

LOOK AT ME

Self-Portrait Photography After Cindy Sherman

Jennifer Dalton

Nikki S. Lee, Anthony Goicolea, and David Henry Brown, Jr.

Any photographer working with self-portraiture today is necessarily working in the long shadow cast by Cindy Sherman. A rash of intelligent and enthusiastic responses to the challenge of her formidable precedent has recently appeared, generated by young artists clearly working with one eye on their distinguished precursor and the other—determined—in their lenses. Three strong voices emerge as most prominent among the young artists turning the camera on themselves and mining the fertile land so presciently staked out by Sherman, each grappling with his or her own face, identity, and vanity. These are the self-camouflage artist Nikki S. Lee, adolescence-obsessed Anthony Goicolea, and celebrity hound David Henry Brown, Jr.

Rather than asserting her individuality, identity, and physical presence, Nikki S. Lee's self-portraiture strives to make herself effectively invisible. For her photographs, Lee approaches various social groups, befriends them, and enlists their cooperation and collaboration in physically transforming herself into a member of each. In series of photographs with titles such as "The Yuppie Project," "The Young Japanese Project," "The Drag Queen Project," and "The Seniors Project," the Korean-American Lee visually blends into divergent subcultures, pointing up the constructed nature of identity to amusing, as well as sober, effect.

In blown-up, snapshot-style photographs, Lee can be spotted striking a pose with a group of swing dancers, in a pub at happy hour as a yuppie stockbroker, or cuddling with a tattooed young woman at a lesbian club. Though the immediate appeal of Lee's work is the one-liner of spotting Lee and decoding her masquerade (you could call it the "Where's Waldo?" effect), the artist brings a fresh and energetic spirit to what is often a deadly serious debate over assimilation and "passing." Those terms usually describe the process by which immigrants and members of other marginalized groups strive to enter mainstream culture, but Lee assimilates into both mainstream and marginal cultures with zeal and success, highlighting both the intricate visual markings and broader social functions of our cultural boundaries.



Nikki S. Lee, *The Drag Queen (5)*, 1997. Fujiflex print, 28-1/4" x 21-1/4". Photo: Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.

Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project (4)*, 1998. Fujiflex print, 21-1/4" x 28-1/4". Photo: Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.



The fact that a young Korean-American artist can be equally convincing as a Japanese hipster, yuppie stockbroker, Hispanic teenager, or Ohio trailer-park-dweller suggests that social identity has at least as much to do with conscious choices about clothing and hairstyle as with facial features and skin color. Lee has an uncanny ability to affect a pose with both her face and body: her Asian features are clearly visible in a group of whiter-than-white Ohio beer drinkers or Hispanic teenagers, but her posture and the look on her face say she belongs there, and we buy it. Her work argues that even the subcultures one is apparently born into, such as ethnic groups, are more socially fluid and self-subscribing than conventionally believed. Part of the strength of Lee's work derives from its empathetic energy; one gets the sense from her photographs that she likes meeting people through the project and briefly, but sincerely, identifying with them, and that they enjoy playing their part in her work. The performative aspect of her work requires her to look beyond the surface markings that define us to one another and keep us separated—while simultaneously riffing on those very markings.

Lee's photographs are obviously snapshots, complete with time/date stamp. Though enlarged to "art size," they retain the attendant strengths (a candid, documentary feel) and weaknesses (occasionally flat, banal compositions) that snapshots connote. The people in the photos are usually smiling and posing for the camera, apparently comfortable in their personal and social roles as, for instance, a young urban professional shooting the breeze at happy hour and a "yuppie." Jerry Saltz wrote in the *Village Voice* that Lee "splices the dressing-up of Cindy Sherman with the snapshottness of Nan Goldin" and the shoe fits: specifically, Lee combines the shape-and-identity-shifting of Sherman with the intense immediacy and collaboration/exploitation dynamic of Goldin. But unlike both, Lee is a conceptualist more than a photographer; she doesn't snap her own photographs and it doesn't seem to matter very much who does; the photographs are documentations of performances—proof that something happened.

