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Kiss Me Like You Mean It

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Kiss Me Like You Mean It

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2014

Dedication

To Sarah and everyone who let me photograph them.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Mark Goodman and his China Marker, who collectively taught me how to see. I am indebted to Jeff for readings, his faith in my work, and laughter. Thanks are due to Dan Sutherland and Michael Smith for providing me with advice when it was most required; and finally for my editor—in so many ways—Anna Collette, who helped me make the dream real on the wall and from whom nothing escapes.

Abstract

Kiss Me Like You Mean It

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

Supervisor: Anna Collette

Throughout my work I have always sought/ wished to talk about a love between people with no actual connection. Emmanuel Levinas' description of the *face-to-face* echoes throughout my work: "Face, as I have always described it, is nakedness, helplessness, perhaps an exposure to death" (Levinas, "Intention, Event, and the Other"). Indeed, the face then is not the literal face but a vulnerability that we can feel and almost touch. For me, Levinas' description of the *face* applies not only to portraits but also to the things and marks others make with a secret sort-of-love, a private ritual when no one watches. I observe their marks on surface as gratuitous flourish. These marks can be anything: tire grease, metrics of hair, ad hoc assemblage. This inadvertent history the makers cast on objects allows me to project thoughts about them, recreate a fiction of who they are, and conjecture why they made a mark that is just a mark. With the people un-pictured I hope the objects become stand-ins, projections of the people and their labor, functioning as flocculent afterthoughts of their human reality. I think objects may possess their own agency such as in Heidegger's *The Thing*, "The Potter forms the clay. No—he shapes the void." This paper will trace my attempts and line of questioning with regard to knowing. My mapping of objects and people meet at the cross-section of agency and failure. Despite the disparate subject matter I photograph, I want to convey a sense of unwavering empathy with my work.

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Sarah or Again

"This never wanting it to end." -Mark Strand, "Provisional Eternity"



Figure 1: *Gowanus*

When I began graduate school I had never made portraits before. My application contained one picture with a person. I was told it was time to experiment with content, time to push limits. Graduate school was prescribed to me as an "ok"

time to fail. I started to make portraits as an exercise in failure. The learning curve is high. At first I tried to photograph everyone I knew. I could not, however, answer my peers' questions as to why I chose the sitters. Then I photographed the woman I was dating at the time, Sarah. The answer as to why became obvious. I operated in a similar mode to Harry Callahan and Emmet Gowin but I also thought of the



Figure 2: *Oso*

photographs of Seiichi Furuya. In his *Memoires* he photographed his wife, the birth of their child, you see her age and become ill. I often thought of these pictures when I photographed Sarah. I thought they were similar in their degree of intimacy and elements of unlovely. I started making pictures at times one “shouldn’t” photograph: sleeping, anger, Too Much Fun, and states of undress. I often thought about her sleeping as a way of removing the performative. I made these pictures with a variety of cameras, mostly handheld, using both flash and natural lighting.

I photographed day and night. I soon began photographing her with a 4x5 view camera.

This changed everything. The slowness of the view camera process gave the pictures a palpable stillness where before they had an aesthetic of movement. The camera had wandered and then it stopped. First, I think the camera hindered the results. The pictures I



Figure 3: *Neapolitan*

made of her, however, now entered the more classical realm of portraiture. The language, though still contemporary, entered a different/ more ancient conversation. I now started to study the history of portraiture, specifically Balthus’ portraits of Therese. With my portraits of Sarah I wanted to conduct the weight of Balthus’ portraits and their undercurrent of desire. I became interested in how a portrait of someone could be an important catalogue of the time. Though I was seldom physically present in the

photographs, the portraits bespoke my own search to share a gaze. When I look at the images of her sleeping sometimes I feel like she could almost wake up.

Many of these pictures have a confrontational direct gaze but in many there is a refusal. I posit that sometimes a picture of someone is not always one of the face. Emmanuel Levinas, too, emphasizes this negation of a literal read of the *face* encapsulating someone: “But the face can assume meaning on what is the ‘opposite’ of the face! The face then is not the color of the eyes, the shape of the nose, the ruddiness of the cheeks, etc.” (Levinas “The Other, Utopia, and Justice”).



