesy the artist; 56 Henry; and Bortolami, New York).

This is search-engine art, born of and reliant on the Internet's glut of images. Both fine art and seedy amateur photographs are treated as raw content to be repurposed, pried from context and teamed up in crass configurations. Yet for all their deflationary intent, Freeman's *Comparisons* are also surprisingly informed and theoretically rich. Comparativism in its various guises has long been central to the history of art, key to the discipline's founding and still its primary mode of instruction; it remains, as Helen Molesworth recently noted, 'art history's favorite method of analysis'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Freeman's dyads have a mock-pedagogical feel, recalling slide comparisons used to teach a survey course or illustrate a textbook. Her matchups are a shrewd reprisal of this defining template for the field, mirroring the means by which we have learned to confer value on the visual. For as sporting, even mildly transgressive, as Freeman's conceit may seem, her *Comparisons* tap into one of art history's most prized traditions and meditate on what the comparative method might still have to teach us about the digital image-world in which we live.

Freeman made her first comparison shortly after graduating from Yale in 2010, where she trained as a painter in the university's MFA program. The artist was in the habit of hoarding images of all kinds for inspiration; when she finished school and gave up painting for good, her vast archive of postcards and printouts remained. She tacked up a reproduction of Matisse's *Blue Nude* (1952) in her studio, turning the vertical odalisque on its side, and paired it with another toppled figure: a (presumably drunk) young man who has fallen off a broken toilet FIG. 5. Freeman lived with this combination for several years before developing it into a series, by which point she had plenty of material on hand: an image, stumbled upon online, triggers the memory of something highbrow, drawn from the art-historical inventory she carries from years of study. The grittier imagery she marshals often pictures failure or drunken high jinks, giving form to stubborn clichés of toxic masculinity – a phrase that Freeman acknowledges is a cliché in itself, but also a useful shorthand for what she calls 'the unchecked bad behavior that's associated with men', and the obliviousness permitted for the male-identified in a culture that validates them no matter what.<sup>6</sup> Her *Comparisons* do not express righteous anger or indictment so much as a rueful recognition; an offbeat, funny response to gender privilege and white male entitlement.



**FIG. 5** Page spread from *Comparisons*, by Al Freeman. 2017. Artist's book. (Flat Fix Press, Brooklyn).

Culled largely from social media and other caches of user-generated content (what we used to call Web 2.0), Freeman's series falls under the rubric of post-Internet art, a term coined around 2006 to describe art made 'in the wake of - 'after' - time spent online, as the 'cognitive yield' of obsessive clicking'.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the earlier generation of Net artists made work designed to live on the web, post-Internet art uses the Internet as a research aid or point of reference - which is to say, it is contemporary, made by artists that have the same digital habits and frame of mind as any person alive today. What's more, post-Internet art comes in every medium, extending well beyond online platforms, and Freeman executes her Google Image-based series in the analogue forms of collage and the printed book - one-off or limited-edition objects to be held in the hand or hung on the wall.



**FIG. 6** *Comparison 26*, by AI Freeman. 2018. Collage on paper, 31.8 by 48 cm. (Courtesy the artist; 56 Henry; and Bortolami, New York).

Freeman's source material – both on the high end and the low – demonstrates how the Internet has fundamentally altered the production, transmission and reception of visual culture. Her use of fine art images reminds us that we now consume the art-historical canon almost exclusively in digital reproduction, and the prank photographs she pulls from the dregs of the Internet feel tailor-made for social media, destined to circulate online. Take Freeman's pairing of Kazimir Malevich's *Mystic Suprematism* (1920–22) with a picture of a passed-out guy covered in face paint **FIG. 6**. The duo reduces a paragon of high abstraction to so much alcohol-fuelled graffiti, a hazing ritual that turns its victim into a hapless clown.

