



SOPHIA CAVALLUZZI

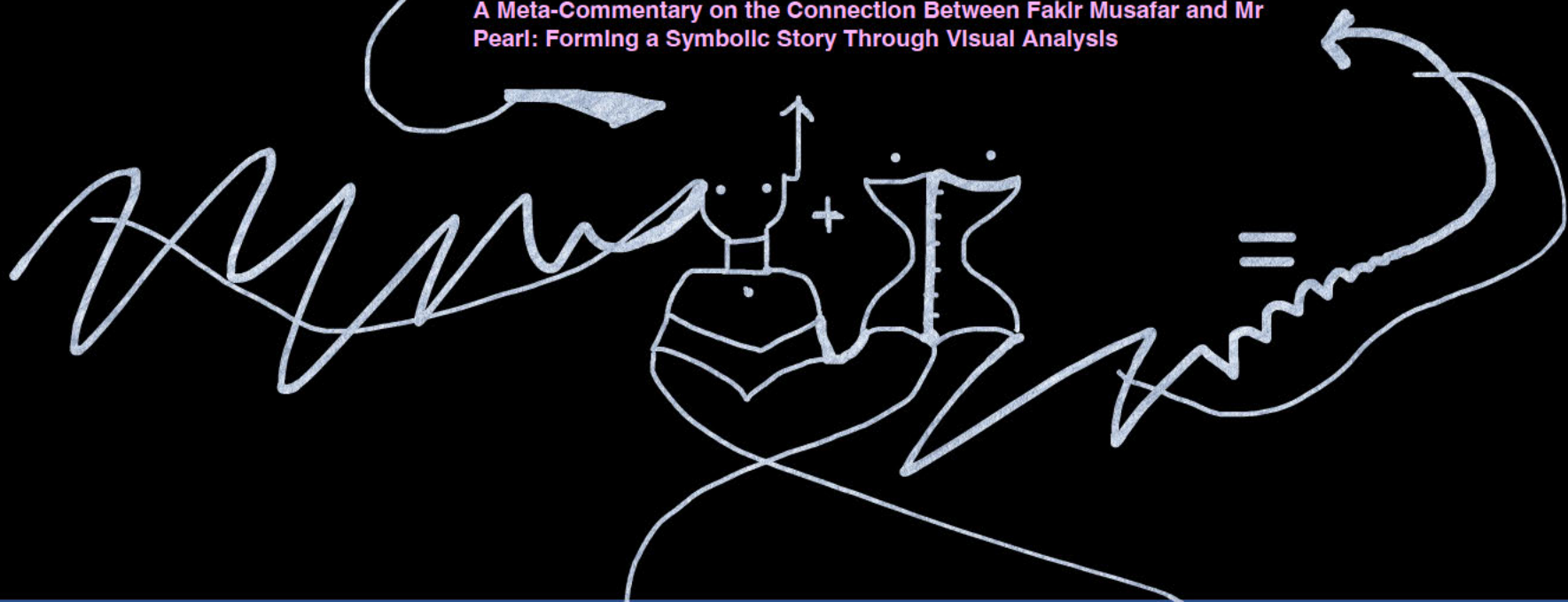
*SCULPTING MOTIFS*

VISUAL ESSAY (

,

# SCULPTING MOTIFS

A Meta-Commentary on the Connection Between Fakir Musafar and Mr Pearl: Forming a Symbolic Story Through Visual Analysis



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	2-4
Synopsis.....	5
Introduction.....	6
The Ibltoe.....	7
Discovery.....	8
A Connection Is Formed.....	9
The Perfect Gentleman.....	10
The Female.....	11
Introducing Mr Pearl.....	12
The Club Kid.....	13
Safety In Drag: The Butterfly.....	14
A Portal to the Past.....	15
The Trembling Star.....	16
A Painful Interpretation.....	17
A Potential Influence.....	18
Teasing Butterfly.....	19
The Modern Woman.....	20
Conclusion.....	21
Finale.....	22
Bibliography.....	23-25

## KEY / RULES

-  Portal
-  Crescent Shape
-  Necklace
-  Hourglass
-  Pain
-  Belt
-  Sepia
-  Showgirl
-  Performing Female
-  Arm Placement

-  Butterfly

**TEXT:** Title

**TEXT:** Denotation

**TEXT:** Connotation

**TEXT:** Manifestation

 : Expression

The Image Is first analysed through its denotations, which then reveal connotations and expressions. The meaning of the Image manifests through the interplay of these three elements.

## LIST OF FIGURES



**Figure 1** Young Roland Loomis (Birth name) practicing 'peg meditation' in 1948 at 18 years old. Edgewalkers <https://www.edgewalkers.info/info/body-play-day/> [Accessed 9 Jan. 2025]



**Figure 2** A Mekeo Ibitoe' by A. Wilkin. Haddon, A.C. (Alfred C., 1855-1940 (1901) Head-hunters: Black, white, and Brown.



**Figure 3** Roland Loomis (Birth Name) Photographer unknown. (Circa 1944). Point 87: Fakir Musafar — In Pursuit of the Spirit (2020)



**Figure 4** Farik Musafar 'Nineteen Inches' (1959). Hourglass Corset Company corset. Dazed Digital (March 7<sup>th</sup> 2019)



**Figure 5** Farik Musafar 'Perfect Gentleman' (1959) 'Body Play' magazine cover shoot. Photographer unknown. Body Play and Modern Primitives Quarterly Vol. 1, No. 1



**Figure 6** Vander Von Odd (2020), 'Witch's Flight' Photographer: Nathan Noye. Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/vJB8QvGV3o27K7hl=a> [Accessed 9 Jan. 2025]



**Figure 7** Farik Musafar at the first international tattoo convention in Reno, Nevada, (1977). Point 89: From the Body Piercing Archive, (2019)



**Figure 8** Susanne Bartsch and guest at Love Ball I, (1989) Photographer unknown. V Magazine (June 27, 2019)



**Figure 9** Susanne Bartsch and Thierry Mugler at Love Ball I, (1989) Photographer unknown. V Magazine (June 27, 2019)



**Figure 10** Susanne Bartsch photographer by Josef Astor for Vanity Fair Magazine (Feb 1989). Location unknown. Via email (2025)



**Figure 11** Fakir Musafar Body Play (1982) cover photo. Body Play, the Self-Images of Roland Loomis, 1950-1980.



**Figure 12** Lady Miss Kier of Deee-Lite photographed by Tina Paul at Wigstock in NYC (1992). Threads.com: 90sfashionboard (2024)

LIST OF FIGURES



Figure 13. Mr Pearl photographed by Josef Astor. 1994. Location unknown. Josefastor.com [Accessed 9 Nov 2024]



Figure 14. The Showgirl Corset' Chandra North for John Galliano Spring / Summer 1997. Photographer unknown. jessicalight.blogspot.com (2014)



Figure 15 Madonna for Vanity Fair Magazine US April 1997. Wearing John Galliano, styled by Lori Goldstein, photographed by Herb Ritts



Figure 16 Erica Van Briel, Thierry Mugler Haute Couture Spring /Summer 1998. Photographer: Pierre Vauthey via Getty Images. 17 January 1998



Figure 17 Mr Pearl corset for Thierry Mugler Haute Couture Spring /Summer 1998. Photographer: Thomas Coax via Getty Images.17 January 1998



Figure 18 Dita Von Teese at Jean Paul Gaultier Haute Couture Spring Summer 2014 show in Paris, Photographer: Miguel Medina via Getty Images

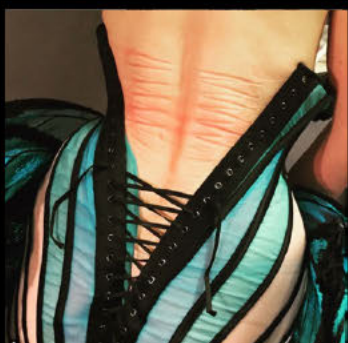


Figure 19 Von Teese, Dita. "Show's Over," Facebook, 16 May 2015  
[www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=945571102141777&id=120773047954924&set=a.661926550506235](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=945571102141777&id=120773047954924&set=a.661926550506235).



Figure 20 Barnard, Neilson. "Kim Kardashian Met Gala 2019 in New York," Getty Images, 6 May 2019,  
[www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/kim-kardashian-west-attends-the-2019-met-gala-celebrating-news-photo/1147426885?adppopup=true](https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/kim-kardashian-west-attends-the-2019-met-gala-celebrating-news-photo/1147426885?adppopup=true).



Figure 21 Roan, Chappell. "Chappell Roan Coachella Week 2 Performance 19th April 2024," Instagram, 24 Apr. 2024,  
[www.instagram.com/chappellroan/p/C6H8QOHvzR/?img\\_index=4](https://www.instagram.com/chappellroan/p/C6H8QOHvzR/?img_index=4).

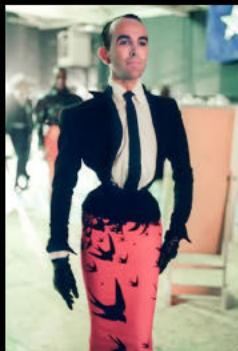


Figure 22 Susan, Amy. "Kim Kardashian at Academy Museum Gala at Academy Museum of Motion Pictures on October 19, 2024 in Los Angeles, California," Getty Images, 19 Oct. 2024,



Figure 23 Love Mr Pearl. "Isabella Blow Wearing Mr Pearl for Vogue Russia (2000)," Facebook, 14 July 2021,  
[www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=468125224277363&id=100032396692453](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=468125224277363&id=100032396692453).

