

AT FACE VALUE: INVESTIGATING PERCEPTION THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS

by

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ABSTRACT

At Face Value: Investigating Perception Through Portraiture is a body of work that examines how people process perception in imagery. Deadpan Aesthetic, photographic truth and American identity are discussed as well as the amount of influence a photographer has in their work. Since perception is defined as an understanding of setting via the senses I hope to challenge viewers by employing various subtle strategies that destabilize the viewer's reception of the photographs.

To Ashley: without you it would not have been possible.

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CHAPTER ONE: DEADPAN

The deadpan aesthetic is a style of photography in which the artist's intent is to ostensibly remove his or her personal influence over the photograph, such as emotional reactions, or political views. This most commonly comes through as a neutral perspective or emotional detachment in the picture. Deadpan photography places the subject in the center of the frame in perfect clarity, often through the use of large-scale prints. The key aspect of understanding deadpan photography is that the photographs question issues that go beyond the photographer's personal feelings. In her book *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, Charlotte Cotton wrote a chapter titled "Deadpan". In her opening paragraph she states, "These pictures may engage us with emotive subjects, but our sense of what the photographers' emotions might be is not the obvious guide to understanding the meaning of the images" (Cotton 81). Cotton introduces the reader to the deadpan aesthetic by explaining that the imagery the reader is about to see is concerned with questions addressing social, political, or environmental issues rather than the photographer's emotional bias. The subjects may show emotion or be emotional, but the artist's personal convictions do not influence the artwork. She references artists who make work questioning ideas about subjects that typically fall into four categories; architecture, industrial settings, nature, and human interaction. Cotton also gives a brief history of deadpan:

Although the art world's acknowledgement of this new approach dates to the early 1990s, today's front-ranking practitioners had been working out of the limelight for at least half a decade before. The deadpan aesthetic we see today is often characterized as 'Germanic'. This moniker refers not only to the nationality of many of the key figures but also to the fact that a significant number were educated, under the tutelage of Bernd

Becher, at the Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf, Germany. ... The ‘Germanic’ characterization also refers to the traditions of 1920s and 1930s German photography known as New Objectivity. Albert Renger-Patsch (1897-1966), August Sander (1876-1974), and Erwin Blumenfeld (1897-1969) are the most regularly mentioned forefathers of today’s deadpan photography. (Cotton 82)

Bernd Becher encouraged his students to explore and continue the work of the New Objectivity photographers. If one compares August Sander’s work to contemporary photographers working in deadpan, one can see the influence. For example, August Sander’s “Bricklayer” and Rineke Dijkstra’s “Montemor, Portugal, May 1, 1994” although the images were made over 50 years apart, they are similar. They utilize frontal positioning of the subject, a neutral background, and a neutral facial expression.

In his book, *Criticizing Photographs*, Terry Barrett talks about context in photography. He introduces the reader to three forms of context: internal, original, and external. Barrett explains:

To consider a photograph’s internal context is to pay attention to what is descriptively evident, as was discussed in Chapter 2; namely the photograph’s subject matter, medium, form, and the relations among the three. ... To consider a photograph’s original context is to consider certain information about the photographer and about the social times in which he or she was working. ... Original context includes knowledge of other work by the photographer. ... Original context is history: social history art history, and the history of the individual photograph and the photographer who made it. ... External context is the situation in which a photograph is presented or found. (Barrett 106-109)

Barrett raises the idea that context affects the way an image is perceived, and that all three kinds must be taken into account to understand a photographer's intent. Internal context is usually the first thing we consider the actual physical photograph. External context can effect our perception, based on where we see an image. Often, a photograph presented in a museum has higher intrinsic merit than a photograph on the side of a bus. Original context involves the artist's intent. It can be difficult to consider because often the intent does not accompany the artwork. It must be researched or read about or experienced at an artist's talk. Original context is important to the deadpan aesthetic because it indicates the photographer's influence over the image. Deadpan photographers actively try to limit their influence during the creation of their work to create photographs that engage an active response. That entices the viewer to consider his or her own understanding of a subject, and possibly change that understanding.