Freeman's penchant for such coarse, mean-spirited images could be seen to undermine the seriousness of her endeavour. And her impulse to juxtapose art and vernacular imagery in itself is nothing new, lending her series a certain family resemblance to older appropriation art or to Internet memes. Luis Jacob's *Albums* **FIG. 7**, for instance, or Tom Burr's *Bulletin Boards* also mix fine art reproductions with found photography – although the resulting arrangements have a poetic 'scrapbook feel' at odds with Freeman's wit and visual economy.<sup>8</sup> The binary format of her *Comparisons* may bring other split-screen entertainments to mind; one could think of the 'art selfie' craze that briefly took Instagram by storm, matching users' faces with famous portraits, or the current fad for restaging masterpieces with household items during lockdown due to COVID-19.<sup>9</sup> But Freeman's series ultimately has little in common with these online diversions, as the form of likeness she achieves is neither algorithmically derived nor carefully posed. Rather than straight correspondence she seeks out more elliptical relations, when one image channels or conjures

another, and the act of placing them side by side is a spur to further thought.<sup>10</sup> The better referent for Freeman's *Comparisons*, then, may be a more didactic mode – familiar to anyone who has attended an art history lecture or thumbed through a survey text.

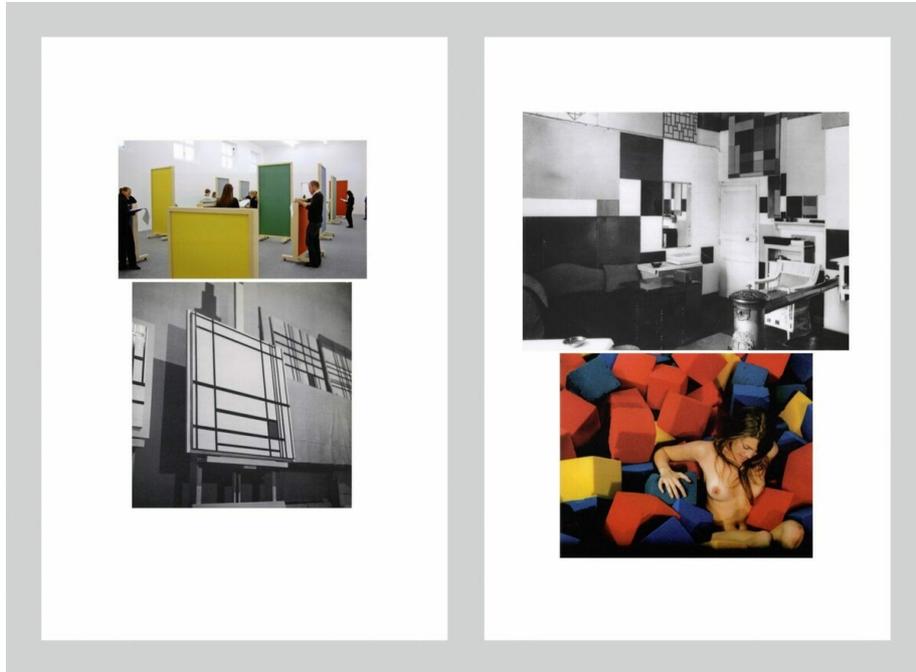


FIG. 7 *Album X*, by Luis Jacob. 2010. Image montage in plastic laminate, 80 panels, each 44.5 by 29 cm. (Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal).

This method of compare-and-contrast dates back to the advent of the modern slide lecture. Magic lantern shows using projected images began as a popular entertainment at fairs and playhouses, but the technique had migrated onto university campuses by the 1890s. The slide lecture's ascendance thus coincided with the development of the discipline of art history, which became codified in German-speaking Europe around the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin pioneered the format of the illustrated lecture and made use of twin projectors, allowing full-scale reproductions of works of art to be shown side by side.<sup>12</sup> Visual comparisons also structured his widely-read book *Principles of Art History* (*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 1915) FIG. 8, where images shown on facing pages proved a powerful tool of instruction, and soon became standard practice for publications in the field.