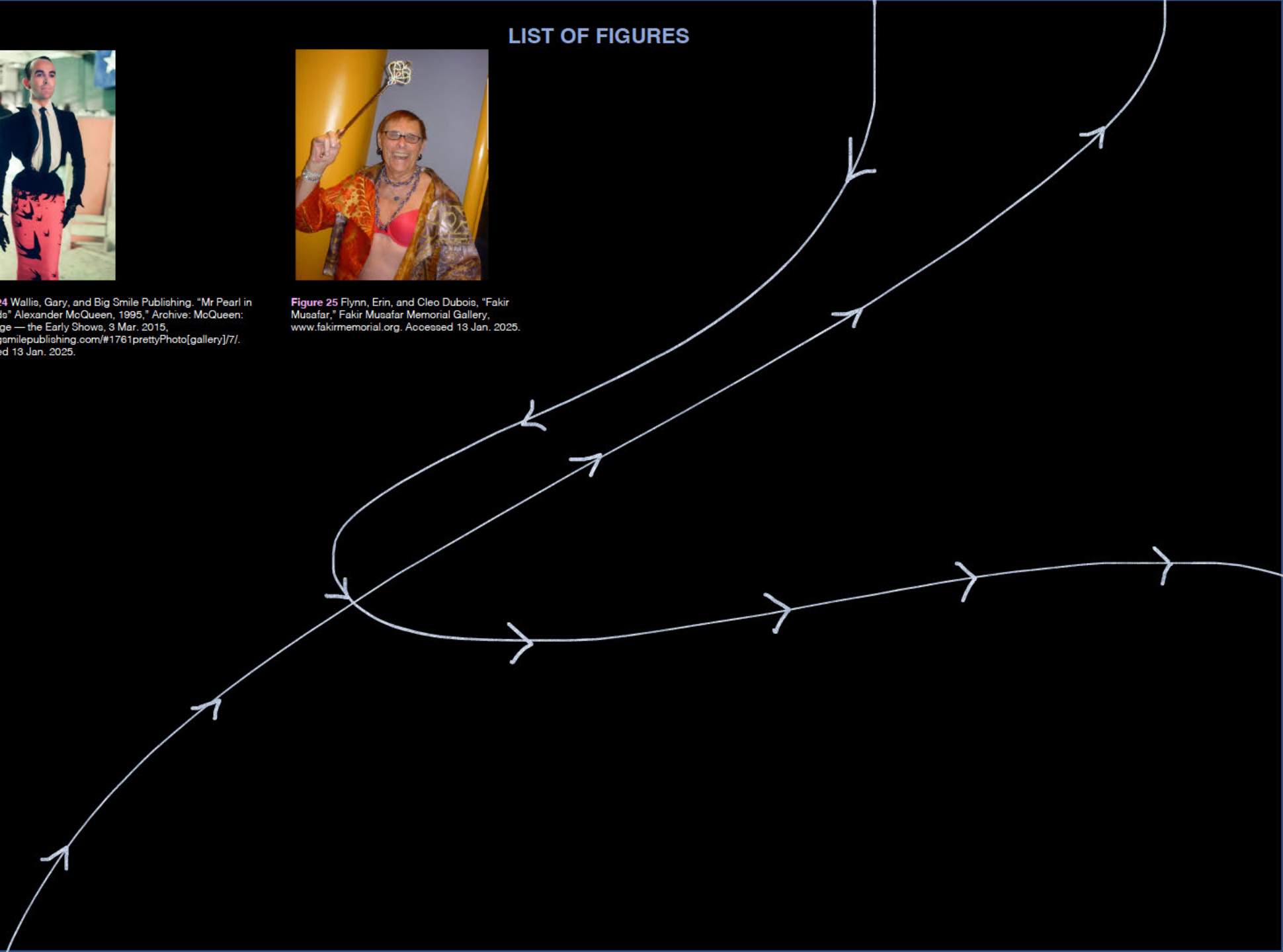
## LIST OF FIGURES

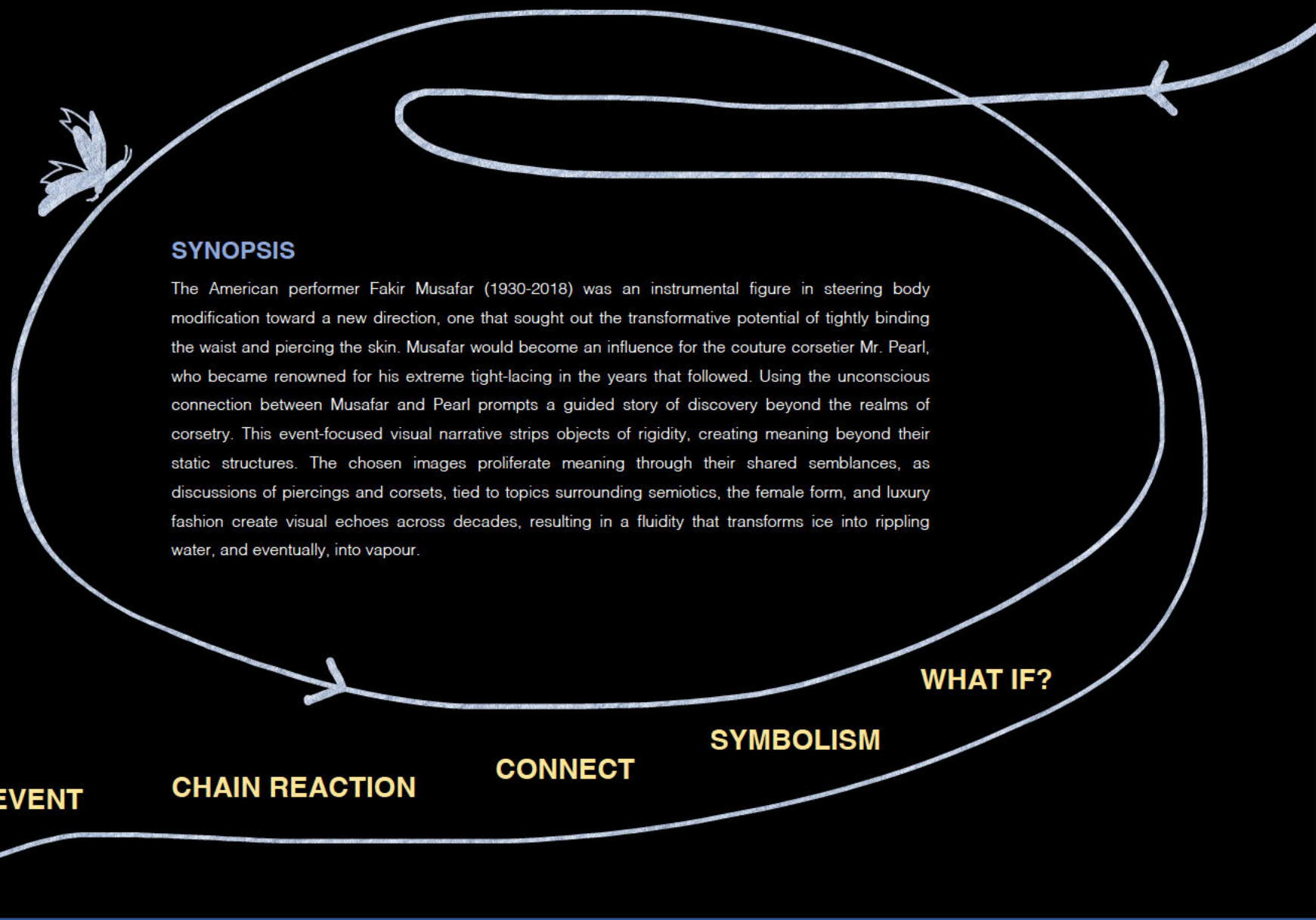


**Figure 24** Wallie, Gary, and Big Smile Publishing. "Mr Pearl in "the Birds" Alexander McQueen, 1995," Archive: McQueen: Backstage — the Early Shows, 3 Mar. 2015, [www.bigsmilepublishing.com/#1761prettyPhoto\[gallery\]/7/](http://www.bigsmilepublishing.com/#1761prettyPhoto[gallery]/7/). Accessed 13 Jan. 2025.



**Figure 25** Flynn, Erin, and Cleo Dubois, "Fakir Musafar," Fakir Musafar Memorial Gallery, [www.fakirmemorial.org](http://www.fakirmemorial.org). Accessed 13 Jan. 2025.







## INTRODUCTION

This narrative presents a collection of denotations, each paired with applied manifestations.<sup>1</sup> This interplay of image and interpretation sculpts a narrative that ultimately connotes the very essence of its own creation, the creator being the author. Following French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's axioms for the 'Logic of Sense', 'propositions' lay the foundation of truths found within the imagery. His axiom of The Three Dimensions culminates in the height of concept - the Tertiary Arrangement - where propositions divide into four sections: denotation, manifestation, signification, and expression.<sup>2</sup> The essay begins with a foundation of solidity. The Papua New Guinean culture of the Ibitoe, serving as Fakir Musafar's introduction to body modification, provides this initial grounding.

Propositional analysis commences when the images are interpreted through the lens of semiotic language. The author applies significant connotations to hypothesize what one is sensing from the image, mixed with an intense background of research and tightly bound by the overarching topic of the corset. This style of image reading can be related to *détournement*, a French art 'hijacking' technique created by the Situationists in 1950's:

It is a fragment of one thing or another that has been taken out of its context in order to create a unique artwork, piece of writing, song etc. that is meant to be viewed from a new perspective.<sup>3</sup>

Guided by the influence of the past, the narrative diverges towards a fragmented future. This is achieved by pushing the boundaries of visual language through the exploration of contrasting identities, encompassing drag, club kid culture, objectification and luxury fashion.

The common denominator within this visual essay is the continuing discussion regarding the female body, a narrative that inevitably forms when visually analysing corsetry and fetish culture. One must not dismiss the original groundwork of this visual essay. The aspiration is to unlace the unconscious connection between Musafar and Pearl, and how their careers, though travelling down weaving paths, somehow converge on a primary road.