Rineke Dijkstra is one of the most accomplished deadpan photographers working in the art world. Her practice investigates people who are in a state of transition. She began working in 1992 with her series, *Beach Portraits*, featuring adolescents posing on the beach. The image's subjects are captivating because of their sense of uncertainty. In each photograph an adolescent faces the camera. The subjects are framed by the beach, ocean, and sky. This creates continuity throughout the work and directs the viewer directly to the subjects. The backgrounds in the images are unimportant. The viewer focuses on the person represented. The subject's awkward gesture, the choice of bathing suit, and the hairstyle gives us clues about who the person is, as well as the burgeoning sense of adulthood. Dijkstra went on to photograph bullfighters, mothers directly after giving birth, and young Israeli soldiers.

Andreas Gursky is a photographer from Düsseldorf who studied under Bernd Becher. Gursky creates enormous images that depict modern life. The images are often over six feet tall and 16 feet wide. If there are humans present in the images, they are reduced to being small figures of color with few defining features. The viewer is given a scene so large that it forces him to scrutinize the detail in the image to comprehend the scene. Gursky's work bounces between the deadpan categories. *Chicago, Board of Trade II* from his stock market series in the 1990s is an overhead view of a trading floor. The viewer is so far removed from the environment that the illusion that we are godlike figures who look down at everything at once is created. To me, his goal is to describe a space completely in one photograph turning the viewer into a critical observer of contemporary life.

Edward Burtynsky is a Canadian photographer who has worked since the early 1990s. His practice explores the deterioration of the environment. For the last 20 years he has traveled the world photographing oil fields, ship breaking facilities, quarries, and factories. Most recently he travelled around the world for his *Water* project (Figure 1). On his website Burtynsky says, "I understand that it has an editorial aspect to it, but nothing I photograph is typically a news event. I'm not so much into chasing disasters as I am into looking at big industrial incursions into the landscape or in this case, the seascape." (Burtynsky). Burtynsky tells us that his work may seem editorial but that he is interested in the industrial representation of water. This is a classic deadpan approach to photography. Burtynsky photographs a subject that has a broad reach, not because of any personal involvement with the subject, but due to a conviction that he must raise awareness about the issues in his photographs. Burtynsky and Gursky do not make portraits, but they are deadpan photographers, and they represent the broader spectrum of the aesthetic. Their

photographs do not relate to my work, but they represent deadpan photographers who investigate ideas that go beyond the photographer and exemplify how to limit the influence of the creator in their work.



Figure 1 Burtynsky Water Image

There is a difference between making documentary photographs and deadpan photographs. That difference lies in photographic truth. Photographic truth is the amount of truth a photograph can convey. The casual viewer might look at a photograph and assume that it is inherently truthful, that the picture is an objective document of an event. However, this is not the case. A photograph can never tell the objective truth, because it requires a person to create it. A photograph made by a person is an interpretation of a scene. In that interpretation the photographer has control over multiple variables, which influences the way we see the image. The choice of subject, inclusion and exclusion of the scene in the frame, and artificial lighting are all tools a photographer can use to influence the way the viewer perceives the photograph. From *Conscientious Photography Magazine*, in an article titled *Responsibility and Truth in Photography*, Jörg M. Colberg writes about photographic truth. He states:

Photographs don't lie. To say a photograph lies is to believe that there can be such a thing as an objectively truthful photograph. There can never be. All photographs present a truth: their makers'. The issue is not whether or not that truth has any relation to the Truth. The issue is, instead, what photographs tell us about our own truths, about those beliefs that we take for so granted, that we stick to so obsessively, weighing what we see. The photographer's responsibility is not to present us with the Truth. Her/his responsibility instead is to present us with a truth that, crucially, will make us re-examine (not: confirm) our own. That is why or how photography can be art. And if it's done well, then we have good photographic art. But the "good" doesn't come out of what we want. Instead, it comes out of what we are made to experience, whether we like it or not. (Colberg)

Colberg argues that instead of telling The Truth, photographs tell the photographer's truth. Each photographer has a responsibility as an artist to present his or her truth to the viewer, and if that truth is exciting it will make the viewer re-examine his or her own understanding of the truth. Truth in photography relies on our perception of the subject, and how that understanding affects the interpretation of the photograph.

Documentary photographers try to create the most objective photographs possible by limiting the tools they use as photographers. For example they might only capture the scene as they encounter it, not use artificial light, and only photograph people who engage them first, or make straight photographs (photographs that have not been digitally manipulated). Deadpan photographers do the opposite of documentarians. Dijkstra uses artificial light to change the environment of the subject. She looks for people who fit her criteria and isolates them in the scene to create her photographic truth. Deadpan photographers create a scene to capture. Documentary photographers and photojournalists capture the scene as they experience it.