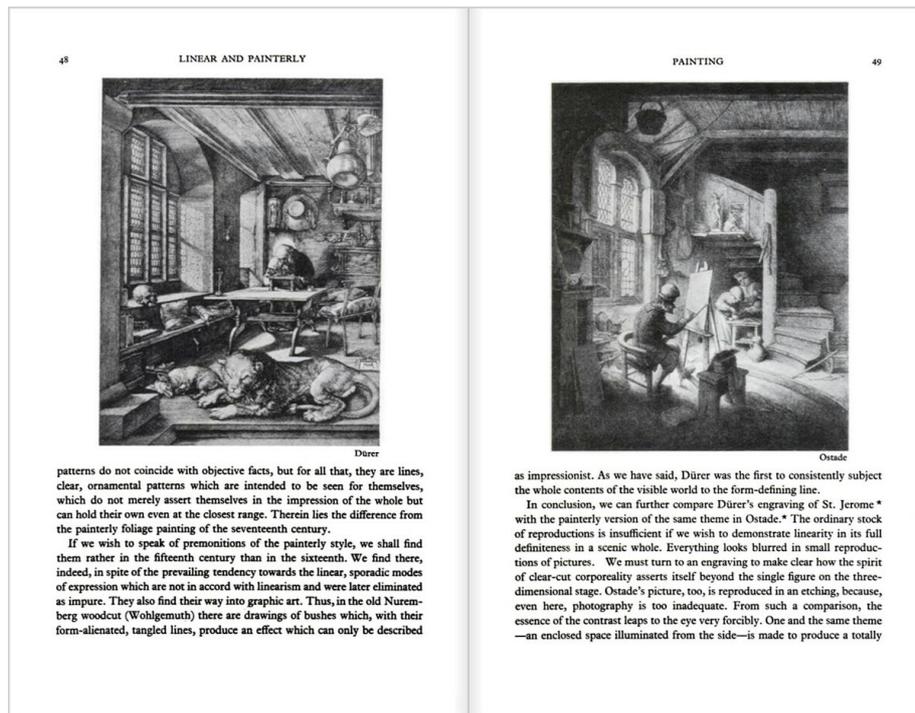


FIG. 8 Page spread from *Principles of Art History*, by Heinrich Wölfflin [1915]. Trans. ed. 1936.

The simple pairing of images established a new rubric for analysing works of art, assessing similarity and difference and evaluating quality based on a series of oppositions. For Wölfflin, these criteria included the linear versus the painterly, multiplicity versus unity, planar versus recessional and so on. Part of this method's appeal was its capacity to assess works of art in purely visual terms. Art-historical information could therefore be gained without prior knowledge or contextual grounds – the sensory data of the eyes alone would be sufficient to draw conclusions. As Zeynep Çelik Alexander has put it in her revisionist history of this period, 'The kind of *looking* promoted by Wölfflin was a surrogate for *reading*', which promoted a 'nondiscursive, nonconceptual way of knowing'.<sup>13</sup> Elements of style could be traced across regions and over time, noting markers of development or regression regardless of who made the work, when or for what purpose. Wölfflin's term for this highly formalist approach to the discipline was 'an art history without names'.<sup>14</sup>

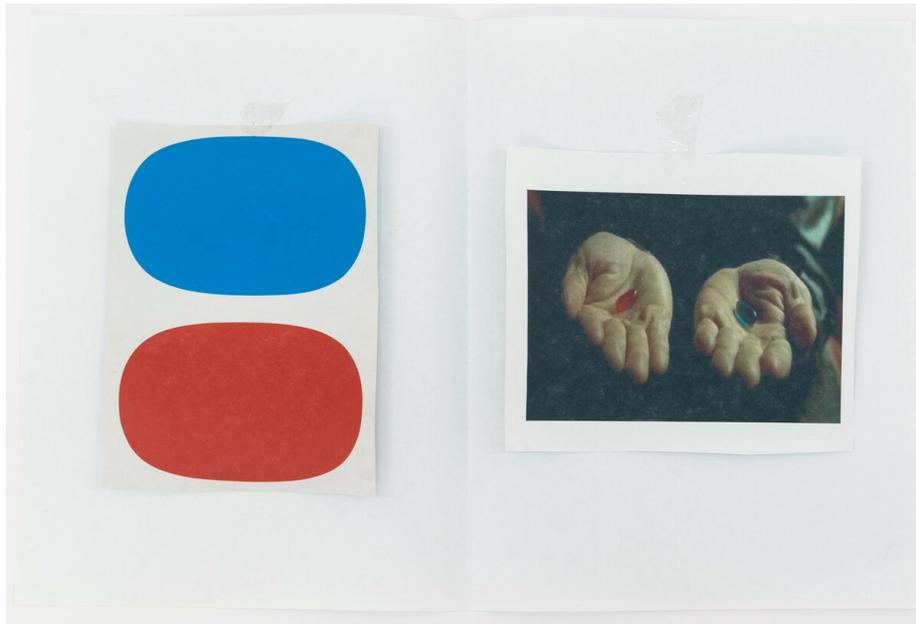
The immediacy of this visual stance fulfilled a democratising impulse as universities opened up to the middle classes, many of whom were not arriving prepared with a broad-based humanistic education.<sup>15</sup> It also dovetailed with period aims to invest art history with the gravitas of science.<sup>16</sup> Comparativism professed to offer a more objective, empirical basis for the study of visual art, more systematic than previously dominant interpretative models of 'intuition' and 'feeling'.<sup>17</sup>