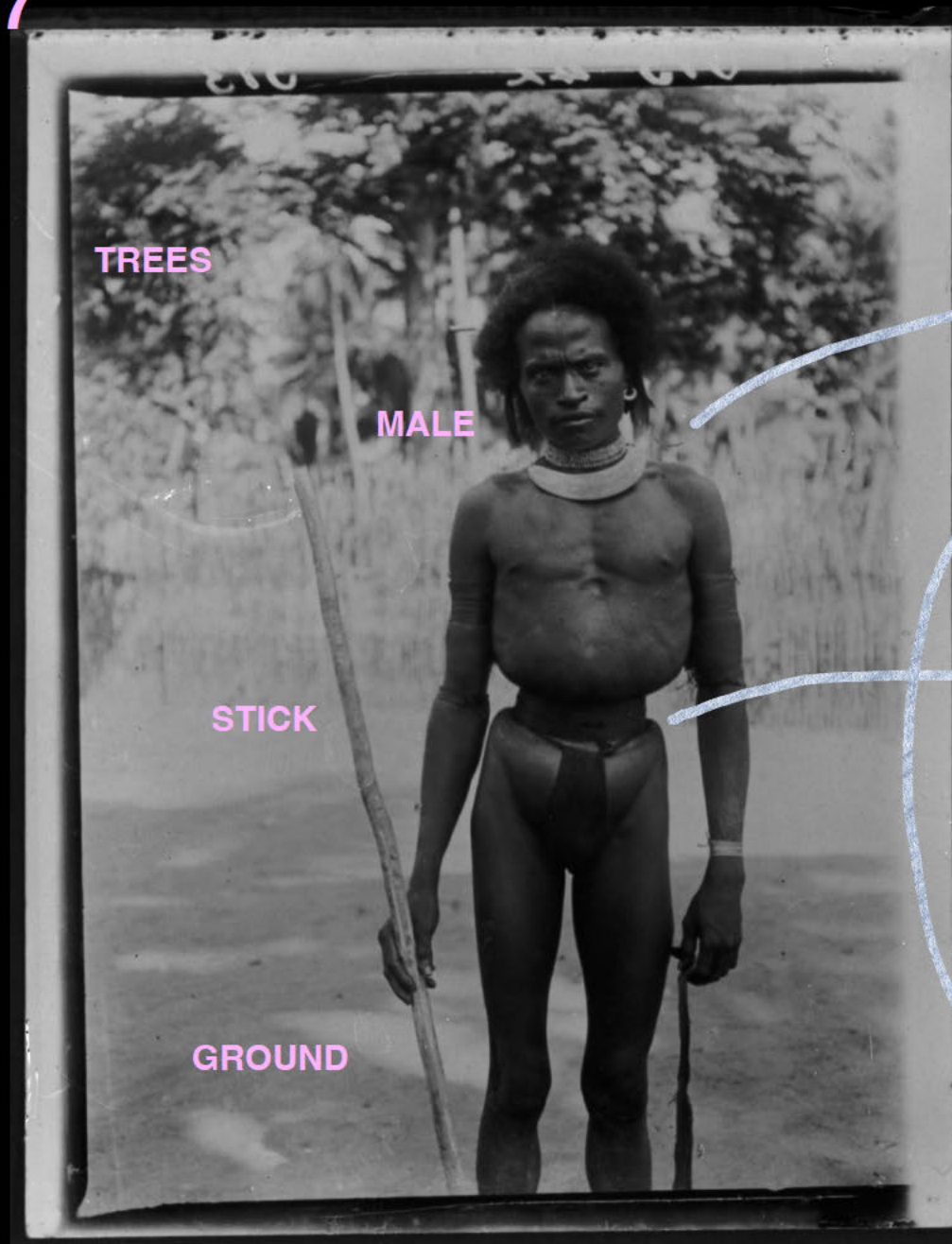


Figure 1 Young Roland Loomis (Birth name) practicing 'peg meditation' in 1948 at 18 years old.

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Boudas, O.V. and Lester, M. 'The Logic of Sense'

<sup>2</sup> . Smith, Daniel, John Protevi, and Daniela Voss, 'Gilles Deleuze'

<sup>3</sup> Ilin, D. 'So What Isn't *Détournement*?'



TREES

MALE

STICK

GROUND

18  
1898  
98

START: THE IBITOE

In the Mekeo region of Papua New Guinea, the 'Ibitoe' males undergo a significant cultural transition into adulthood. At the age of 12-15, they are deemed fit for marriage by their families and begin the process of 'bearing the Itaburi'<sup>4</sup>. As part of this practice, the boys tightly bind their waists with bark belts (named Itaburi) and wear pearl crescent-shaped necklaces. Their singular purpose during this time is to hide in the local woods and make a drum made from a single branch. This period of hiding can last anywhere from one week to one month, with only a select group of friends knowing their location, bringing them food and water. Once the drum is complete, the boys (now considered men) are encouraged to marry quickly, but some have other ideas as they enjoy their new 'Ibitoe' status in the form of dandyism, "He ornaments himself more extravagantly, and tight laces till human nature can stand no more."<sup>5</sup> The tighter the Itaburi, the more luxuries in life he receives. Figure 2 depicts an Ibitoe, his organs protruding over the tightly bound bark belt, with the cloth covering his genitals cinched tightly to his midriff. Given the tendency for increased self-ornamentation after the drum-making process, the male in the photograph may be at the height of this cultural practice.

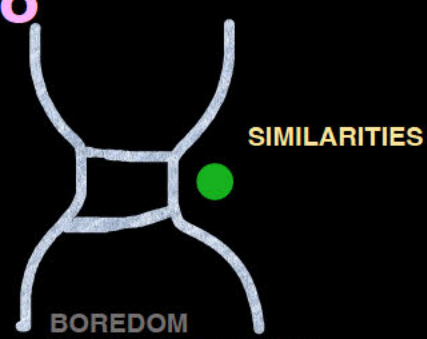
<sup>4</sup> Benezine. 'Ibitoe' - BME Encyclopedia.

<sup>5</sup> Page 258, Haddon. 'Head-Hunters Black, White, And Brown'

IMPORTANT

TIGHT-LACE  
ORNAMENT  
CULTURE  
PEARL  
TRADITION

HOURLASS



SIMILARITIES

BOREDOM  
INSPIRED CREATION  
TIGHTNESS  
EXPLORATION  
DREAM  
ENCYCLOPEDIA

Roland Loomis, a young boy from a small farming community in South Dakota, discovered the Ibitoe culture of New Guinea in the mid-1940s. His fascination first began when he found photographs of the Ibitoe in a volume of Compton's Encyclopaedia. This inspired him, around the age of 13 or 14, to experiment with body modification in the form of tight-lacing his waist out of boredom living in his small village.<sup>6</sup>

Loomis replicated the Ibitoe's traditional dress using materials he found around his home. In Figure 3, we see that he has replaced the Ibitoe's bark belt with a standard leather belt, and wrapped his neck in rope to mimic the pearl crescent-shaped necklace seen in Figure 2. Faintly visible on his torso are stencilled-on tattoos.

Though he did not know it at the time, Loomis would later change his name to Fakir Musafar and become known as the father of contemporary body modification. He also founded the "Modern Primitive Movement" - a group of people from 'modern, developed' countries who have studied various cultural and ritualistic practices, and strive to incorporate these customs into their own lives through body piercing, modification, and spiritual or sexual exploration. This group revolts against societal backlash, using these methods of "body play" as a form of self-discovery.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> KMTV: 'Present! - Fakir Musafar (part one)'.

<sup>7</sup> KMTV: 'Present! - Fakir Musafar (part one)'.

<sup>8</sup> KMTV: 'Present! - Fakir Musafar (part one)'.

RESTRICTED?



CIRCA 19  
1944  
44

DISCOVERY

ANGEL  
NUMBERS



PORTAL



TIGHT

RESERVED

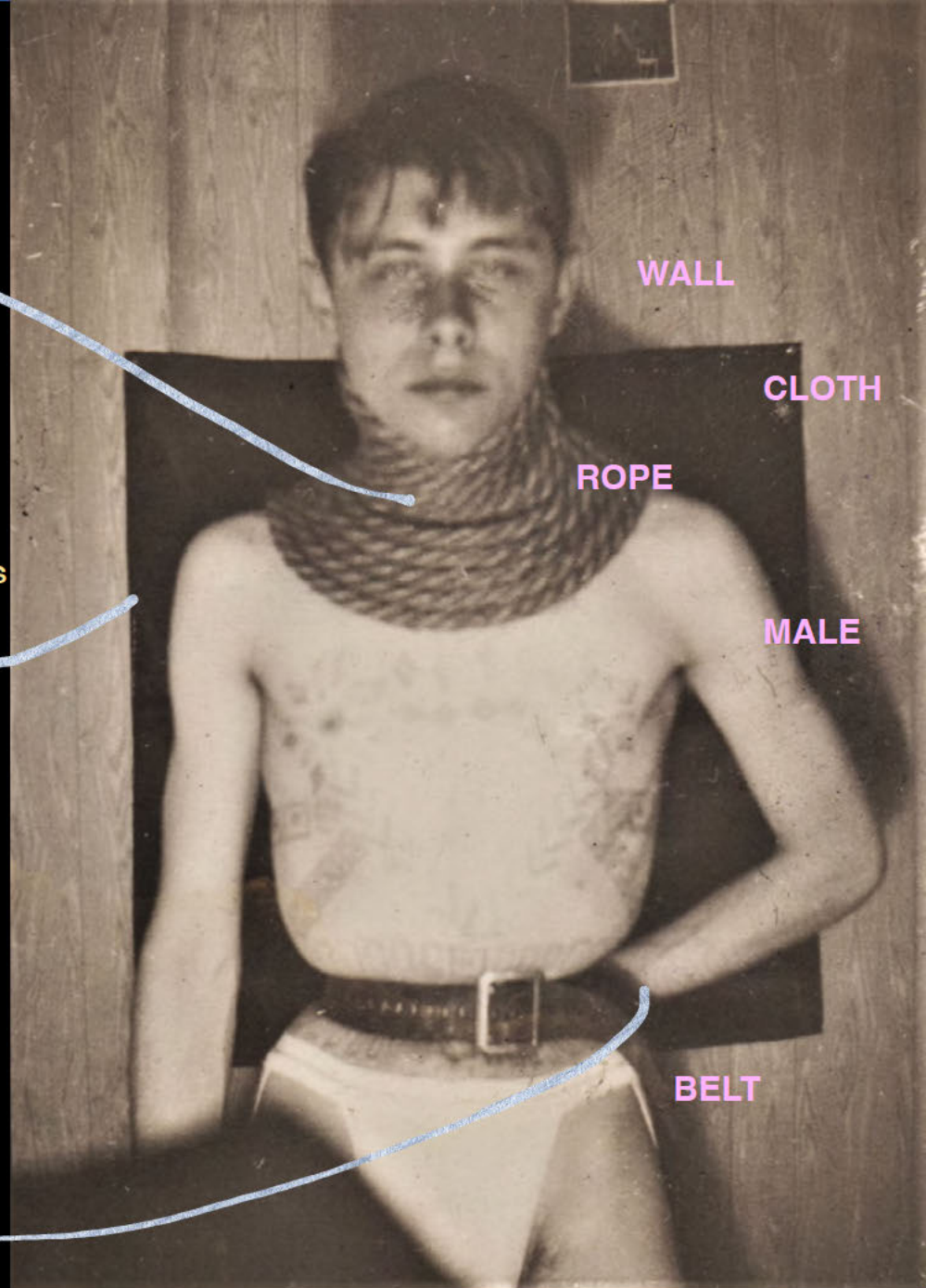


Figure 3 Roland Loomis (Birth Name) Photographer unknown. (Circa 1944). Point 87: Fakir Musafar — In Pursuit of the Spirit (2020)

NIPPLES  
EXPOSURE

RIBS  
VISIBLE, SHADOW

CORSET  
EXTREME, TIGHT

JEANS  
LOOSE

19  
1959  
59

PEARL!

