

A Thesis Presented to
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Participation as Observation: How I Create My Self from Others

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Over the past four years, I have acquired four best friends: Ian, Nick, Cody, and Andrew. Although other young men have come in and out of my time at Alfred, this year, my core group coalesced into these four. I have had the privilege to observe them in their home as their friend and as a female. Although they may essentially never forget that there is a girl in the room, I believe I have come nearly as close as one of my gender can to witnessing young men's relationships in action without the influence of the female presence. My observations of these men, as well as the strong influence of my lifetime of observation of the male members of my family, are the subject of my artistic exploration.

The work consists of images of the type of people I have had the most experience with: 20-something year old, white, middle-class men. Almost all of the images are of my closest friends, or of other young men I am around because of my proximity to the activities of college men. I have put their interests and actions in the context of family and tradition; thus, oval mats and hanging frames. The frames are made of different materials – wood, plastic, metal – and resemble the hodgepodge nature of frames found in most family homes. The use of frames and mats indicates my relationship to the men – loving and familial – while also pointing to the specific culture formed by a family. They each come bearing their own culture of traditions as all participate in a new one, one formed by their everyday interactions with their peers. Frames provide a familiar and dated method of presentation of the portrait, but the formality of a posed sitter is broken by intimate and specific views of young men's actions. By placing him in the home, I am drawing attention to a general familiarity with the modern young man and putting his seemingly innocuous actions up for consideration.

The lack of eye contact in profile portraiture distances the subject from the viewer. Black cutout portraits are even further removed, as we cannot see some specific features. However, these portraits are interesting in that we can immediately recognize very basic details of the sitter: his age, gender, style of dress, etc. Although many of my portraits are of specific people, I wanted to use this format to convey the basics of the kind of people I am portraying. These are young men who wear their hair a little long, do not go to the gym very often, and play video games.

I observe these young men, consciously or unconsciously, through the context of the men on my father's side of the family. Those men believe in the importance of actions over words, competitive spirit, work ethic as a sign of worth, and teasing as a sign of affection. More important than being physically imposing is having a job, a task, or something to do and do well. This is by no means a unique American family, however, that does not make it less important in shaping how I see my male friends and my inclusion in their lives. I want to be irreplaceable – essentially, I want to be a part of their “family.”

A family is a group of people that is always your family, no matter what. Family is a powerful bond that, even if one is ignored or is ostracized, still influences a person and his or her relationships with other people. By creating these portraits, I am attempting to capture moments, even mundane ones, that tie people together in their understanding of each other. These moments are the familial to me. Other moments represented, ones that are not specifically of my friends, are based on my actual experiences with the men in my family, so that my family experiences are interspersed with the family I have attempted to form around me.

Kara Walker is a contemporary African-American artist who uses wall-sized black silhouettes depicting the American South in the Civil War era. She creates fictional scenes exploring violence, stereotypes, sexuality, and race through theatrical figures. The images are often taken from historical sources, and the imagery includes mammies, pickaninnies, plantation mistresses and masters, as well as clear differentiation between white and black, male and female figures. The imagery is often grotesque but a caricature of what it represents – an observation of race and gender stereotypes that persist in how we as a culture perceive types of bodies. Her stories are told almost as a fairy tale, but the playfulness and humor paired with excess violence and sexuality turns into irony and questions what we want to see as a modern audience.*

The article “Postmodern Repetitions: Parody, Trauma, and the Case of Kara Walker” discusses Walker’s “use of parody to challenge the male white tradition from within, to use irony to implicate and yet to critique”¹ all who are drawn to her work because of its subject matter. “From within” referring to the tradition of white, European men historically dominating the walls of the most prestigious galleries. She is critiquing the history and prevalence of white masculine domination in all settings by her presence in a gallery space and by using the silhouette format – which also originated with white, European men. Her works are sickly humorous on more than a surface level: she has been invited to openly critique the history of what is celebrated in a gallery setting. Walker challenges her audience to take a closer look at why she is so welcome in a gallery, revealing their own desire to see the vulgar, explicit, and shameful. She states, “I would be happy if visitors would stand in

1 Amy Tang, "Postmodern Repetitions: Parody, Trauma, and the Case of Kara Walker," *Differences: A Journal Of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 21, no. 2 (2010): 142-172, EBSCOhost (accessed May 1, 2012).

front of my work and feel a bit ashamed—ashamed because they have... simply believed in the project of modernism.”²

Her pairing of parody and trauma is a way to observe the past and recognize its reverberations in the present. Although the two seem opposed, both are a reincarnation of the past, “parody ostensibly being an actively critical return to the past and trauma an unconscious and uncontrolled repetition of the past”.³ By simultaneously critiquing but returning over and over again to the trauma of the past in a cinematic presentation, Walker gives her American audience what it wants, but makes it very aware that its voyeuristic desires for the past may be the cause of repetition of trauma in the present. She implicates herself in this culture of viewing and imagination, as she states, “the interesting thing for me in my work is how easy it is to commit atrocities... If a girl like me can think this stuff, then what?”⁴

Walker’s thoughts and historical images have been distilled into the dramatic presence of figures filled with suggestive absence. Troupes are “reduced to this one thing, this black paper”⁵ making them appear to be what they actually are – a simplification of a larger idea. At the same time, the simplified images force the audience to consider the implications of that simplification. In my work I am also using the black paper to simplify. I am simplifying a moment, allowing the viewer to observe the figure as I do, from an outside

² Kara Walker, (Artist), interview by Walker Art Center, "The Art of Kara Walker," May 2007, May 1, 2012, <http://learn.walkerart.org/karawalker?n=Main.HomePage>.

