

For my final project, I studied the ways in which portraiture has the ability to illustrate one's authentic self. To do so, I explored how photography works to capture people in a vulnerable state, how an honest photograph is created, and what photo portraiture can reveal. Through my research, I discovered that this genre is often used to explore various components of one's personality and illustrate the complexities of identity. I found myself questioning why we conceal fragments of our identities that we are uncomfortable displaying, and how I might be able to unveil these components to create honest portraits of the people around me.

I examined this topic by studying the methods of photographers who are known for creating extremely candid photographs of their subjects. Using digital photography, I created a series of eight black and white portraits that are representative of my peers' most genuine selves. Asking personal questions and having profound discussions with my peers during photoshoots enabled me to draw out the components of their personalities that they may not always expose, in turn creating a genuine photograph. I hope that my work simultaneously conveys how elusive the subject of identity is and illustrates my peers as honestly as possible.

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Chapter 1 – Photography and the Masks

I began my research for my final project by posing the question of how portraiture illustrates one's authentic self. This paper addresses the concept of how photography works on a more profound level to capture people in a genuine state. It analyzes the questions of how an honest photograph is created, what photographic portraiture reveals about a person, and why we put on masks to conceal fragments of our identities that we are uncomfortable displaying.

I have avidly photographed people for as long as I can remember, but I have never truly considered why it is so appealing to me. Pondering the subject of identity in accord with portraiture has made me question what truly interests me about photography, and how my love for it plays a role in my own personal identity. Portraiture is often used as a vehicle to explore various components of one's personality and illustrate the complexities of identity. The relationship between these two subjects lead me to wonder how it is possible for me as a photographer to draw out the hidden elements of my peers' identities; the qualities they possess that they choose to mask. One can conceal any part of themselves they do not feel comfortable enough sharing with a mask. My objective in my final project was to learn how to unveil these 'masks' in order to produce genuine photos of my peers.

Amidst the exploration of my own identity, I discovered the reason for my attraction to photographic portraiture pertains to establishing a personal connection with my subject. By learning more about what they choose to conceal, I am able to understand my subjects better as people. I myself choose to keep various parts of myself hidden because I am scared of how others will perceive me because of my experiences. My past is something that I often don't share with people because I don't want to be defined as the person I used to be, but I believe by sharing those parts of myself, others gain a better understanding of why I am the way I am.

Over the course of my middle school and high school experiences, I have become close to many people as a result of my outgoing nature. Several years ago, I developed a particularly strong relationship with a friend of mine, and it was wonderful to feel as if I had finally found someone who completely understood every part of me. We spent every moment together, constantly at each other's sides. At the time, I was in the midst of dealing with severe anxiety and depression, and at that age, I thought mental conditions like those weren't normal. I thought they made me strange, and I remember thinking that no one would want to be around me if they knew that I was constantly thinking how badly I wanted to die. I felt anything but comfortable exposing that part of myself to others, but I finally gathered up the courage to explain what was happening to this friend.

Everything went fine for a while. They offered their support and helped me through many difficult days and nights, and I felt like they could be trusted with anything. I was so grateful to have someone by my side that understood me better than anyone ever had, but that's when things began to go awry. They became controlling, manipulative, and malicious, and our previously smooth friendship morphed into an abusive one. It took me too long to realize what was happening, and I was so ashamed I had shared this part of my life with somebody who took advantage of information that was so personal.

I made this mistake several times. I had too much faith in people—I would grow close with somebody, feel comfortable enough to tell them a lot about myself, and the relationship would result in the exact same way. I felt utterly betrayed by these incidents, and for fear of

similar experiences happening, I still feel uneasy sharing information about myself with others. Despite my health having improved greatly, occurrences like these have led me to put up a façade of constant happiness and positivity when I am around people I care about. It is because of experiences like these that it takes me a great deal of trust to let others into my life.

Chapter 2 – The Visuals

The first step I took in my research was determining a clear definition of a portrait. In her book *Art Photography Now*, writer and photography curator Susan Bright describes a portrait as “the questioning or exploration of self and identity through a literal representation of what somebody looks like. The human face has long been read as a ‘window’ onto the soul of a person, and early photographic portraits, like their painted equivalents, were certainly read in this way. But in the late twentieth century, with the debunking of the idea of essences (of both the photographer and the sitter) has come a sustained questioning of what a portrait is. Is it all about surface appearance or can it communicate something more?” (Bright 19). It can be inferred from this definition that Bright believes a portrait is a clear representation of somebody’s identity. After reading this, I began to contemplate the complexity of identity, leading me to wonder whether or not photographs have the ability to convey this intricacy.