RESERVED

CORSETRY  
ORNAMENT  
CINCH  
GENEALOGY  
ALLUSIONS  
UNCANNY  
BEGINNING

### A CONNECTION IS FORMED

Before Loomis became Musafar, we see him in a corset, cinching his waist to 19 inches. [Fig 4] His nipples are pierced, subtly resembling the crescent-shaped pearl necklace seen in Figure 2. In an interview with Mel Van Dusen, Musafar reflected upon his experience experimenting with tight-lacing. He reflects upon the time he discovered the Ibitoe, noting that Western culture had been partaking in similar methods of tight-lacing through corsetry for many years, mirroring a practice found in a culture far removed from the West in geography, but close in function - the cinching of the waist.<sup>9</sup>

Exploring the cultural archaeology of tight-lacing reveals a visible correlation between the Ibitoe, and Musafar's interpretation of tight-lacing. This connection manifests in the subtle allusions to a crescent-shaped pearl necklace ornamenting Musafar's nipples [Fig. 4], first seen on the neck of the Ibitoe male in figure 2. Piecing together the visual elements reveals an uncanny, genealogical link that will inform the deconstruction of future images, with the crescent shape emerging as a recurring theme.

<sup>9</sup> KMVT "Present! - Fakir Musafar (part one)." .

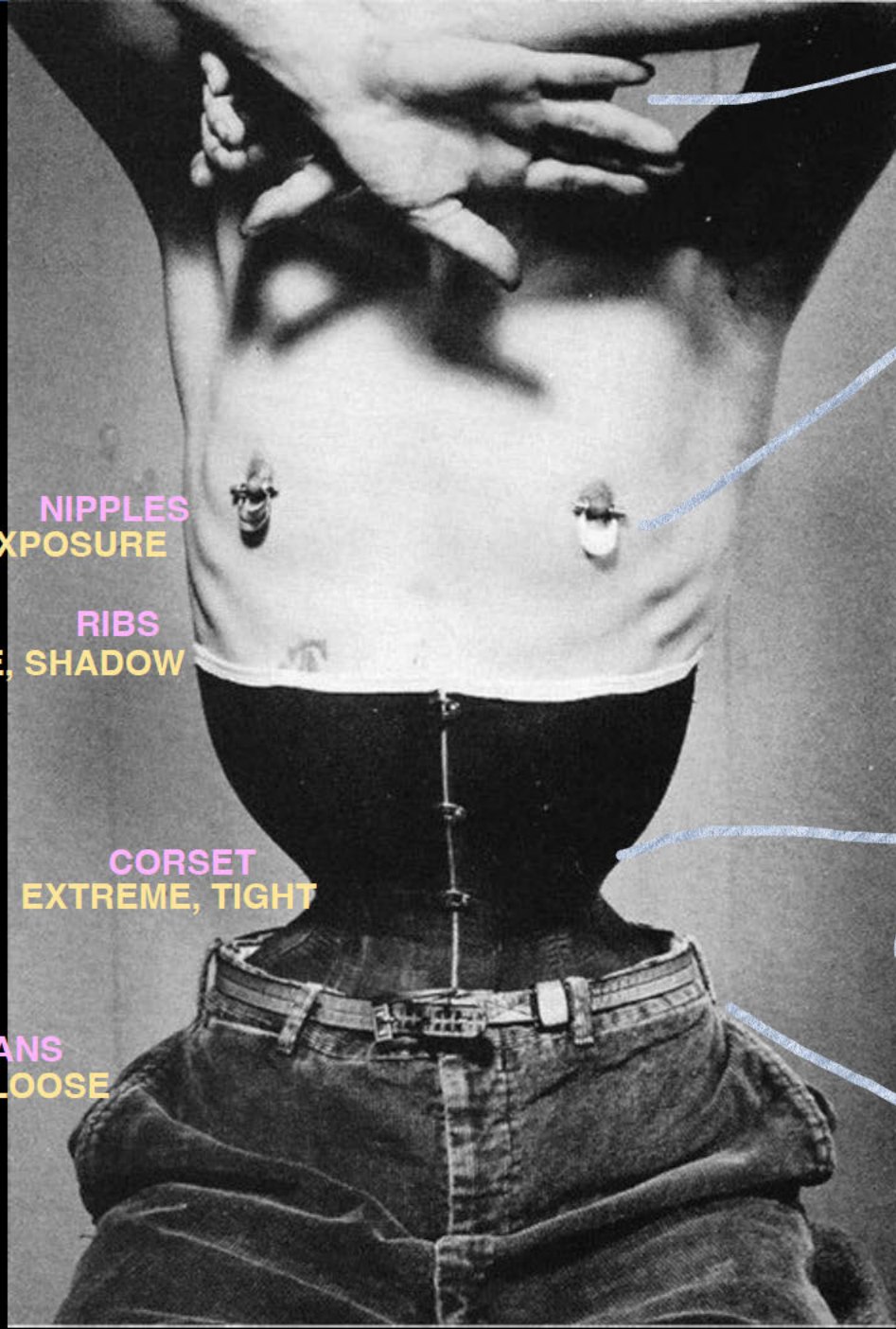


Figure 4 Farik Musafar 'Nineteen Inches' (1959). Wearing an Hourglass Corset Company corset.

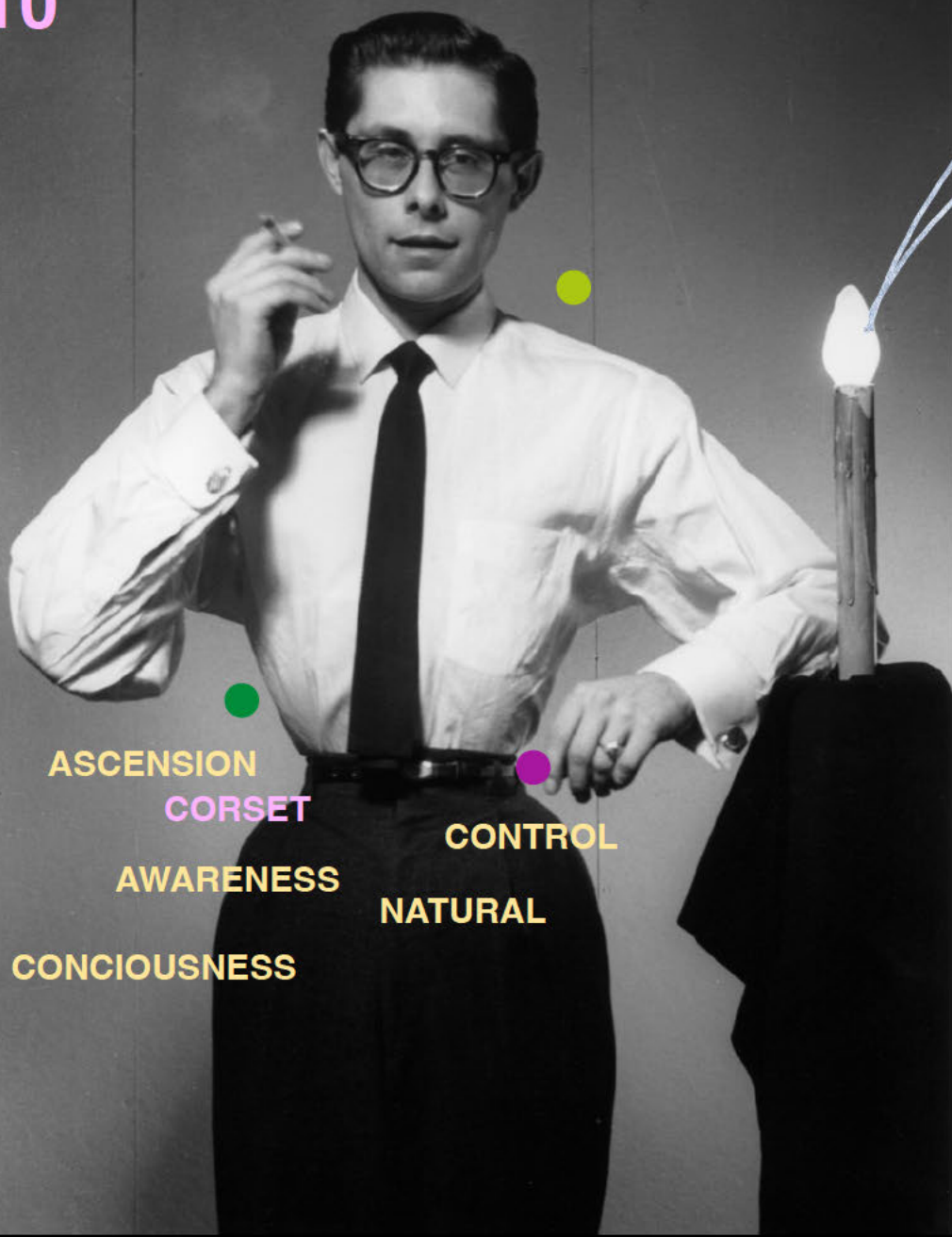


Figure 5 Fakir Musafar 'Perfect Gentleman' (1959) 'Body Play' magazine cover shoot. Body Play and Modern Primitives Quarterly Vol. 1, No. 1

