Picturing ‘Naked Life’
Bodies at the Margins in the Photography of Parminder Sekhon

Lauran E. Whitworth, Emory University

1 Agamben, 2000, p. 42-3. Giorgio Agamben and other philosophers such as Hannah Arendt use the term 'bare life,' originally presented in his Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998), to address issues of citizenship and biopolitics. “Bare life” (occasionally translated as “naked life”) refers not only to one’s physical body but to the individual as an entity separate from the state and stripped of that which constitutes one’s sociopolitical selfhood. Agamben traces the concept to Aristotle and Greek conceptions of zoe and bios, terms used to designate individual existence from collectively experienced civic and political life (i.e. the political body). In employing the term, I am intentionally engaging Agamben though my chief interest is in Sekhon’s photographs of naked subjects and the ways in which they lay bare (via literal nakedness) sociopolitical tensions, many of which also interested Agamben.
In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray (1977) argues, we only touch each other naked. And...to find ourselves once again in that state, we have a lot to take off. So many representations, so many appearances separate us from each other that we have come to forget the feel of our own skin (p. 217-218). Irigaray’s poetic observation precedes Parminder Sekhon’s artistic career by nearly a decade, yet it is as though Irigaray’s words were meant to describe Sekhon’s photographs. Sekhon, a queer South Asian artist who lives and works in Britain, uses her photographic work to encapsulate such complexities of identity as those she herself embodies. In her *Urban Lives* series (1999-2002) [fig 1], Sekhon dismantles binaries—of gender, of space (private/public), of viewership (active viewer/passive subject). Her photographic subjects resist categorization, refusing to alienate others or be “othered” themselves. Yet her work does more than this. Sekhon’s photographs raise crucial questions about the naked body as a medium for ethical intervention.

Before exploring the theoretical implications of her photographs, it is worthwhile to acknowledge Sekhon’s background, which provides further insight into her artistry as activism. Sekhon is a self-taught photographer, though she identifies more as an activist than an artist, claiming in 2003, at least four years after her initial foray into photography, that her conception of herself as an artist was a recent development (Smyth, 2003, p.110). Sekhon’s primary career has been in client services at Naz Project London (NPL), a long-standing non-profit devoted to sexual health awareness and support. The organization, which predominately serves London’s South Asian communities, focuses on AIDS and HIV prevention and consultation (NPL, 2011). During her time at Naz, Sekhon, who is now Deputy Director, became involved in the organization’s media campaigns and began taking photographs for the posters herself[fig 2]. Thus Sekhon’s entrée into photography was through her work on anti-homophobia campaigns. That Sekhon is an artist-activist attuned to the power of visual messaging is evident in her borrowing of commercial advertising tactics, specifically the use of text and slogans evident in United Colors of Benetton ads as well as on mainstream movie posters [fig 2b], to foster queer visibility. This representational stratagem is manifest in Sekhon’s *Urban Lives* photographic series, to which I now return.
“Naked without Shame”

There is controversy among scholars over the use of the naked body for feminist aims. Avant-garde filmmaker and cinematographer Peter Gidal laments, “I do not see how [there] is any possibility of using the image of a naked woman [other than in an absolutely sexist and politically repressive patriarchal way in this conjuncture” (Gidal in Wolff, 1990, p. 121). Cultural critic and theorist Janet Wolff expresses a similar wariness of using the female body for feminist ends when she writes about the arguably failed 1989 Sandycove, Dublin protest.² Wolff highlights the bare body’s “pre-existing meanings, as sex object, as object of the male gaze,” which she maintains “can always prevail and reappropriate the body, despite the intentions of the woman herself (p. 121). While she initially acknowledges the dangers of body politics, Wolff ultimately affirms “that a feminist cultural politics of the body is a possibility,” explaining “There is every reason, too, to propose the body as a privileged site of political intervention, precisely because it is the site of repression and possession (p. 122).

This paper engages this dialogue by asking if Sekhon’s imaging of the female and/or queer body, either her own or that of her photographic subjects, can facilitate reclamation and empowerment of the unclothed body when for so long it has been objectified. In other words, is there potential for contestation via the naked female or queer body, particularly an unclothed woman or queer of color? Can we conceive of the naked figure in the absence of capitalist inscription, gender expectations, and art genre (i.e. the canonical female nude)? Can this nakedness as activist intervention prompt political and conceptual reformulations of selfhood and otherness?

