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Recommended Citation

Strobel, Kyle, "Same Stuff, Just Packaged a Different Way (Maybe It's Not So Bad?)" (2017). *Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers*. 21.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/21>

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Same Stuff, Just Packaged a Different Way (Maybe It's Not So Bad?)

Kyle Strobel
Majors in Art and Economics
Washington University in St. Louis
May 5, 2017

Abstract:

Who Would You Be? examines the interplay between person and persona, relationship building, and artist-sitter dynamics. By placing contemporary sitters in the context of historical portraiture conventions, it seeks to lead viewers to consider the issue of self-absorption and vanity in social media profiles from a different angle. Additionally, this project became a way to enhance the quality of my personal relationships with those involved through providing a space to interact and creating a link for them between myself and each other.

Who Would You Be? examines the interplay between person and persona, relationship building, and artist-sitter dynamics from two angles: prompt interpretations and sitter interaction. I begin each portrait by giving my sitters a prompt, they choose how and what they want to be viewed as, and then I shoot them in the studio. I draw parallels between the historical and contemporary by keeping one foot in the past through my use of historical portraiture conventions and the time-specific aspect of the prompt, and one foot in the present through my use of contemporary mounting and framing techniques and a digital camera.

Every individual sitter's entry into the *Who Would You Be?* project begins with receiving a prompt. The prompt seeks to make the potential sitter consider what visually defines them and then how they could alter that definition and play with expectations surrounding such a portrait.



Kyle Strobel
Amrita Ramesh
Digital photograph
16" x 20"

Imagine living more than 300 years ago, well before the advent of photography. The only way to see what another human looks like with any sort of realism is a painted portrait.

Portraits are expensive and time consuming, even the most elite might only have one or two made a year. So it is not uncommon to only have one portrait of yourself for many years, or even your whole life.

With this exclusivity of images comes a great amount of power. You can completely curate your image to the outside world. It is like all of your profile pictures and tagged photos online rolled into a single image, and you have control of it. Since it is the only version of you out there, people will have no choice but to be influenced by it at face value, whether it is truthful or not.

Look at historical portraiture; people can display their wealth by wearing borrowed expensive garments, declare their intelligence by holding a pen to paper while surrounded by books and an invention on the table, or any number of other mechanisms to shape their outward image.

If you could completely curate the only image of yourself in existence, who would you be?

The origin for this came from looking at historical portraiture and suddenly realizing that many of the portraits are exaggerated versions of individuals, sometimes even entirely fabricated. For example, American painter John Singleton Copley was a prolific portrait painter, and some of his portraits have striking similarities to each other. His portraits of Mrs. Benjamin Pickman (Mary Toppan), and Mrs. Daniel Sargent (Mary Turner Sargent) both feature the women in the same elaborately expensive blue dress (Lovell).



John Singleton Copley
Mrs. Daniel Sargent (Mary Turner Sargent), 1763
Oil on canvas
101 cm x 126 cm



John Singleton Copley
Mrs. Benjamin Pickman (Mary Toppan), 1763
Oil on canvas
101 cm x 126 cm

Despite their prior background, using this borrowed dress for their portrait is an apparent attempt to automatically elevate the image of themselves to a higher level of status. The issue of image staging is something that is ever-present in contemporary culture due to concerns surrounding over-curated social media profiles. But until this thought, I had never considered it to extend back into pre-photography representation. With this new perspective, I turned to my favorite classical painters to see how they handle portraiture and representation to solidify the historical portraiture conventions to employ in my portraits. Aesthetically, Caravaggio's use of a single light source and a dark black, shadowy background serves to add intrigue to any representation. His use of "vivid chiaroscuro enhanced both three-dimensionality and drama, as well as evoking the mystery of the faith" (John M. Gash).



Caravaggio
Saint Jerome Writing, c. 1605-06
Oil on canvas
112 cm x 157 cm

By simplifying the light source in such a way, more weight can be given to the emotive qualities of a portrait as well as an added layer of mystery created by the shadow-driven

contrast. Similarly, Johannes Vermeer “experimented ceaselessly with techniques to create the illusion of three-dimensional space and to render the effects of natural light” (Janson). He is known for his use of a single natural light source, typically a window, as opposed to the unnatural light sources present in Caravaggio’s work. In addition, Vermeer seems to capture his subjects in between moments of action or rest.