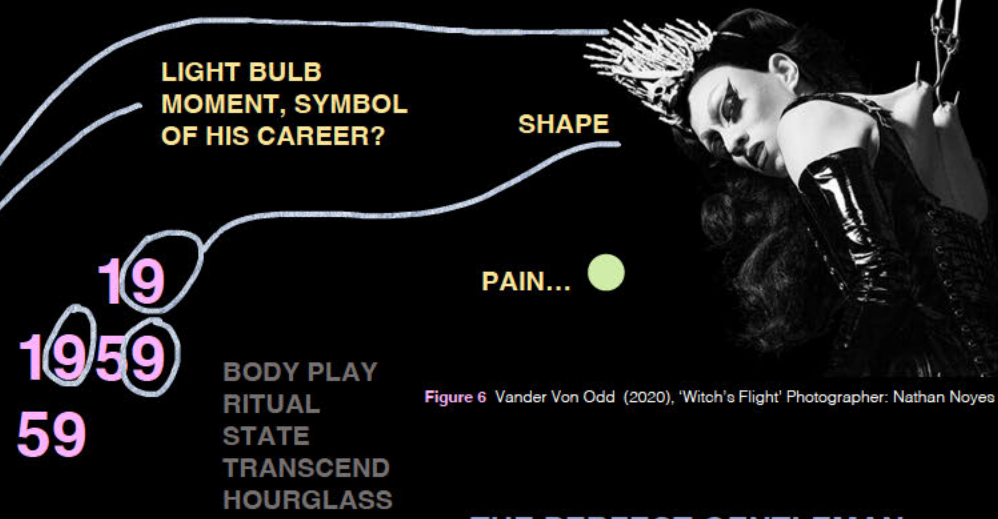


Figure 6 Vander Von Odd (2020), 'Witch's Flight' Photographer: Nathan Noyes

## THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN

The Perfect Gentleman cover shoot for Body Play magazine, featuring Musafar in a 19-inch corset holding a cigarette, would become iconic not only in the tight-lacing community but also in the drag world [Fig 5]. The image was replicated by American drag artist Vander Von Odd in 2018 with their piece titled 'Homage to an Icon: Fakir Musafar'.<sup>10</sup>

In 2020, Von Odd went on to replicate hook suspension [Fig 6], a practice Musafar became known for in the 1960s. In this practice, the skin is hooked and the body is suspended in the air. In Musafar's magazine 'Body Play,' he states that "Body Play is the deliberate, ritualized modification of the human body. It is a deep rooted, universal urge that seemingly transcends time and cultural boundaries."<sup>11</sup>

Just as Loomis found the Ibitoe, Drag found Musafar. The art of Drag and body modification are intertwined, as tight lacing has become a common practice within drag communities. Musafar also states, "You constrict the torso with a tight corset and you are constantly aware that it exists. When the new "body state" feels "natural" the effect is heightened to again bring back the desired state of "body awareness" (the ear piercing is stretched larger, the corset tightened)."<sup>12</sup> In an interview with Scout, drag queen Violet Chachki who also champions a 19-inch waist states "Well, for me, it kind of reminds me to be present.(...) It really transforms me into something, that I'm kind of greater or more impactful than I usually am."<sup>13</sup>

At this stage of manifestation, corsetry emerges as a meditative, event-focused practice, transcending genres and becoming a symbol of ritualistic self control.

<sup>10</sup> Odd, Yee "Homage to an Icon: Fakir Musafar"  
<sup>11</sup> Page 3 Musafar, Fakir, 'Body Play and Modern Primitives'  
<sup>12</sup> Page 3 Musafar, Fakir, 'Body Play and Modern Primitives'  
<sup>13</sup> Scout Magazine, Violet Chachki, Giselle Barrientos

FEMALE FORM  
PERFORMANCE  
A CHANGE  
CULTURE  
FETISH  
MEDITATIVE

RESTRICTIVE

THE FEMALE

In 1977, Roland Loomis became Fakir Musafar. His new name came from a "12th century Sufi called Fakir Musafar who said to get close to the divine, you should pierce yourself." <sup>14</sup> He was invited to close the show at the first international tattoo convention in Reno, Nevada, performing ritualistic practices he had learned from cultures around the world [Fig 7]. As we approach the introduction to Mr. Pearl, one is considering the impact Musafar had on his community, and how this may have inspired the individuals who viewed his work, particularly Pearl. While less invasive in Musafar's career, corsetry runs adjacent in both their practices, with tight-lacing predominantly being the starting point of inspiration for both Musafar and Pearl. As one speculates, the introduction of the female form [Fig 7] plays a pivotal role within the context of this essay, shifting from a male-focused narrative to one that includes a prominent figure within the world of corsetry and body modification: the female. A tattooed woman in a sparkly red and white two-piece stands on Fakir's back while he lays face down on the bed of swords [Fig 7]. The more interesting visual component of this image lies in the introduction of colour. In a wider context, the colour red on the body of the female acts as a genealogical link between both Musafar's and Pearl's careers and marks the visual introduction of the female form in a performative manner.

<sup>14</sup> Dowell. S. 'Point 83: Fakir Musafar'

19  
1977  
77

SECONDARY

DANGER

MALE  
DOMINANT

FEMALE  
PERFORMATIVE

SKIRT  
SPARKLE

SWORDS  
PAIN

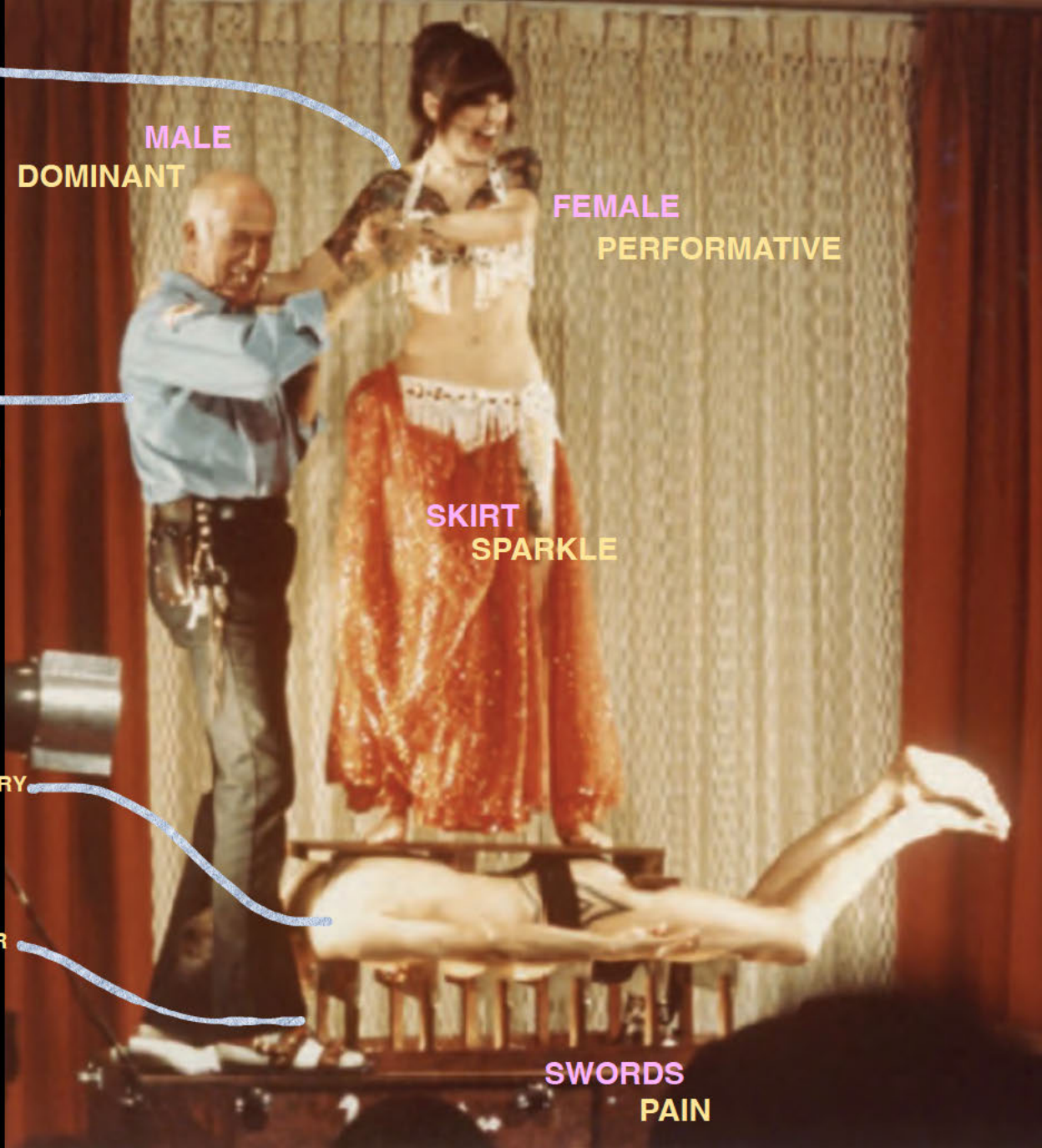


Figure 7 Farik Musafar at the first international tattoo convention in Reno, Nevada, (1977). 'Point 83: Fakir Musafar



RECURRING



SHOWGIRL  
ANONYMOUS  
CONNECT  
ALIGNMENT  
EXCITEMENT  
OPPORTUNITY

BLACK AND WHITE. PEARL,  
MUGLER AND BARTSCH

LOST BALANCE?

