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Self Portraits

Erin Leland

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Self Portraits
College Scholars Final Project

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December 4, 2007

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I began to photograph myself because I had not seen myself. Yet, the photographs are closed to me now. The pictures do not tell me who I am; I cannot reenter the photographs. I am at times either open to taking my own picture, resentful of the camera, or disengaged from the camera and engaged only with myself. I make the work in all of the phases, attempting to become more visible, though in the multiplicity of photographs, I may become less so. This project has evolved in relationship to my fear of narcissism, and at the same time, my impulse to self-look.

My earlier work avoided the audience through a metaphor for seeing, paradoxically obscuring my visibility to others. I guarded my self-exposure by exposing the viewer. I once dramatized a flopping goldfish, writhing in and out of an oversized suit. I could hear response from the audience during the performance, forming my double perspective of onlooker and performer inside the costume. I had displaced my self-looking onto the audience by designating those watching as voyeurs. If people did not want to watch, there was no choice, because if they turned away, I would be behind them. Purposively, the audience was in as awkward a position as I. I intercepted opinions of me, made not behind my back, but because I was present. My performance was a circuitous confrontation, hinging on my presence in the costume yet dependent on my absence from direct opposition.

I like to spy, to spy on myself or turn other people into spies.

I like to put myself in situations with a camera where the lens becomes the intermediary between the viewer and my own performance. This performance is often a repetitive, private one, or an invasion of someone else's privacy. My first attempt at photographing myself began by hiding a camera in my clothes and letting it go off intermittently to maintain a private space, regardless of the public situation in which I was also. It was a counter reaction to my voyeurism, which had previously meant sneaking up on someone. It is a rush when I am caught looking in on another person. I feel as vulnerable as the person I am eyeing with my camera. I instead tried to expose myself through the invasion of my privacy. Without looking directly, but by triggering the camera through my inadvertent movement, the camera was a faulty extension of me.

I need confrontation with another person, or a confrontation between my piece and the viewer, the audience wondering whether or not to look. Photography is a performance that questions what is allowably seen and what cannot be so. In our culture, much draws our attention, forcing us to look. Conversely, commercial culture goes through a process of shielding and propaganda by marketing flawlessness, and in opposition, non-white identity as threatening, or a celebrity as seamless beside the more scattered consumer. Media guides looking to how, when and what to see. I am self-conscious of watching someone in public, or candidly photographing a stranger. In public, our consensual privacy insulates us. The action of taking a photograph is a way to negotiate the private and public, and to question this constructed line as arbitrary.

In the recent project, I began to photograph myself alone in anticipation of the public space. I left the voyeurism that I had orchestrated in public for my voyeurism

extended onto the camera in privacy. The camera is a surrogate for me. The camera is also a surrogate for another person. It is a catalyst for my relationship with the viewer and an intermediary between us. The camera assumes a stranger's view in the absence of a photographer, the viewer assuming the camera's view when in front of my photograph. I assume the camera's view when I am in front of the lens, an estranged self-viewing that is in essence a stranger's view.

I took pictures in my bathroom daily, a routine that was a part of my life for six months. I imbedded the camera in the bathroom and other rooms in my apartment, shooting by redundancy rather than inspiration. The frequency and intensity of grooming determined the length of intervals during which I photographed. I often put my camera into the medicine cabinet and treated it as a mirror, as invisible. I also photographed my mirror reflection. Two or more selves appear in the picture, my face reflected and my back to the lens, the viewer distanced from my self-dialogue. When the camera acts as the passive mirror and there is only one self pictured, the photograph remains blind, or only open, to me, another narcissus. To begin, I candidly stared into the camera, often without preparation, but during the ritual preparation of making up to be seen in public. I took pictures at times I wanted to be seen and at times I did not. I ignored the camera, sensed it opposed to me or on my side. I was open to the blank lens that is a blind object and also the knowing lens onto which I projected my sight, which might see as I would. The camera is a presence that I imagine to be other, but that embodies my internalizations as its mechanism. The wounds and pulled hair are a register of internal pressures that I point to as other and then re-internalize as imagined judgment. I disguised my desire to

be photographed with the camera's assumed desire to look. The camera is another self that I varyingly recognize. It is a voyeur, a doubling of me in order that I can see.

The camera was vulnerable to me, then I to it, varying with my defense against visibility. The shooting and my engagement with the camera depended upon my removal from the eye of the lens as well as defiant elation in the face of the camera while smoothing my skin and removing facial hair. More than a documentation of a person, the camera marks a pattern of resistance. The pictures at first looked mundane and repetitive, reflective of the bathroom itself. Others saw them as a called alarm.