Figure 4: *Waverly Place*

Spandrels

“On a beech tree rudely carved/ NC was here/ Why did she do it?/ Was she scared or sad?” –Belle and Sebastian “We Rule the School”



Figure 5: *BMX Cloudscape*

Concurrently, I started to photograph objects, mark-making and other residue that people make with no artistic intention but a very human one. I started to think of these photographs as spandrels, which are the gaps between two columns that are an architectural

necessity but came to be decorated over time. A porch draped in plastic sheeting, a bed being dwarfed by a series of poor paintjobs. These pictures functioned as a fetishism of failure or an exegesis in expedience. I thought by photographing them there came to be an exposure of private ritual. These marks and objects possess a backstory/system/lexicon wherein only the makers have access. With picture making, I was trying to obsessively catalogue these marks to talk about how we can view ourselves as an object. Since



Figure 6: *RedRoom*

photographs objectify, I sought to show how we sculpt, carve, or mark—not as works of art but as byproducts of our daily lives. As when a cat brushes against a leg, we leave ourselves on things we touch. They speak about us.



Figure 7: *Nine Concentric Circles*

I Love You and I Want You to Stay

*“I feel with absolute clarity the way the polished facets that define me in space are melting, melting. I’m vanishing, dissolving in her lap... she’s no longer herself, she’s the whole universe.” Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We**

The pictures of Sarah became, perhaps, practice for photographing everyone else. I started thinking of Susan Sontag “All photographs are memento mori (Latin meaning: I know that I will die)” and Judith Joy Ross remarking every portrait she made was “an act

of love.” Conflating these ideas I began to see the portraits as a fulfillment of longing. I saw the photographs I made of people as an apotheosis of this desire: to hold onto someone, to try to hold onto them forever.



Figure 8: *Cara*

I made many pictures living in the realm I created with these ideas. The first photograph, chronologically, that I still show is of my grandmother. Here, my private life bleeds into the public sphere.

My grandmother is Chinese from the island of Hong Kong. We do not speak the same language so we have never conversed beyond a few polite phrases. In photography there is a connection that goes beyond language. When I place the view camera in front of someone there is an unspoken tactile

languor. I think the anachronistic qualities of the 4x5 camera—tripod, accordion pleats, a focusing cloth hiding the photographer for most of the process—lend themselves to create a psychological space of self-contemplation. Since the photographer remains unseen the person is left to stare into the lens. This inevitably creates a specular moment of self-reflection for the sitter: they must think for the duration of the encounter on how they appear, on why I chose them. My gaze and the sitters’ touch in the glass. This is almost myopic. Just us. It no longer matters what our connection is, or if there even is one. The process creates the space wherein the connection lives.



Figure 9: Pawpaw

In Paul de Man’s “Autobiography as de-Facement” he posits that autobiography should not be included in the canon of literature. It follows for us to assume we are the experts on ourselves, indeed, the authority. This interests me with regard to portraiture concerning the idea of the “mask”. As a sitter one tries to reveal only a part of oneself thinking a self-conscious awareness can protect what needs be hidden. Unawareness, self-deception, and vanity, however, skew the

visible rendered on the picture. I have seen things slip through. There is a difference between the person and the persona. Vulnerability slips through where one did not even know one was vulnerable.

The writings of J.M. Coetzee combine fiction and autobiography so closely it is impossible to discern between the two: “The real question is: this massive autobiographical writing enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction—does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself.” (Coetzee *Doubling the Point*) This blur between self and fiction is always present in a portrait.

Sometimes vulnerability is hard to find. Sometimes portraits do not work. We are encouraged to be hard. To not care. “At the age of eight, he fell under the tyranny of Cool” (Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* 485). Even though I often fail at portraits I want to hold that photographing someone gives me and maybe people who view the photograph a chance to think about something other than yourself and, much like Levinas, think it an ethical necessity.



Figure 10: *Jeannie*

We're All Gonna Be Famous

-Do you think people would be down for me to photograph them?

-Dude, all comedians are narcissists. Everyone is going to let you take their picture.

-In conversation with Pat Dean, Standup Comedian. Austin, TX. March, 2013.



Figure 11: Pat Dean

I feel the contemporary standards for beauty seem more androgynous than ever before. They narrow sexual dimorphism by attenuating features prized to be ultra-male or ultra-female. How beautiful/exciting/what other species does that?

In this next body of work I found a frame—standup comedians—wherein I could work serially but still photograph seemingly disparate people. I was drawn to photograph the comedians on account of their self-selected performance. Despite the

performativity of the profession many, I found, were shy. The egocentric was involved with wanting to be heard by strangers. To issue grievances with how things are. I found they wanted to be famous but not necessarily for appearance.

There were several facets to this work. In addition to the portraits, I also had them write down their name and a joke that they think is funny but that does not always work on stage. I think this channels, again, the idea of failure in my work. Comedians must have endurance. Their threshold for giving up goes far past most people. They must continually try new material. To work on their craft they must fail and fail publicly. The specificity of my criteria emphasized these failures but also hope.

When I told the comics said criteria more often than not they replied almost verbatim, “This is going to be hard because all my jokes are funny.”