CHAPTER TWO: INFLUENCES

This chapter outlines artists who influence my practice. I will not list every artist who has ever inspired me to create work but will focus instead on the people who have caused major shifts in my way of thinking about art.

Irving Penn got me excited about photography. When I first saw his work I knew I wanted to be like him. Penn's work is a lesson in composition. He was a modernist portrait photographer. His most influential body of work is *Small Trades*. Penn started photographing trade workers in 1950 in Paris. In the following years he photographed people in London and New York City. According to Virginia A. Heckert and Anne Lacoste, who wrote the introduction for Penn's small trades book, "The author of this book was motivated by the fact that individuality and occupational pride seem on the wane. To a degree everyone has proved right, and since these photographs were made, London chimney sweeps have all but disappeared and in New York horseshoers — hard to find in 1950 now scarcely exist" (Heckert and Lacoste 14). Penn is interested in the perception of self, and the worker's identity. Each worker is photographed on a muslin background with the tools he uses daily. Almost every worker looks into the camera with dignity. Each is proud to share his representation of his work. Each image is titled with the occupation, city, and year captured: *Cuisinier, Paris, 1950; Butcher, London, 1950; Hot Dog Seller, New York, 1950*. Penn spent more than two years finding these ordinary people and photographing them. Each is unique and displays a different attitude while being photographed.

Bill Owens is another photographer working outside the deadpan aesthetic, who

influenced my work. In the 1970's he photographed suburbia in California. I was interested in his consideration of American Identity. Giles Morra comments on Owens in his book, *The Last Photographic Heroes*:

Owens's frontal framing and his stylistic neutrality perfectly accentuate the standardization stemming from the new lifestyles of the American middle class. Yet there is no satirical ambition in Owens's photographs. His neutral documents, he believed, could offer people the opportunity to "become aware of their lifestyles, and have a better appreciation of it, [so] they could change it for the better." (Morra 148)

Owens tried to capture the changing landscape on the west coast at the time, and how the standard of living was changing in these lifestyles (Figure 2). He considered himself a documentary photographer who wanted to show people what was happening in these new communities. The photographs show ordinary life at the time, and capture a classic American look. It was also something I was investigating in my work at the time.



Figure 2 Bill Owens Suburbia

As mentioned in the last chapter, August Sander was a German photographer who worked between the world wars documenting the people of Germany. As a New Objective photographer his practice focused on the practical use of photography instead of the narrative style of the pictorialists working at the time. His compositions are frontal, with the subject often centered in the frame. The expressions are neutral, as if he doesn't want to influence the viewer. He considered himself a documentary photographer, so I understand his desire to remain objective and capture the scene as he found it. His practice is different from Penn's. Penn had conversations with the trade workers as he photographed them. These conversations influenced

the subjects making them more comfortable with the act of being photographed.

Rineke Dijkstra was the first deadpan photographer I was introduced to. According to the Guggenheim Museum website, “Rineke Dijkstra was born in Sittard, the Netherlands, in 1959. She studied photography at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam from 1981 to 1986” (Guggenheim). I admire her work from a formal standpoint and for its seemingly simple intent. When I started researching her I was confused about the intention of my work. I kept trying to invent long narratives that proved my work was conceptually strong. Dijkstra’s practice helped me realize that intent can be simple and still convey historical references and captivating images, and it can embody interesting concepts.

Thomas Ruff is another German photographer who attended the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. Ultimately he is interested in the questions photography raises as a medium. His most influential work is his series of portraits from the late 1980s and 1990s. The Tate Museum’s website summarizes the series as, “Monumental, highly detailed and immaculately finished, these were unglamorous portraits of ordinary people, devoid of expression. The Porträts suggest that it is impossible to photographically represent a subject's inner life, positing instead a more democratic, socially based mode of representation” (TATE). The portraits are ordinary people posed against neutral seamless paper backgrounds. Their headshots include the face and upper torso, and are commonly associated with passport photos. Thomas Ruff talks about them in an interview with Gil Blank in a 2004 issue of *Influence* magazine. Throughout the interview Ruff is asked about the portraits. His response is as follows:

My idea for the portraits was to use a very even light in combination with a large-format camera, so that you could see everything about the sitter’s face. I didn’t want to hide

anything. Yet I also didn't want the people I portrayed to show any emotion. I told them to look into the camera with self-confidence, but likewise, that they should be conscious of the fact that they were being photographed, that they were looking into a camera. ... I wanted to do a kind of official portrait of my generation. I wanted the photographs to look like those in passports, but without any other information, such as the subject's address, religion, profession, or prior convictions. I didn't want the police/viewer to get any information about us. They shouldn't be able to know what we felt at that moment, whether we were happy or sad. ...

