

**Persona: Photography and the
Re-Imagined Self**
Large Print Labels

[Intro]

Imagine that you could be a different version of yourself. What parts of your identity might you reinvent?

Since the 1920s, artists have used photography to create and share a persona, an alter ego that is distinct from an everyday self. In recording a re-envisioned self, they both embrace and challenge any expectations a viewer may have that a photograph relays a documentary truth. Identity and photography are both fluid and flexible in the hands of creative people. An artist may choose a persona that is aspirational. It may relate to an artist's cultural or social identity. It may be a form of activism and advocacy. And it can be a way of stepping into another's shoes, creating a sense of empathy.

Isabella Stewart Gardner, who came of age alongside the beginning of photography, cultivated her own mythic persona. **Picturing Isabella**, a complementary exhibition in the Fenway Gallery, explores this legacy, while Jamie Diamond, in her work **Monstra Te**

Esse Matrem (show yourself to be a mother) on the Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade on the front of this building, confronts the persona of motherhood.

From its earliest technology, the camera has exposed multiple interior lives, whether real or imagined. In this era of Instagram filters and artificial intelligence, the options for self-presentation are even more fluid. We invite you to find power in all the ways you might re-envision yourself.

[Antegallery]

Photography can be a mirror. It can also conjure new realities that reveal multiple truths. Photographs of artistic personas from the 1920s to the present explore the relationship between the interior self and how a person may appear on the surface.

The artists in this gallery play with gender fluidity. Some experiment with femininity and masculinity as a tool for self-discovery and role-play. Others carefully embody the spirit of people they admire, no matter their gender.

Gillian Wearing



Me as Madame and Monsieur Duchamp

2018

Bromide Print

Courtesy Tanya Bonakdar
Gallery, New York



Me as Cahun Holding a Mask of My Face

2012

Bromide Print

The Museum of
Contemporary Art, Los
Angeles

Gift of the Heather and
Tony Podesta Collection
2015.43

Gillian Wearing embodies artists who are part of her “spiritual family,” people who have inspired her and shared her interest in fluid identities. On the left, she channels Claude Cahun, a French photographer who made

self-portraits in the 1920s. On the right, Wearing becomes conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp and his alter ego, Rose Sélavy. She framed this pair of photographs in an oversized locket, suggesting that she keeps both figures affectionately close to her.

Compare these self-portraits with photographs of Cahun and Duchamp on the opposite wall to see the precision in Wearing's role-play.

Samuel Fosso



Self-Portrait (Malcolm X)

2008, from **African Spirits**

Gelatin silver print
Courtesy of the artist and
Yossi Milo, NY



Self-Portrait (Angela Davis)

2008, from **African Spirits**

Gelatin silver print
Courtesy of the artist and
Yossi Milo, NY

In his series **African Spirits**, Samuel Fosso becomes icons of the pan-African liberation movement. Here, he embodies revolutionaries Malcolm X and Angela Davis. He channels their mastery of self-styling that

communicated their activism and power.

Fosso says, "My body does nothing but transform a subject. A figure that I want to talk about. It has nothing to do with my body but maybe my spirit. My spirit, my spirit that follows the subject."

John Dugdale



John Kelly as Dagmar Onassis

1984

Cyanotype

Courtesy of the artists



Dagmar Onassis Visits the Sickbed

1996

Cyanotype

Courtesy of the artists

Photographer John Dugdale worked with his dear friend, performance artist John Kelly, to convey one of Kelly's many personas, Dagmar Onassis. About this persona, Kelly says: "My admiration for the opera singer Maria Callas

prodded me to create an autobiographical work in which I portray a fan who is driven to embody her through the creation of her fictitious daughter, an obsessed punk diva named Dagmar Onassis. The antics of this female alter ego drive him to near self-destruction. He survives, as does his love of 'La Divina' Callas." In 1996, when Dugdale was quite ill, he photographed Dagmar providing love and friendship at his sickbed.

Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp



Rrose Sélavy (Marcel Duchamp)

1923

Gelatin silver print

Collection of The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



Belle Haleine

1921

Gelatin silver print

Collection of The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray were part of a circle of artists who rejected the constraints of tradition, insisting instead that art could tease, challenge, and be absurd and playful. In 1920, Duchamp decided that "it wasn't

enough to be one single individual with a masculine name, I wanted ... to make another personality for myself." So Rose Sélavy was born.