CONNECTIVITY

RECURRING

19  
1989  
89



SAVIOUR  
MALE

### INTRODUCING MR PEARL

South African-born Mark Erskine Pullin changes his name to Mr Pearl and moves to New York to pursue a career in fashion. At 30 years old, he views a photo of Musafar in a corset and finds inspiration to enter the world of tight-lacing.<sup>15</sup> In 1989, Susanne Bartsch (a female Swiss-born icon of NYC nightlife) threw a charity event at Roseland Ballroom in New York City to raise money for the AIDS epidemic, which had claimed many lives throughout the 1980s. The event, which raised \$400,000, would become known as 'Love Ball 1'. The guest list included Leigh Bowery, Thierry Mugler, Madonna, RuPaul Charles, and many other figures.<sup>16</sup> At this point in his career, Pearl was relatively unknown, but he dressed Susanne Bartsch [Fig 8,9] for the event. The most intriguing element of this ensemble is the headpiece worn by Bartsch [Fig 8]. This style of 'showgirl' headpiece would become a recurring motif throughout Mr. Pearl's career, as evidenced in subsequent images. That same night, Pearl was introduced to Thierry Mugler, a French couturier who had contributed significantly to the high fashion world of the 1990s through his fusion of luxury, theatricality, fetish, and artistry - a legacy that continues today. When Pearl and Mugler met, the stars aligned, manifesting a connection that would propel Pearl into the world of couture corsetry. The 1989 Love Ball served as a canon event for Pearl's career.

<sup>15</sup> "Mr Pearl - France - Age 57 - 18 Inch Waist - 5ft 8in Tall - Corset Training."

<sup>16</sup> Bartsch, S. "Pride Throwback: Love Ball '89."

Figure 9 Susanne Bartsch and Thierry Mugler at Love Ball I, (1989) V Magazine

ENERGY  
BDSM  
FETISH  
SEQUINS  
CLUB KID  
19  
89

SUSANNE BARTSCH

QUEEN OF NIGHTLIFE

*I used to call him Stitch Bitch*

HEAVEN/HELL

CORSET  
KINKY

BOUNDLESS ENERGY

As we rewind back to before 'Love Ball 1', Susanne Bartsch is photographed by Josef Astor for Vanity Fair magazine in February 1989, wearing a corset designed by Pearl [Fig 10] The heavily embellished corset does not cinch the waist to the extremes seen in previous images, [Fig 3,4,5], manifesting a looser interpretation of figure 10. Bartsch's ties to the Ballroom/nightlife scene mean her style resembles that of a Club Kid, and her friendship with Leigh Bowery further projects the eccentric nightlife style made popular in the late 1980s by a wider group. In an interview with Vogue, Bartsch reflects upon her time working with Pearl, stating: "I also used to love working with Mr. Pearl; I'm the first person who bought his corsets. He was in the East Village in a basement. I used to call him 'Stitch Bitch' because he would be sewing all day, all night."<sup>17</sup> In this particular image, the sequined penis with pearl-shaped sperm is the main focal point, highlighted in colour against a monochromatic background.

As stated by Astor in a personal interview, "...his sort of extreme corsetry cannot be separated from the world of BDSM...."<sup>18</sup> In this instance, the word 'extreme' is not linked to the cinch of the waist, but instead refers to a bold sexual statement that links corsetry and fetish culture in a more explicit, playful way. The Vanity Fair spread includes a short piece of text written by Michael Musto to accompany the photograph. The text starts with "The voice--'Darrrrring! You look geeeni-us'--wails on in the night like a banshee cry."<sup>19</sup> In 'Roland Barthes: The Fashion System', Barthes questions,

Is not speech the inevitable relay of any signifying order? If we go beyond a few rudimentary signs (eccentricity, classicism, dandyism, sport, ceremony), can clothing signify without recourse to the speech that describes it, comments upon it, and provides it with signifiers and signifieds abundant enough to constitute a system of meaning?<sup>20</sup>

In this case, Musto uses terminology to describe Bartsch, such as "Boundless energy," "Queen of the Night," and that she wears "Heavenly clothes from hell."<sup>21</sup> If we take the visual elements of corsetry, sequins, and genitals, and interweave them with words like "queen," "heaven/hell," "nightlife," and "energy," a new perspective is created for the viewer/reader. Similar to other articles written in the late 1980s/early 1990s, the way Bartsch is perceived is substantially influenced by the text in magazines that propel her as the 'Queen of Nightlife.' As for Pearl, his career may have been predicted before the 'Love Ball' took place due to the influence Bartsch had on his journey into fashion. It was natural that he would fall into high-concept corsetry, as seen in the following images. As for Astor, he also plays a role in how Pearl's corsetry is perceived on an individual basis, not only through text but through the highlighting of certain aspects of the image that provoke a sexual narrative.

17 Allaire, C. 'Susanne Bartsch—Queen of New York Nightlife.'  
18 Astor, J. Cavalluzzi, S. 'Student at the Glasgow School of Art.'  
19 Page.89 Musto, M. Bartsch of Triumph. Vanity Fair.  
20 Page.XI Barthes, R. 'The Fashion System'.  
21 Page.89 Musto, M. 'Bartsch of Triumph. Vanity Fair'

Figure 10 Sunaanne Bartsch photographer by Josef Astor for Vanity Fair Magazine (Feb 1989). Via email (2025)



**MASK**  
**SAFETY**

Figure 11 Fakir Musafar wearing a sequined butterfly mask. Body Play (1982) cover photo. Body Play, the Self-Images of Roland Loomis, 1950-1980.

REWIND

19  
1982  
82



SMILE = CRESCENT

BLACK AND WHITE + COLOUR. MUSAFAR AND PEARL

## SAFETY IN DRAG: THE BUTTERFLY

As one reflects upon the world of Club Kid fashion, we travel back in time to 1982 where Fakir Musafar is photographed wearing a butterfly mask for the cover of his magazine, Body Play [Fig 11]. We then jump a decade to 1992, where performer Lady Miss Kier of Deee-Lite is seen wearing a butterfly costume designed by Mr. Pearl for 'Wigstock', an annual drag festival held in New York City [Fig 12]. The world of drag and the Club Kid scene are not worlds apart; in fact, they live in close proximity as the Club Kid movement propelled the eccentricity of drag by "...pushing the extent to which queer performance and aesthetics stretched."<sup>22</sup> Kier, also an eccentric Club Kid like Bartsch, advocated for the rights of LGBT communities in the 80's and 90's "...long before advocating was a way to build sexy social media collateral."<sup>23</sup>

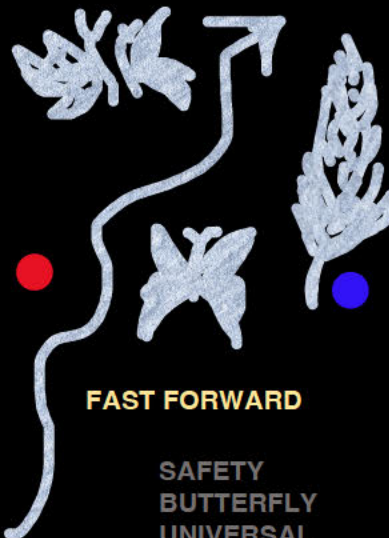
As previously discussed regarding Figure 6, Musafar had an aesthetic influence on drag artists such as Vander Von Odd. Similar to Kier in the sense of advocacy, Musafar encouraged his following to pursue their intimate desires for kink/fetish and advocated for the right of creative/spiritual expression through body modification, whether that be corsetry, piercings, tattoos, et cetera. The similarity between Musafar and Mr Pearl in this particular scenario is the safety their followers found in them. Body modification can be seen as a highly personal experience, as having the skin pierced or the waist tightened can inflict pain onto the individual body experiencing it. Similarly, drag can also be highly personal to the individual who performs, as the connotations associated with drag performance have not always been positive. Both Musafar and Pearl manifest similarities through the nurturing of their communities, creating visually comforting atmospheres through the use of softer symbols such as sequins and butterflies [Fig 11, 12]. In many cultures, the butterfly is seen as a symbol of transformation and rebirth; therefore, the sequined mask on the eyes of Musafar transforms into a sequined costume designed by Pearl, reborn as a garment that speaks a universal language. The pink sequined wings that adorn the back of Kier represent so much more than fabric. They represent the desire to express oneself authentically and artistically through aesthetics, something Musafar and Pearl both undeniably represent.

<sup>22</sup> Değirmenci, Y. 'The Club Kid Movement'

<sup>23</sup> Harboe, P. 'Muse du Jour: Lady Miss Kier'



