

As Borges has noted, “Photography can be used as a tool to mold our sense of reality,” and, indeed, her own work exemplifies this. Borges’s surreal pictures—which are often shot in museums, zoos, aquariums, archives, or other institutions in which display mechanisms play a central role—stimulate us to acknowledge the artifice and spectacle of photographic representation.

While visiting an anthropological museum in Mexico, Borges photographed sculpted depictions of early humans. Instead of presenting them straight on, as they are meant to be encountered by museum visitors, she captured the backs of these slightly stooped figures as they were reflected in their glass vitrine. The photographer’s hand is visible against the glass surface at the right side of the picture, but there is no trace of her camera. Such details, which function as clues for comprehension, are obscured by the multiple layers of reflection. This initially unassuming picture prompts us to consider how we comprehend our surroundings: How do the lenses and languages of representation influence our perception? And how does our understanding of reality compare to that of the beings that lived before us, such as those represented by the small figures at the center of this picture?

Bodies in proximity, hands engaged in work or in an embrace. Physical actions and relationships populate Contis's series Deep Springs, from which this two-channel video and photographs are drawn. The series takes its name from its setting: a historically all-male liberal arts college situated in the remote high desert of California. Contis's subjects are pictured in their early college years, a time of coming into one's adult self. As the artist has pointed out, the West has "always been thought of as a place where one can try on new identities, reinvent or discover oneself. And photography has always been used as a tool to construct new ideas about place and self, especially in the west."

A person's surname is, for better or worse, closely tied to how they are identified as an individual. "When you fill in a form, the first thing that you are asked for is your surname," Gupta has noted. The surname is an association that individuals must carry with them, but sometimes it becomes a burden. Gupta's project features one hundred individuals—only a fraction of whom appear in the selection of clusters shown here—who have changed their surnames for any number of reasons, whether political, familial, or emotional. (Snatches of their explanations for their decisions can be found in the short texts within the work.) Gupta represents each person through a framed picture that has been sliced in two. The pieces are positioned near enough to their mates that viewers can find and understand the whole image, but they're also read as partial, alluding perhaps to the divided fragments that make up any individual's life.

Khalili's video has the format of a computer monitor screen with several windows open. In the center is the recognizable image of an iPhone held up in a hand. The device's camera app is in use, so we, the viewers, can see the subject on the other side of the lens: a woman holding her hands in various positions over her face, which is framed by the yellow square associated with the iPhone's facial recognition software. This software is also shown being used on photographs of masks, which, in the form of JPEG files, are individually opened one by one. In this way, Khalili utilizes recently developed and now ubiquitous camera technology to evoke the colonial history of photographic "evidence" that served to identify or classify individuals through their facial characteristics.

On the upper right corner of the screen, the following text is typed out over the course of the video:

"all the masks that disappeared from our lives were not recognized as the faces of our ancestors who came from the faraway shores of our dreams asking us to recognize them as messages from trees looking at us as we feel the pain of not being recognized by the thieves who stole our faces and left us unrecognizable facing the flow of time trying to hide our remains with our hands like a dancing wind not wanting to have our faces recognized by the cameras that keep stealing our souls . . ."

There is an almost otherworldly doubling in this photograph, which shows two iterations of the same figure: one faces the camera and raises a hand in a gesture of salutation, while the other looks ahead. In Muluneh's photograph *All in One*, which hangs nearby at the entrance to this exhibition, a single figure similarly embodies multiplicity through the addition of extra hands of different hues. Muluneh's use of colorful makeup is inspired by body art from across Africa and allows her to physically construct a character out of her model. After living around the world, Muluneh returned to Ethiopia, where she founded the Addis Foto Fest, the first international photography festival in East Africa. Though she was born in Ethiopia, she has sometimes felt like an outsider due to many years spent elsewhere. The photographs presented here bear the influence of that complicated experience of heritage, and are all drawn from her series *The World is 9*, which is named after a saying of her grandmother's: "The world is nine; it is never complete and it's never perfect." With this series, Muluneh also recognizes the capacity of photography to convey the multiplicity and contradictions inherent in any individual.

In *Mutter: skeleton of the house under construction*, Olson explores the links between bodies and architecture, as well as the idea of mutability and the ongoing act of becoming. She suggests that the sketchiness of a drawing (represented through a photograph of that drawing) is comparable to the working through of an idea that takes place in the act of photographing. Olson has said that her work is centered on “the prefix ‘re-’ (doing something again). Re—as in rereading, rephotographing, rearranging.” This process of returning and repositioning suggests new ways of construing relationships between bodies and their surroundings.