As well-known feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) states, “The work of the mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show

---

² On July 17, 1989, a group of women staged a protest against a male-dominated portion of the beach at Sandycove in Dublin. The well-known swimming hole, an inlet in the Sandycove harbor called The Forty Foot, was a haven for male beachgoers, who often swam naked there. As such the presence of women was dissuaded. In protest, a small group of women stormed the beach, removed their bathing suits, and swam nude or semi-nude in the harbor. The event, deemed an invasion by many sources, garnered media attention, notably from The Guardian, which included a photograph of a nearly nude female protestor being ogled at and heckled by the male bystanders on the beach. Wolff reads the photograph as emblematic of the potential failures of using the unclothed female body as means to liberatory ends.
in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended (p. 102, my emphasis). In order to transcend objectification and entrenched models of viewing, we must rethink identity (i.e. physical, cultural, and historical models of signification) and ultimately space (i.e. the body in space). To do this we must remember the feel of our own skin (Irigaray, 1977, p. 217-218) and, as bell hooks (1998) eloquently maintains, we must re-encounter ourselves. I contend that Sekhon’s photographs set the stage for this exchange with naked life.

Such a re-encountering of the female and queer self entails recognition of the invisibility of marginalized bodies. On this invisibility Irigaray (1977) writes,

Women’s bodies through their use, consumption, and circulation provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown infrastructure of the elaboration of that social life and culture. The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men [...] The work force is thus always assumed to be masculine, and products are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone. (p. 171)

Irigaray illuminates the ways in which women and their bodies function as necessary but unrecognized entities in the fabric of daily life. It is this commodification, coding, and containment that renders the female and queer body foreign and unseen even to itself. Sekhon recognizes this disappearance or subsuming of the female and queer self and uses the hyper-visibility of her naked subjects to expose and challenge this process of codification. Sekhon’s

---

3 See Mieke Bal, The Politics of Citation, diacritics 21.1 (Spring 1991): 25-45. Bal uses the term “de-objectification” in conjunction with “de-distancing” (31) to argue that insight alone is not enough; we have to live through our part traumas again, not looking at them from a false distance but immersing ourselves in them.” She observes “de-objectification” in a number of early twentieth-century colonial photographs and postcards. According to Bal, “de-objectification” occurs when there is “an exchange of looks” (26) and refusal of complicity on the part of the female subject, which complicates subject/viewer exchange. Recognizing the gaze as returned “makes room for differentiated viewing positions” and the possibility for recognizing the “tight solidarity between knowledge of the other and self-knowledge” (43).
utilization of space and physical structures in her photographs (architectural framings, fences, wires, and street signage) reflects her acknowledgment of women and other marginalized peoples as an unknown infrastructure. Moreover, her use of actual infrastructural elements often dislocates and abstracts her urban settings, calling into question societal infrastructure and the ways in which we are socially composed and assembled.

In Sekhon’s *Southall Market* self-portrait (1999) [fig 1], two figures, the artist and her elderly mother, stand side-by-side facing the camera. The prominent fence that separates the women from the market setting divides the scene at an awkward angle; as such, the figures are shot straight on, but the background is slightly oblique. Beyond the fence, we see the detritus of the day’s exchange—piles of boxes and trash on damp asphalt. An indiscernible sign hangs on the front of the central building. Just behind and to the right of the covered stalls, one can barely make out the rooftops and chimneys of the surrounding suburb. The photograph contains a rather deep field and focus, yet Sekhon’s compression of space (i.e. the closeness of the figures and fence) obscures the background. What is noticeably absent from the background, vendors and customers, is glaringly, perhaps jarringly present in the foreground.