The photographs are evidence of my isolation in euphoric release from undoing the wounds during the attempt to smooth the roughness of a sore. I photographed the process of covering the marks with makeup, in my attempt to hide the marks as the evidence of released stress through pain. The process was cyclical: I marked myself with a visual stigma, then masked over the mark, then picked off the makeup to re-reveal the wound. The marks are a public manifestation of the private. Often, the photographs are marked by the wounds, an index to them. Shame is characterized by hiding and an at times hidden emotion. By revealing shame, I hoped to then erase it through a cathartic sacrifice to the camera. I photographed the self-sacrificial action in order to visualize the hiding of the hidden.

I rewrote this true story to accompany the photographs, a story told to me but of which I have no memory:

My father warned me against touching the hot iron which he had left heating on the table. After he left the room, I placed the back of my hand against the iron to feel the burn he had told about and singed my skin. I was afraid. With shame, I went to him and showed him my wound. I did not cry. My fear shone. I was alone, hiding my shame, yet unable to hide it. I wanted to cover the wound but also desired to admit pain. My burn was evident, but I willed its disguise to make my heroism plain. A translucent bravery would expose me, without need to expose myself by brandishing the burn. Withholding self-exposure would release me from self-assertion. I was aggressively reticent so to seem passive. I wanted to be seen and to not be. The wound was a mark of defiance, yet my branding freed me from reproach. My father did not punish me. Despite his alarm, he nursed the scar until it disappeared.

We ritualized the coating of the scar with ointment and daily smoothed the trace of the burn, erasing the mark, a routine for which I was grateful but by which I was inspired to undo the healing in order to preserve the memory of my action.

The story was a forgotten model that I metaphorically and psychologically rewrote in imitation of myself. “Sexuality is to some degree always closeted, especially to the one who would express it through acts of self-disclosure” (Butler 25). The photographs would tell the impossibility of seeing the self through the camera. I am operating under restriction, within the sexual limitations of my appearance and attractiveness to others. I also act on the urge to undo my appearance as an uninhibited removal from those limitations and expectations. The performance, or culture, has proceeded the performer. The act of femininity is an illusion of completeness, as any character is illusion of a whole. The camera described the illusion of wholesomeness by revealing me repentant and inhibited, then restored the myth as an illusion by photographing me conflicted but brazen. In “Imitation and Gender Subordination,” Judith Butler writes that the performer is a person with an illusion of an inner self, or singular self. Butler calls the unaware state one of psychic excess, “which erupts within the intervals of those repeated gestures and acts that construct...apparent uniformity” (24). She argues these excesses and “risks” appear in every repetitive act, in order to overturn the constructed identity (28). I am picturing pain and my disguise of pain within the act of making myself over. I simultaneously confessed shame of the wounds and triumphed nothing to hide to the camera as my witness of whom I was weary.

These poles and descriptions, sometimes dichotomies, are operative simultaneously in my photographs and/or in me:

the beautiful/ the hair-raising

unconscious/ conscious

passive/ aggressive

commiserate/ demonizing

masochist/ sadist

stigmatic/ recluse

voyeurism/ narcissism/ exhibitionism/ shyness

subject/ object // maker/ character

art/ life

cathartic/ feedback loop

momentous/ continuous

cultural/ natural

disciplinarian/ delinquent

inhibited/ uninhibited

private/ public

confrontation/ reticence

repentant/ scapegoat

singular/ plural

The above pairings at times merge together or become multiple in a rearrangement of the dichotomies. In my editing process, I grouped photographs by words in order to eliminate redundant images and interchange plural images of the same keyword. In the final layout of the exhibition I arranged the photographs in groupings aligned by a grid. All of the pictures were 20 x 30 inches and mounted on foam core. The photographs had mutual importance, hung beside or above and below one another. I matched pictures that comprised a polarized dichotomy and those that muddled one another by coupling multiple keywords.

The first photograph is golden lit but pictures despondency, as if hallucinated by its counterpart from another time, an image of me orgiastic and off center. The two images are an entrance to the exhibit, the poles of the range of imagery to be seen. On the next wall, I hung three photographs in a line that showed my hand to my face and my eyes half lidded. The static sequence might uncover the aggressive undertone. Though, repetition may also screen out visibility by turning a single image of trauma into pattern. In another photograph, I am ready to be seen, yet others say that I do not look like me, nor do I recognize myself. In a second picture above, I am a private self with lopsided, wet hair and no makeup. I am fully recognizable to myself and to others. The camera extracts from me that which I am alienated from, and that which I have never seen of myself but which is familiar, even to relative strangers. The camera, the voyeur of me, externalizes yet a third person, the working self. Out of the corner of my eye, I can enact the repressed, at times without later recognition of such in a photograph. I need another to recognize my blind spots, the other as camera, or the other as a viewer with a resultant self-exposure.

Works Cited

Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Subordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss, (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 13-31







Self portraits

by Erin Leland

Fluorescent Gallery
627 N Central St

October 26, 2007
6-10 PM

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