In other works on view here, Olson juxtaposes her own body with sculptural elements or hand-fashioned objects, or frames her photographs of the figure with man-made materials, such as Plexiglas. In doing so, she also integrates seemingly competing concepts, like singularity and multiplicity, or desire and repulsion. Through spatial play and slippage, these works thwart viewers from maintaining a fixed perspective. By presenting a fragmented body through literal and metaphorical mirror effects, and through the layering of multiple mediums, Olson’s works challenge clear-cut understandings of gender and psychology.

In this collage, the combination and juxtaposition of multiple images suggest a bulletin board or a worktable in an artist's studio. The selection comprises Sepuya's self-portrait and photographs by other artists that echo it visually or relate to it in other ways. Sepuya similarly culled imagery from his artistic community to create *A Sitting for Matthew*, also on view here. The layered images at the top of the picture are actually the source material for a work by the Matthew named in the title, for which Sepuya himself served as a model. Much of the composition is given over to a cascading black drape, as if to imply that the fabric, a "neutral" studio ground, might cover the messy process of making an image.

Sepuya's works accentuate the intersections of race, gender, and desire within the history of portrait photography. The artist is always careful to note that the fragmentation in his images (the cropped limbs, hidden features, and uncertain relationships between body parts) is not arbitrary; rather, it is the result of deliberate decision-making. At the same time, the confusion of positions—Where is the camera? The model?—forces us to confront our own perspectives.

In a group portrait, the relationships and comparisons between individuals are weighty: Who stands and who sits? Why does one person smile, while another scowls? What does the subjects' dress tell us about them? Steinbach's series *Gesellschaft beginnt mit drei* (Society Begins with Three), which is titled after an essay by German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling, follows the basic format of a group portrait composed of three models, all of whom turn toward the camera (and the viewer) with a steady gaze. Yet in each picture, only one figure is depicted in full; the others have been cropped partially out of the frame. As we follow along from one image to the next, we begin to realize that the models have switched positions and clothing. By creating a sense of disorientation in this way, Steinbach's images defy rigid interpretations and remind us that individuals are mutable and inconsistent, as are their relationships to others.

Connors took these photographs over several trips to North Korea from 2013 to 2016. Throughout the world, North Korea is known as a reclusive nation that strictly limits its citizens' access to information. Connors's images of individuals and charged symbols combine a documentary style with a more metaphoric approach. Looking at these pictures, we might imagine what it is like to live with fundamentally different conceptions of reality or to grapple with discrepancies between experience and state-controlled narratives.

Connors, who has also worked as an educator for many years, has long been interested in representing individuals as part of larger collectives, as well as frictions between citizens and their governments. His other recent series include *Fire in Cairo* (published in book form in 2015), which is his distillation of the later phases of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, and *General Assembly*, which comprised portraits of participants of the Occupy movement in New York City during its first year.

Throughout the history of photography, photographs have served as a way to remember those who have passed. These photographs by Mendez, taken at the Necrópolis Cristóbal Colón in Havana, Cuba, or other nearby sites, address this relationship by highlighting the detritus left behind at graves and memorials by the living in their ritual communions with the dead. In this photograph, Mendez focuses on a dark smudge of blood that has been encircled by various colors, which emphasizes this spot as if it might stand in for a person, giving us something to concentrate on as we meditate on a life that has ended. In *Sin nombre*, which hangs nearby, a ghostlike image of a man on horseback looms large, veiled by layers of toner and other pigments. This work is one of many that Mendez has created from found materials—in this case, a glass slide he came across in Havana.

To create this multi-part work, the artists mined their own family photo albums (represented here through covers printed with images of idealized landscapes in saturated color, conjuring places that seem far from everyday life) for 1970s snapshots featuring their mothers, both of whom were born in Vietnam but fled as refugees to the United States. In the selected images, Ngô's and Trương's mothers pose next to cars or in group portraits with their husbands and children. These uncannily similar photographs are juxtaposed with excerpts from transcripts of U.S. congressional hearings about Vietnamese refugees. By interlacing the language of the congressional testimony, which refers in blanket terms to potential welfare for "aliens" or "illegals," with photographs that suggest the roles their mothers played in their families in the U.S., the artists make visible individual lives and labor and present a nuanced perspective on the Vietnamese American experience.