Ironically, Sekhon’s mother forced her to frequent this market on Saturdays throughout her childhood. She recalls:

> My mother tried to persuade me to go […] I hated it and I tried to avoid the inevitable standoff each week. Those mothers lagging behind Stepford daughters, dragging trolleys all over Southall on the way to and from the market. I couldn’t bear it. In the end she did stop asking but it was hard because I couldn’t do the simplest of normal things that was required of me. I must have been hinting at the way of things to come. (Smyth, 2003, p. 110)

Even at an early age, Sekhon recognized that her non-normative behavior failed to contribute to the fodder of the older women’s gossip circle. Her comments reveal a female-centric system, yet it is one of internalized hegemony,
ironically perpetuating heteropatriarchy (see hooks, 1998, p. 73). As an adult and artist, Sekhon responds to her former feelings of exclusion, positioning herself outside that realm of commerce and conformity. She is simultaneously connected to her childhood neighborhood yet resistant to its stifling gender expectations. Just as Sekhon eventually refused to attend the market with her mother, causing a rupture in the habitual happenings of her family, the artist's nakedness also disrupts the idyllic domesticity and social harmony embodied in her use of the term Stepford daughters. Sekhon's nakedness at this site of commerce and transaction thus demonstrates her rejection of the reinforced behavior and performance that frequenting the market often entails.

When asked about the conception of this photograph, Sekhon comments, For me it was about looking at the naked form in a non-pornographic context; it was also about looking at the naked form in an urban landscape. I wanted as much exposure, as it were, as much vulnerability, as much openness and transparency as I could possibly get (Whitworth, 2009). Sekhon's inclusion of infrastructural and architectural elements as well as urban debris, such as discarded boxes and other containers, invoke metaphors of the woman as receptacle. The fence, which converges behind Sekhon's body, and the bare buildings juxtaposed with her bare form create a perspicuous setting for her exposed body and her exposure of the ways in which space and behavioral expectations therein are inscribed on the body. Thus if the space that Sekhon inhabits (or chooses not to inhabit) codes her body, it is not with male-driven, capitalist exploitation but with the possibility of emancipation not in spite of but precisely through her body's evident exclusion.

**Power at the Margins: A Space of One's Own**

“If I speak of marginality, it is because, first of all, these movements [i.e. women's liberation] to some extent keep themselves deliberately apart from institutions and from the play of forces in power. Outside already-existing power

---

4 Stepford wives (or in this case daughters) is an expression derived from Ira Levin's 1974 novel by the same name (there have been a number of movie adaptations as well). These stories, named for their Stepford, Connecticut setting, have evolved into a contemporary archetype of sorts, as satires and even horror story perversions of idyllic domesticity.
relations...This ‘position’ is explained by the difficulties women encounter when they try to make their voices heard in places already fixed within and by a society that has simultaneously used and excluded them. This position can be understood, too, through women’s need to constitute a place to be among themselves, in order to learn to formulate their desires, in the absence of overly immediate pressures and oppressions. (Irigaray, 1977, p. 127)

The question of how to incite change in perceptions, in politics, in power dynamics, from the outside in, from the margins in, or from the supposed bottom up is at the forefront of Sekhon’s photographic aims. Sekhon’s figures, easily recognizable as deviant for their unorthodox hair color, gender bending, or the sheer fact that they are unclothed, often appear alone and isolated. In Untitled (1999) [fig 3], Sekhon’s ambiguously gendered subject is shot against a mainstream movie poster. The juxtaposition of the embracing heterosexual couple on the poster with the lone photographic subject on the right, smoking and as unaware of the poster as the close-eyed actors are of her/hir/him, creates a sense of separateness. In photographs such as Southall Broadway (1999) [fig 4], which will be discussed in detail below, this exposure and separation is tinged with vulnerability and could easily be read as disadvantageous. Thus Sekhon’s photographs elicit fundamental questions regarding how individuals relegated to the outskirts of society, either physically, juridically, or conceptually, can use this exclusion to their advantage.

A useful concept for examining the transformative potential of Sekhon’s photographs can be found in Giorgio Agamben’s (2000) writings on camps. When Agamben writes on camps as communities unto themselves as spaces or states of exception, he has concentration camps and internments such as Abu Ghraib in mind. He observes, what comes to light in the camps is the principle according to which anything is possible. (p. 1, 40) We see the possibility of such lawless places of exception when atrocities of torture and

---

5 I am uncomfortable with my own employment of terminology that suggests my collusion with hierarchical paradigms of space and power in which so-called marginalized populace are marginal, outside, near the bottom, and so on. However, I use these normative conceptions of power and hierarchical arrangements therein to explore the ways in which contestations such as Sekhon’s can potentially alter those very systems and their hegemonic configurations.
human rights violations become the norm. Yet if read against the grain, Agamben’s rather grim observations of extreme exclusion and othering also contain liberatory potential. As he explains,