My portraits look so Appollonian because the sitters provide a perfect surface onto which the viewer can project anything, bad and good experiences alike. They're neutral and friendly, like Buddhas. They're vessels you can fill with all of your wishes and desires.

(Blank and Ruff 48-59)

These images and Ruff's comments are the biggest influence in my work. Ruff's series showed me that photography could be used to challenge someone's understanding of perception. It can force the viewer to confront an image with clues limited to what little is given in that image.

CHAPTER THREE: ARTWORK

I started making portraits during my second year in my MFA program. At the time I was interested in Americana and American identity. I was trying to understand what made someone American, if there was a universal description of American, and how it matched my own. I started making portraits of the members of local hobby clubs in Central Florida. The first was The Central Florida Accordion Club, Orlando Chapter (Figure 3). The club has three chapters, one for Orange County, one for Polk County, and one in Brevard County. The Orange County chapter told to come to the next meeting to photograph the members. All the images were made with the subject sitting in a chair looking above the camera, centered in the frame, with defined lighting. I did not know about Rineke Dijkstra or deadpan photography at this time. I was only looking at Bill Owens' suburbia photographs.



Figure 3Accordion Club

While discussing the work with my fellow graduate students, I was called an indexical photographer, meaning that I was creating a catalogue of photographs similar to a sociological study. These conversations helped me define my interest in identity. I realized after I made the accordion photographs that I was interested in the comparison between group identity and individual identity. The subtle differences of each person I photographed came through when one viewed all of the portraits at one time.

The change from still life to portrait photography was difficult for me. I had to force myself to become comfortable interacting with strangers to create my work. Whereas in the past I could create a scene in the studio and spend all day photographing it my sitters now limited the amount of time allowed to perform my process. This shift forced me to review all my formal knowledge of studio photography. The change to portraiture also raised fears about objectifying the sitter. When I saw the accordion photographs on the wall for the first time, I was afraid that I was taking advantage of the sitters. I thought that using their images for my personal gain was disrespectful, and it was hard for me to come to terms with. The objectification of the sitter was discussed in critique with faculty split, half of them thinking I was objectifying the sitters, and half thinking that I wasn't. The realization that I could be objectifying these people upset me. I asked some of the sitters to come to the studio and view the work. Their response to the work encouraged me to keep making portraits. The people from the accordion club who saw the photographs on the wall were excited to see them, and proud of the way they looked in the photographs. This experience gave me permission to keep making portrait photographs.

After the accordion club photographs I decided to find a club that had more overt American symbolism associated with it. I chose to photograph Cub Scouts because their parent organization, The Boy Scouts of America, has a long history of American tradition. Furthermore, the common viewer is familiar with the symbolism and its reputation as Americana. I was able to photograph the local Cub Scout chapter during its Pinewood Derby (Figure 4). Every year Cub Scouts across America carve and race tiny wooden cars. I photographed each scout with his derby car. The scouts were of varying ages. Some knew how to smile for the camera, and others did not. Some boys smiled proudly about their cars, and others grimaced because of their

discomfort while posing. The viewers I was able to observe responding to the work would talk about how happy the kids were, or the faces they were making, or try to guess who made the cars.

The viewers were projecting their own perceptions of these kids into the work. This series helped me become aware of the photographer-and-sitter relationship and the socialization required to pose. The younger children did not have enough experience with the camera and didn't know how. Older children had learned posing and knew exactly how to act as soon as they saw the camera. This showed me that the presentation of self is a learned behavior and is easier to recognize in children than adults.