Frowst—a little-known English word more frequently used (though still uncommon) in Britain, where Piotrowska lives—refers to a warm, stuffy, claustrophobic atmosphere. And indeed, the subjects of Piotrowska’s *Frowst* series appear to be ill at ease in their closeness with one another. Some bodies are positioned so that they seem to merge; some depend on each other physically and perhaps emotionally, but in a way that is uncomfortable. The ambiguous nature of the actions of and the relationships between the people pictured, and their immense scale, make these images especially surreal. Hung together with three photographs from *Frowst* are two smaller pictures from a more recent series featuring child-like “forts” constructed out of ubiquitous household objects (books, fabrics, and the like). These temporary structures built within larger domestic interiors suggest that the desire to feel safe and protected exists even within the familiar space of the home.

It is common for photographs to become mementos: objects that live in special frames, positioned on a mantle or an altar, or placed in a dedicated box in the back of the closet. Rooney underscores this phenomenon in her work. She selects photographs from her personal archive and presents them with unique frames or armatures, some crafted from old books, some built anew from cloth, metal, glass, or ceramic materials. The resulting composite portraits are gifts or offerings to their subjects—not because they are literally handed over to them, but because they refer especially to them in their particular presentations.

Sarah with a Painting of Her Own Eyes is flipped in its metal brackets so that only the back is visible. A sticker pasted to the surface of the glass on the back of the work reads, “I have this image of Sarah that I’m not sure if it’s from a dream or if it’s from a picture I saw of her somewhere . . .” Behind it we can make out the shape of a photograph, along with the hinges that adhere it to the glass. Though the image printed on the photograph itself is not discernible to us, we can only assume it is a portrait of Sarah.

Syjuco's work references various forms of studio portraiture, including nineteenth-century ethnographic portraiture by travelers, who captured their subjects in "exotic" dress, and the ubiquitous passport photograph, in which the sitter is expected to pose, unsmiling, with their facial features unobstructed. Syjuco simultaneously exposes and thwarts the standards of these subgenres. The "migrants" in these passport-style photos have completely covered their faces, perhaps aware that exposing their physical identities might be dangerous. This gesture, while potentially protecting those pictured, also serves to render them part of a faceless mass, which is how migrants and refugees are often seen, rather than as individual human beings. In the Cargo Cults portraits, also on view here, the sitter (the artist herself) wears costumes that were assembled from garments and other objects purchased at big-box stores in American shopping malls and styled to evoke ideas of "ethnic" patterns and styles. Syjuco also makes it difficult to locate a singular subject in each portrait through her use of patterns, which shift attention from foreground to background, and through the presence of calibration charts, which slyly offer a "standard" against which the central figure might be measured.

Occupying two walls, this work is composed of over two thousand images of women preparing for and in the process of labor and childbirth. Winant is conscious of the ways the work of women is both visible and invisible: the activities shown here are widespread and essential, and yet pictures of them are not common, even in our image-saturated culture. The artist sourced masses of material from diverse books and magazines, many from several decades past, including those aimed at empowering women (such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, first published in 1971). She acquired some imagery by sifting through the inventory of used bookstores and mining the offerings at garage and estate sales. As Winant has pointed out, “There’s so much deaccessioned material now. The digital world is expanding and the analog world is contracting. Libraries are purging; it’s an important time to be collecting.” Another source of images was a network of women’s health workers and midwives that the artist had tapped into. Though she organizes these materials by category while working in her studio, the relationships that form between the components on the wall once the images are installed are not necessarily obvious, allowing for multiple readings, some seemingly contradictory, others complementary.

Imagine it is many years in the future and that, as a result of a major global event, the Museum has lost the ability to carry out some of its primary functions: collecting and displaying artwork. Imagine you are a member of a council of representatives that must decide the Museum's future: what might its new functions be, given the impact of potential environmental changes, political conflicts, cultural shifts, and other influencing factors? Husni-Bey posed this scenario to a group of alumni from MoMA's Digital Advisory Board, a long-running teen program that explores youth-directed video production, social media initiatives, and other educational projects. Over the course of a multiday workshop, they contemplated possible futures for this institution and envisioned their own roles, and their relationships with others, within them. These three group portraits were shot on the last day of the workshop, when participants enacted characters as members of groups they had developed (which variously imagined the institution as a place for healing through technology, a radical education center, or a covert government project), embodying the responsibilities and concerns they would take on in this speculative future.

With an interest in collectivist and non-competitive pedagogical models, Husni-Bey has staged many workshops and other programs all over the world, frequently portraying the participants through photographs or video. She encourages those she works with—often young people, but also activists and educators—to consider their individual contributions to the larger ensemble.

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