

ISABELLA
STEWART GARDNER
MUSEUM

EXHIBITIONS AT ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM EXPLORE
HOW ARTISTS THROUGHOUT TIME HAVE USED PHOTOGRAPHY
TO EXPRESS PERSONAS

- ~ *Persona: Photography and the Re-Imagined Self* Highlights 31 Global Artists
- ~ *Picturing Isabella* Investigates Founder's Cultivation of Enigmatic Identity
- ~ New Work by Jamie Diamond Probes Concepts of Motherhood

Select exhibition images [here](#).

BOSTON, MA (February 17, 2026) — A suite of exhibitions at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum explores how photography has been used throughout time as a medium of self-expression and reinvention, a means for questioning and challenging personal identity. [Persona: Photography and the Re-Imagined Self](#) (February 19 – May 10) examines how artists, both historic and contemporary, have utilized photography to create and share a persona, an alter ego that is distinct from the self they present to the public. [Picturing Isabella](#) (February 19 – June 21) investigates the deliberate curation of an enigmatic and elusive identity by Museum founder Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840 – 1924), who hid from the camera as her fame grew. A newly-commissioned public work of art by Gardner Museum [Artist-in-Residence, Jamie Diamond: Monstra Te Esse Matrem](#) (show yourself to be a mother), 2026 (February 10 – July 28), confronts preconceived notions of motherhood. In all of these exhibitions, photography is revealed as a critical tool in presenting one's persona, real or imagined—a theme of particular relevance in today's social media-driven society.

“Photography can provide a creative avenue for cultivating and even reinventing one’s own identity,” said Peggy Fogelman, *Norma Jean Calderwood Director*. “Artists have used its power to project a certain image, or persona, and posit an alternate or imagined reality, from the time of Isabella Stewart Gardner, who fiercely protected her own unique identity, to the current era of digital editing and AI.”

[Persona: Photography and the Re-Imagined Self](#)

February 19 – May 10, Hostetter Gallery

[Persona: Photography and the Re-Imagined Self](#), on view from February 19 – May 10, features 83 works by 31 internationally-recognized artists who have imagined and re-imagined themselves and others through unique personas, alter egos, and avatars. Whether aspirational, related to cultural or social identity, or a form of activism and advocacy, inhabiting a character enables artists to empower themselves and interrogate societal norms, expectations, and stereotypes. [Persona: Photography and the Re-Imagined Self](#), which takes place in the Museum’s Hostetter Gallery, is co-curated by Pieranna Cavalchini, the Gardner’s *Tom and Lisa Blumenthal Curator of Contemporary Art*, and Melissa Harris, editor-at-large of Aperture Foundation. The exhibition includes generous loans from artists, museums, and galleries, as well as university and private collections.

Photographs chosen for the exhibition represent a wide range of artists who confront the complex nature of identity in a myriad of different ways. They are: Hakeem Adewumi (American, b. 1990); Azra Akšamija (Austrian, b. 1976); Claude Cahun (French, 1894 – 1954); Sophie Calle (French, b. 1953); María Magdalena Campos-Pons (Cuban American, b. 1959);

Cao Fei (Chinese, b. 1978); Jamie Diamond (American, b. 1983); Marcel Duchamp (French American, 1887 – 1968); John Dugdale (American, b. 1960); Samuel Fosso (Cameroonian, b. 1962); Lina Geoushy (Egyptian, b. 1990); Kahn & Selesnick (Nicholas Kahn [American, b. 1964] and Richard Selesnick [British, b. 1964]); Mary Reid Kelley (American, b. 1979) and Patrick Kelley (American, b. 1969); John Kelly (American, b. 1959); Shigeyuki Kihara (Samoan, b. 1975); Şükran Moral (Turkish, b. 1962); Mariko Mori (Japanese, b. 1967); Yasumasa Morimura (Japanese, b. 1951); Zanele Muholi (South African, b. 1972); Narcissister (American, b. 1971); Man Ray (American, 1890 – 1976); Tomoko Sawada (Japanese, b. 1977); Cindy Sherman (American, b. 1954); Yinka Shonibare (British-Nigerian, b. 1962); Tseng Kwong Chi (Chinese-American, 1950 – 1990); Wang Qingsong (Chinese, b. 1966); Gillian Wearing (British, b. 1963); Carrie Mae Weems (American, b. 1953); and David Wojnarowicz (American, 1954 – 1992).