Figure 4 Cub Scouts

After the Cub Scouts project, I wanted to make a series about the modern American family, but first had to define my own sense of family. This is the only autobiographical work I created in the MFA program. I created a series of four images about my in-laws. The goal was

to define my place in my wife's family as a husband, son-in-law, brother-in-law, and uncle. The images depict each member of my wife's family, her parents, her brothers with their families, and my wife and me (Figure 5). Each part of the family is shown in a separate image. In each image I added a red, white, and blue striped blanket crocheted by my great aunt to cover the family members. The family is apparently naked underneath. The blanket represented my family and traditions, and it was also a symbol for my idealized role in my wife's family.



Figure 5 Blanket Series

After I completed this work I felt that I had accurately defined my notions of family, but did not move on to other families. I decided that the concept was too broad to benefit my questions about American identity. Also, I felt that working autobiographically hindered my process. Turning the camera on myself made the viewer think about my relationship to the photographs not the larger ideas about American identity that I was interested in.

Shortly after the blanket series, I started making new work about patriotism and nostalgia, trying to answer this question, “Who decides what is American?” Since starting the program I was encouraged by the faculty to also make non-photographic work. I created an installation by transforming my studio space into a living room decorated for Christmas (Figure 6). The room had wood paneled walls, beige carpet, a record player console, a Christmas tree with homemade ornaments, stockings on the wall, an electric heater, a couch with Christmas pillows, a lamp, and Christmas cards that were sent to me specifically for the installation. It was built to be immersive and to create a nostalgic feeling for Christmas. Instead, I realized that I was challenging the viewer’s understanding of Christmas tradition and not necessarily creating nostalgia. I built the room based on my personal Christmas experience, only to discover that it differed from my cohort’s Christmas experiences. This realization led me to engage in a more confrontational way of working.



Figure 6 Christmas Installation

I began to make objects that directly confronted the viewer's understanding of American society and patriotism. First I placed two American flags on the ground. Each flag had a message spray painted onto it. The first flag read "God Bless America", and the second flag read "Fuck Yeah 'Murica". The flags were placed in a hallway, so that if the viewer wanted to read both flags at once he had to walk across one of them. This work was directly inspired by the artist Dread Scott's piece "WHAT IS THE PROPER WAY TO DISPLAY A US FLAG?" (Figure 7). I had responded to Scott's piece by taking it a step further and defacing the flag,

which was already treated disrespectfully by my displaying it on the floor. My flag piece convinced me that I could not answer my own questions about American identity. The viewers I noticed would not walk on the flag even though it had been defaced, and one viewer was visibly upset by the piece (Figure 8). This was most likely due to the external context of the piece. As a result of showing the piece in an art space, the viewer could assume some work would be controversial. If the flag piece was presented in a different space, such as a city street corner or a shopping mall, that external context would remove the safety of the art setting, and people might be more open about their disagreement with the piece.



Figure 7 Dread Scott What Is The Proper Way To Display A US Flag?

A nearby piece of mine showed eight near life-size portraits displayed on a wall with a sign above them that read, “Who is the most American?” (Figure 9). There were stickers



Figure 8 My Flag Piece

positioned on the wall that the viewers could place on the portrait they thought represented the “most American” person. I set up a hidden camera and recorded the viewers casting their votes. This was another attempt to answer my questions about American identity, but was also a thought exercise. I am convinced that there is no quality that makes someone more American than someone else. It was my hope that the viewer would also come to realize this. This piece eventually led to my realization that all of my work was primarily about perception.



Figure 9 Who Is the Most American?

During the fall term of my third year I started photographing again. I wanted to photograph people, but I wasn't sure if I should go back to clubs or photograph a new subject. I decided to photograph my own version of Penn's *Small Trades*. I decided to photograph trade workers because I was confused about how to incorporate the idea of perception into a new photographic series and I felt pressured to create work. Photographing the trades offered me a way to keep working while I figured out a way to pursue what I was interested in. Ultimately this led to a critique with my cohort group in which I admitted to being frustrated with the work and wanting to make simple portraits about perception.

My next body of work included portraits of my in-laws, similar to Thomas Ruff's, in which the viewer projected his or her perception of the person into the work based on the information in the portrait. The responses from faculty were mixed, but the key criticisms were

that the work was too similar to Ruff's and that there is too much emotion coming through for the portraits to truly be considered a product of the deadpan aesthetic.