Man Ray's first photograph of Rose Sélavy decorates a perfume bottle label in **Belle Haleine, Eau de Voilette** (Beautiful Breath, Veil Water). Man Ray continued to photograph Duchamp as Rose Sélavy through the 1920s.

Claude Cahun

(clockwise from top left)



Self portrait (shaved head, material draped across body)

1928

Gelatin silver print
Courtesy of the Jersey
Heritage Collections,
Claude Cahun (1894-
1954)



Self portrait (reflected image in mirror, chequered jacket)

1928

Gelatin silver print
Courtesy of the Jersey
Heritate Collections,
Claude Cahun (1894-
1954)



Self portrait (with shaved head)

1920

Gelatin Silverprint
Courtesy of the Hersey
Heritage Collections,
Claude Cahun (1894-
1954)



I am in training don't kiss me

1927

Gelatin silver print
Courtesy the Jersey
Heritage Collections,
Claude Cahun (1894-
1954)

In 1914, this 20-year-old photographer chose a new gender-fluid name for herself: Claude Cahun. She made self-portraits that experimented with gender identity in her life and her art as she shaved her head and tried on different versions of femininity and masculinity.

Cahun didn't think she could ever know herself. She wrote in her memoir, "under this mask, another mask. I will never finish removing all these faces." Cahun used the camera to explore who she could become.

[Main Gallery]

Masks and myths enable artists to tell new stories. A mask allows you to hide, to be anonymous. A mask liberates. A mask signals a possibility. A myth is larger-than-life, passed down and reinterpreted. It is a story we tell about how we came to be.

Narcissister

(clockwise from top left)



Untitled Self-Portrait Series (Pink Nails)
2012
C-print
Courtesy of the artist



Untitled Self-Portrait Series (Cracked Mask)
2012
C-print
Courtesy of the artist



**Untitled Self-Portrait
Series (Gold Earrings)**

2012

C-print

Courtesy of the artist



**Untitled Self-Portrait
Series (Checkered
Shirt)**

2012

C-print

Courtesy of the artist

Narcissister wears a plastic mask patented by inventor Verna Doran as the face of a wig form, on which a wig rests to keep its shape. The mask reflects conventional beauty standards for mannequins from the 1950s: wide set eyes with a pointed nose and a prim mouth. Sometimes, Narcissister introduces

imperfections with cracks and gashes. She uses masks of varied skin tones to reflect her belonging in a multiracial family.

Narcissister browsed a dictionary to get ideas for her character's name. She says, "The word narcissist jumped out at me. I realized that if I added an '-er' to the end it would refer to my being a woman of color, a 'sister.'"

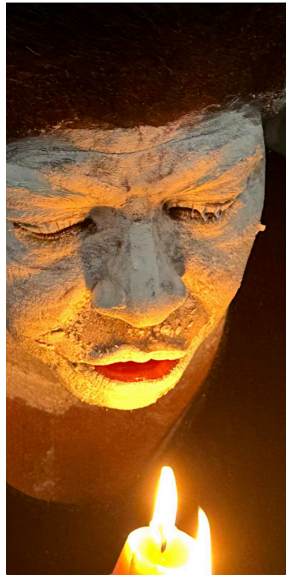


Mariko Mori
Tea Ceremony III
1994
Cibachrome print
mounted on aluminum
Courtesy of The New
School Art Collection

In this still from a performance, Mariko Mori plays an alien serving tea to corporate suits in Tokyo. She wears a serene smile like a mask. Even though she is dressed in a silver bodysuit with pointy ears, the men nearby avoid looking at her.

Mori made this performance after attending a business meeting where smart and educated women were serving tea in the office. She transformed her anger into this alter ego.

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons



A Mother of River of Tears #1

2023

Archival pigment prints
Courtesy of the artist



A Mother of River of Tears #2

2025

Archival pigment prints
Courtesy of the artist

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons's mask is made of sacred Yoruba white powder. In this performance, Campos-Pons practices a cleansing ceremony, creating a ritual persona. Campos-Pons says, "I refer to notions of

Yoruba practice and build them into the context of performance in the 20th and 21st century. I use the body as a space of transit, of embodiment, of both real and imaginary connections, I consider the body as a vessel for spiritual incarnations.” In the **Mother of River of Tears** performance, Campos-Pons eats flowers and lights candles: ritual symbols that connect humans to nature.



