

Emme, M. (2003). 'Critical Self-Portraits.' in Photoed 8 Fall 2003 32-35.

In 1840 Hippolyte Beyard used a paper negative process of his own invention to photograph himself as a drowning victim. Beyard created this stark self-portrait as a form of protest. Caught up in the excitement of celebrating the invention of the daguerreotype, the French government of the day ignored Beyard's photographic innovations. As a political gesture his morbid photograph is probably the earliest example of self-portraiture used as a form of social criticism.

Since Beyard's day there has been a steady stream of photographers who have combined the personal and the political through self-portraiture. One of the great critical delights of photography is its supposed 'democracy'. The camera is a tool that most anyone can use and a photographic image allows most anyone to see almost anything. The great critical dilemma of photography is that with all of these images moving freely through the world, pictures tend to take the place of actual people and places. Along with being entertained, we choose everything from our clothes to our country's leaders, and even our enemies, based in large part on photographic and video pictures. For many contemporary photographers, the act of self-portraiture is an attempt to take some control of the representations and misrepresentations that are a byproduct of this visual culture.

Artists like British photographer, Jo Spence, have redefined their own family history by re-enacting and documenting critical moments from their families' photo albums. Later Spence used documentary self-portraiture as a weapon in her own, unfortunately unsuccessful battle with cancer. Carrie Mae Weems' early self-images lead her to installations of archival photographs that in their origins and her revisions investigate American black experience. Cindy Sherman's deconstruction of 'woman' in her film stills series each used the artist's body as both a referent to self and a critical symbol to confront stereotypes. Even Canadian Jeff Wall, in an early work that anticipated the academic tendencies of his future photography, pictured himself as the archetypal voyeuristic photographer in his double homage to feminist criticism and Manet's "Bar at the Fol-

lies-Bergère” in a work he titled, “Picture for Women.”

The balancing act of critical self-portraiture involves using your individuality to stand for a larger community. This act of self-representation can be quietly self-reflective, deeply egotistical or almost a form of self-sacrifice. Jean-Francois Lecourt committed symbolic suicide by aiming a gun at the lens of a camera which was aimed back at his own face. Set to snap a picture at the sound of the guns report, lens, camera, film and the resulting photograph all reveal images of both the artist and the damage done. Self-portraiture can be less visceral, but no less critical as when Judith Golden playfully cut strategically placed holes into the cover portraits of celebrities on People magazine. By peaking through these windows and snapping her camera, Judith was able to probe fame and self-image simultaneously.

Among the photographically most misrepresented groups in society are children and youth. Virtually all of the images we see of young people are images produced by adults. In the past several decades activist photographers in a number of communities have been giving cameras to young people as a form of visual emancipation. Jim Hubbard’s ‘Shooting Back’ program was originally a response to former U.S. president Ronald Reagan’s claim that there were no homeless in the U.S capitol. For ten years, young homeless people involved with “Shooting Back” produced and exhibited photographs that were unblinking celebrations of their lives. Young photographers can cut through the romanticizing and commodifying fictions in the media to represent what matters in their lives, but it can be hard. How often has it been said that a real-life tragedy, “was like a movie”? Self-portraiture that doesn’t resort to the pre-existing cliché’s available to us through the media takes both artistry and critical honesty.

The portfolio of images included here are works done by a variety of university students. Some are first-year students exploring social issues and self-identity. Some are images by experienced classroom teachers exploring their career and life-choices. Some are by art educators in training exploring aspects of performance art as a way to link their own art experience with the idea of audience and teaching. In every case the images are self-portraits where the subject is also the photographer. The setting, pose, costume and lighting are all managed by the person being photographed. In each case the rest of the class and the instructor served as crew. In each case a video camera and monitor faced the subject so they could constantly monitor their choices up to the moment the shutter was tripped. Each portrait was preceded by a research process where the subject/photographer explored how they were represented visually in the media.

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**Below are web references that lead to work by many of the artists mentioned in this article.**

Hippolyte Bayard: <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/history/bayard.htm>

Carrie Mae Weems: (current work) [http://www.artnet.com/magazine/reviews/ebony/ebony\(4\)3-20-01.asp](http://www.artnet.com/magazine/reviews/ebony/ebony(4)3-20-01.asp)

Judith Golden: (search by artist) <http://www.universalcolorslide.com>

Cindy Sherman: <http://www.moma.org/docs/collection/photography>

Jo Spence: <http://hosted.aware.easynet.co.uk/jospence/jo5.htm>

Jeff Wall: <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/news/hart/hart7-31-2.asp>

Jim Hubbard and Shooting Back: <http://www.klammeraffe.org/~fritsch/uni-sb/fsinfo/Papers/Voices/story.html>

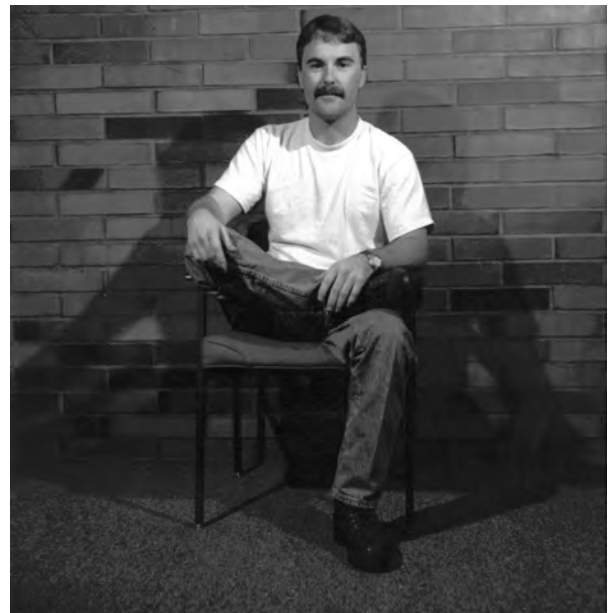
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When people look at me, I want them to look up at me - not because I think that I am better than them but because I have earned respect throughout my life. I want people to see me & say "Wow - there's someone who did something with her life." In this picture, I am portraying a proud, white, upperclass American woman in a respectable & powerful position.

First-year students involved in exploring social issues using video and photography

I'm just an ordinary country boy, content with my life not having to worry about being stereotyped. I chose to look this way, because I feel confident in myself and like to project that to other people. By taking away the chair with wheels it takes away the "oh! I wonder what happened to him?" I makes me look independent rather than relying on a mobile chair!





Classroom teachers reflections on their careers



Art education students exploring performance art as an avenue to creative teaching