Such objectivity is clearly far from Freeman's mind: her series is

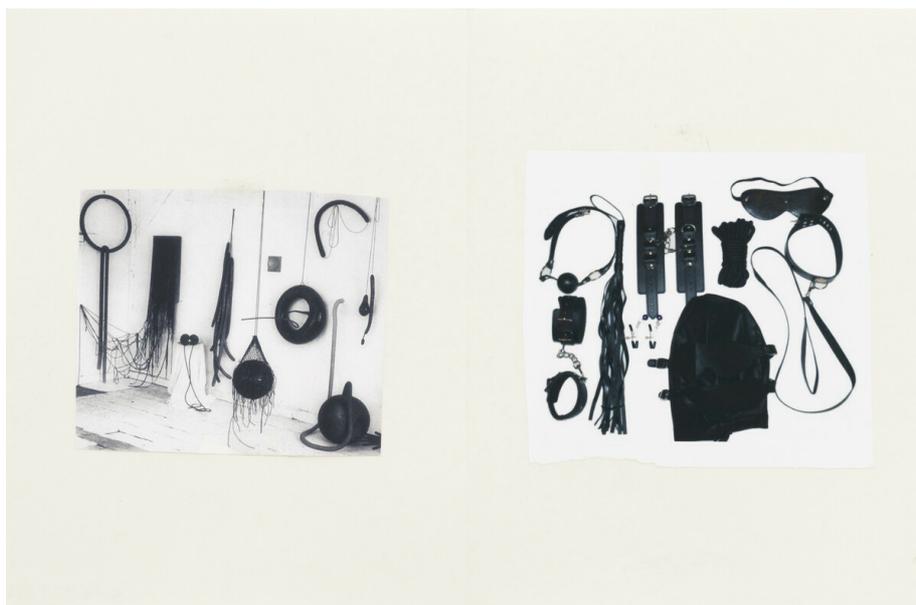
not an earnest attempt to instruct or to edify. Her clever parallels skewer the use of comparison as a neutral means to nail down the discipline, undermining the method's historic pretensions to inductive, unbiased research. And despite the fact that we continue to teach (and test) art history this way, comparativism has faced considerable backlash and scepticism within the field: how could visual similarity alone warrant scholars' interpretative leaps, shuttling between anachronistic moments and distinct cultures?<sup>18</sup>

This reliance on outward resemblance raises the spectre of pseudomorphosis; a phenomenon in which two things have 'formal similarities where there is no similarity of artistic intent'.<sup>19</sup> That shared traits may sanction a false correlation is a major pitfall of visual affinity – likeness may be only skin-deep and misleading rather than meaningful. Art historians have expressed legitimate concern that such comparisons strip objects of their cultural specificity; an alarm that Yve-Alain Bois has sounded in a recent article, describing the irritation he feels at shallow connections drawn between disparate things – a lazy and destructive habit he calls 'the abusive search for analogies'.<sup>20</sup>

And yet, their obvious perils notwithstanding, surface comparisons retain their hold on the art-historical imagination. Bois himself concludes that, wary as he is of 'a purely morphological formalism', the phenomenon itself is 'impossible to ignore [. . .]. We simply cannot avoid the titillating flashes of look-alikes that take us by surprise, and it does no good to repress them'.<sup>21</sup> Freeman's project could easily fall into the trap of pseudomorphosis, but instead it seems to dwell on the absurdities of resemblance, playing up the faultiness of this interpretative method. She indulges the very human tendency to put like-looking things together, following the natural drift of free association and its attendant jolts and pleasures.