Mary Reid Kelley and
Patrick Kelley
Stills from The Rape
of Europa
2025

Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artists

In their 2021 video **The Rape of Europa**, Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley reimagine the Greek myth of Europa, the princess kidnapped and raped by the god Zeus, who was masquerading as a bull. According to the story, the child born from this assault established a dynasty that became the foundation of European civilization.

The Kelleys were responding to Titian's monumental painting of this story in the Gardner collection and set their video in a ruined, graffitied re-creation of the Museum's Courtyard. Mary performs as Europa: imperious, proud, and furious (and sometimes funny, perhaps in spite of herself). Her eyes have been forced open and she rages at the violence she sees.



Hakeem Adewumi
**Possession of a
Recalcitrant Dream**
2024

Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artists

In Hakeem Adewumi's tender self-portrait, he replaces his face with a multi-headed Hydra, a creature from Greek mythology that regenerates in the wake of harm. Adewumi's persona blends fantasy, desire, and the thrill of being unknowable. He refuses to be seen as a singular being.

Adewumi was inspired by Martinican poet Édouard Glissant's idea of the right to opacity, that we can never completely know ourselves or another. The humanoid camera and the jinn, a shapeshifting supernatural being, are parts of Adewumi's persona that will always be impenetrable—even to his own camera.



David Wojnarowicz
**Arthur Rimbaud in
New York**

1978-79/2004

Gelatin silver prints
Collection of Shelley
Fox Aarons and Phillip
Aarons

David Wojnarowicz photographed himself and friends wearing a mask portraying Arthur Rimbaud. He felt a kinship with this French poet, who a century earlier had lived as a runaway teenager and shocked readers with racy language and gay love affairs. Wojnarowicz made the mask using the only known photograph of Rimbaud, printed on cardstock and secured with a rubber band.

Wojnarowicz staged these photographs in his favorite spots throughout New York City: Coney Island, Times Square, the subway, nightclubs, and theaters. Critic Lucy Lippard suggested that these images “constitute a kind of objective autobiography, permitting Wojnarowicz simultaneously to be himself and to step outside himself.”

Tseng Kwong Chi
(clockwise from top left)



**New York, New York
(Statue of Liberty)**

1979

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of Muna

Tseng Dance Projects

and Yancey Richardson

Gallery, New York



**Provincetown,
Massachusetts**

1979

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of Muna

Tseng Dance Projects

and Yancey Richardson

Gallery, New York



**Banff National Park,
Alberta, Canada**

1986

Gelatin silver print
Courtesy of Muna
Tseng Dance Projects
and Yancey Richardson
Gallery, New York



Rome, Italy

1989

Gelatin silver print
Courtesy of Muna
Tseng Dance Projects
and Yancey Richardson
Gallery, New York

Tseng Kwong Chi photographed himself as a character he called the "Ambiguous Ambassador," visiting cultural landmarks and sublime landscapes in North America and Europe. His costume was always the same suit style popularized by Chairman Mao Zedong and associated with the Chinese

Communist party.

Tseng said, "I heighten the irony of the icons and symbols of Western popular culture ... all of which are worshipped, exploited, and exported to China through the media of television, Hollywood movies, and Madison Avenue magazines."

Many artists align their personas with well-known historical figures. They step into extraordinary shoes and become entangled with a famous person. Other artists might be drawn to archetypes: the artist's model, the Hollywood cliché, or fictional characters in literature. Whatever the case, these artists insist these people matter, they deserve to be seen.



Yinka Shonibare CBE
RA

Dorian Gray

2001

Black-and-white resin
prints, digital lambda
print

The Jack Shear
Collection of
Photography at
the Tang Teaching
Museum, Skidmore
College

Yinka Shonibare retells **The Picture of Dorian Gray**, a novel written by Oscar Wilde (1890) and later adapted into a film (1945). Shonibare casts himself as Dorian, who trades his soul for eternal youth and beauty and whose painted portrait, rather than his physical body, decays with age and wrongdoing. Standing out from the black-and-white photographs, the single color image references the moment when the corrupted portrait makes its final appearance.

Dorian Gray is a dandy, a man who accesses elite social circles through wit and style.

Shonibare celebrates the dandy as “both an insider and an outsider who disrupts such distinctions.”