The camp is the space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule [...] One ought to reflect on the paradoxical status of the camp as space of exception: the camp is a piece of territory that is placed outside the normal juridical order; for all that, however, *it is not simply an external space [...] what is being excluded in the camp is captured outside, that is, it is included by virtue of its very exclusion.* (p. 38-40, my emphasis)

Agamben’s commentary is important when considering Sekhon’s photographs and when rethinking marginality, a word he perhaps deliberately avoids. If, as I posited earlier, we are to rethink subject-object patterns of viewing, then it must begin with a rethinking of spatiality, more specifically a rethinking of bodies, in Sekhon’s case, naked bodies, in space. A re-conceptualization of ethics and the success of activist happenings therein hinge on the emancipatory potential that Agamben makes room for and which Sekhon elucidates. By photographing her figures in highly public, often recognizable urban settings that she then compresses or abstracts, Sekhon interrogates space. Through her illumination of physical infrastructure, she exposes largely ignored elements of spatial composition (junctures, crevices, building joints, and seams) to call into question our assembling of selfhood. In her exposure of bare life, Sekhon reveals often-concealed dynamics and exchanges, what Agamben deems the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we live (in *What Is a Camp?* p. 38, 7).

**Bodies, Cities, and Urban Interventions**

Metaphors of space and habitation predominate many discussions of identity formation, as is evident in the Anzaldúa, Irigaray, and Agamben quotations above. In *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Pérez (1999) devises the phrases “third
space and interstitial moments of history to explain the position of a marginalized populace and its relation to history. She describes her scholarly approach as going outside [history] in order to come back in with different kinds of inquiries (p. xiii, xvi). Similarly, Sekhon uses her photography to document South Asian queer life in London going outside mainstream culture to archive culture without a history. Sekhon and her subjects not only physically occupy a third space, as they appear lone outsiders in metropolitan street-scapes, they also conceptually dwell in a third space inhabiting identities that are neither fixed, dichotomous, nor binary. In this tertiary space, Sekhon’s queer sitters secure increased visibility through intentional exposure, a harbinger for this welcomed between-ness.

In a biological sense “interstitial” is defined as “situated within but not restricted to or characteristic of a particular organ or tissue. Interstitial stems from the Latin interstitium meaning both standing and a break or a gap (Merriam-Webster, 2009). This etymology will prove especially pertinent throughout this discussion. In Sekhon’s photography, her subjects often stand before deserted markets, famous landmarks, and garish storefronts, yet they are positioned between these architectural spaces—spaces that we perceive them to be separate from and the camera lens/viewer. It is from this liminal space, both outside and inside the city, both within systems of power (i.e. subjected to the gaze) and beyond them, that these seditious photographs of street-dwellers spur acts of critical intervention and collective resistance (hooks, 1998, p. 73).

Integral to Sekhon’s ability to challenge subject-object paradigms of viewing and objectification is her juxtaposition of naked bodies in urban settings. While the nudity in Sekhon’s photographs could potentially stand on its own as a break, rupture, or interventionist tactic, the cityscapes and architectural framings behind these figures are equally active and crucial to the effect and success of Sekhon’s work. In photographs such as Bricklane (1999) [fig 5], nakedness and urbanity are inextricably linked. Here two men pose before a large brick building. The building and its windows comprise the background of the photograph, subsuming any sense of depth, horizon, or skyline, as Sekhon again flattens space. The yellow and white street lines that flank the male figures become abstract patterns, creating a nearly
symmetrical framework with the windows behind them. The striated background of bricks, pipes, and wires is mirrored in the gaps and lines between the cobblestone street. The interplay of black and white is evident in the men's caps and the adjacent window. The sparseness of the scene is especially striking—the glare on the windows that renders them blank, the empty backstreet, the lack of signage and signs of life. Our focus is thus forced on the figures, who appear as blank as their surroundings. The men’s bare feet and the rawness of flesh on stone create both a sense of unity with and separateness from the urban space. Sekhon confirmed in an interview that she “was interested in how disconnected or connected you might be to a landscape that you've grown up in and that she “wanted that juxtaposition [of flesh and city setting] because ironically those were places she also felt the safest” (Whitworth, 2009). This contrast of skin and concrete, an element we see in nearly all of Sekhon’s photographs, serves as a literal reminder of this physical and discursive exposure of naked life.