One thing I have yet to see from Lee is an attempt at passing as a child or a boy. If she were to do so, she would come close to Anthony Goicolea's oeuvre. In his photographs, the now twenty-nine-year-old Goicolea becomes a convincing adolescent with the simple tools of costuming, makeup, and wigs, and uses more sophisticated computer tools to pull off the creation of scenes containing multiple Goicoleas, as many as twelve, interacting with each other. Vanity is the backbone of all art; at its essence, all art says, look at my view of the world, it is better, more accurate, more beautiful, than yours. What message, then, can we infer from an artist who creates a microcosm populated entirely by his extraordinarily cute self? This question becomes even more interesting when self-obsession is paired with Goicolea's other favorite theme, adolescent sexuality. In Goicolea's photographs, kids discover themselves in ways that range from innocent to mildly horrifying. In "Pisser," a boy pees on his brother in the bathtub; in "Bedwetters," two boys lie sleeping on a giant bed, one drooling excessively, the other wetting himself in a more stereotypical fashion. In "Premature," a group of boys masturbate into large Mason jars in a classroom. Goicolea has confessed that Charles Ray's "Oh! Charley, Charley,

Charley,” a sculpture of several replicas of the artist engaged in an orgy with each other, was a major inspiration, but in all of these photographs Goicolea refrains from actually showing any penises. Even the boy in the bathtub wears underwear, which only adds to the absurdity of the scene.

As the titles of the pieces indicate, Goicolea’s humor is occasionally no more mature than that of the fifth graders he portrays. But the photographs are powerful, beautiful, and compellingly cinematic. He is a stylish master of *mise-en-scène*; his photographs knowingly mimic and perpetuate the current fetish within advertising, fashion, and music for updated 70s style, saturated colors, ambiguous sexual situations, and absurd juxtapositions. Goicolea is compelled by awkwardness, discomfort, and uncomfortable situations. His alter-egos are usually found in precarious places: hanging on to something for dear life, stuffing bread in their mouths like starving orphans, playing a desperate tug-of-war with a small dog, being peed on or spit on, participating in a circle jerk, or waiting in a long line to look down a girl’s underwear. But Goicolea’s point of view—and by extension, the viewer’s—is filled with ambiguity: in every scene he plays both tormenter and victim, first in line and last in line, pee-er and pee-ee, performer and voyeur, boy and girl.

“Whet” is one of Goicolea’s finest moments of cinematic scope and narrative ambiguity. A boy sits at the side of a swimming pool, an obviously fake suntanned bra-strap visible on his bare back. In front of him two other boys stand in the shallow end of the pool, fully clothed, absorbed in touching tongues. The boy sitting on the edge, in the foreground, is turned around, engaging the camera tentatively. All three boys, of course, have the same face—Goicolea’s. The question of identification is complicated and sophisticated: the foregrounded boy is clearly left out; the longing on his face is surprisingly heartbreaking. He looks back at us tragically, but who are we but voyeurs of the second degree? Like Chris Verene, who shoots small-time pornographers on the job and thus becomes a pornographer once-removed, Goicolea sets up a cycle of mediated desire as never-ending as a hall of mirrors.

The creepy/innocent dialectic of childhood has been mined furiously in recent years, notably in photographs of girl-chroniclers like Anna Gaskell and Justine Kurland, the baby doll fashions of Courtney Love and other post-punk divas, and the sexed-up virginity of Britney Spears and her imitators. There is an immediate discomfort in the juxtaposition of childhood and sexuality that is an easy attention-getter. But all these examples are women dealing with imagery of girls. The adolescent sexuality of females has been much more accessible territory than that of males, perhaps because the innocence, naiveté, frailty, (and by extension, the potential corruptibility) of girls is such an immensely popular theme in our culture, and when grown-up women such as Kate Moss or Britney Spears flaunt these traits, they are rewarded handsomely.



