PERFORMING THE PORTRAIT:

PHOTOGRAPHY BY J. SHIMON & J. LINDEMANN

I would like to curate an exhibition of portrait photography by John Shimon and Julie Lindemann. Shimon and Lindemann have been photographing collaboratively since 1985. Working from Manitowoc, Wisconsin the two have captured the idiosyncrasies and rural behavior of the Midwestern town and its inhabitants. I would like to focus primarily on their series of portrait photographs entitled "Pictures of Non-Famous People," which is a set of platinum-palladium prints that highlights residents, both old and young, in the small towns of Wisconsin. Shimon and Lindemann utilize antiquated cameras in this series, initially working with an 8x10 Deardorff and then with a circa 1913 12x20 Folmer & Schwing banquet camera. The time consuming process of using these historic cameras allows Shimon and Lindemann the opportunity to really connect with those being photographed. Stories unfold in a kind of performance between the photographers and the photographed, as the intermingling of performance and identity seems to seep out of the arduous portrait making procedure. As people stand before the camera and interact with Shimon and Lindemann, they have the opportunity to pose, looking into the camera and portraying an identity they perform in the way they see fit for that moment.

While the photograph displays a single moment in time, the work, process and performance surrounding the single photograph has a much larger story. Shimon and Lindemann’s use of antiquated camera processes mixed with modern techniques and contemporary culture allows for a new view of history, as seen by their statement:

Part of our experiment is to draw from all phases of photographic evolution to see different things in the same manner (the contemporary through the eyes of history) and the same things in different ways (the subject rendered in different processes). ¹

Shimon and Lindemann’s poetic rendering of a rural Wisconsin culture, often choosing misfits and characters from punk bands, demonstrates the intensity of a small town persona to create its own identity. By taking those who would otherwise remain mostly anonymous peoples and exploring their likeness and idiosyncrasies, Shimon and Lindemann use the portrait as a vehicle to discover what hides behind an individual and his or her culture. This performance unravels before the camera and a Midwestern subculture becomes meaningful and a larger reflection of humanity.

In discussing these portraits in the context of both performance studies and portraiture, this thesis would be an intervention into the history of portraiture. In viewing the subjects of these portraits as performing within a rural Midwestern culture, Shimon and Lindemann highlight each of their sitters’ individual reality. The photographic process allows for a performance, for the sitter to identify with the camera and his or herself. During the photographing process, various levels of performance unfold. The first kind performance is the process of using an old camera. Foregoing the fast and easy use of a modern camera, Shimon and Lindemann choose to use old cameras, which require a slow and delicate handling. In the space of time that they are preparing their camera equipment, another performance unfolds. The photographers begin to form a relationship with the person being photographed. In many cases, Shimon

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and Lindemann have made an initial connection with their sitter by already having made them close friends or by simply meeting them in the street or in a local bar. There is an investment in both time and friendship as they come to know the people they photograph. These relationships greatly affect the outcome of the portrait, giving the final photograph a vitality and uniqueness that not all portraits carry.

Shimon and Lindemann have written statements on the back of their prints, telling the story of the person or persons being photographed. These statements emphasize the connection between the photographers and their sitters. Indeed, another performance, and an inevitable outcome of a portrait photo shoot, is the development and consideration of identity. The sitter poses and performs for the camera, taking on a persona that he/she wants viewers to see. The camera urges and invites this play with identity as the person being photographed can perform any identity he/she chooses. The background stories told to Shimon and Lindemann are the written outcome of the performances that occur in front of the camera. For example, on the back of a black and white 8 x 10 photograph, Nigel Smoking, a portrait of a man in a leather jacket, resembling a James Dean figure, the story reads: The first time we met Nigel, he claimed to have just gotten out of prison. He said he has served time for assault or murder—he never really clarified. When he went out he’d get drunk, say the wrong thing and get beaten-up or arrested. The process of getting drunk and the state of being hung over were aspects of his identity. He referred to himself as a “cultural icon” and admitted that the stories he told about his past were sometimes lies. It didn’t seem to matter—they just became part of his personal mythology.

The day Carrie turned 18, she moved out her parents’ house and into an apartment with Nigel. It was a block from our studio and we ended up there with our 8x10 view camera that day. Nigel drank a 12-pack while we worked. Carrie barely said a word.

That summer they’d go everywhere together. Nigel told us how they’d sit along the lake and she’d read him stories. She’d hold his guitar picks while he performed with his surf-punk band, Thee Insects. For a couple days they worked at the bubble bath factory together until the soap flumes got to them. For his birthday, she bought him a Stray Cats tattoo for his forearm with the money she earned as a hostess at a hotel restaurant.

They moved to Milwaukee together and she got a job right away as a waitress at George Webb’s. He’d stay home and get drunk. Eventually she kicked him out.

While the photographs can speak for themselves, these statements, written in a beautiful and poetic prose, are very much a part of the portraits as they tell a story and create a new life and identity for the person in the photograph. The statements would be available in the gallery show. Either as wall text or in a booklet, viewers would have access to these stories, giving further insight into the photographs. The show would consist of mostly 8x10 portraits and 12x20 portraits from the initial platinum prints. There would also be the inclusion of four 34 x 27 archival inkjet color portraits prints, which would add a bold statement and interesting visual aesthetic. The intimacy of an 8x10 would also allow for a pleasurable and personal viewing experience in the gallery. The photographers have frames for all of their photographs, so framing and matting would be provided by the artists. The focus of the photographs would be on 5-7 specific individuals that Shimon and Lindemann have photographed frequently over time. I would like to consider the individual stories behind each photograph as well as their larger collective statement of Wisconsin culture and identity.

This exhibition would be an excellent addition to the UWM Art History Gallery as it deals with a tradition of art history that everyone is familiar with, yet it sheds a new perspective and challenges viewers’ expectations. The photographers are both contemporary and local, and it would be a wonderful opportunity to present working Wisconsin artists in a University of Wisconsin academic setting. Due to the Midwestern subjects, the photographs will draw in Wisconsin natives and inhabitants as well as
those already familiar with Shimon and Lindemann's work. There may also be opportunities for artist's talks about the photographs, which would be an excellent educational experience for the art history department as well as other extended art departments. The popularity of photography as well as portraiture will draw students into the department's gallery space.
PRELIMINARY BIBLIOGRAPHY


