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Of reality: a society of selves

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OF REALITY: A SOCIETY OF SELVES

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ABSTRACT

*Of Reality: A Society of Selves* is a series of photographs that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. Through digital image manipulation, costumed, multiplicitous self-portraits merge with handcrafted miniature environments. With the goal of illustrating the complexity of existing within society, the resulting images examine the psychological process of perception as it relates to social interaction and identity.
INTRODUCTION

*Of Reality: A Society of Selves* is about existing as an individual within a world of individuals. Our close proximity to each other in daily activities ensures that we witness experiences together. Our experiences are shared, but we interpret them differently. We internalize observations and emotions through a process called perception, which involves not only sensory input from real-time experience, but also past knowledge (Gregory, 1997). The more we observe and learn about the world, the richer our future perceptions will be. Activated by this belief, the photographs discussed here are borne out of an insatiable curiosity about the workings of the world and a need for social knowledge. Driving this investigation is a keen appreciation for the awkwardness of being human – the myriad emotions we feel, the strength of the bonds we form, and the disconnectedness that occasionally surfaces. Through constructed representations of identity and environment, this series considers the forces involved in defining ourselves, relating to others, and perceiving the world.

These photographs investigate cognitive and social processes of perception by pairing miniature environments with costumed self-portraits. The combination of these illusory elements results in photographic images that contradict the prevalent understanding that a photograph is a document of truth. For decades, photographers have manipulated photographic images to meet their own artistic needs. Never has technique had such profound implications for the integrity of a medium as the proliferation of digital image manipulation. Consequently, the photograph is no longer regarded without the shadow of doubt. Deceptive imagery has become so pervasive that the public relies on websites, such as Snopes.com to separate truth from visual lies. Despite the trend of growing suspicion, there remains a deep-seated desire to believe
the images we see. The photographs in this series exploit the medium’s remaining semblance of truth even as they employ the artifice responsible for compromising photography’s once trusted status in society.
INFLUENCES

The concepts and methods involved in the creation of the series, *Of Reality: A Society of Selves*, are a synthesis of influences from many sources across various disciplines of art. The most prominent influences are the work of Edward Hopper, the films of Wong Kar-Wai, and the photographs of Lori Nix and Cindy Sherman.

An appreciation for the mundane permeates the work of both Hopper and Wong. Our daily activities and the moments “in-between” constitute a significant portion of our lives, although they are often overlooked as models for artistic expression. These moments contain minimal action, but they are rich in information, providing context and revealing how we really live. Both Hopper and Wong recreate these subtle moments in their work; therefore, they are of particular interest to me as I seek inspiration.

Hopper’s *Nighthawks*, 1942 [Fig. 1] is especially relevant to the creation of a “diner” for this series. Most intriguing is his placement of the figures – stranding one in isolation while three others converse at the end of the bar. This social dynamic resonates with recollections of my own experience. For example, a similar arrangement is apparent in my photograph, *Cultivating Dissociation* [Fig. 2].

![Figure 1: Edward Hopper, Nighthawks, 1942.](image-url)
In his films, Wong Kar-Wai applies slow motion and extended scenes of anti-climactic moments to dramatic effect. One such scene from the 2004 film *2046* depicts the main character perched, half-dressed at bedside, eating alone. The scene lingers for a long moment, encouraging the viewer to contemplate the character’s circumstances and reflect on his or her own past experiences. That Wong gives such significance to these quiet moments motivates me to honor similar instances in my own work.

As I have explored ways to communicate ideas about perception and representation, the photographs of Lori Nix have continued to be a source of inspiration and influence. In her series *Accidentally Kansas* [Fig. 3], Nix depicts an array of accidents and natural disasters by building dioramas and photographing them. The appeal of her photographs lies in the meticulous, yet subtle, stylized fabrication, with some constructed elements appearing more realistic than others. Through Nix’s work, I recognize the value in the tension between wanting to believe the scene is real and knowing that it is not. This tension is the mechanism through which my work addresses the complexity of perception.
The most noticeable influence on my work is that of the seminal self-disguising artist, Cindy Sherman. From 1977 to 1980, Sherman photographed herself in costumes, producing the series, *Untitled Film Stills* [Fig. 4]. Her work, calling attention to stereotypical portrayals of women in films, has continued to inspire artists for the past three decades. Throughout her career, she has created subsequent series in which she dresses herself as various types of characters. Sherman’s work attends almost exclusively to women’s issues, as in *Untitled Film Stills* and *Centerfolds*, 1981 [Fig. 5]. Her recent work *Rich Women*, 2008 [Fig. 6] implies a socio-economic critique of women in high society. Like Sherman, I don costumes with the intent to assume alternate identities, but my conceptual intentions differ from the issues raised by her work. My work is more concerned with reflecting on social perception and the dynamics of identity as they affect both men and women.
Figure 4: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled No. 84*, 1978.

