

A Series of Selfhood Portraits (2021): An Essay

Alex Sainsbury

A Series of Selfhood Portraits (2021) is a mixed-media photographic introspection of selfhood that looks at the component of my unconscious characterised by my parents. Rational thoughts are explainable and easily interpreted, but like artists Gillian Wearing and Lindy Lee, I found that an examination of the realms of self, beyond recognisable cognition, can offer substantial teaching. While our genetics drive our personalities and behaviours via a link to those who came before us, so to do the images of life we see in those around us in our youth – those images that we unintentionally imitate (Bargh & Morsella, 2008). This work is part of a therapeutic uncovering of myself, my strengths and my frailties as derived from those who showed me how to be: my parents.

The work in question appropriates the photos in the albums kept by my parents over the last four decades, chronicling their lives from university students to parenthood. In reviewing the several hundred photographs for the first time in years, I came to see my parents through the lens of my own emerging adulthood.

Firstly, the two-dimensional visage I had of my parents was broken down to show an underlying humanness. While this process began with their divorce five years ago, observing them in the context of a youth like my own, and distinctly not parental, helped me empathise with them, and recognize the underlying flaws and strengths that make them people capable of, well, being people.

The similarities between their lives and my own became increasingly apparent. Even visually, the narrative of their youth resonates with my own, and acts to underscore the similar trajectory I find myself on, prompting me to question my own autonomy: 'am I a copy of them? Am I just following in their footsteps?'

Renowned British conceptual artist Gillian Wearing offers similar speculation on the inescapable link between one's own sense of self, and one's parents. Since the early



Gillian Wearing, *Self Portrait as my Brother Richard*, 2003

1990s, Wearing has produced a suite of work across various media, that look beneath the façade of the personality via confession, heavily influenced by the sociologist Erving Goffman (The Art Story, 2021). Goffman's is best known for his 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which takes a dramaturgical approach to the idea of selfhood, suggesting that we adopt "front-stage and backstage personalities, that we perform all the time, when we walk down the street, when we go into a shop. And when we are behind closed doors we go into a bit of a slump."

This notion is explored most intimately by Wearing in her five-part photo series *Album* (2003), in which she photographed herself wearing near-realistic masks of her family, restaging archival photos. Visually appropriating from those archival images, Wearing's photos are almost identical to their source, her eyes peering out from beneath the silicone, make-up and costume the only distinguishing feature. Masks are a motif through Wearing's work, but in this case, differentiate between an outward façade, and an underlying humanity in line with the duality of Goffman's understanding. By placing herself behind the skin of her kin, Wearing not only physically takes on an empathetic standpoint but speculates on where we come from as an inevitable mould of selfhood.

In much the same way, yet formally distinct, Lindy Lee's recognition of selfhood, as derived from heritage, is central to her work. Pre-dating Wearing's by a decade, Lee's artistic practice is characterised by a preoccupation with the notions of 'originality' and 'reproduction' reflecting her cognition of self. In contrast to Goffman's writing on duality, Lee has used her work to reflect on her upbringing under migrant parents in Brisbane, Australia: "I had always felt a fraud — a copy, and a flawed one at that ... I was counterfeit white and counterfeit Chinese" (2020).

An installation art piece comprising of nearly a hundred Chinese accordion books, Lee's 2003 *Birth and Death*, is one of her most direct investigations on heritage and selfhood. Each book is comprised of portrait photographs of her family and friends, both living and deceased, photocopied to near-abstractness in monochromatic black and red. And while Lee's colour palette underscores a sense of duality, and nods to symbolism of Imperial China (Art Gallery NSW, 2021), *Birth and Death*'s use of minimalistic repetition and copy questions notions of originality in relation to the idea of self. In doing so, there exists an implicit, linear, connection between her and her family – as if a distinction between selfhood and those central to our lives, is blurred.



Lindy Lee, *Birth and Death*, 2003

As I looked harder at my parent's photographic archive, I began to see how my parents had left their impression on me, not only purposefully, but also unknowingly, beneath the visible. There are many components to selfhood, but in her 2008 book *Adult Children of Divorce: Confused Love Seekers*, psychologist Dr. Geraldine K. Piorkowski elucidates on a critical part of it: intimacy. Through the lens of divorce, a significant viewpoint from which I continue to analyse myself in relation to my parents, she quotes Judith Wallerstein on children of divorce: "Their lack of inner images of a man and a woman in a stable relationship and their memories of their parents' failure to sustain the marriage badly hobble their search for love, sexual intimacy, and commitment." I, depressingly, do recognise what Piorkowski writes about. It has led me to continued empathy for my parents, knowing that my father is a child of divorce himself, and revealed how my own selfhood, beneath any kind of personality or outward façade, is inescapably built upon the images I have of them.



Alex Sainsbury, *A Series of Selfhood Portraits*. 2021

A Series of Selfhood Portraits is a mixed-media artwork consisting of eight photocopied photos from my parent's personal archive and acrylic paint on A4 printer paper. Four photos feature my mother, and four my father, each painted over with black until they are the only subject left in the frame. The photos were selected for the time they were taken, before I was born, to show that their influence on my selfhood did not originate

with their parenting, but instead always existed in them, inline with the understanding of Piorkowski.

While I explored various means of mark-making the physical manipulation, I decided upon was intentionally derived from Lee's artistic practice, drawing on her ability to identify the people who contribute to her identity. In contrast, while her use of repetition in *Birth and Death* underscores linear connection, my work depicts the multiplicity and complexity of the unconscious. The use of black paint, while recognisable in Lee's work, visually references the idea of a spotlight in recognition of Goffman's dramaturgical understanding of self, and in doing so, articulates parents as an inevitable component of identity much like Wearing. Most significantly however, in combination with the imperfection of line, black simply signifies the unknown – there is a lot about my selfhood I don't understand, but, for good or for bad, my parents remain little points of light slowly coming into focus.

Informed by Lindy Lee and Gillian Wearing's understanding of self, *A Series of Selfhood Portraits* is the introspective realisation that my selfhood has been, is, and will continued to be, shaped by my parents.

References

Art Gallery of NSW, 2021, *Birth and Death*, viewed 15 September 2021, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/5.2014.1-114/#about>

Bargh, J. & Morsella, E. 2008, 'The Unconscious Mind', *Perspect Psychol Sci*, vol 3, no. 1, pp. 73–79.

Goffman, E. 1959, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, New York.

Lee, L as quoted in. O'Hehir, A. 2020, 'The Body Electric', in Bullock, N et al. *Know My Name*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Lee, L. 2003, *Birth and Death*, Art Gallery of NSW, viewed 15 September 2021, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/5.2014.1-114/#about>

The Art Story, 2021, *Gillian Wearing*, viewed 1 October 2021, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/wearing-gillian/>

Wallerstein J as quoted in. Piorkowski, G, *Adult Children of Divorce: Confused Love Seekers*, Praeger Publishing, Westport Connecticut.

Wearing, G. 2003, *Album*, Ocula, viewed 1 October 2021, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/gillian-wearing/>

Images

Lee, L. 2003, *Birth and Death*, Art Gallery of NSW, viewed 15 September 2021, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/5.2014.1-114/#about>

Sainsbury, A, 2021, *A Series of Selfhood Portraits*

Wearing, G. 2003, *Self Portrait as my Brother Richard*, Elephant, viewed 24 October 2021, <https://elephant.art/gillian-wearing-family-stories/>