I viewed an exhibit at the Whitney Museum that provided commentary on the topic of portraits, helping me answer the question of whether or not photographers are able to express a more complex message about identity through their artwork. Curated by Dana Miller, Richard DeMartini, Scott Rothkopf, Nancy and Steve Crown, Mia Curran, Jennie Goldstein, and Sasha Nicholas, *Human Interest: Portraits From the Whitney’s Collection* is comprised of artworks that raise questions about who we are, how we perceive others, and how we present ourselves. In an area of the exhibition entitled *Self-Conscious*, artists used to self-portraiture to explore each of their multiple invented personas. “In a culture in which the fashion industry, cosmetic surgery, and digital editing have made physical appearance more malleable, the artists’ work testifies to a widespread sense of uncertainty in the self and how it might be portrayed” (The Whitney Museum of American Art). Living in a culture where every part of us is so harshly criticized results in us comparing ourselves to others, in turn leading us to overanalyze our physical appearances, mental states, and personality traits. This contributes to how we act around others and what we decide to let people see versus what we don’t.

A featured photographer in this exhibit, Cindy Sherman, uses the theme of identity to communicate more powerful ideas in lieu of focusing solely on creating an aesthetically pleasing picture. As described by Eva Respini, chief curator of the Museum of Modern Art, Sherman concentrates “on the postmodern belief that our identities are made up of multiple selves dished up and adopted in a series of performances and masquerades in order to fit in with how culture has defined and determined us” (Respini 20). To bring this notion to life, her photographs are often statements about the way our culture has impacted us to the point where we alter ourselves, and how our identities are formed by doing so. As previously mentioned, identity is a prevalent topic throughout her photography, as her art mostly consists of what can only be described as “photographs of Cindy Sherman that are also simultaneously, not photographs of Cindy Sherman, portraits of the artist in which she is both present and absent” (Photoshopped Sherman). She dresses up in dramatic disguises to portray somebody

completely different than herself, creating an alter ego to make commentary on identity and our culture. An example of a statement she makes about the manner in which society changes us is the work below.



Figure 1 Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled #465, 2008*. Digital image. *The Museum of Modern Art*. The Museum of Modern Art, n.d. Web. 21 Apr. 2016.

Part of a series entitled “Society Portraits”, this photograph is a statement about the economy being on the verge of collapse in 2008. It implies “an age of excess, a status-obsessed society. This image seems, in part, to critique that society—even to mock its members, cruelly exposing their flaws” (The Whitney Museum of American Art). This artwork depicts a woman glancing over her shoulder, surrounded by luxuries. Her gaze expresses an air of superiority, yet suggests disappointment. The subject’s thick makeup does not cover up but instead emphasizes her aging features. The depth of this photograph proves that the concepts behind Sherman’s work are very profound, in turn creating a powerful piece of art.

Dawoud Bey, another featured photographer in this exhibit, has also helped me see that portraiture has the ability to convey a deeper message revolving around the topic of identity. His series “Class Pictures” consists of high school students’ portraits. The photographs are simple yet profound, and are each accompanied by short statements from the subjects. Without reading the captions, the faces are simply a mystery, but upon reading the statements, an entirely different idea of who these people are become immediately ingrained into one’s mind, modifying our judgments about their identities. By disclosing pieces of themselves the subjects do not usually reveal, the audience gains insight into what makes them who they are.



Bey, Dawoud. Charles. Digital image. Aperture. Aperture Foundation, n.d. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.

CHARLES

There are a lot of things I don't do or say. I think I have an especially acute sense of self-awareness and ability to control my behavior. I think about everything I do. I weigh the consequences and the necessity, and lots of times I just decide to keep things to myself. I try to be conscientious. One time in the seventh grade a kid hit me, but I didn't fight back. I could have easily, but I tried to do the right thing by leaving. Some kids probably thought I was a wuss. I guess you can't have everyone like you. I kind of see that as a defining moment. I guess I'm generally kind, and I don't like being pushy or competitive, but I think that doesn't get you far, especially at a school like Andover. You succeed by doing better than the people around you, by making sure they don't. There are no prizes for letting other people win, but maybe success just isn't worth it.

In Bey's photo entitled "Charles", the statement included next to the artwork completely changed my perception of the subject. The background is somber, the lighting is somewhat dramatic, the boy has a serious look on his face, the colors of his clothing are monochromatic, his arms are crossed defiantly, and he is hunched over the chair. Without reading the statement, my first impression of him is that he seems troubled and angry based on his facial expression, leading me to wonder if he is struggling with something. However, upon reading the caption where he discusses his most prevalent qualities—conscientiousness and self-awareness—a completely different message is said. I then understood that he is not angry, but wise and serious. Bey uses the writing as a way to explore parts of Charles' personality that may not come across in the photograph by itself, helping the audience learn more about him and in turn advancing their understanding of his personality.