Figure 5: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled No. 93*, 1981.

Figure 6: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled from the series Rich Women*, 2008.
THE MULTIPLICITOUS SELF AND ROLE-PLAY

The photographs in this series explore the power of outward appearance and its effect on perception. In order to execute my ideas, I construct sets in which various social interactions take place. Within that framework, I portray all facets of the interactions by altering my likeness with wigs, makeup, facial hair, clothing, and chest binders. The scenarios are inspired by my own notions of social relationships, rather than by published empirical studies. These scenes are not autobiographical; they are not vignettes of my life. However, the scenarios are generated by information gathered from internalized observations. They are a reflection of my views of how we relate to each other. They are, in effect, my own portraits of society. Playing all of the roles myself, rather than relying on other actors and models, maintains the singularity of vision necessary to address the concepts of individual perception, multiplicity, and self-created identity.

People often build, stretch, and shift their identities based on notions of who they think they are, who they want to be, or who they think they should be. By mapping stereotypes onto myself, I demonstrate that it is possible to achieve the illusion of identity by combining any number of distinctive physical traits. In addition to manipulating my physical appearance through costumes and makeup, I also use gesture and expression to represent both male and female characters.

Society encompasses both masculine and feminine identities. The decision to portray both genders was a natural one. To leave one gender out of this work would not accurately depict my impression of society, nor would it allow me to articulate as broad of a range of interactions. Stereotypes about masculine and feminine roles are pervasive in society, and therefore, possess substantial symbolic potential. The intention is not to uphold nor upset stereotypes, but rather to use them to communicate ideas about social roles and identities. For
example, in *Green Line #4* [Fig. 7], there are two masculine figures. One is seated, touching his forehead and one is standing, holding flowers. The juxtaposition of these dissimilar gestures and emotions is the focus of this photograph. With flowers held upright and close to his chest, the standing figure communicates a feeling of anticipation, excitement, and even nervousness. Viewers are encouraged to imagine that he is en route to some manner of initial encounter – perhaps a first date. Contrarily, depicting a female figure in transit with flowers may elicit an ambiguous or altogether opposite interpretation. In this case, understanding and illustrating customary social behaviors, such as bringing flowers to a first date, is instrumental in creating the appropriate disparity between the two figures in the scene.

![Green Line #4, 2011.](image)

The placement of the figures in *Sweet Evening Nothings* [Fig. 8] reveals the impact that stereotypical views of gender roles have had on my perception of interpersonal dynamics. The female figure stands by the stove, as if poised to cook. The male figure sits idly at the kitchen table, glancing back in anger. The intention here is to communicate a state of heightened tension between two people, who are involved in a complex partnership; the portrayal of both genders
acts to clarify this close personal relationship. As relationships shift and change, our roles within
them transform, as well. By playing all sides of an interaction myself, I argue that our roles in
society are not fixed; they are as dynamic as they are constructed.

Figure 8: *Sweet Evening Nothings*, 2011.
CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENTS

The social interactions represented in the photographs occur across an array of settings, from private to public. At first glance, the images appear quite realistic, triggering perhaps only a slight feeling of dissonance in the viewer. Upon closer inspection, the incongruity of the roughly constructed environments and the manipulated self-portraits challenges the viewer’s perception of reality. The textures are unnatural. The objects are disproportionate. The sets are handcrafted in miniature scale. Rendered much like an image formed from memory, some elements retain intricate detail, while others recede into relative obscurity. Apart from providing context for the characters’ interactions, the aesthetic qualities of the sets afford the compositions a subtle surrealism, and thus complete a visual metaphor for the discrepancy between perception and physical reality. We know this discrepancy exists, although it is difficult to determine to what degree. The noticeable sculptural imperfections, therefore, honor the subjectivity of perception and pronounce that these images are manifestations of my imagination, rather than actual events.
METHODS

The creation of the images is a multifaceted process, which is dominated by photography, but also includes sculptural set construction and digital manipulation. The initial step is to conceptualize the setting and its associated social interaction – public, private, incidental, or intentional. After these elements are paired, fabrication of the miniature environment begins.