Figure 12: *Michael Priest*

No One Gets Hot Pink Like You and Me

"Such an eye was not born when the bird was, but is coeval with the sky it reflects." -Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*



Figure 13: *Coeval*

I felt that the portraits of comedians were a failure because they were not difficult. Since the sitters wanted to be looked at maybe these pictures were more about the desire for celebrity than my own desire for connection. After this, I became interested in the idea of

the ersatz: how something, usually, inferior can be a placeholder for something else. How appropriate an idea for photography that democratically renders the visual world in two dimensions.



Figure 14: *Thorne*

I began photographing people by the water when walking around an island in the middle of a city. I photographed two women sitting on a rock in a river. Their cheap sunglasses were on their heads, reflecting the clouds. Hot pink and white, the other's covered in cannabis flowers. The glasses

reflected the sky. The ersatz sky in mass-produced plastic was inescapably captivating. I started bringing my view camera to swimming holes and wading past waist deep into the water and asking strangers: “May I take your picture?” These people are already in some sense psychologically exposed and ready to be looked at due to the culture of the beach. So much so that no one refused my request for a year and a month. I photographed hundreds of people.



Figure 15: *Myka*

Continue Being My Dream, Then

Think about me when you land on the moon, okay? -Victor Pelevin, Omon Ra

On my closet door there are glow-in-the-dark stickers of stars and planets. They are painted over in white. I counted almost a hundred. The stickers begin 27" off the ground and end at 78"—the closet itself is 80" in height. An adult presumably placed the stickers, likely for a small child. These people do not live here anymore. Another person painted over them. The phosphors are



Figure 16: #00 (*White Planets*)

trapped. There is an erasure of what used to fluoresce. I have become the caretaker of the white planets. Everyday I see them caught in a stasis of latex, the image of melancholy sealed in paint. What else disrespects the childlike sense of wonder and skews it towards the helpless?

We were once able to feel the sublime in small things. I began photographing surfaces of objects that contained a tactile memory: an existence of a person or experience. I am not just

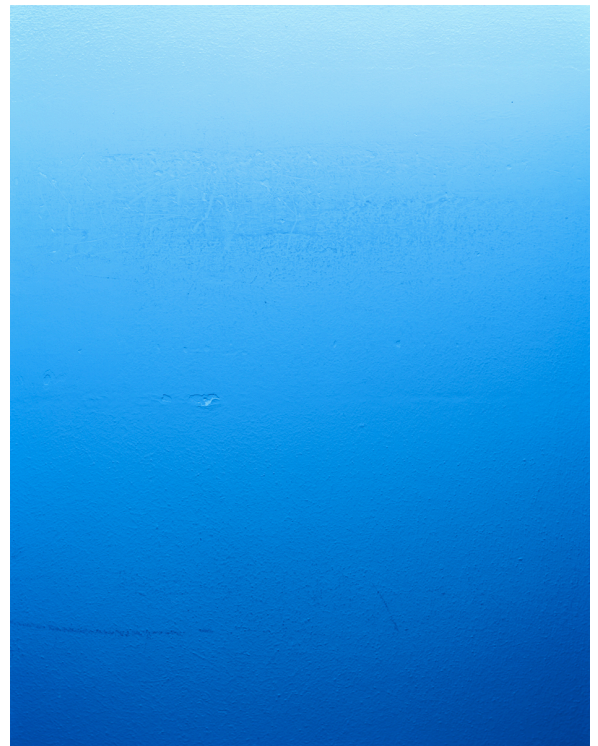


Figure 17: #14 (*Chair Hits the Wall*)

photographing the remnant but include the whole. A scar becomes an ellipse on the firmament of skin.

I think of these photographs as constellations. I employ the artifice of the vast. I unify the subjects on the picture plane, which attenuates them to line and color. Like constellations, the photographs become reductive stand-ins for a larger idea. Constellations reflect the human need to flatten space and time. They initiate narratives. Through something far away they explain the here and now, history and myth. The astral plane is a governing metaphor for how I make and think about this work.

The subjects are cosmetic fantasies and small tragedies; less tragedies and more missteps, as when you fall and the ground leaves its impressions on your flesh. I want to elicit the inexplicable as we empathize with a hurt or dwell in the dark of the night sky: whether projected on the belly of the inamorata or the fecundity of plastic. The face, too, is a kind of constellation—two ovals and four lines.

I want to create tableaux, through a photographic fiction, where unimportant histories blend into each other as in a dream.

These pictures are a romance for the ineffectual and blessedly neglected.

I hope to learn to see and to look for the first time.



Figure 18: *Elliptic*

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full
hands;
How could I answer the child? . . . I do not know what it
is any more than he.

-Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

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