Johannes Vermeer
Girl with a Pearl Earring, 1665
Oil on canvas
44.5 cm x 39 cm

Through their eyes, Vermeer makes it seem that the mind has decided to begin an action, but that message has only just begun to reach the body. This gives the portraits an immediate air of separation from reality, there is a slight mythical air to them because it is a frozen image of a rarely noticed moment. After examining these artists, the Chiaroscuro, moment frozen in between action and rest , and black background served as the foundation for the historical portraiture conventions in which this project would work within.

As opposed to representation in the time of these painters, individuals today can create entire stockpiles of images to curate their outward image. This is all thanks to the mass proliferation of images due to photography, and even more so now due to digital photography, the internet, and social media. Contemporary individuals can fabricate their outward image in much the same way that sitters in historical portraiture did. The difference is instead of crafting a single image, people today curate an entire gallery of images (both candid and posed), videos, and text that all build up their persona. What people choose to represent has been changed by our ability to capture and share.

A natural consideration when looking at individual-representation is the idea of vanity. At what point does displaying yourself to the world pass the point of understandable and become self-indulgent? For many, it is a gray area where the line can be hard to find. British philosopher, Simon Blackburn, ponders, “Can we have a virtuous sense of worth without the vanity of self-love?” (Blackburn). To address this question, he refers to the thoughts of John Milton, an English poet from the 1600s. Blackburn states that Milton “thought, rightly, that a ‘pious and just honoring of ourselves’ was essential to us” (Blackburn). He felt that too much would lead to arrogance, while too little would lead to unfulfillment. This is an important notion because it seeks to clarify vanity, it is not the mere presence of self-admiration, but rather an extreme excess of it.

An interesting body of work that is intertwined with this idea is Sergei Produkin-Gorskii’s photographs of the Russian empire at the beginning of the 20th century. In his photos, it appears that the wealth in the empire at the time could be best represented through lavish, colorful garments. The “ultimate goal” for his documentation of the Russian Empire “was to educate the schoolchildren of Russia with his ‘optical color

projections’ of the vast and diverse history, culture, and modernization of the empire” (Produkin-Gorskii). It was integral to him for color to be present in order to be able to create an accurate representation of the nation.



Sergeii Prokudin-Gorskii
Untitled, c. 1907-1918
Albumen print

This points to the idea that there are some aspects of an identity that are so integral to the overall image, that without them the portrait is inherently inaccurate. In *Who Would You Be?*, that integral aspect is not always color, but understanding that there are some core elements of an identity that need to be represented, or else the portrait will be unsuccessful, was crucial to my project.

Additionally, Cindy Sherman’s self-portraits tackle representation head-on. She “turned to photography...to explore a wide range of common female social roles, or personas” (Cindy Sherman Biography...). She considered the elements that define various negative stereotypes, and to combat them, she employed them in a series of self-portraits.



Cindy Sherman
Untitled, 2016
Digital photograph

She tries to “call her audience’s attention to the powerful machinery and make-up that lay behind the countless images circulating in an incessantly public, ‘plugged in,’ culture” (Cindy Sherman Biography...). She uses the conventions of the culture she is critiquing to show the audience the potential dark side to it. While I do not seek to be overtly critical like Sherman, I do wish to use my chosen conventions to illuminate the constructed nature of self-representation in a new way.

In *Who Would You Be?*, I employ these considerations gained from examining contemporary portraiture combined with the insights gained from looking to historical portrait painting to bring the many aspects surrounding self representation, and our current place in its timeline, to my portraits. Armed with my conceptual framework, I set about deciding who should be my subjects, and this decision created a secondary purpose of the project.

My initial inclination was to turn to my close friends, and that proved to be the correct decision. The effect this project started having on relationships in my personal life bears equal weight to this project sparking conversation about self-representation. When I first started to enter the world of photography, one of my immediate role models was Annie Leibovitz. Before taking any photos, she engages with her subjects for days to both create a relationship between herself and her subjects and give her insight into what is important to an individual that wouldn't be gained if she started shooting immediately (*Annie Leibovitz: Life through a Lens*). Similarly, Alexander Melamid spends time with his sitters in *Holy Hip Hop!* for a few days, all the while taking notes, before deciding on a final portrait to paint (Kino). He takes the time to assess the situation and get to know his subjects before he begins creating, leading to authentic portraits that show the human side of celebrities.