Although it was not featured in this exhibit, I also studied photographer Elinor Carucci's series entitled "Closer" because of how authentic the portraits are. They depict herself, her love interest and her family members usually naked or minimally clothed, exposing them to show more about their personalities and how they live their lives. The photos showcase insignificant yet private scenes in her life such as her grandfather taking a shower, her mother applying her lipstick, her parents reading together in bed, her boyfriend taking a nap with her, and her grandparents eating together. Many of her self-portraits show portions of her beauty routine that also seem unimportant, but the photographs actually divulge a lot about Carucci's character. They depict her bathing, curling her eyelashes, removing and bleaching her body hair, putting her stockings on; all activities that aren't out of the ordinary, but immediately become personal once they are photographed and put on display for an audience to see. It is by photographing herself and her subjects in such a stripped down manner that she is able to produce such truthful, candid pictures.

Figure 2 Carucci, Elinor. *My Mother and I in a Hotel Room*, 1998. Digital image. *Elinor Carucci*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.elinorcarucci.com/closer.php#53>>.



The photograph above depicts Carucci and her mother sitting across from each other on their hotel beds; Carucci clean from bathing and her mother waiting her turn to do so. Carucci is completely naked, her chest exposed, and her mother is covered by a towel. They gaze at each other, but it is difficult to tell what the topic of conversation is. They appear to be having an intimate exchange, but they could just as well be discussing something unimportant based on the casualness of Carucci's other photographs.

What I can conclude from studying the photos taken by Cindy Sherman, Dawoud Bey, and Elinor Carucci is that it is entirely possible to illustrate the complexity of identity through photography based on the methods one uses to do so. Whether it be through making a strong statement about how our identities are shaped, accompanying art with writing, or photographing people in a vulnerable state, these artists prove that by revealing fragments of one's identity, an honest photograph can be created.

Chapter 3 – Identity

A large area of my research consisted of investigating what identity is comprised of and how I use photography to critically examine my own identity. As I began to think about the qualities that make me who I am, I started to question the reason why I am so attached to the idea of documenting people. Although it may be considered impersonal to solely photograph others and never myself, I believe this illustrates me perfectly. While interviewing photographer and Oxbow alum Sasha Frolova, she echoed my thoughts exactly when she stated "often times a portrait is a product of an artist's bias, a flash judgment, and can even become a self-portrait as the artist projects such a bias onto the subject, ultimately reflecting more of the artist than the subject themselves". She also noted how she believes photographing others helps her understand herself, which is something I find to be true for me as well.

Identity is something that is extremely difficult to convey because of how broad of a subject it is, how frequently we change and develop as people, and how much of ourselves we decide to reveal. As stated by Susan Bright, "the use of the mask, and the play between what is revealed and what is disguised, is central to portraiture as subjects offer different versions of themselves up to the camera" (Bright 13). Depending on our comfort levels around certain people and places, we often times 'mask' aspects of our personalities that we are too fearful to share with others.

Religious teacher and thinker Jiddu Krishnamurti defines identity as consisting of "all of one's senses, one's feelings, one's imagination, one's romantic demands, one's possessions, a husband, a wife, one's qualities, one's struggles, one's achievements, one's ambitions, one's aspirations, one's unhappiness, and one's joys" (Questions and Answers). He believes that "the essence of identity is the center, the 'me', my impulses. From this center all action takes place: all our aspirations, our ambitions, our quarrels, our disagreements, our opinions, judgments, experiences are centered in this" (Questions and Answers). Despite the fact we are born with a set of DNA that makes us a certain way, I believe our identities are constructed by our experiences more so than that. It is how our parents raised us, our encounters with people, where we went to school, and a million other components that our identities are comprised of, and it is impossible to show every part of that in a photograph. Despite this, by gaining more of

an understanding as to how those experiences shaped us, a photographer can depict the subject in a more truthful way.

Chapter 4 – Fin

By studying the works of various photographers, I began to question my own idea of what a photograph can achieve. Throughout my research, I found myself contemplating whether photography is purely an aesthetically pleasing art form, or if it is able to communicate something more. Through analysis of the works of Cindy Sherman, Dawoud Bey, and Elinor Carucci, I discovered that it is entirely possible to not only convey a deeper meaning through photography, but also illustrate the complexity of identity based on the methods one uses to do so.

My final project began as an attempt to portray my peers' true personalities. However, by photographing the people around me, only then did I realize it is impossible to capture the entirety of someone's identity in one photograph. As I began to understand this, I wondered what it takes to create a photograph that honestly depicts the subject. Through my research on other artists' processes to accomplish this goal in addition to the time I spent photographing my peers, I discovered that by asking personal questions and having profound discussions with my subjects, I was able to create candid portraits of them that represent their real selves. Although not every conversation I had with the people I photographed was extremely profound, even just hearing about minor experiences that have shaped their identities helped me understand my subjects better as people. Through this project, I learned that only by the subject revealing pieces of one's personality that they might not usually put forth can a photographer produce a meaningful and genuine picture.

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