Nikki S. Lee, *The Ohio Project (39)*, 1999. Fujiflex print, 28-1/4" x 21-1/4".
Photo: Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects.



Anthony Goicolea. *Bedwetters*, 2000. C-print, 55" x 40".
Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Rare Gallery.

Goicolea's work does much more than capitalize on his own attractiveness and the compelling creepiness of pedophilia, but it does not exactly rise above it. Though there is more subversion in the fact that he is a man making sexually-infused images of himself as a boy than there is in women making similar images of girls, there is the additional complication that Goicolea is gay, and so is a sizable portion of his audience—a culture that prizes boyishness in men as much as straight culture esteems girlishness in women. But even in exploitation Goicolea plays multiple roles: in a conceptual self-suck, he exploits his own body as a possible turn-on to others, while quite clearly getting off on his own images as well.

Like Lee and Goicolea, David Henry Brown, Jr., explores identity, but he's most interested in identity as it pertains to celebrity and class. In "Celebrity Portraits," Brown's tightest series, each photograph features the artist with celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, Tony Bennett, or James Brown. But most often it is Donald Trump who is hanging with Brown all over town, as if he'd known him all his life. In the "Dave and Donald Trump" photos, a clean-scrubbed Brown wears a generic suit and a great big smile for the paparazzi, and Trump is a perfectly genial, slightly preoccupied father-figure type. These days, it is important to note that these are undoctored snapshots. Brown's methods for crashing celebrity parties vary; most often he assumes the name of a particular socialite, someone whose family name will gain Brown entry, but whom few people know by sight. Brown, with a camera-wielding friend, infiltrates the scene, finds out where the biggest celebrities are, and asks them to pose for a photo. Virtually all of them oblige.

The practice of having your picture taken with someone is a staple of celebrity-worship; even in these Photoshop times, such a snapshot still serves as proof of your access. Not unlike a photo of yourself in front of the Eiffel Tower, it proves you were *there*. It is a souvenir, a document of a transitive event or a performance, something to take with you from the experience of being proximate to celebrity fairy dust. Brown believes "celebrity fanaticism is one of the glues that holds this country together socially," and he has a considerable background in performance and spectacle creation designed to create this glue. A 1999 project, "Carpet Rollers," features him and collaborator Dominic McGill lugging around a red carpet and rolling it out in front of various buildings to create a kind of street theatre using bystanders as unwitting players. When they rolled out the carpet at fancy hotels around midtown Manhattan, dozens of passers-by came to a stop and waited around for hours to catch a glimpse of a celebrity—any celebrity—without a clue as to who was expected. Other people actually hired Brown and McGill to roll out the carpet for them at family functions so they could feel—momentarily—special.

Unlike Nikki S. Lee, it is crucial to Brown that his public collaborators not be aware that he is creating art. The moment someone mentions he or she is an artist, people begin to act self-consciously, he feels, and this knowledge in his subjects would ruin his staging, the unselfconscious selfconsciousness that marks his subjects as victims of consumerism and media oversaturation. In theory, Brown is interested in capturing the way ordinary people look at the world at large, not the way they look

at art—but in practice this seems to mean he becomes a catalyst for other people outside the art world to act as unsophisticated as possible. Lee's subjects, on the other hand, appear to be willing collaborators, if not on an equal level with the artist, at least possessing an understanding of what's really going on.

Brown's work takes an active stance against an ephemeral yet omnipresent enemy: "mainstream" American culture. I use the word in quotation marks, because the generality and condescension implicit in the word render its accuracy and usefulness as a concept suspect—yet the bugaboo of the "mainstream" is clearly the object in Brown's viewfinder. The viewer's first clue to Brown's bias is his work's presentation. He sometimes mounts his photographs in slick corporate-style gold-and-black frames on staggered black velvet shelves or even in gaudy stars reminiscent of those in the sidewalk of Hollywood Boulevard. Issues of taste, style, and display are crucially important to Brown: he takes pains not to create something that has too many of the trappings of "art"; to that end he avoids subtlety like the plague.