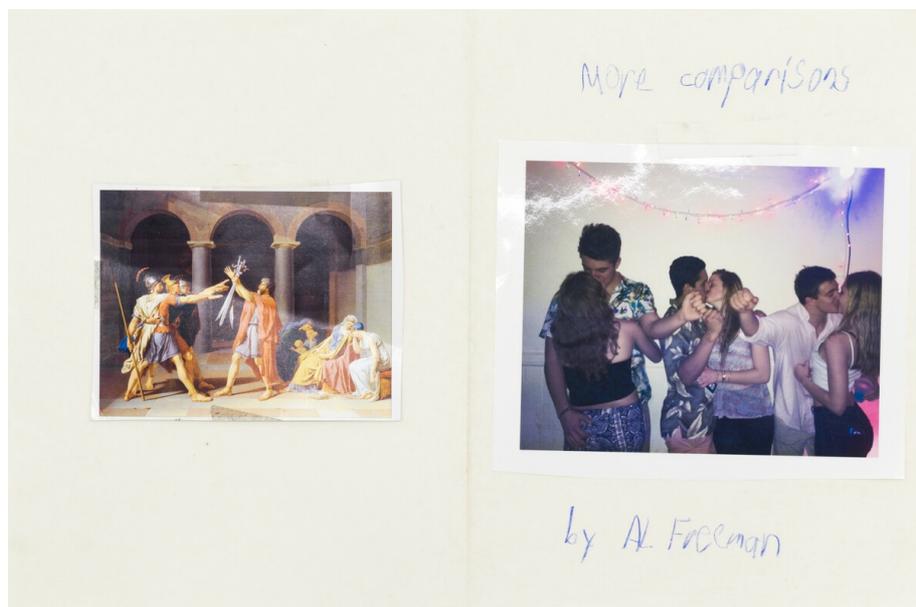
**FIG. 9** *Comparison 46*, by Al Freeman. 2018. Collage on paper, 31.8 by 48.3 cm. (Courtesy the artist; 56 Henry; and Bortolami, New York).



**FIG. 10** *Comparison 4*, by Al Freeman. 2018. Collage on paper, 31.8 by 48 cm. (Courtesy the artist; 56 Henry; and Bortolami, New York).

Freeman's series as a whole displays a welcome sense of humour, but individual results vary: some of the couplings feel brazen and fresh, but others superficial and slight. What insights do we gain from conflating, for example, Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* and an unwound roll of paper towels, or the vibrant ovals of an Ellsworth Kelly with the 'red pill or blue pill' scene from *The Matrix*? **FIG. 9** Freeman is certainly an artist at ease in this laid-back, low-stakes register, and her *Comparisons* will strike some as amusing but forgettable – a call-and-response game unencumbered by conceptual heft or political argument. Her more

substantive pairings, however, exceed these quick hits of recognition. For Carol Armstrong, the comparative technique is most productive when it 'serve[s] as a two-way mirror, in which each half of the pair reflects on and serves a screen through which to look at the other'.<sup>22</sup> And at their best, Freeman's combinations do reveal latent truths about both the work of art and its cruder counterpart, as seen in an archival photo of Eva Hesse sculptures paired with an array of fetish gear, hinting at the erotics of all those bulbous sculpted forms sheathed in mesh **FIG. 10**.<sup>23</sup> The collage implies there is something kinky about Hesse's biomorphism, executed in latex, netting and rubberised fabric, and perhaps draws an implicit link between the privacy of the artist's studio and a dominatrix's lair.



**FIG. 11** *Comparison 33*, by Al Freeman. 2018. Collage on paper, 31.8 by 48 cm. (Courtesy the artist; 56 Henry; and Bortolami, New York).