Sekhon often incorporates spaces personal to her subjects, environs familiar to her, such as Southall Market, or iconic and therefore loaded settings like the Hoover building, which I will return to below. Unlike her photographs of Club Kali, an active and well-known queer South Asian nightclub where her drag sitters play up their queerness for the camera [figs 6 & 7], in this Urban Lives series of nude figures in public spaces, it is as if she queers space and our conceptions of people and place. Art critic Raman Mundair (2003) writes that, in Sekhon's work, the South Asian Queer exists in an urban space where creative play can subvert representation (p. 7). Interestingly, in her Urban Lives series, Sekhon’s subversive tactics are found not in photographic manipulation or shock-and-awe tactics but in the form of realism reminiscent of snapshot photography. Sekhon’s figures are portrayed realistically, even unflatteringly, challenging sexist ideals about the mythic female nude. We note the crouched woman’s flesh that bunches on her side in Southall Broadway (1999) [fig 4] and the awkward camera angle from which we view the woman in Hoover Building, Perivale (2002) [fig 8].

Yet Sekhon's work goes beyond subverting ideal body types. She often photographs the exposed bodies of her
sitters amidst capitalist imagery. While the artist claimed in a 2009 interview that these capitalist undertones were incidental, it is remarkable that the majority of her images take place in commercial settings from cash-and-carry shops to open-air markets. In *Hoover Building, Perivale* (2002) [fig 8], a woman appears in front of London’s well-known Hoover building located in the suburb of Perivale, Middlesex. The Art Deco building, originally constructed by Wallis, Gilbert and Partners in 1932, housed offices and later a factory for the Hoover vacuum company. During World War II, the site manufactured electrical parts. In the 1980s, the complex was purchased and restored by the Tesco supermarket chain (Hoover Building, 2008). Sekhon’s depiction of this historical structure creates a symbolic context that evokes normative expectations of domesticity (Hoover vacuums) and commercialism (Tesco supermarkets), as well as violence and consumerism (World War II contributions). The gold characters on what appears to be the building’s main entrance visually rhyme with the woman’s jewelry. This ornamentation, both on the building and her body, emphasizes the figure’s lack of clothing. Her body language—crossed arms, firm stance, and a reticent facial expression—suggest her awareness of being viewed and seeming discomfort therewith. This mutual recognition between viewer and viewed is an example of what Bal (1991) termed “de-objectification,” as Sekhon’s figure is not a passive subject who looks away to give the voyeur more license to look.

A comparison of the two photographs in this particular series reveals an even deeper level of commercial and corporeal interplay. Through her characteristic compression of space, Sekhon transforms a figure in space into a disjunct sign or “interface,” to borrow from Elizabeth Grosz (1995, p. 108). This two-way linkage or exchange results in interplay between the figure and her backdrop, as the flattened composition dislocates all sense of spatial depth and separateness. It’s as if the red lines of the building and the overhang which falls right at her shoulders are as much a part of her body as the jewelry she wears. As Mundair (2003) argues, Many of [Sekhon’s] images carry strong cultural motifs, iconography and symbols, often represented via clothing, makeup and jewelry. Such things are encoded onto the skin, juxtaposed against an urban landscape (p. 7). Yet in Sekhon’s photographs this coding or inscription
is obscure. Grosz (1995) argues that the body “becomes a human body only through mediation from others, from one’s surrounding and that its inscription by a set of socially coded meanings and significances (both for the subject and for others), makes the body a meaningful, readable, depth entity (p. 104). In Sekhon’s photographs, however, bodies are not easily readable entities.

In *Southall Broadway* (1999) [fig 4], Sekhon highlights signifiers of identity (jewelry, make up, clothing, faint tan lines, even other individuals) to illuminate layers of inscription and our investment in using these markers to maintain perceived difference. Unlike many of Sekhon’s frontal figures, the woman in this image crouches on the curb and grabs her ankle. Like the standing woman in front of the Hoover building and the men in *Bricklane*, the figures’ flesh contrasts with the grey concrete, which seems an inhospitable setting for these exposed beings. Her crouching position does not appear particularly empowered, but perhaps that is the point. Her pose and obliviousness to the voyeur’s gaze render her easy to view, yet the backdrop screaming “sale!” creates an uncomfortable correlation with doing so. In fact, the signage, which protrudes from her head and eye level, seems to function like an overt caption. The red of the window sale sign and the shop awnings is echoed in her red lipstick. Interestingly, the only prevalent color in the photograph stems from the woman’s make up and nail polish and the commodities for sale behind her. Here again corporeality and consumerism collide, as we sense that these products and sales pitches are visually manifesting on the woman’s body. Yet while these commercial forces may manifest on the skin, they never fully overtake Sekhon’s figures. Sekhon demonstrates that while the body is inscribed--by capitalism, sociocultural expectations, history, even familial obligations--the body can also resist containment and inscription.