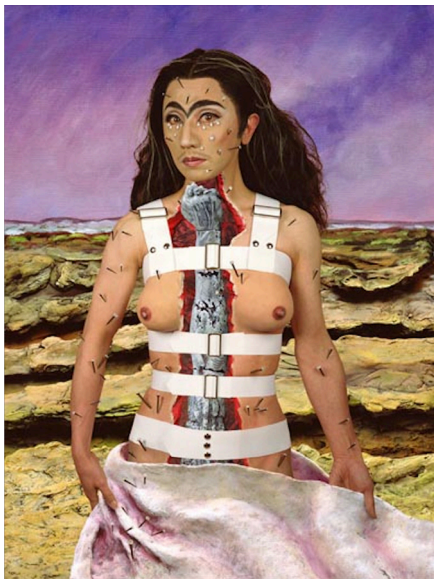
Yasumasa Morimura



An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo

2001

Digital chromogenic print
mounted on aluminum
Courtesy of the artist and
Luhring Augustine, New
York



An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Standing Firm)

2001

Digital chromogenic print
mounted on aluminum
Courtesy of the artist and
Luhring Augustine, New
York

Yasumasa Morimura describes himself as a cross between an actor and a visual artist. Here, he uses a variety of props and digital manipulation to channel Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, who made now-iconic self-portraits that expressed her joy, pain, and suffering.

Morimura says, "The various elements of . . . Frida and myself mix into a muddle and a chemical reaction occurs, creating this imaginary Frida of mine."

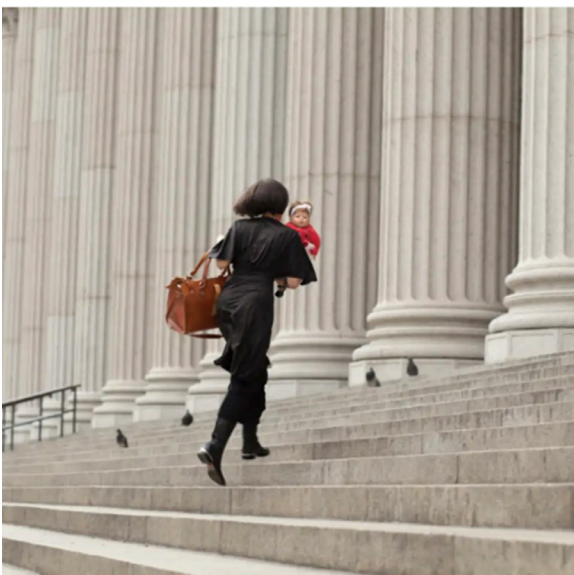
Jamie Diamond
(clockwise from top left)



**2.28.10, I Promise to
be a Good Mother**

2010

Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist and
Kewenig Gallery



**2.14.11, I Promise to
be a Good Mother**

2011

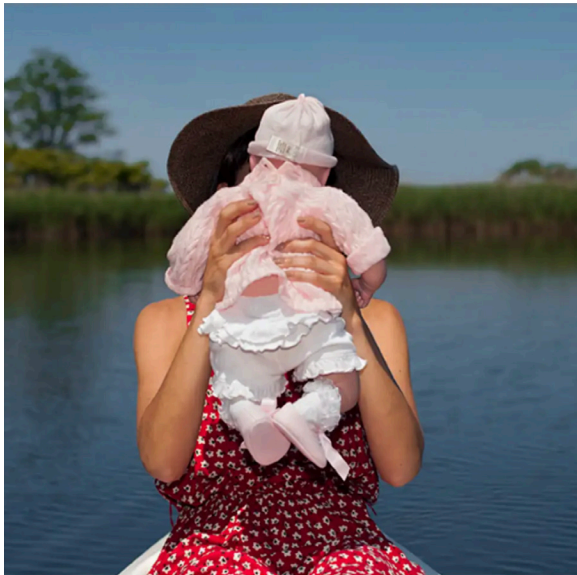
Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist and
Kewenig Gallery



**1.21.11, I Promise to
be a Good Mother**

2011

Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist and
Kewenig Gallery



**5.28.12, I Promise to
be a Good Mother**

2012

archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist and
Kewenig Gallery

In this series, Jamie Diamond wears what she calls the “mask of motherhood.” She photographs herself wearing her own mother’s clothes and caring for a reborn doll—a lifelike silicone or vinyl baby doll, anatomically correct, warm, and appropriately weighted.