The miniature environment is constructed at roughly one-eighth scale, as seen in the production photograph below [Fig. 9]. Foam core boards and extruded insulation foam serve as the structural material for the set. Items within the set are crafted from myriad materials, such as polymer clay, resin, plastic, paper, wire, wood, and fabric. After construction is complete, the set is photographed digitally from numerous angles.

Immediately after photographing the set, the images are imported to Adobe Photoshop Lightroom for initial review and quick global adjustments, such as color temperature, exposure, and contrast. At this point, each image is evaluated to determine the arrangement of figures and the angles that are most appropriate for the intended social interaction. In the case of the set
illustrated above [Fig. 9], the two photographs selected fulfill two important criteria. The first angle captures an overall view of the setting with all attendees visible [Fig. 10], while the second point of view emphasizes one figure’s physical distance from the group [Fig. 2].

Once the background photograph is selected and the number of figures is determined, I can begin preparation for photographing myself in my home studio. In order to achieve a believable composite photograph, several photographic elements must be matched: lighting, camera angle, depth of field, exposure, and color temperature.

In order to photograph myself as the characters and eventually place them into the miniature settings, I connect a DSLR (digital single-lens reflex) camera to a laptop. Via the camera’s proprietary software, EOS Utility, I record images directly to the laptop and view them immediately on-screen. I view an overlay of a live image in my studio and the photograph of the miniature set, and I match the camera angles of the respective images. After evaluating the lighting in the miniature scene, I arrange studio strobes and small flashes to create similar lighting effects for the figures. Once the lighting is in place, I assemble the costumes and apply
makeup to transform myself into the characters. Then, I program the camera to make fifty consecutive exposures at ten-second intervals. This setup allows me to evaluate the results almost immediately, making adjustments to my placement and gestures as I go. For most characters, I have a rough idea of the emotion or action I want to portray. The more time I spend as each character, the clearer these ideas become. Most characters require several rounds of consecutive exposures to achieve the desired effect.

After each character is photographed, I import the images to Adobe Photoshop Lightroom to review and choose the most appropriate expressions for the intended scenario. It is at this point that conceptualization of a character is finalized. The figure image is exported to Adobe Photoshop and roughly placed into the background scene for verification of alignment and lighting. Each completed figure influences the portrayal of subsequent characters, in terms of position and posture. One by one, the characters are placed into the scene. Once all figures are present in the image, specific adjustments are made to hair color, eye color, and facial details, as needed. The overall placement of each figure is refined and shadows are added to the background images to enhance believability. Finally, the photograph is ready for printing.
OF REALITY: A SOCIETY OF SELVES

This series consists of thirteen composite photographs, depicting a range of social interactions, from public and incidental to private and intentional. These social interactions provide a framework for investigating the interplay of role and identity. Contrived miniature environments set the stage for complex social interactions: a subway car, a diner, an art gallery, a campsite, a private kitchen, and a motel room.

The realm of mass transit, represented in this work by a subway car, forces a public, transient, and incidental type of social contact. As discussed earlier, Green Line #4 [Fig. 7], illustrates emotional distance between the figures despite their close proximity. The seated character is marked with fatigue, while the standing character’s posture and the flowers he carries suggest hopeful anticipation. The disparity between these two figures arises from their emotional responses to an external factor, such as the standing figure’s anticipated date, which exists outside of the confines of the subway car.