In *Southall Broadway*, the viewer’s potential discomfort with this exposure and excess of flesh is eased by the presence of a garment, yet the woman does not cover herself with her hands nor does she reach for the discarded garb. The latter implies that she chose to disrobe and is in control of her own exposure. Significantly, it is not the woman who confronts the viewer. While her head faces forward, she seems unaware of us and the passers-by in the background. Thus in lieu of the figure confronting the camera,
it is the commercial context that complicate our viewing; this is especially ironic considering commercial aims to visually appeal to and entice potential consumers. These urban settings activate the photographed individuals, whose unclothed state perpetuates a sense of simultaneous exposure and empowerment, or empowerment through exposure.

Integral to this transgressive potential is exchange—exchange between the figures and their surroundings, between Sekhon and her subjects, between these figures and the viewer, and between the figures within the frame. As such, it seems especially significant that the majority of Sekhon’s *Urban Lives* photographs take place in city streets, places of constant traffic, transaction, and negotiation. In *Cat and Steve, 2002* [fig 9], a two-photograph pairing or pendant piece, the initially clothed figure on the viewer’s left is unclothed in the following image, while the figure on the right undergoes that same transformation in reverse, imbuing the series with a sense of animation. This interplay of bare and clothed echoes throughout the scene; for example, the figure on the left’s turtleneck renders his upper body and arms fully clothed, yet his exposed midriff creates an awkward juxtaposition that enhances a sense of exposure. The man on the right, sporting vibrantly dyed hair and goatee, creates a similarly jarring contrast with his pale white skin, which also differs from the other figure’s olive-toned complexion. The right figure’s absence of facial and pubic hair again serves as a visual foil to the left figure’s abundance of body hair. The severe part of the left individual’s hair and shave marks, which reflect an absence of hair, contrast or are visually transposed to the figure’s face through his faint moustache. While the left figure wears no jewelry, save a large silver belt buckle, the figure on the right has a number of piercings. These and his necklaces are far more noticeable when the man is nude, and stand out further because of the adjacent figure. As such, Sekhon invites us to see how clothing changes our reading of the figures’ identities and their own self-presentation. Again she draws attention to perceived difference and identity markers; here, however, Sekhon does so through dynamic interplay between her subjects.

In *Space, Time, & Perversion*, Elizabeth Grosz (1995) maintains, “If bodies are to be reconceived, not only must
their matter and form be rethought, but so too must their environment and spatio-temporal location (p. 84). Similarly, Irigaray asserts, “In order to make it possible to think through and live [sexual] difference, we must consider the whole problematic of space and time. The transition to a new age requires a change in our perception and conception of space-time, the inhabiting of places and of containers, or envelopes of identity” (Grosz, 1995, p. 121). In Cat and Steve, the figures’ environ accentuates the exchange and fluidity we witness in the photographs. The square bricks, black pipes, second-story metal railing, wooden lattice, blue door, windows, light fixtures, and even the yellow clothes line create an abstract geometric patterning, as Sekhon once again condenses the background. We have no sense of the building’s size or its roofline. While the clothes on the line and the colored objects within the lattice suggest that this is an inhabited space, the figures before us seem to have transcended these containers or envelopes of identity. Though their bodies are framed by piping and guardrails, they appear beyond containment, as their clothing swap and visual interplay suggest. Furthermore, the pipes, drain (in the left photograph), and linear patterns of the intersecting and often parallel shapes actually further activate the scene, as the figures are not behind, under, or within these boundaries. Just as Grosz perceives the city as a “point of transit,” a “site for chaotic, deregulated, and unregulatable flows” (p. 107), Sekhon employs urban settings in her photographs to show that the city can also be a site for the fluidity of identity, a haven for hybridity and in-betweenness.6