More pointed still is Freeman's take on *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), which finds unwitting echoes of the painting's composition in a photograph of fist-bumping frat guys **FIG. 11**. Jacques Louis David's canvas is sharply divided along gender lines, pitting masculine ideals of strength and self-sacrifice against feminine passivity and lack of composure.<sup>24</sup> In Freeman's found photograph, another trio of men extend their arms in solidarity, celebrating, it would appear, their simultaneous romantic conquests: each is making out with a young woman who may not realise the picture is being taken. The neoclassical fable of republican virtue has curdled in the present, with the painting's (always sexist) signifiers of honour recast in a scene of casual misogyny.

Thus Freeman's series is neither a good-faith effort at compare-and-contrast on Wölfflin's terms, nor can it simply be chalked up to pastiche or aesthetic gamesmanship. In matching up different orders of images, she heightens their class distinctions: art objects

can feel academic and staid, while the Internet screenshots invoke the chance encounters one might actually have online – perhaps the errant results of an image search that cross our screens unbidden. Freeman’s *Comparisons* are one artist’s way of sifting the avalanche of available pictures: a start at the task of coming to terms with the surfeit of images now at our fingertips. Her levelling of the august and the mundane chips away at the hierarchy of what counts as visual culture.<sup>25</sup> It asks us to take seriously the grossly accelerated pace and volume of image production and jokingly alludes to the kind of visual literacy needed to master it. By elevating the artefacts of Internet backwaters, she saps iconic works of their authority, but also exploits the layered meanings fine art has accrued to help us better attend to the Internet material, urging a closer look at a league of images otherwise beneath art-historical notice.

Dating back to Wölfflin, comparativism has offered a means to hone the senses, and Freeman’s is an exercise in discernment and visual acumen keyed to this era of idle scrolling and endless selection. She trawls the Internet’s vast reserves of data with a keen eye for extracting patterns, and her irreverent take on the trusty slide comparison is ultimately less a critique than a tacit endorsement. Freeman holds this art-historical method up to new scrutiny but lets it emerge more or less intact - still the core educational trope by which the norms of the discipline are propagated. Her use of profane, even tasteless imagery proves the enduring power of the comparative format, since the visual convention of paired images is so ingrained that viewers know implicitly what to do. We cannot help but begin to draw connections, forging links between the pictures. We find ourselves performing the mental operations that comparativism was meant to teach.

## **Acknowledgments**

An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the conference ‘Artifacts, Images and Forms in Global Circulation’, at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris, in June 2019. With thanks to AI Freeman for generous discussion.

## **Footnotes**

- 1** See B.H.D. Buchloh: ‘The primary colors for the second time: a paradigm repetition for the neo-avant-garde’ [1986], in *idem: Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art*, Cambridge 2015, pp.335–74.

- 2** This series and its chauvinistic tendencies are well documented in A. Perl: 'Succès de "Scandale" and Biblical scandal: Yves Klein's debut performance of Anthropometries in 1960', *Thresholds* 43 (2015), pp.12–18 and 363–71. [https://doi.org/10.1162/thld\\_a\\_00051](https://doi.org/10.1162/thld_a_00051).
- 3** Roberta Smith refers to Freeman's 'feminist barbs' in R. Smith: 'What to see in New York art galleries this week', *New York Times* (16th May 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/arts/design/what-to-see-in-new-york-art-galleries-this-week.html>, accessed 8th May 2020.
- 4** C. Bishop: 'Digital divide: contemporary art and new media', *Artforum* 51, no.2 (September 2012), pp.434–42.
- 5** H. Molesworth: 'San Francisco housewife and mother', in T.H. Schenkenberg, ed.: exh. cat. *Ruth Asawa: Life's Work*, St. Louis (Pulitzer Arts Foundation) 2018, p.36. For more on the method's ubiquity, see M. Battles and M. Maizels: 'Collections and/of data: art history and the art museum in the DH mode', in M.K. Gold and L.F. Klein, eds: *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, available online at <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/78>, accessed 21st April 2020.
- 6** Al Freeman, interview with the author, 2nd April 2019. All descriptions of the artist's process derive from this and subsequent conversations.
- 7** M. Connor: 'Post-Internet art: what it is and what it was', in O. Kholeif, ed.: *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, Manchester and London 2014, p.57. See also L. Cornell and E. Halter, eds: *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge MA, 2015.
- 8** L. Jacob, quoted in R. Heather: 'Artists at work: Luis Jacob', *Afterall Online*, 3rd December 2008, <https://www.afterall.org/online/artists.at.work.luis.jacob#.XrNILxNKjOQ>, accessed 8th May 2020. On Burr's *Bulletin Boards*, see G. Baker: 'The other side of the wall', *October* 120 (Spring 2007), pp.127–28. Jacob began his series in 2000; Burr's dates to the late 1990s.
- 9** Google Arts & Culture introduced the Art Selfie app in January 2018, see <https://artsandculture.google.com/camera/selfie>, accessed 11th May 2020. On how museums are encouraging recreations of works from their collections, see K. Kelleher: 'Like the portrait, become the portrait', *New York Times* (19th April 2020), Section ST, p.2.
- 10** Freeman, interview with the author, 29th April 2020.
- 11** See D. Neumann: 'Teaching the History of Architecture in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland: "Architekturgeschichte" vs. "Bauforschung"', *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61, no.3 (2002), p.377; and H. Bredekamp: 'Art History as "Bildwissenschaft"', *Critical Inquiry* 29, no.3 (Spring 2003), pp.421–22.