Diamond says, "I started staging specific memories from my childhood, acting out recalled events and behaviors. Eventually the performance evolved into an exploration of the complexities surrounding the paradox of the mother/child relationship. I'm interested in the fantasy of motherhood, the social structure of the relationship between mother and child, and the performance of inherited social and gender roles."



Sophie Calle
**Autobiographies
(Shiner)**

2020

Inkjet print on fine art cotton, Hahnemuhle paper, mounted on a wooden box with brass plaque

Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

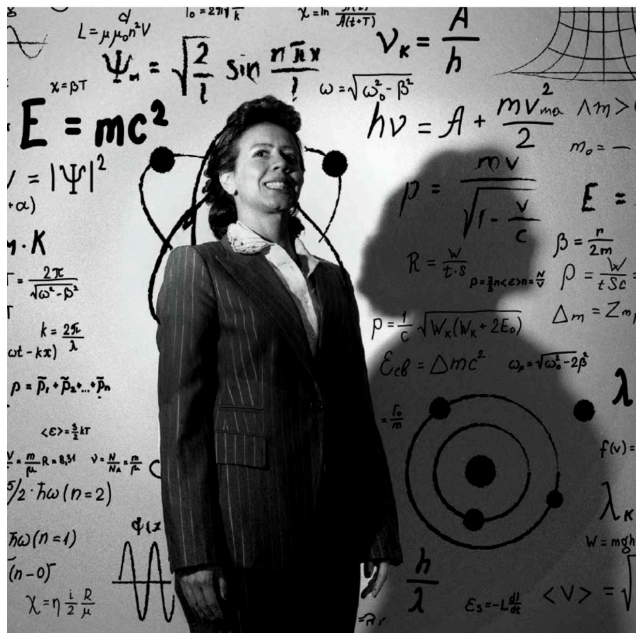
Sophie Calle installed this self-portrait with a tear-shaped black eye upside-down, adopting a grieving persona. In this emotional state, she is not herself: she is undone, topsy-turvy. She inverts and hides herself to take on the role of mourner.

Calle's work often incorporates elements of voyeurism, surveillance, and personal narrative to explore the nature of love, intimacy, violence, and death.

We all experience or witness major life milestones: birth, death, marriage. Each experience is specific—and also shaped by the norms of the culture around you or imposed on you. A persona can empower an artist to critique and subvert those cultural expectations.

Lina Geoushy

In her series **Trailblazers**, Lina Geoushy inhabits female leaders in Egyptian history. She says, "Through socially engaged self-portraiture, I inhabit overlooked icons, using my body as a canvas to honour their struggles and contributions, reclaiming erased stories and building a living feminist counter-archive."



Self-Portrait as Egyptian Physicist Sameera Moussa 2024

Giclee prints

Courtesy of the artist

Sameera Moussa (1917–52) was an Egyptian nuclear physicist. After her mother died from cancer, she earned a degree in radiology and became the first woman to hold a post at Cairo University. She discovered an equation to break atoms of cheap metals for affordable medical applications.



**Self-Portrait as
Egyptian Ballerina
Magda Saleh**

2023

Giclee prints

Courtesy of the artist

Magda Saleh (1944–2023) was an Egyptian ballet dancer. In the 1960s, she became the most notable ballerina in Egypt. She was named founding director of the new opera house, but she was unfairly replaced, allegedly because of differences with a new culture minister.



**Self-Portrait as
Egyptian Feminist
and Activist Doria
Shafik**

2023

Giclee prints

Courtesy of the artist

Doria Shafik (1919–75) campaigned for women’s rights in Egypt and founded the feminist organization Bint al-Nīl (Daughter of the Nile) in 1948. Eight years later, she and her colleagues went on hunger strike, which resulted in women being granted the right to vote and to run for elections.



**Self-Portrait as
Egyptian Artist
and Activist Inji
Eflatoun**

2023

Giclee prints

Courtesy of the artist

Inji Eflatoun (1924–89) saw art as a form of liberation. She was at the forefront of the post-1940s anticolonial movement and one of the many women imprisoned for their subversive political activities from 1959 to 1963 during Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency.

