What is it with women and mirrors? John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* explains the ubiquity of the mirror in paintings of nude women as a symbol of vanity, the male artist’s hypocritical device for “morally condemning the woman whose nakedness [he] had depicted for [his] own pleasure”. The “real function of the mirror” in this scheme is to “make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight”1. Virginia Woolf had already taken it further in *A Room of One’s Own,* identifying women as mirrors:“Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.”2 In both scenarios, mirror and woman alike are there to aid and abet the man’s seeing.

These photos by women and non-binary photographers reject, transcend, and play with these patriarchal associations. Their mirrors are never used to condemn, nor empower another at one’s own expense. Rather than reducing themselves or their models to “a sight,” they use mirrors and mirror-images to shape how they are seen, to magnify and multiply, to meet and challenge the viewer’s gaze.

Self-portraiture is its own kind of magic mirror, granting the power to capture and manipulate one’s own reflection. Zanele Muholi holds a mirror that conceals their body and reveals their face, turning their gaze back on both themself and the viewer. Francesca Woodman photographed herself after lying down on photosensitive powder, creating a double self-portrait: a woman and her incomplete reflection. The mirror in Carrie Mae Weems’s photo doesn’t reflect anything at the viewer; like the man’s unseen face, it is intent only on her. She directly returns the viewer’s gaze, smiling with confidence. Claude Cahun used photo manipulation—almost a century ago—to create a psychologically interrogative double self-portrait. The manipulation in Kelli Connell’s *Double Life* series may not initially reveal itself: the same model appears twice in each photo, inhabiting different roles and identities. Nan Goldin’s photo of Siobhan, her lover, takes advantage of the visual and emotional depth of an actual mirror. The viewer gets to know Siobhan through her mirror-image, seeing what she sees. Looking at a mirror and seeing someone else—that is what these photos give us.

1. page 51. [Pdf copy](http://waysofseeingwaysofseeing.com/ways-of-seeing-john-berger-5.7.pdf)

2. page 35.

**Plates**

Zanele Muholi

*Bona, Charlottesville*

2015

from the *Somnyama Ngonyama* series

[view](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/muholi-bona-charlottesville-p82043)

Francesca Woodman

*Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island*

1976

[view](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/woodman-untitled-providence-rhode-island-ar00352)

Claude Cahun

*Que me veux tu?*

1929

[view](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/296276)

Carrie Mae Weems

*Untitled (Man and mirror)*

1990

from the *Kitchen Table* series

[view](https://www.clevelandart.org/art/2008.116.1)

Nan Goldin

Siobhan in My Mirror, Berlin, 1992

1992

[view](https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/siobhan-in-my-mirror)

Kelli Connell

Reverie

2008

[view](https://www.kelliconnell.com/2008)