**BUTTERFLY**  
**TRANSFORMATION**

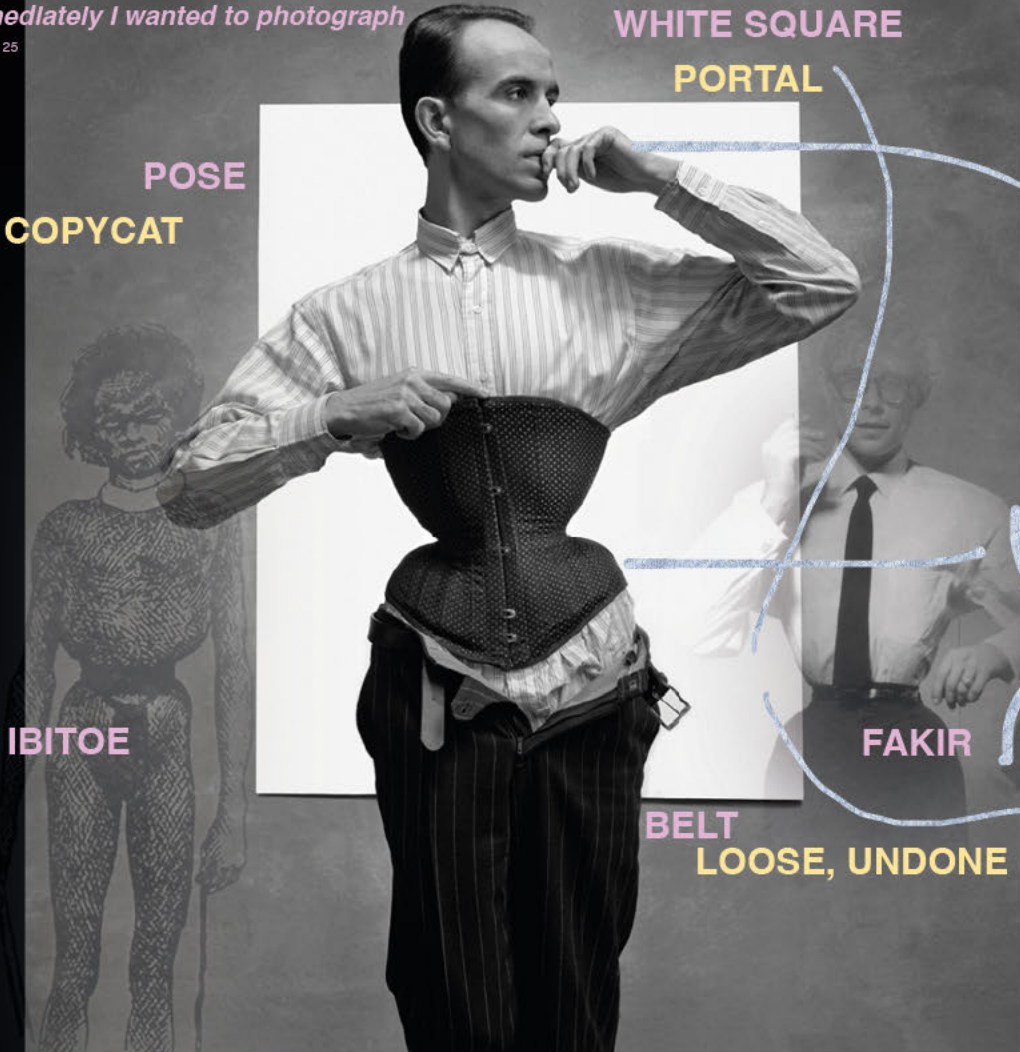


FAST FORWARD

SAFETY  
BUTTERFLY  
UNIVERSAL  
COMMUNITY  
REBIRTH  
JOURNEY  
TRANSCEND

Figure 12 Lady Miss Kier of Deee-Lite wearing a sequined butterfly costume. Photographed by Tina Paul at Wigstock in NYC (1992).

*I recall seeing an old photo of a costume designed by Leigh Bowery which featured an enormous bustle supported underneath by Mr Pearl who was on roller skates. I knew immediately I wanted to photograph him*<sup>25</sup>



19  
1994  
94

A PORTAL TO THE PAST

In a personal interview, the author of this visual essay asked esteemed photographer Josef Astor questions about this specific image via email, to which he responded:

I met Pearl through my old friend video artist Charles Atlas. He was part of a group of avant-garde artists who collaborated on projects in one way or another - Leigh Bowery, Michael Clark, and Pearl....I knew immediately I wanted to photograph him, so invited him to my studio where we did several different looks. He insisted above all else that viewers be assured that the photographs were not retouched in any way at all.

Even though Mr Pearl was known primarily as a designer of corsets for top couturiers, it must be acknowledged that his sort of extreme corsetry cannot be separated from the world of BDSM..<sup>24</sup>

In his response, Astor included an image of the Ibitoe male seen in Figure 2, the figure who inspired Musafar's journey into body modification. Remarkably, Musafar was never mentioned in the questions posed to Astor, prompting an organic manifestation free from the restraints of the author's narrative.

Inspiration can be drawn from a variety of cultures, whether consciously or unconsciously. An example of unintentional symbolism can be found in the use of the white square, as seen in this image [Fig 13]. While this square was most likely intended to highlight Mr. Pearl's wasp-waist, extending the context to genealogy reveals clear similarities between Figure 3 and Figure 13, with the square acting as a portal, further connecting Pearl and Musafar in the wide, yet oddly narrow world of tight-lacing.

RESERVED?

BDSM  
PORTAL  
WASP WAIST  
UNCONSCIOUS  
STRENGTH  
CONNECTION

Figure 13. Mr Pearl photographed by Josef Astor. 1994. Email. (2025)

<sup>24</sup> Astor, J. Cavalluzzi, S. 'Student at the Glasgow School of Art'.  
<sup>25</sup> Astor, J. Cavalluzzi, S. 'Student at the Glasgow School of Art'.

THE TREMBLING STAR

19  
1997  
97

Model Chandra North debuts a John Galliano 'Circus Collection' Spring/Summer 1997 corset and headdress designed by John Galliano, Mr Pearl, Jessica Light, and Scott Wilson. The piece was inspired by Gina Lollobrigida in the 1956 film 'Trapeze'.<sup>26</sup> The stars were made using a French jewellery craft called En Tremblant, where the maker "...mount[s] parts of a piece of jewellery on a coiled spring which would then allow the piece to move in accordance with the wearer."<sup>27</sup> Jessica and Scott predominantly embellished this impressive corset over the course of two weeks.<sup>28</sup> [Fig 14]. The showgirl headdress is similar in style to the one seen on Susanne Bartsch for the Love Ball in 1989 [Fig 8].

In 'Fashion and Visual Language: A Social Semiotic Analysis of Women's Clothing in Photographs from the 1920s', it is said that

...in order to express and share information, experiences, ideas and feelings in different contexts and produce meanings that lead to mutual understanding, it is necessary to consider the different forms of representation that lead to meaning, such as static images...<sup>29</sup>

Within this image, the corset represents the 'showgirl', with the reference point being the sex symbol of her time, Gina Lollobrigida. Through the eyes of Galliano and Pearl, Lollobrigida was the vision for the garment. However, through the eyes of the author, the trembling stars on the corset symbolise Pearl's rise to stardom through his introduction to the world of luxury fashion. The sepia tone connects this image to the one of young Musafar [Fig 3], creating a visual pairing that may not have otherwise been connected. The sepia tone represents the beginning of a journey, a significant life event, that being the cinch of the belt [Fig 3] and the creation of the trembling star [Fig 14]. Finally, the headdress may be seen as a standard showgirl item. However, in this case, the headdress manifests a duplication in styles from Pearl's earlier designs.

<sup>26</sup> Light, J. 'Mr Pearl'  
<sup>27</sup> En Tremblant Definition. Joseph Jewelry Bellevue  
<sup>28</sup> Light, J. 'Mr Pearl'  
<sup>29</sup> Page 4 Ferreira, S., Castro, G. and Wellington, F. 'Fashion and Visual Language',

TREMBLE  
INSPIRATION  
STAR  
DUPLICATION  
SHOWGIRL  
STARDOM  
FAME

HEADDRESS  
DUPLICATION

MODEL

SHOWGIRL

CORSET  
TREMBLING STAR

SEPIA  
PORTAL



Figure 14. 'The Showgirl Corset' Chandra North for John Galliano Spring / Summer 1997



PERFORMANCE OR GENUINE?

SEX SYMBOL  
HEAVEN/HELL  
FEMALE FORM  
ICON  
PERFORMANCE  
SHOWGIRL



19  
1997  
97

## A PAINFUL INTERPRETATION

Taken out of the realms of runway presentation and onto the body of Madonna, the corset and headdress are photographed by Herb Ritts against a red and black background for Vanity Fair magazine's April issue, shot in January 1997 [Fig 15].

Just as Gina Lollobrigida was described as a sex symbol of her time, so was Madonna, deemed as the "Poster Girl for 'sexy'" according to Grazia Magazine.<sup>30</sup>

As discussed previously, the corset was embellished using the technical craft, En Tremblant. The corset, as an existing garment off of the body, is made up of fabric, boning and star-shaped jewels constructed into the shape of a torso. In contrast, the corset on the body of Madonna becomes so much more than a beautifully and technically crafted corset; it becomes a part of her identity and performance persona.

In the article, her song 'Survival' (1994) is quoted to round off the piece - "I'll never be an angel, I'll never be a saint, it's true, I'm too busy surviving, Whether it's heaven or hell, I'm gonna be living to tell."<sup>31</sup>

The words 'Heaven' and 'Hell' are regurgitated from the slide featuring Figure 10, but also Bartsch's pose, with the placement of their hands being similar. Another notable similarity between Figure 10 and Figure 15 is the language used in the articles to describe them. In the Vanity Fair article that the image sits beside [Fig 15], Madonna is introduced to the reader through the words 'The Icon'.

So, what do the 'Queen of the Night' [Fig 10] and 'The Icon' have in common? They are both feminine public figures who personify a rare eccentricity. The language used to describe them in written forms, such as articles, can have a lasting impact, potentially solidifying their image and limiting their ability to fully evolve beyond the narratives constructed during certain periods of their lives.

Just as Musafar incorporated the female form into his performance in 1977, Pearl's work ultimately attracted the performing female, as his corsets were created for use beyond the realms of everyday tight-lacing. They were performance pieces.

<sup>30</sup> Ashley, B. 'Why Is It Okay For The World To Sexualise Madonna, But She Can't Sexualise Herself?'

<sup>31</sup> Page 301 Leibovitz, Ritts. Vanity Fair Magazine

## 18

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# TEASING BUTTERFLY

As we jump to 2014, highly renowned burlesque artist Dita Von Teese walks down the runway for a Jean Paul Gaultier fashion show wearing a blue butterfly corset co-designed by Pearl and Gaultier. The symbol of the butterfly reappears, transcending time and jumping from Musafar in '82 [Fig 11], to Kier in '92 [Fig 12], all the way to 2014, as seen in Figure 18. The difference between Figure 16 and Figure 18 is the individual wearing the garment. Teese fell into the art of burlesque in 1992, reviving the art form with "elegance and sophistication."<sup>36</sup> At the age of 18, Teese became a club kid and was introduced to the world of fetish culture by "injecting herself into the club kid rave scene, where creative queer culture blossomed."<sup>37</sup> In an interview with Matthew Wade, she states "I don't know where I'd be right now without the LGBTI community."<sup>38</sup>

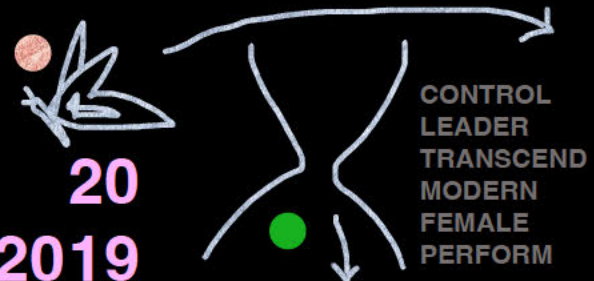
Pearl's venture into the world of luxury fashion somewhat limited his contribution to the club kid scene; however, he maintained his status through his trusted club kid clients, including Teese. Although this garment was produced for Gaultier, a luxury fashion house, Teese's eccentric club kid past alongside the reoccurring symbol of the butterfly creates a nostalgic pairing reminiscent of 90's club kid / drag culture. Musafar also had a varied career, as stated by BodyPlay: "Fakir has had, over the years, a very checkered career path that included such odd occupations as Instructor in Demolitions & Explosives (U.S. Army 1952-54) and teacher of ballroom dancing at Arthur Murray's."<sup>39</sup>

As we almost draw a close to the varied topics discussed within this essay, one must expand on the world of luxury fashion. Although idolized and deemed as iconic figures of their time, the models of the 1990s underwent difficulties in how they were perceived; "...women were often reduced to one-dimensional characters and subjected to objectification, reinforcing damaging societal norms."<sup>40</sup> Mugler, Galliano, Pearl, and Gaultier are all male designers dressing the female; therefore, they have power in how the garments appear on the female body. The difference between Mugler's garment seen in Figure 16 and Pearl's corset [Fig 18] is that the butterfly garment appears less provocative as Teese's breasts are covered. This may showcase a shift in the times, and how performative luxury fashion manifested a less risqué quality. The authors regurgitated notion that 'safety is found in the symbol of the butterfly' radiates through the image, similar to the butterflies seen in Figures 11 and 12.