In Two Black Girls, 1999 [fig 10] and Untitled, 1999 [fig 11], we do not see the exposed wires, pipes, or scaffolding of many of Sekhon’s street scenes; we do, however, encounter spaces whose interface with the figures who

---

6 Grosz (1995) conceives of the exchanges between bodies and space as flows and interchanges. While she perceives the body as constituted by a confluence of meaning and experience, both self and other-imposed, she similarly sees the city as a relational amalgam, a complex and interactive network that links together disparate social activities, processes, relations, with a number of architectural, geographical, civic, and public relations to create a semi-permanent but ever-changing built environment or milieu (p. 107). What Grosz describes is not merely a physical environ always under construction; in her acknowledgment of the socioeconomic, cultural, and political matrix of daily life (note the connections to Agamben here), she also describes community under construction.
inhabit them furthers more fluid conceptions of identity. In *Two Black Girls*, two women pose arm in arm on an upholstered bench. While Sekhon is obviously critiquing the limitations of language when it comes to encapsulating identity the women’s contrasting skin colors reveal the variations that such titles can contain she also continues her use of urban landscapes to elucidate such linguistic shortcomings. In *Two Black Girls*, the dark/light contrasts are accentuated by the women’s clothing: one wears black boots, the other tan loafers; one wears dark grey pants, the other light; one wears a white print shirt, the other a solid black parka. Even the seat below them contains a geometric patterning of dark and light-toned bands and lines. This visual interplay, which we see throughout Sekhon’s oeuvre, is further fueled by the setting. Behind the seated women are two doors; the dark-skinned woman is framed by the black door and her companion sits before white. In this photograph, as in numerous others by Sekhon, seams, joints, and in this case, bolts, are not hidden or obscured. Sekhon’s inclusion of architectural fixtures, the metal chair leg, bolts, and concrete below the women, suggests that while these devices are seemingly static, the figures that they support are not.

Similarly, in *Untitled, 1999* [fig 11] two ambiguously gendered individuals pose under the heading Gentleman, an ostensible jab at restrictive and dimorphous gender norms. Sekhon’s play with text, titles, and labels is furthered by the right figure’s Superman t-shirt. Like a tattoo, the logo functions as an ironic inscription not unlike the bathroom label above. As in *Two Black Girls*, the figures at once contrast and complement one another. The figure in the navy suit has flat hair, while the other figure has spiky hair. The figure on the right wears sunglasses while we clearly see the whites of the left figure’s eyes. Both figures twist their legs as they lean on one leg, but each advances the opposite appendage. The figure’s resemblances are as apparent as their differences: both left hands are tucked or fisted, both figures are in relaxed poses, and both wear navy. Sekhon’s choice of a black and white, tiled stairwell, not unlike the black and white doorways in *Two Black Girls*, seems a symbolic setting for this shot, as this classic color binary is the backdrop for Sekhon’s challenging of racial and gender binaries. The figures in both shots are separate yet together. There are palpable disjunctions, as neither the dark-skinned woman in *Two Black Girls* nor the
figure in sunglasses face the camera (the latter does in premise, but we cannot see the figure’s eyes); yet the figures and the viewer engaging the photographs remain connected, “social network[s] linked to other bodies and objects” (Grosz, 1995, p. 104). Thus instead of reductive and divisive subcategories such as East/West, Public/Private, Gay/Straight, or Female/Male, Sekhon’s photographs advocate and conceptualize disarticulated linkages, East-West, Public-Private, Gay-Straight, and Male-Female, an acknowledgment of all that lies in between and its potential to subvert such dichotomous and problematic pairings.

Seeing the Other in Ourselves; Seeing Ourselves in the Other

“She is indefinitely other in herself.” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 28)

Art theorist and Irigaray scholar Hilary Robinson (1995) responds to Irigaray’s thought-provoking statement above by asking: who is she? what is other? where is self? (p. 138). These questions pervade Sekhon’s portraits, especially her most disorienting and enigmatic self-portrait, Old Southall Broadway, 1999 [fig 12]. Sekhon again poses nude in a commercial context, as she did in her Southall Market photograph with her mother. Old Southall Broadway, a three-part series, places the artist in the center flanked by minimized repetitions of another image, a separate photograph of Sekhon’s nude body against a storefront.