³ Amy Tang, "Postmodern Repetitions: Parody, Trauma, and the Case of Kara Walker," *Differences: A Journal Of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 21, no. 2 (2010): 142-172, EBSCOhost (accessed May 1, 2012).

*See image reference page.

⁴ Kara Walker, (Artist), interview by SFMoMA, San Francisco "Kara Walker's "uneasy relationship" with her own imagination," August 2005, May 1, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6t-S_DfXCI.

⁵ Kara Walker, (Artist), interview by SFMoMA, San Francisco "Kara Walker's "uneasy relationship" with her own imagination," August 2005, May 1, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6t-S_DfXCI.

perspective, with only speculation as to the inner thoughts or feelings of the subject. Kara Walker uses the cyclorama, a theatrical display, to present her characters. Her figures are often in the round and are life size, immediately throwing the viewer into a narrative. Where it begins and ends is in question, but the audience is caught in a loop of the past repeated. I use domestic frames, placing my subjects in the context of the home. The oval mats and frames are both nostalgic and voyeuristic, suggesting a hidden and focused look at one subject, as if through a keyhole. I want my audience to experience my subjects as I do, watching them as they go through daily life, but with the viewer unable to directly experience the subject's feelings or actions. The frames feel close and familial, but the moments captured are already in the past and can only be observed.

Silhouette portraits are nostalgic and these portraits are my nostalgia for the recent past and my memory of my own past. All of these experiences I am cataloguing are not directly experienced by me. I am observing them, absorbing them and they are becoming a part of my understanding of these people or moments in my life, but I am not the one affected in the moment. It is not I playing video games, putting down a card, or wiping away my vomit. The black silhouette is my removal from the moment. I am not there; it is not my bodily experience. The form is both absent and present, as it is in my memory, as I am the witness, not the participant of experience.

The most obvious aspect of this project is the most difficult for me to address: all of these images are of men. As a woman, I must answer this. They are each my friend because of their individual traits and character. I have friends both male and female and they are my friends because they all offer me love, compassion, and support. This piece is about a group of men, however, and I can only explain this choice of subject matter as pride. I am proud to

know them and to be as close to them as I am because of who they are and because I am female. It is too dangerously a stereotype to say that men and women can never be friends and that I have transcended that barrier. Instead, I would say that I am proud to be a female accepted as an equal among a group of male friends. I have gained insight into how I would like to conduct my future relationships with men and women, both friendly and romantic.

The conflicts I am representing are never involve actual yelling or malicious intent, because more important to me are the moments in between placid interaction and actions motivated by anger. Usually the conflicts I witness never build into actual confrontation. Mockery, allocation of blame, disagreements and the like are the minor conflicts that build and shape the relationships around me. Those relationships and power shifts affect me by my proximity to them. Although my individual relationships with people I know are shaped most importantly by my direct experience with them, observing them from a position of exclusion forces a consideration of other aspects of them as a person that they do not necessarily share with me one on one.

Annette Messenger is a visual artist who produces installation works in a variety of mediums. In recent years she made several pieces using soft fabric dolls and inflatables, studying the importance of play in the formation of identity. Past works include “My Vows”*, a circular installation of intimate black and white portraits of body parts. The piece also explores the formation of identity through our experience with how we view the body. The closeness of the features seems sexually intimate, but the pictures do not discriminate which parts of the body they portray. I am most drawn to Messenger’s exploration of identity and how the “other” is always somehow included in the formation of an individual’s personality. Messenger’s works leave room for each viewer’s imagination to play with the

concept of self. The self is often influenced and shaped by reactions to what we creatively engage in, whether it is sex or stuffed toys, we are a series of shifting interactions.

The silhouettes all come from photos or moments I have captured among my friends, from real interaction among a group of people. The young men I observe and share my life with shape my identity and I shape theirs, even if it is merely by my presence. By acting as a witness to their lives, I am giving them a part of myself – my attention, consideration, and value of their identities as individuals and as a unit. As one critic remarked in regards to an origin of Messenger's work, "Nobody becomes a self alone. It happens only in relation to others, and within a specific culture and language."⁶ I believe they are forming me and I them in the same way that my early influences, especially in the specific culture of my family, taught me how to become part of a culture, and gave me the tools to become a part of and help create a new culture. Although these young men are not my family by blood, perhaps they are now my kin in the tribal sense; we are bound together by common language, environment, and traditions. Finding normalcy in different environments than that of our childhood home is how we mature and find ourselves in the modern world. These young men have been an essential part of my maturation and confidence to maintain my identity within my family while recognizing my ability to make my own choices.

As a welcomed outsider, I have watched my male friends as they have interacted with each other and as they have taken moments alone. Their relative indifference to my presence has allowed for focused observation, the quiet contemplation I experienced sitting in family gatherings, watching the adult men in my family interact. Through the position of an excluded witness, I find myself nonetheless engaged. Although I may be partially excluded

6 Hustvedt, Siri. "Puppet master: Trickster, Tinkerer, Peddler, Practical Woman..." The Guardian, February 20, 2009.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/feb/21/annette-messenger> (accessed May 1, 2012).

* See image reference page.

from the activity, by necessity of my gender, I am still present with them. By watching men who are important in my life, I gain understanding of their inner selves through what they display during routine activity, just the normal stuff of our lives: playing video games, texting, a game of pick up soccer. When I am confronted with other outsiders – other females – in these environments of control, I often feel defensive and threatened. I feel the need to maintain my position as an irreplaceable and unique witness to the lives of these men. That role is real to me and must remain undiminished, as it is how I identify myself among them, but I do not believe they know that the role exists.

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Annette Messenger



Annette Messenger, *My Vows (Mes Voeux)*. 1988-91. Gelatin-silver prints under glass, and string. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Detail of *My Vows*.