“His gentle, yet assertive command of the photographic frame, serves as a commentary on how he would like the world to see him.”

The gap that exists between the photographer and the photographed, thus giving meaning to the portrait. Failure to do so, creates a flawed memento, or worse, a contrived and possibly exploitive narrative about the subject.

Wrestling with race and perception, Binary Consciousness calms suspicions about photographic intent, while suggesting that we should have more faith in the photographer’s purpose. Unlike my family’s banal photographs mostly intended for record keeping, these works convey a cause to believe in, an expression of kinship care, and declarations of self-identity. Similar to all subjects, I stepped in front of the lens at times with skepticism. But, does the need to step forward, to be visible, to affirm one’s place in society - partially through photography - override these concerns? Leveraging the context of the photographic space, the documentary works by Parks, Hudnall, Jr., Fernandez and Bey, complemented by the portrait works by Anderson-Staley, evoke the intention of their subjects to be commentators on their own struggle, humanity and dignity. These artists prove that a connection exists with their subjects, informing the photographic exchange and the outcome of the photograph.

References


This exhibit examines a binary stream of consciousness present in portrait photography. When confronted with the cliche of a smiling subject or a subject’s attempt at a solemn gesture, the politics of portraiture calls into question the veracity of the photographer’s intent as well as the subject’s locus of control.

Curated by Dr. Giraud Polite, this exhibition includes images by photographers Dawoud Bey, Keliy Anderson-Staley and Carrie Mae Weems.
Binary Consciousness examines the veracity in portraiture by underscoring a dual stream of thought present during the photographic experience. The works presented in this exhibition confront the complexities of humanity and emphasize the politics of portraiture, while examining the photographer’s intent and influence as well as the subject's locus of control. The exhibit, featuring twelve photographers, celebrates the mystique of the portrait and challenges the fidelity of meaning surrounding the photographic experience.

For as long as I can remember, I have avoided being in front of the camera. My reasons are neither spiritual nor born of shyness. Rather, my misgivings stem from bearing witness to a lack of legitimacy surrounding the portrait. As I look back at family portraits from the mid-1980s, I question the integrity of those moments. The contrived backdrops, coordinated attire and stiff poses reflect orchestration, not human essence. My present experience with these photographs, coupled with my past participation as a subject within the photograph, has reframed my understanding of how the space between the photographer and the photographed can transform the outcome of the image. Within that space, the consciousness of the subject risks disruption. In The Soul of Black Folks, author W.E.B. Du Bois speaks to the reality of black Americans’ struggle with dual identities. Described as a struggle with the perception of “what being black means” within the black community and the simultaneous perception of what being black means by the dominant race. As I consider Du Bois’s theory and the possible disruption of consciousness within the photographic experience, I am challenged to extend the photographic frame of portraiture - examining the relationship between the photographer and photographed, which holds the power to fracture, elevate or solidify the black human identity and experience.

Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida addresses this exchange between artist and subject by sharing Barthes’s experience of the physical and mental changes he endured while in front of the camera. Barthes notes, “I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing.’” I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image” (Barthes 22). To Barthes’s point, just as the camera’s presence may distort the recorded essence of the subject, the confrontation between the photographer and photographed equally distorts our ability to discern the validity of a photograph. To extend Barthes’s experience, while considering how the spectator absorbs images, Susan Sontag in her text, On Photography, discusses the “presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority” (Sontag, 6). Sontag’s illustration offers an example of the Farm Security Administration’s photographic project of the late 1930s, where photographers were said to have shot a series of frames “until satisfied that they had just the right look on film” (Sontag, 6). Such contrived photographic narratives violate a truth between the photographer and the photographed. Intertwined, these individuals work as curators or co-conspirators, giving way to portraiture that obscures the memory of the thing it is meant to preserve. Furthermore, with the shift from analog to digital, the exertion of photography can be mitigated by the luxury of technology. This enhanced freedom to shoot without the restrictions of film should heighten spectators’ suspicions of the outcome of the photograph.

Conversely, Binary Consciousness offers a glimpse into the integral human authenticity and photographic intention with selected works that speak to the identity and agency of the subject. For instance, the photograph titled, Washington, D.C. Government charwoman (1942), by Gordon Parks is a succinct depiction of race relations in America at the time the photo was taken. The background, adorned with an American flag, affirms the political tone of this photographic caricature, which satirizes Grant Wood’s painting American Gothic (1930). As a civil rights activist, Parks binds his hopes for racial equality to the essence of the photograph. Benedict Fernandez’s 1968 photograph titled, Memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr., Central Park, New York, presents three young men confronting the camera, decorated with MLK buttons. Their gaze and stoic expressions declare neither fear nor apology in relation to their cause. Dignified and direct, the posture of the men emits a sense of determination within the frame of the photograph. Memorial to MLK, like many of Fernandez’s street photographs, recorded a variety of socially significant events throughout the country that served as a photographic chronicle of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Whether the achievement of this photograph stems from the context of the event or the photographer relinquishing a modicum of control that allows the subject, Fernandez’s presence yields in favor of the subject’s purpose.

Unlike the resistance photography of Parks and Fernandez, Dawoud Bey and Earlie Hudnall, Jr. document children pricked by a responsibility beyond their years. Bey’s photograph, Five Children (2005), addresses the dynamics of cultural identity and kinship care — a tradition where children are usually raised by their grandparents or elder siblings. In this photograph, two older children gaze intently into the camera, while the younger children are distracted — looking elsewhere. This frame captures a familial bond, expressing the closeness of the supposed siblings and their charge to protect the young. Bey’s ability to reproduce the weight of this familial bond stems from his photographer’s privilege. According to Amethyst Bever, former curatorial assistant at the Blanton Museum of Art, when Bey began shooting in 1975, he desired a connection with his subjects. He spent time conversing with them, and in the end, shared the photographs he had taken. Bey’s aptitude for disarming his subjects through conversation is critical in that it legitimizes their individuality, while giving way to a more genuine image.

Additionally, Earlie Hudnall, Jr.’s Three Drummers (2008) portrays African American boys holding soiled plastic paint buckets and weathered sticks. As street performers, the boys confront the camera as soldiers of the inner city, primed for their environment wearing unlaced tennis shoes, untucked shirts and tattered jeans. Seemingly unshaken by the camera or the photographer, two of the boys appear indifferent to the photographic exchange,