In the central shot [fig 12b.], the background is an eerie, almost gallows-like setting of broken black rope, wooden boards, and a tattered white bag. As in her Southall Market photograph, Sekhon makes no effort to hide the accrual of this presumably abandoned loading dock. A damp, flattened cardboard box tops the platform in the center of the shot while an intact box sits to Sekhon’s right. In a departure from her usual positioning of her portrait figures, here Sekhon looks away as if startled in the central shot. Her nipple ring serves as the focal point of the composition, as if to invite exoticism and sensuality, yet this is not an aesthetically pleasing backdrop for the exposed body.

In this photograph, as in many of Sekhon’s works, the setting does more than deter the voyeuristic gaze. Grosz
(1995) claims that the city is the site for the body’s cultural saturation, its takeover and transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media, and the arts the place where the body is representationally reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed. She further explains, In turn, the body (as cultural product) transforms, reinscribes the urban landscape according to its changing (demographic) needs a hinge between the population and the individual, the body, its distribution, habits, alignments, pleasures, norms, and ideals (p. 108-109, my emphasis). Sekhon’s half-turned body indeed operates like a hinge, as she swivels behind her, encouraging our eyes to follow hers into the maze of wooden boards. Here we see what appears to be new construction. The light-colored wood contrasts with the darker, seemingly damp boards in the foreground. Her body correlates with the tan-colored box to her right. The new wood and Sekhon herself appear to be the only dry entities in the shot. Read conceptually and in light of Grosz’s commentary above, the space and Sekhon’s presence are even more symbolically loaded.

The intact cardboard box and wooden frames, as discussed above in Southall Market, are containers, connoting associations of the female body as a repository. Yet Sekhon intentionally positions herself between these flattened, damp, and torn boxes (one detached box flap is between us and the artist and the larger, still intact box is slightly behind her). It is as if Sekhon is showing us literally what her photographs aim to accomplish conceptually: to interrogate identity formation through deconstruction and reformation of bodies in space. The correlation between Sekhon’s jewelry (nipple ring and single bracelet) and the metal bolts in the wood around her again illustrate this point. Here Sekhon is physically naked but also naked as a pre-symbolic being, absent of and thus free from the overt capitalist inscription of the flanking storefront images. In the side photographs, however, the surrounding shops’ shadows literally overtake Sekhon’s diminutive body. By incorporating the mechanical facets of her environ in the central photograph, Sekhon employs the city and its unseen dimensions to draw attention to the construction of space as a means to question the constructed-ness of identity.

While Sekhon renders the body exposed and seemingly all the more accessible and vulnerable to outside gazes,
she complicates that viewing, making visibility an act of empowerment and subversion rather than further grounds for isolation. Her work demands and encourages new modes of viewing, which entails a consideration of how [the city] affects the way the subject sees others” (Grosz, 1995, p. 108-109). In her portrayal of bare life, Sekhon depicts naked beings whose exposure exposes the mechanics of how we form identity. She thus reveals a pedagogy of emancipation one of spatiality, ethics, aesthetics, and politics. In her querying of our consciousness, she highlights the potential for visual culture and the arts to provoke, embody, and illustrate what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) perceives as a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other” (p. 103). In fulfilling her goal that her photographs serve as images people can connect to, (Whitworth, 2009) Sekhon’s photographs facilitate exchange and in doing so, challenge normative perceptions of not only the Other but the spaces between us. Sekhon demonstrates that margins can be a place of empowerment and when moved to the center, they can promote transformation. Sekhon’s photographs ultimately reveal more than these interstitial, third spaces and the naked life therein. She also exposes us.
Works Cited


Figure 1

*Photographs reproduced with permission of the artist.*
Figure 2
Sekhon, *Naz Anti-homophobia Poster Campaign*, (date unknown)

Figure 2b
Sekhon, *Untitled*, 2000
Figure 3
Untitled, 1999
Figure 4
Sekhon, Southall, Broadway, 2002
Figure 5
Sekhon, *Bricklane*, 1999
Figure 6
Sekhon, *Rani*, 2000
Figure 7
Sekhon, *Supermodel*, 1997
Fig 8
Fig 9
Sekhon, *Cat and Steve*, 2002
Fig 10
Sekhon, *Two Black Girls*, 1999
Fig 11

Untitled, 1999.
**Fig 12**

*Old Southall Broadway, 1999.*