Alexander Melamid
50 Cent, 2008
Oil on canvas

This method of creation struck a strong chord with me, both conceptually and ethically. First, I think it improves the overall quality of the portrait. The more you learn about an individual or group, the more you know about the key elements that can visually represent them. Additionally, I feel artists tasked with creating visual representations of people have a certain responsibility to create a well-informed portrait. Richard Avadon's *In the American West* is an example of portraiture that ignores these concerns and strays into exploitative territory. Regardless of intentionality, there appears to be a bias present in how he portrays the people he interacts with. Before he had taken a photo or met any of his subjects, he had a pre-conceived vision for what the portraits were going to tell. His

goal was “to portray the whole American West as a blighted culture that spews out casualties by the bucket: misfits, drifters, degenerates, crackups, and prisoners-entrapped, either literally or by debasing work” (The ASX Team).



Richard Avedon
Blue Cloud Wright, slaughterhouse worker, 1979
Photographic contact print
11" x 14"

It is not a problem in and of itself to enter a project with one’s own goals, but it has potential to become a problem when one continues their own agenda regardless of the reality they ended up encountering, as in Avedon’s case. It seems the dynamics between artists and sitters can be complex, therefore I find it important to consider issues of exploitation that could arise from my work in order to attempt to prevent any harm that could arise as a result.

So I keep this in mind whenever I make art, and for *Who Would You Be?*, the natural way to ensure the intentions and understanding between the sitters and I would be as aligned as possible was to use people I already have close relationships with: my friends. Whenever I posed this prompt to friends, it often led to a lively dialogue about the different ways they could interpret the prompt and what aspects of their real or fictional character they could craft a persona with and what that would say about them. Never before had my art been a vehicle for me to strengthen relationships, and that's exactly what this project started to do. The prompt serves as a springboard to one-on-one conversations with those close to me. We've delved into anything from their favorite music to what it would mean to, and how to, summarize their identity. Throughout the course of this project, there have been three general ways in which people interpret the prompt: a genuine representation of who they are, a hyperbolized version of themselves, or a completely unrelated, made-up character. Each interpretation has its own merit, and regardless of the level of truthfulness, it seems that each portrait accurately represents the sitters in their own way. It is my hope that my art practice can work to strengthen these relationships in my life and bring some happiness into their lives for as long as they keep the portrait.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the friends I'm working with are all interconnected by webs of their own. So as the project grew, they began talking with each other about it and had conversations like the ones I valued having with them. This added a strong sense of a collective whole to the project that I had not previously considered. I wanted to create a method of presentation that maintained the individualism of each portrait while supporting this new sense of a collective whole through shared experience. As a result, I

decided to accumulate all the portraits in a book, with each portrait getting its own two-page spread. This would allow each portrait to simultaneously have the potential for individual attention and be considered in the context of the entire body of work.

Additionally, each portrait is supplemented by that sitters own writing about their decision making process from receiving the prompt to approving the final portrait. Aside from my aesthetic decisions to fit within historical portraiture conventions, I work to minimize my influence on the portraits. In doing so, I seek to maximize the sitter's control over the portrait, so they have final say on props, poses, and the end product. The book, and its format, is a way to present the work in a way that works in tandem with the primary goals of the project itself.

Who Would You Be? seeks to lead viewers to consider the issue of self-absorption and vanity in social media profiles from a different angle by placing contemporary sitters in the context of historical portraiture conventions. I want to bring to light the fact that we are not a new breed of horribly vain humans. People have falsified and exaggerated representations of themselves as long as portraiture has existed. Our awareness of the tension between person and persona is just amplified today due to the mass proliferation of images. Additionally, in working to achieve its goal, this project became a way to enhance the quality of my personal relationships with those involved through providing a space to interact and creating a link for them between myself and each other.

I intend to continue along this trajectory with my continued work, I am especially interested in exploring these same concepts with strangers. I think it would bring a new element to the series if my relationship with the sitters existed almost solely because of the project. Additionally, I want to explore using environment as another tool to cultivate

a persona. Allowing the sitters to chose where they want to be photographed, in addition to their chosen clothing and props, could create new depth in the portraits.



Kyle Strobel
Laura Talpey
Digital photograph
16" x 20"



Kyle Strobel
Nick Annin
Digital photograph
16" x 20"



Kyle Strobel
Dalton Nonweiler
Digital photograph
16" x 20"



Kyle Strobel
Grace Wang
Digital photograph
16" x 20"



Kyle Strobel
Peter Schneider
Digital photograph
16" x 20"

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Figure List

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16" x 20"
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