The exhibition opens with works dating back to the 1920s by pioneering artists of gender expression. Two gelatin silver prints by conceptual artist Man Ray, who photographed close friend and artistic collaborator Marcel Duchamp as his female alter-ego Rose Sélavy, are on view in the exhibition's anteroom. *Belle Haleine* (1921), Man Ray's first photograph of Rose, which decorates a perfume bottle label, is on loan from the Getty Museum. These works are complemented by a series of surrealist self-portraits (1920 – 1928) by Claude Cahun. Cahun defied societal conventions by making self-portraits that explored gender expression, shaving her head and trying on different versions of femininity and masculinity. Nearly a century later, Gillian Wearing pays homage to these historic works, and alter egos of her predecessors, in her diptych *Me as Madame and Monsieur Duchamp* (2018) and *Me as Cahun Holding a Mask of My Face* (2012).

Other artists in the exhibition address themes of race, power, and cultural hybridity by embodying historic figures or cultural icons. In his series *African Spirits*, Samuel Fosso transforms into icons of the pan-African liberation movement in *Self-Portrait (Malcolm X)* (2008) and *Self-Portrait (Angela Davis)* (2008), channeling masterful self-styling that communicated their activism and power. Yasumasa Morimura, who describes himself as a cross between an actor and visual artist, uses props and digital manipulation to channel Mexican artist Frida Kahlo in two portraits (*Standing Firm* and *Skull Ring*) of *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo*, 2001. David Wojnarowicz stages photographs of himself wearing a mask of a 19th-century French poet in *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* (1978 – 1979). In a large grid of 12 photographs, Yinka Shonibare's *Dorian Gray* (2001) retells the novel written by Oscar Wilde (1890) and later adapted into a film (1945), casting himself as the dandy lead.

Also finding inspiration in cinema, Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* recalls scenes from low-budget 1950s movies, with the artist embodying female archetypes and clichés. The exhibition includes two gelatin silver prints from this early series—*Untitled Film Still #24* (1978) and *#44* (1979)—which became a stimulus for conversation about feminism and representation.

Gender roles and stereotypes continue to be a theme investigated by contemporary artists. Mariko Mori's *Tea Ceremony III* (1994) depicts a still image from her performance piece in which she channels frustration at gender conventions by playing her alien alter-ego and serving tea to corporate suits in Tokyo. In *Ulugali'i Samoa: Samoan Couple* (2004 – 2005), on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, artist Shigeyuki Kihara poses as both male and female, transposing her head (altered with a moustache, thicker eyebrows, and short hair) onto a man's body. This wedding portrait references tropes from 1800s colonial photography that

reinforced bias for gender binaries and exoticized stereotypes of Pacific culture. *Married with Three Men* (2010), a series by Turkish performance artist Şükran Moral, pushes social and political boundaries by inverting typical gender roles, portraying a bride marrying three young grooms.

Carrie Mae Weems and Lina Geoushy further interrogate issues of gender, race, and representation, challenging viewers to reconsider perceptions and the roles we assume as we shape our identity. Carrie Mae Weems takes on the persona of an artist's model in *Not Manet's Type* (1997), questioning the way a white male artist may have perceived her as a subject. In her self-portrait series, *Trailblazers*, Lina Geoushy inhabits overlooked female icons in Egyptian history as a way to honor their contributions and reclaim erased feminist stories.