- 12** This history is detailed in T. Fawcett: 'Visual facts and the nineteenth century art lecture', *Art History* 6, no.4 (December 1983); and D. Preziosi: 'The panoptic gaze and the anamorphic archive', in *idem: Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven 1989. Zeynep Çelik Alexander's recent work has clarified that, while Wölfflin was not the inventor of this technique, he was widely acclaimed as its leading practitioner, see Z. Çelik Alexander: 'Introduction to Wölfflin's "On Left and Right Images"', *Grey Room* 73, no.4 (2018), pp.82-87; and *idem: Kinaesthetic Knowing: Aesthetics, Epistemology, Modern Design*, Chicago 2017, p.95.
- 13** Çelik Alexander 2017, *op. cit.* (note 12), pp.22 and 11, emphasis in original. See also D. Karlholm: 'Developing the picture: Wölfflin's performance art', *Photography & Culture* 3, no.2 (July 2010), pp.208 and 209. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175145110X12700318320512>.
- 14** Wölfflin, quoted in Alexander, *op. cit.* (note 13), p.83.
- 15** *Ibid.*, p.92 and *passim*.
- 16** See Karlholm, *op. cit.* (note 13), p.208.
- 17** See D. Summers: 'Heinrich Wölfflin's "Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe", 1915', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE*, 151 (July 2009), p.477; and R.S. Nelson: 'The slide lecture, or the work of art "history" in the age of mechanical reproduction', *Critical Inquiry* 26, no.3 (Spring 2000), p.433.
- 18** On the recent crisis of confidence in this method, see W. Davis: 'Bivisibility: why art history is comparative', in J. Elsner, ed.: *Comparativism in Art History*, London 2017, pp.43 and 46.
- 19** A.K. Powell: *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum*, New York 2012, pp.10-11; the definition Powell glosses is from E. Panofsky: *Tomb Sculpture*, London 1964.
- 20** Y.-A. Bois: 'On the uses and abuse of look-alikes', *October* 154 (2015), p.139. [https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO\\_a\\_00240](https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00240). C.W. Bynum also discusses scholars' doubts in 'Avoiding the tyranny of morphology; or, why compare?', *History of Religions* 53, no.4 (May 2014), p.346 and *passim*.
- 21** Bois, *op. cit.* (note 20), p.130.
- 22** C. Armstrong: *Cezanne's Gravity*, New Haven 2018, p.20.
- 23** For an evocative description of this photograph, see B. Fer: *Eva Hesse: Studiowork*, Edinburgh 2009, p.50. On Hesse's sculpture and sexuality more generally, see M. Nixon: 'Posing the phallus', *October* 92 (Spring 2000).
- 24** For David's 'political vision of gender', see N. Kampen: 'The muted other', *Art Journal* 47, no.1 (Spring 1988), p.17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/776900>.

**25** For this flattening of all digital images on the web, see E. Respini: 'No ghost just shell', in *idem*, ed.: *Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today* , Boston 2018, p.21.

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