Although less revealing, the physical extremities of corsetry cannot be escaped. Teese's back is seen embellished with temporary red lines from the tightness of the corset [Fig 19]. This is the first instance of physical 'damage' caused by Pearl's corsetry we are seeing, which consequently makes the author question Teese's smile in Figure 16. However, much like Musafar's ritual of body modification, removing oneself mentally from the infliction of pain caused by the garment or piercing is a meditative process. Through examining Figure 18, it appears Teese is a master of self-control. The domino effect of Musafar's ritualistic practice of body modification, which subconsciously trickled down into Pearl's corsetry, inevitably radiates through to those who wear his garments.

<sup>36</sup> Dita Von Teese, Dita.net  
<sup>37</sup> Wade, M. 'The LGBTI community want to see their idols age and be inspiring': Dita Von Teese'  
<sup>38</sup> Wade, M. 'The LGBTI community want to see their idols age and be inspiring': Dita Von Teese'  
<sup>39</sup> Fakir Musafar - Biography.  
<sup>40</sup> Sydney. The Misrepresentation of Women in 90s Media



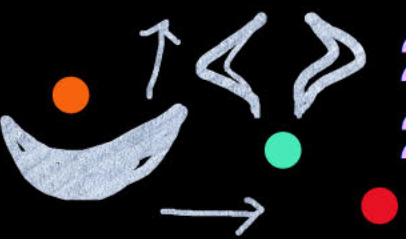


20  
2019  
19



Figure 20 Barnard, Neilson. "Kim Kardashian Met Gala 2019 in New York," Getty Images, (6 May 2019.)

20  
2024  
24



THE MODERN WOMAN

As we jump from 2014 to 2019, Pearl appears to have "reduced his workload"<sup>41</sup> and operates from his atelier with a limited number of private clients including Kim Kardashian; an instrumental figure in steering our current societal beauty standards towards the desire for small waists while maintaining curvaceous silhouettes.<sup>42</sup>

In 2018, Musafar passed away from a long battle with stage-4 lung cancer. This is where Pearl and Musafar's career connection begins to disintegrate within this visual essay. However, it's interesting to speculate on how Pearl's career continued with his new tie to Kardashian.

Kardashian is seen wearing a custom Mugler dress with an undergarment corset by Pearl in 2019 for the Met Gala [Fig 20]. Similar to the John Galliano 'Circus Collection' Spring/Summer 1997 showgirl corset [Fig 14], the inspiration behind the dress came from another sex symbol of her time, Sophia Loren. In this instance, her 'wet shirt' look from the 1957 film 'Boy on a Dolphin' served as 'cool California girl chic' inspiration.<sup>43</sup> Fragments of Pearl are seen in the pearl-esque water droplets hanging off of the dress, symbolising a growing disconnect from his contribution to luxury fashion houses, but in exchange contributing a new narrative to modern corsetry. Kardashian's decision to partner with Pearl holds significance because she embodies everything the modern corset symbolises. In the context of this essay, the corset is no longer held down by a specific genre. It simply exists as an undergarment on the body of a style innovator, contributing to her aesthetic and complimenting her pre-existing curves.

Finally landing in 2024, self-named drag queen and singer Chappell Roan is seen wearing a Pearl-inspired garment, a replica of Lady Miss Kier's butterfly costume as seen in figure 12 made by Jackalope Land [Fig 21].<sup>44</sup> Pearl is now directly removed from the narrative and serves only as inspiration in the mainstream world of corsetry, remaining private but continuing to inspire Kardashian with archival Mugler / Pearl creations as seen in figure 22. Within this slide [Page 20], the colour red serves as one of two final connecting factors between Musafar and Pearl, linking performances of femininity across time. This visual thread runs from Musafar's 1977 sword performance [Figure 7] to Bartsch's 1989 Vanity Fair photoshoot [Figure 10], through Madonna's 1997 shoot for the same magazine [Fig 15], and extends to 2024 with Kardashian's posed performance for an audience. [Fig 22] The final connecting factor is the diluted butterfly [Fig 21]. The symbol has been reduced to a mere replica, further emphasising the erasure not only of Pearl but also of Musafar from this narrative. As summary commences, the corset takes its final bow, before performing an encore in the form of a conclusion.

41 Trajković, Katarina. "Mr Pearl."

42 Biggs, Jade. "Everything Kim Kardashian Did to Get the "Fire" Body She Has Now."

43 Vogue, "Kim Kardashian West Gets Fitted for Her Waist-Snatching Met Gala Look"

44 Roan, Chappell. "Chappell Roan Coachella Week 2 Performance"



Figure 21 Roan, Chappell. "Chappell Roan Coachella Week 2 Performance 19th April 2024," Instagram, (24 Apr. 2024.)



Figure 22 Susan, Amy. "Kim Kardashian at Academy Museum Gala at Academy Museum of Motion Pictures on October 19, 2024 in Los Angeles, California," Getty Images, (19 Oct. 2024).

This visual essay sought to shed light on the connection between Fakir Musafar and Mr Pearl, provoking a narrative that lay dormant within the static qualities of the selected images. Though the contents of the photographs themselves remained unchanged, they momentarily breathed new life when viewed through the author's analytical lens. The similarities found in Pearl and Musafar were not only seen to be 'true' through certain research, such as 'body modification' being ritualistic across subgenres like corsetry, but also through the applied manifestations to each image, creating a domino effect that finally led to the completion of the semi-orchestrated narrative.

The word 'true' can be viewed as the author's truth, or the genuine grounds of the image, by taking the symbols and gathering their absolute denotations to form a factual basis of solidity.

Returning to the concept of 'Détournement,' 'hijacking' feels too forceful a term, as the truths remain intact within the static qualities of the original images but were enriched by ideas that created new discoveries through words and drawings. The individualistic approach to interpreting each visual creates possibilities for discussions that might have remained unexplored had it not been for this deeper search for meaning and symbolism beyond the surface of objects and events.

The symbol of the butterfly emerged as the strongest visual connecting factor between Musafar and Pearl, as during the larval phase of metamorphosis, the caterpillar undergoes rapid growth and development.<sup>45</sup> This relates to Musafar's growing legacy and Pearl's developments within the world of luxury fashion, transforming him into an iconic figure within the world of corsetry during this period of his life.

Similarities within their careers are seen on a more fragmented level when we enter the late 2010s when Musafar tragically passed and Pearl began to fade into a quieter way of working. Although deceased, Musafar continues to be an inspiration for many body modifiers across the globe through the ongoing 'Fakir Musafar Foundation', while Pearl passes on the baton of performative corsetry to Kim Kardashian—the modern beauty standard of the present—where she inspires new generations but with the subtle interjection of Pearl's undergarments and archival collaborations.

In *Fashion and Visual Language: A Social Semiotic Analysis of Women's Clothing in Photographs from the 1920s*, it is stated,

Through the analysis and observation of images, it is possible not only to get to know snapshots of a certain period but also to reveal the cultural practices of a certain social group, the relationships that were established over time, interpret and build imagery narratives of their own and those of third parties, as well as constructing speeches and communicating ideas and concepts according to different communicative purposes.<sup>46</sup>

The corset begins its journey to full-cinch undone, but with the tugging of certain strings, the gaps are bridged and a silhouette is formed. However, the opposite process occurred within this essay. The metaphorical corset became looser with every slide, and inevitably became the basis of a deeper understanding of drag/club kid culture, body modification, the Ibitoe, luxury fashion, and lastly, the connection between Fakir Musafar and Mr Pearl.



Figure 23 | Love Mr Pearl. "Isabella Blow Wearing Mr Pearl for Vogue Russia (2000).", Facebook," ( 14 July 2021)

<sup>45</sup> Florida Museum. "Butterfly Life Cycle."

<sup>46</sup> Page 4 Ferreira, S., Castro, G. and Wellington, F. "Fashion and Visual Language"



Figure 24 Wallis, Gary, and Big Smile Publishing. "Mr Pearl in "the Birds" Alexander McQueen, 1995," Archive: McQueen: Backstage — the Early Shows, (3 Mar. 2015.)

*My work is not about being fashionable. I do not follow fashion at all. I'm interested in an ideal, a kind of expression of elegance, which really has nothing to do with fashion.*<sup>47</sup>

Mr Pearl

*His philosophy of using the body to explore spirituality shaped the way people viewed body art, piercing, branding, and other modifications as tools for personal expression and spiritual growth.*<sup>48</sup>

Fakir Musafar Foundation



Figure 25 Flynn, Erin, and Cleo Dubois, "Fakir Musafar," Fakir Musafar Memorial Gallery.

47 "Mr Pearl - France - Age 57 - 18 Inch Waist - 5ft 8in Tall - Corset Training." Corset Training.

48 Foundation, Fakir. "About Fakir." Fakir Musafar Foundation

FINALE

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