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SELF PORTRAITS

“The problem of self-identity is not just a problem for the young. It is a problem all the time. Perhaps *the* problem. It should haunt old age, and when it no longer does it should tell you that you are dead.”
Norman Maclean

The act of portraiture—taking a photograph—is the easy part of a self-portrait; really, anyone can take a photograph of himself. The challenge is the self. How does the artist use photography to reveal something about the ‘self’? This challenge is compounded by the limitations inherent in photography. The artist must use a tool which records only superficial, externalized appearances to communicate something far beneath the skin’s surface.

When I was an art student some years ago, I received an assignment to make a photographic self-portrait and I immediately understood that photographing myself would expose all of the ways in which I do not measure up. After realizing that I would have no trouble with the assignment if I looked like the people I envied, I decided to photograph them instead. Without capturing what I look like, the resulting series of photographs would therefore reveal something about who I am and not how I appear. The result has become a carefully curated wish-list of self-portraits, which ultimately communicates something about my identity, namely, my self-image, self-awareness and desire, while simultaneously addressing such universal dualities as self/other, mind/body and young/old.

As I have aged and become more comfortable in my skin, the project has continued, over the course of twenty-five years now. Inevitably, it has evolved to become a sharp reminder of the power of youth and the command that youth has on our culture. Perversely, the project allows me to vicariously experience the missed opportunities of my own youth through my subjects. And I have learned that being handsome or having perfect abs comes with its own pressures, even setting aside the clichés of “how hard it is to be beautiful.” Most profoundly, though, I have learned that when all is said and done, I – with my gray hair and extra pounds – may in fact be more comfortable with my body than the young men I photograph, who increasingly face the pressure to conform to the expectations bestowed upon them by their youth and the world it occupies.

What I have found over time, though, is that while it was admiration and envy of the physical that drew me to approach my subjects, what I now enjoy the most about the portraits is the simple opportunity for human interaction. To some extent, the project has become a performance piece, where the ‘art’ is the act of convincing the stranger to pose, thus creating an opportunity for two people to learn something about one another. I liken it to that figure in your high-school physics textbook that shows how the course of the billiard ball changes with the impact of another ball. As human beings, we have those interactions constantly. But the portrait makes it deliberate, and the photos simply become the record of that interaction.

Because of the human interaction, the project has a lot to do with trust and human nature – certainly much more so than a conventional self-portrait. And while I surprise myself, and others, with my success rate, I sometimes wonder if I would participate if a stranger approached me with a similar proposition.

Ultimately, these photographs are an attempt to explore and record what I perceive to be beautiful, a perception based entirely on my own history, experiences, and—most importantly—self-identity. My hope is that the photographs force the viewer to assess their own sense of beauty, and in so doing, their own self-identity, because, as Norman Maclean points out, when we stop doing this, we cease to live.