I explained in my introduction that deadpan photography can show emotive subjects, but that the photographer's influence should not contribute to that emotion. I do not believe my interaction with the sitters as I was creating this work influenced their emotional output. I gave each sitter directions only to look directly into the camera, avoid smiling, and try to use his or her resting face or to assume a neutral expression if that was too difficult. Part of the misunderstanding arose because I misarticulated the deadpan aesthetic. In an effort to promote discussion of my work instead of deadpan photography theory, I made a broad statement about how the key aspect of deadpan photography was the neutrality of the subject and my emotional detachment. I did not specify the expectation of the photographer's emotional detachment. My poor statement about the deadpan aesthetic led to the faculty misunderstanding, and ultimately a poor critique of the work. During critique the faculty instead projected their own understandings into the work and discussed how some people's interpretations were different than others.



Figure 10 Georgia

What did not happen was an acknowledgement of my exercise in perception. Instead the faculty projected their perceptions into the work and did not realize that it was my intention for that to happen and for them to discuss that phenomenon.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, perception is defined as:

The ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses:
the normal limits to human perception ... The state of being or process of becoming
aware of ... A way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental
impression: Intuitive understanding and insight. (Oxford)

Perception is how we form opinions about things when we first encounter them. Our

experiences of the cleanliness of a hotel room, someone's home the first time we enter, and a future boss during a job interview are all things about which we form perceptions. One individual's perception of these is what constitutes his or her unique understanding of the world. In my work I hope to challenge individual perceptions by presenting a person's image that lacks the interaction experienced in ordinary human encounters. In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger says:

For photographs are not as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights ... Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing. (Berger 10)

Berger is suggesting that our own understanding of the world and our perceptions influence every photograph we see because we can only understand an image from our own experiences. The photographer can never force his interpretation on the viewer, because the viewer is unaware of the experiences that the photographer used to create the image.

In an ordinary social introduction, a person gets to see body language and hear the voice of the person he is meeting as he forms his opinion of the person. In my photographs the viewer is restricted to what is shown in each photograph. This narrows the viewer's basis for judgment to what is seen in the subject's face, clothing, and upper torso. And yet such neutral expressions in the portraits make it hard to form a positive or negative reaction. What can a person perceive about another person when there is little information in the photograph, and how does perception differ between viewers?

I've spoken previously about the photographer's truth, and the reduction of influence in deadpan photography. In my most recent work, the Georgia series, I paid close attention to the subject-photographer relationship for the first time. In terms of removing my influence from my photographed image of a person, this relationship is the best place to limit influence. Irving Penn would make his subjects feel comfortable as he posed them by making casual conversation. He used it to distract them as he positioned them to make the best composition. This is an example of a photographer's influence over the subject. In my work I too try to limit my influence as much as possible. I tell my subjects to react to the camera in any way. Thus they may feel comfortable or awkward in front of the camera.

Artificial lighting has interested me more than most formal aspects of photography. Photographic strobe lighting is unique in that the fraction of a second it takes to make an image it cannot be recreated. My approach to lighting has remained constant as I explored other ideas. My use of lighting helps define the subject by presenting it in a way that is normally impossible to see. A light set-up involves two soft light modifiers as a main and fill light, with hard light modifiers serving as accent lights. I make the subject brighter than the background, and thus more important in the visual hierarchy of the image. This draws the viewer immediately to the subject. Without this defining light my photographs feel flat and muted, as if something is missing. As an example, the image in figure 11 is the lighting set-up from the Cub Scout series. The light in the room is completely different in this image compared to the images from the rest of the body of work.



Figure 11 Lighting Setup

CHAPTER FOUR: CONTEMPORARIES

Among my artistic influences, Irving Penn is dead, Thomas Ruff has moved away from portraiture, and Rineke Dijkstra is making video art. Of the photographers working in contemporary portraiture, only the work of Sophie Kirchner is similar to mine. Her website explains: “Sophie Kirchner was born in 1984 in the former Eastern part of Berlin. In her personal work, she mainly focuses on documenting social issues and has a strong interest in giving a voice to social disadvantaged groups, and provoking taboo subjects through photography.” (Kirchner) Kirchner studied in America before returning to her homeland to work as a freelancer. Her work is not strictly deadpan but is heavily influenced by that aesthetic.