The subway car is also the setting for another variant of social isolation in Red Line #7 [Fig. 11]. In this instance, the two figures choose to ignore their proximity. Despite their prime positioning for interaction, the figures avoid eye contact, stealing into themselves and tuning out their surroundings. This public isolation is self-directed, encouraged by the obligatory closeness imposed by public transportation. We cannot always physically avoid being in public, but we can mentally retreat from the masses.
A diner is a public venue brimming with potential for diverse social relationships, encompassing both intentional and incidental interactions. *Fifth and Main I* [Fig. 12] gives a full view of a diner and the distribution of its occupants, which are two workers, two isolated figures at the bar, and two separate groups in booths. A mixture of professional and social relationships creates a complex dynamic within the diner. The server is the only figure to participate across all of the boundaries. However, her participation is superficial. The server-customer relationship generally follows a prescribed pattern of professionalism, patience, and courtesy. Admittedly, these patterns do not always prevail. In *Fifth and Main II* [Fig. 13], the server’s facial expression betrays her opinion of the young couple’s delight, and her professional façade is compromised.
An art gallery, as shown in *Relative Positions – Gallery 64* [Fig. 14], presents a public, intentional, yet esoteric type of interaction. The reception attendees are members of a distinct community – artists, critics, and connoisseurs. Gatherings of this sort can be polarizing and cliquish, separating ranks within the community. The characters depicted choose to be in this environment to associate with certain individuals, while dismissing others.
The characters seated at a kitchen table reference another kind of interpersonal relationship – one based on a cycle of cooperation and opposition. The dynamic of close personal relationships can lead to periods of frustration and anger, but can also achieve reconciliation. This cycle is shown in three phases: isolation and despair [Fig. 15], frustration and anger [Fig. 7], forgiveness and acceptance [Fig. 16].
A motel room hosts two intimate and intentional interactions: one filled with hope and intrigue and the other overwhelmed by emotional distance and disappointment. In *Room 111* [Fig. 17], a woman anxiously awaits a presumed visitor; an open door suggests the visitor’s anticipated arrival. In contrast, the mood of *Room 113* [Fig. 18] is fraught with vulnerability and disappointment. The seated figure puts on his shirt, as the woman stands in shock at his hasty departure. The intimacy between the characters is apparent in their degree of undress. However, the body language, facial expressions, and actions of the individual characters suggest a visceral distance between them.
Amidst woodsly environs, a trailer and bonfire allude to a jovial getaway. A small group crowds around the fire and appears festive. A closer reading of *A Collective Space* [Fig. 10] finds only two of the figures actively conversing, as an awkwardly dressed woman watches intently from across the fire. The remaining figure squats nearby, staring blankly into the flames. Although the figures are positioned close to each other, the emotional withdrawal of the male figure and the physical isolation of the lone female diminish the scene’s celebratory veneer.
CONCLUSION

The social interactions depicted in these photographs and the visual implications discussed above constitute an expression of how I perceive the workings of society. There are countless patterns of social behavior at work at any given time. The examples portrayed within this body of work are merely a small fraction of those. Furthermore, these scenarios are filtered through my understanding and may not reflect the experience of anyone else. Alternative readings and opposite perspectives are at the very heart of what this project seeks to celebrate. Acknowledging that any sense of reality is the subjective product of an individual’s perception, all aspects of these images were created by me. I constructed the sets by hand and played the characters myself, in order to emphasize not only the singularity, but also the versatility and relativity of individuality.

Inspired by my curiosity, cultivated by observation, and illustrated through metaphor, Of Reality: A Society of Selves honors the complexity of what it is to be human. We construct notions of ourselves and project what we want others to perceive. We see through our own eyes, filtering new information through what we already know. We play roles based on the roles assumed by those around us. We - individuals among the masses of individuals – affect each other.
REFERENCES


VITA

A native of Louisiana, Kelly Colleen Tate was born in 1979. Several years later, in 2003, she received her Bachelor of Arts in German language from Louisiana State University. During the final year of her Bachelor degree, she discovered an overwhelming interest in photography. She scheduled an elective class in basic photography on a whim and had no idea how this simple action would change her life. It’s too bad it’s a cliché, because that is really how it happened. After graduation, she ran away to Houston, took another photography class, and returned to Louisiana State University, where she would eventually pursue her Master of Fine Arts degree in photography. She met a lot of encouraging and supportive people along the way. Many of their names are on the Acknowledgments page. Without them, she would not be writing this Vita for herself.