In today's digital culture, self-portraiture is ubiquitous and easily manipulated with filters and artificial intelligence blurring the lines between reality and fiction. Five works from Cao Fei's futuristic series *The Fashions of China Tracy 01-05* (2009) illustrate the artist's fascination with global pop culture and anime through her avatar China Tracy who takes charge in a fictional Chinese city in the online virtual world Second Life. Wang Qingsong remixes the past with the present reimagining an ancient Chinese scroll painting in which he appears four times amongst a crowd of party-goers in *Night Revels of Lao Li* (2000). Azra Akšamija trained artificial intelligence software to create *Hallucinating Traditions* (2024 – 2025), a video animation sequence morphing self-portraits of her wearing various global and fantastical headdresses.

Portraits by Gardner Museum [Artists-in Residence](#) comment on societal norms and expectations and challenge viewers to reconsider their perceptions of identity and personal history. Photographic portraits by

[Hakeem Adewumi](#), [Sophie Calle](#), [Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley](#), and [Zanele Muholi](#) are featured in the exhibition. Four photographs from Narcissister's *Untitled Self-Portrait Series* (2012) reflect on the conventional beauty standards of mannequins from the 1950s as well as her own mixed-race identity. Four examples (2010 – 2012) from [Jamie Diamond](#)'s sequence *I Promise to be a Good Mother* confront the complexities of the mother/child relationship through images of the artist caring for a lifelike baby doll.

Opening Night Program — [Persona: An Exploration in Four Acts](#)
February 19, 7 – 8:30 pm, Calderwood Hall

Three artists featured in *Persona*—Narcissister, Hakeem Adewumi, and Jamie Diamond—will interrogate the concept of “persona” after an introduction by exhibition co-curators Pieranna Cavalchini and Melissa Harris. Questions like, “Why does an artist take on a persona?” and “How might the creation and embodiment of a persona be an exploration of the personal, cultural, or political?” will be examined.

Jamie Diamond: [Monstra Te Esse Matrem](#), 2026
February 10 – July 28, Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade

“Motherhood is so often idealized, glorified, and sanitized, far removed from the everyday realities and emotional complexity it actually holds. This work challenges that idealization. It confronts the role itself: its expectations, its contradictions, its beauty, and its failures.”

— Jamie Diamond

In addition to her photographs showcased in the *Persona* exhibition, Gardner Museum [Artist-in-Residence Jamie Diamond](#) was selected to create a new work to hang on the Museum's façade. This original commission—*Monstra Te Esse Matrem* (show yourself to be a mother),

2026—will be displayed as a public work of art on the Museum's Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade along Evans Way from February 10 – July 28.

This most recent iteration of the artist's engagement with the theme of motherhood was impacted by her experience as a Gardner Museum Artist-in-Residence, influenced by the poignancy of Isabella's story of motherhood and premature loss of her son, as well as the many depictions of Madonna and Child that fill the Museum's galleries. In *Monstra Te Esse Matrem*, Diamond holds a reborn doll, a lifelike silicone surrogate of an infant, while her two children hug her tightly from behind. The photograph was taken at The Mother Church at the Christian Science Plaza in Boston. The photo's title, *Monstra Te Esse Matrem*, was inspired by the 15th-century sculpture [Virgin Adoring the Christ Child](#) by Matteo di Giovanni Civitali (Italian, 1436 – 1501) in the Museum's [Long Gallery](#).

[Picturing Isabella](#)

February 19 – June 21, Fenway Gallery

"I am never photographed, unless by some Kodak fiend, who does it on the sly, and without my permission. I am sorry to disappoint you."

—Isabella Stewart Gardner, 1915

As a complement to the *Persona* exhibition, [Picturing Isabella](#), on view in the Fenway Gallery (adjacent to the Museum's Courtyard) from February 19 – June 21, highlights Isabella Stewart Gardner's deliberate cultivation of her own dramatic and enigmatic persona. Bringing together select photographs that Isabella chose to preserve—both formal portraits and candid snapshots—the exhibition traces the Museum founder's changing and complicated relationship to image, fame, and legacy. The exhibition of 35 objects (31 photographs of Isabella and four historical newspaper

clippings) culled from the Museum's collection is divided into three sections: *Early Photographs*, *Dodging the Camera*, and *Selectively Posing*.