The photographic work that closely relates to my own is her most recent series, *Male Sport*. In it she photographs women who play male-dominated sports. She writes, “Here, it is not about soccer or boxing, where women are by now reasonably accepted. It is about sports, where men can still be ‘real guys’: water polo, ice hockey and rugby” (Kirchner). She photographs the women after a game. They are still sweaty, or as with the water polo athletes, still wet. The images recall Dijkstra’s bullfighter series for which she photographed young men still covered in blood, sweat, and dirt after a bullfight

Greta Pratt’s work also relates to mine. Pratt is an American professor of photography at Old Dominion University. She is interested in American identity, history, and myth. Pratt’s monograph titled *The Wavers* features employees of Liberty Tax Service doing their job. Employees are paid to dress up like the Statue of Liberty by standing on street corners to entice drivers to use the tax service to file their taxes. From her statement:

I was first drawn to the wavers, as everyone is, by the unexpected sight of someone

dancing on an urban street corner dressed as the Statue of Liberty. In photographing and talking with them I became interested in them as individuals and curious about their individual stories. ... To create these portraits I ask them to adopt a pose that portrays them as a person and not as an employee and I photographed them in the location they were working. I ask them to show me who they are as an individual and I titled the images with their names to signify that the image is a portrait of a person. (Pratt)

Pratt is interested in the use of an American symbol to sell a service, but as she photographs her subjects she becomes interested in them. Pratt works in deadpan but permits the images to convey a narrative element, which the viewer uses to form his or her opinion of the people in the photographs. Pratt's work relates more to my American identity work than to my perception photographs, but she remains a contemporary reference for me. Her viewer is expected to reflect on his perception of the wavers and the use of an American icon to sell a service (Figure 12).



Figure 12 Pratt Wavers

Richard Renaldi is an American photographer whose work comments on human relationships and identity. His most recent work *Touching Strangers* is a series of portraits (made with an 8 x 10 view camera) shot across the United States. Renaldi asks strangers to embrace intimately for portraits (Figure 13). In an interview with Jonathan Blaustein on aphotoeditor.com, Richard Renaldi talks about his practice:

JB: I have a 7 year old. It was his birthday yesterday. When I told him I was going to interview you, he said I should ask you why the people had to be touching?

RR: What's your son's name?

JB: Theo.

RR: Theo? I like that name. Well, they had to touch because the concept was about connecting two strangers in a photograph. I'd been doing single portraits for many years, and I was shooting "See America By Bus," about the people traveling across the country on Greyhound buses. That was the first experience where I was making large format work. Consensual portraits of two people that didn't know each other, in the same space. It added this new layer of complexity and challenge to making a portrait. I had to get the permission and approval of two different sets of people to be in a picture together. And I really liked that, and thought there was something really rich there. I was interested in the space between people, like in the city. You see a group of people, clustered together, and in that moment and space in time, they're connected. Standing at a light, waiting to cross the street. Everyone looks like they're together, because they're in a group. But they're not. They don't know each other. I wanted to link them. Also, there was this desire to catalog, in the way August Sander catalogued people. I had this impulse to do that, but to mix and match. To take different types of people and put them together. As the project progressed, I became as interested in people who looked like they belonged together. Similar types. But I think the reason why they had to touch, to answer Theo's question, is that I was really curious what the body language would look like. As I write in the essay, what would the physical vocabulary look like, when someone asks two strangers to do that. ... I realized I needed to be more of a director, and construct the points of contact. What I now have come to see is sometimes, I'm transferring what I would want to do one of the subjects. By having the other subject do it. There's this one

image of a woman who's going through chemotherapy, and she looks sick. You can tell. She has these ortho shoes on.

JB: In Hawaii?

RR: Yeah, it's in Oahu. I paired her with this other woman, who was on her honeymoon, and I had her caress her on the cheek. I think it was the second exposure I made. I know that's how I felt. I felt bad, and I would have wanted to do that. There is this emotional transference that I see in these pictures, from where I stand now.

There's another with a sexy black guy and black girl, in Venice Beach. I really wanted to touch the guy. He was like a body-builder working out at the pit in Venice Beach. You know?

JB: Sure.