Brown's class and culture biases are also evident in his series of self-portrait photographs taken in local photo studios. To make these photographs, Brown dresses up as one of a number of variations on the theme of "dork" or "nerd" and goes to the kind of photo studios that can be found in shopping malls or in the back of local department stores. Brown allows the studio photographers to pose and style him and to choose suitable backdrops, all based on assumptions they make about his personality. The photographers' assumptions are aided by Brown's various disguises, each apparently intended to evoke an unflattering slice of the "mainstream" culture. His costumes and accoutrements include sleazy shiny suits, graduated-lens sunglasses, metallic helium "get well soon" balloons, and a police uniform.

In all three series of works—"Carpet Rollers," the celebrity portraits, and the self-portraits—Brown seeks to explore the ways by which those without social power seek to represent themselves within a culture whose very images are commodities. This is a substantial, worthwhile project. But "Carpet Rollers" and the self-portraits are handicapped to a degree by a simplistic, polarized model of contemporary culture: intellectuals vs. the uneducated, urban vs. suburban, good taste vs. bad taste; though Brown might play at slumming, it is obvious where he believes himself to belong. Though these works might be seen as momentarily giving a voice to the image-creation-challenged, they ultimately force his unwitting players into the role of artistic foils or unsophisticated rubes at least as much as our daytime talk shows do. Classism is one of the last prejudices still allowed in liberal circles, and it gets quite a bit of play in the art world, usually under the truly offensive rubric of "white-trash" bashing.

Brown's work is too substantial to be dismissed with simply a chuckle and a pat on our own backs, however. Despite the occasional attitude, it cuts a brave slice through murky, complicated issues of class, social self-image, access, and cultural representation. The celebrity portraits go the farthest, forcing Brown to implicate himself in the celebrity-worship game, to act publicly as a tasteless celebrity hound, and, most



David Henry Brown.
*Shopping Mall
Portrait—Graduation
Special*, 1998. C-print,
8" x 10". Photo:
Courtesy of the artist.

David Henry Brown.
*Snapshot with Donald
Trump at Tourneau
Time Machine Auction
March 1999*, 1999.
C-print, 8" x 10".
Photo: Courtesy of
the artist.



crucially, to get his own hands dirty. The series also benefits from the substantial irony that he is using the name of a very rich and powerful person in order to become a celebrity-chasing loser. And, not least, the works just look great: it is immensely satisfying to see Brown's earnest visage repeated over and over, surrounded by the flash-illuminated perfect skin, fluorescent teeth, expensive clothes, and wary eyes of that strange species we pay ridiculous sums to entertain us. Thanks to the subtle, multiple relationships within and among the celebrity portraits, they constitute Brown's most ambiguous and profound body of work thus far.

These artists are not primarily photographers, but rather conceptualists who use photography to illustrate their ideas about social identity. Lee and Brown don't even snap their own photographs, and Goicolea's computer, rather than his lens, is where his images are largely composed. In this they diverge from Sherman, who is a careful and skillful photographer and who is often given much of the credit for raising the status (and selling price) of contemporary photography nearly to that of painting and sculpture. Most prominent among the many contributions Sherman brought to photography is the element of performance: each of her photographs documents an elaborate ritual of research, costuming, makeup, and posing. Performance comes so naturally to Lee, Goicolea, and Brown, they almost seem to take it for granted. But for Sherman, performance is an individual endeavor; her rituals take place for an audience consisting entirely of herself; no one (other than her assistants, of course) sees Sherman "performing" for the camera, and she virtually always appears solo. This is not true in the case of these three photographers, whose work is oriented outwards, toward society. Rather than individual identity and psychology, their work engages ideas about class identity, cultural groups, and social interaction. The meanings behind their work depend on the cooperation of other people and the context of other faces in their photographs, even if, in Goicolea's case, all the other people have the same face.

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