Early Photographs — Isabella Stewart Gardner (April 14, 1840 – July 17, 1924) and photography came of age at the same time. By the late 1800s, photography was a staple of American visual culture. Notable people were photographed again and again, and formal studio portraiture was common for an upper-class woman.

The most personal photographs of Isabella were taken when she was a teenager, newlywed, and mother. A tiny leather album (about the size of a locket), *Portrait Album of Gem Photographs* (about 1860), contains side-by-side tintypes of Isabella and her husband, Jack, around the time of their marriage. An intimate shot taken in a studio with backdrop shows Isabella as a young mom nuzzling her only child, Jackie, who died just a few months later.

More candid photographs from the 1860s – 1890s document Isabella and Jack's travels— their first international trip to Norway (1867) and gathered around a table for a luncheon in Seville (1888). In contrast to the more intimate portraiture of Isabella's youth, these travel photos reflect her expanding world, social status, and emerging public persona.

By the time Isabella was into her 40s, she had evolved toward a practice of more conscious self-image making. After Isabella commissioned John Singer Sargent to paint her [full length portrait](#) (on view in the Museum's Gothic Room), she commissioned Thomas E. Marr to photograph the controversial portrait, making copies to sign and distribute to friends. Isabella was beginning to intentionally shape her public persona.

Dodging the Camera — Of the small number of photographs that exist of Isabella at the peak of her fame, most are snapshots taken with her dogs or socializing with her close-knit groups of artistic friends. Even in these photos with trusted companions, Isabella is frequently veiled or turned away from the camera. (Isabella regularly wore a veil in public by the 1890s, for unknown reasons but possibly to protect her skin.)

Lacking reliable photography of the famed socialite, civic leader, and Museum founder (the Museum opened in 1903), some newspapers resorted to using images of other women to accompany their articles about Isabella. As someone who defied expectations of her gender and class, press coverage was often exaggerated or scandalous. Three original feature articles, published around the turn of the century, are on view in this section.

Selectively Posing — Very occasionally, Gardner agreed to pose for formal photographs later in life, working exclusively with artists and photographers she knew and trusted. Two of these portraits were taken in 1906 by Adolf de Meyer, who would go on to become *Vogue's* first official fashion photographer. Additionally, a portrait by Otto Rosenheim, poses Isabella with a book, signaling her desire to be recognized as a scholar.

Isabella's Museum, homes, and gardens—spaces that she meticulously curated—were tangible expressions of her persona. Three photographs in the exhibition show Isabella in those environs—the Museum as it was being constructed; her conservatory at Green Hill, her Brookline estate where she maintained extensive gardens and greenhouses; and Beach Hill, one of her many homes where she displayed art. In each image, she is central but facing away from the camera, letting the spaces, not her image, speak for her. Whatever the motive of Isabella's tightly-controlled public

persona, her actions assured that her Museum—and not her personal image—anchored her legacy.

Support

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The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum invites you to escape the ordinary in a magical setting where art and community come together to inspire new ways of envisioning our world. Embodying the fearless legacy of its founder, the Museum offers a singular invitation to explore the past through a contemporary lens, creating meaningful encounters with art and joyful connections for all. Modeled after a Venetian palazzo, unforgettable galleries surround a luminous Courtyard and are home to masters such as Rembrandt, Raphael, Titian, Michelangelo, Whistler, and Sargent. The Renzo Piano wing provides a platform for contemporary artists, musicians, and scholars and serves as an innovative venue where creativity is celebrated in all of its forms.

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum • 25 Evans Way, Boston, MA 02115 • Hours: Open Weekends from 10 am to 5 pm. Weekdays from 11 am to 5 pm and Thursdays until 9 pm. Closed Tuesdays. • Admission: Adults \$22; Seniors \$20; Students \$15; Free for members, children under 18, everyone on their birthday, and all named "Isabella" • \$2 off admission with a same-day Museum of Fine Arts, Boston ticket • For information 617 566 1401 • Box Office 617 278 5156 • gardnermuseum.org

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