RR: I wanted to be really intimate. So what she did was what I wanted to do. I find that conversation interesting, because it's newer for me. It's come up lately, discussing the work at talks. I've started to see my own projections. What I would wish for, were I to have that freedom to touch someone. (Blaustein and Renaldi)

Renaldi extends the definition of deadpan photography. What started as a body of work with negligible photographer influence has evolved into a series that would not be compelling if not for the influence of the photographer. The artist combines the directorial mode with the deadpan aesthetic to create a new way of photographing his subjects. The viewer is still asked to question his or her perception of the people in the image, but now to focus more on the encounter staged by Renaldi. For the brief moments that these people interact with the camera, they are forming a bond. The viewer wonders what formed that bond and who the people are. Did they ever speak

to each other again? Did they form a friendship from this experience? Did they think about what they were doing when they agreed to be photographed?



Figure 13 Renaldi Touching Strangers

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

I consider myself a deadpan photographer, and I am interested in my viewer's perceptions in my portraiture. My work meets all the conditions artists have used to define the deadpan aesthetic. As I grow as an artist I see my practice becoming more about my viewer's interaction with my subjects, and about the documentation of that interaction.

During my MFA experience, my artistic practice transformed from a relationship with my sitter into a relationship with my viewer. Now, when I make a body of work, the viewer responds to that work, and I adapt my process to that response. I have continually refined my artistic questions to better control my viewer's response. The MFA program allowed me to discover the questions that motivate me to keep making photographs. When I started, the question was, "What makes me an artist?" That question then became "What makes me American?" It changed again to, "Who defines what is American?" and then to "How do people perceive each other in photographs?" The question is always changing because as I make photographs I learn from them and then ask a new question. Before I started the MFA program I worked as a commercial photographer. My undergraduate degree came from a school focused on training photographers to sell their services, not to create artwork or think of themselves as artists. The second question "What makes me American?" came during my first semester, when I began to reflect on the content of my photographs. I realized that all of my work had an Americana theme. I started questioning American identity, which led to the third question, "Who defines what is American?" While trying to answer this question I made confrontation-based artwork. This led me to realize that I was actually most interested in perception, but was using American identity to investigate it. When I discovered the significance of perception in

my previous work, my question changed to “How do people perceive each other in photographs?” This led to the portrait series that directly confronts the viewer’s understanding of perception. This understanding of perception comes from limiting my influence over the photographs so that the viewer can project his own feelings into the work. I realize that I may never be able to limit my influence entirely. My intent is to keep creating work observing the viewer to control the photographer, sitter, and viewer relationship. The sitter presents himself or herself for the camera. The camera captures that presentation. The viewer interprets that presentation and forms their perception based on their experience. The viewer has the most control in this relationship because they are the last active participants. I am excited to continue to explore this relationship.

APPENDIX: COPYRIGHT PERMISSION LETTERS



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greta pratt <gretapratt@gmail.com>

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Hi Dominic yes that is fine as long as you credit me. Best of luck!

Greta

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ddipaolo

Tue 3/10/2015 11:51 AM

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To: ☐ info@gretapratt.com;

Hello Ms. Pratt,

My name is Dominic DiPaolo, and I am an MFA candidate at The University of Central Florida. I've recently started writing my thesis paper, and list your work in my writing. In order to meet university standards I need your permission to publish your images in my paper digitally and physically in the university library collection. This is for purely academic use, and will not be used commercially in any way.

In my paper I've included this image:

http://www.gretapratt.com/wp-content/gallery/the-wavers/pratt_wavers_07.jpg

Please let me know if you have any questions about the process, or would like to discuss these permissions any further.

Dominic DiPaolo

Dear Dominic,

Richard's permission is granted.

Regards,

Douglas Summers
Studio Manager

On Mar 10, 2015, at 10:56 PM, ddipaolo <ddipaolo@knights.ucf.edu> wrote:

Hello Mr. Renaldi,

My name is Dominic DiPaolo, and I am an MFA candidate at The University of Central Florida. I've recently started writing my thesis paper, and list your work in my writing. In order to meet university standards I need your permission to publish your images in my paper digitally and physically in the university library collection. This is for purely academic use, and will not be used commercially in any way.

In my paper I've included this image:

http://benrubigallery.com/sites/default/files/styles/threshold-992/public/Renaldi_Richard_M-77_Bruce_Naomi2011NY.jpg?itok=xFWGZO1g

Please let me know if you have any questions about the process, or would like to discuss these permissions any further.

Thank you,
Dominic DiPaolo

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