Cindy Sherman



Untitled Film Still #24
1978
Gelatin silver print
Private Collection



Untitled Film Still #44
1979
Gelatin silver print
Institute of
Contemporary Art/Boston
Gift of Barbara Lee, The
Barbara Lee Collection of
Art by Women

Shortly after moving to New York at age 23, Cindy Sherman made her series **Untitled Film Stills**, scenes that recall stills from low-budget 1950s movies. Sherman used wigs, makeup, clothing, and cinematic settings to embody recognizable female film stereotypes

and clichés such as the jaded seductress, the unhappy housewife, the jilted lover, and the vulnerable innocent. The series immediately became a flashpoint for conversations about feminism and representation in the 1970s.

Sherman appears alone in every one of the 69 photographs in the series, suggesting both independence and also the loneliness of playing these reductive roles.



Carrie Mae Weems
Not Manet's Type
1997

Gelatin silver prints
Collection of the
Herbert F. Johnson
Museum of Art, Cornell
University. The Ames
Family Collection
of Contemporary
Photography;
2002.197 a-eu

In **Not Manet's Type**, Carrie Mae Weems takes on the persona of an artist's model. Undressed in her bedroom, she poses a question: why do famous white male artists not see her as a person and a subject? She turns to self-portrait artist Frida Kahlo for a different way: to be her own model and maker.

Zanele Muholi



**Basizeni XI,
Cassilhaus, North
Carolina**

2016

Archival pigment print
Courtesy the artist
and Yancey Richardson
Gallery, New York



Thulani II, Parktown

2015

Archival pigment print
Courtesy the artist
and Yancey Richardson
Gallery, New York

South African photographer and visual activist Zanele Muholi takes on different personas to challenge a range of stereotypes and inspire resistance. They made **Basizeni XI, Cassilhaus, North Carolina** in honor of their eldest sister, Muholi's strict caretaker when

46

they were young. They take on the role of a proud and sad elder.

Thulani II, Parktown sees Muholi as a miner. It references the Marikana massacre in 2012 perpetrated by the South African Police Service, whose officers opened fire on a group of striking miners.



Tomoko Sawada

OMIAI ♡.

2001

Chromogenic prints
Courtesy of the artist
and the Rose Gallery

Tomoko Sawada takes on the role of 10 prospective brides. Each time she inhabits a different persona in search of a husband by changing her hair, makeup, kimonos, dresses, and weight.

Sawada made these portraits in a studio where clients are photographed for **omiai**, a Japanese matchmaking practice. A formal, professional portrait kicks off the process: parents of children seeking a partner circulate them along with a dating resume. In **OMIAI** ♡, Sawada comments on the “influential power of outward appearance,” especially in finding a partner.



Şükran Moral
**Married with Three
Men 01 - 03**

2010

Archival pigment print
Courtesy of the artist

Turkish performance artist Şükran Moral pushes social and political boundaries with outrageous humor. In **Married with Three Men**, Moral plays a bride marrying three 18 year olds in a ceremony in rural Turkey. The young grooms smile cautiously in the wedding procession and dance. Moral eventually leads them to a private place, where she asks them to drop their pants to their ankles and grins at the camera.

Moral's performance targets polygamy, illegal in Turkey but still practiced under the radar in some rural areas. She inverts the usual gender roles—here an older woman marries and controls younger men.



Shigeyuki Kihara
**Ulugali'i Samoa:
Samoan Couple**

2004-05

Chromogenic print on
Fujicolor Professional
Paper

Collection of the
Metropolitan Museum
of Art, gift of the artist,
2009

Artist Shigeyuki Kihara poses as both members of this Samoan couple. She modeled for the female role and transposed her head (altered with a moustache, thicker eyebrows, and short hair) onto a man's body to complete this wedding portrait. Her staging and props reference tropes from 1800s colonial photography in Samoa, which reinforced a bias for gender binaries and exoticized stereotypes of Pacific culture.

Kihara is fa'afafine, a nonbinary third gender in Samoa. Kihara says this photograph "pay[s] homage to my ancestors and to simultaneously subvert the dominant western heterosexual 'normalcy' that continues to

conflict with the existence of fa'afafine people today.”

A persona thrives with a world to live in: a history, a culture, a geography. Artists might remix the past with the present to imagine a setting. The fashion and styling choices of the persona can reveal context for the character. Experiments with new technologies can defy and expand our expectations for what that world can look like.



Wang Qingsong
Night Revels of Lao Li

2000

Chromogenic print
Collection of the Yale
University Art Gallery
Gift of Susan and
Arthur Fleischer, Jr.,
B.A. 1953, LL.B. 1958

The artist Wang Qingsong appears four times in this photograph: with blond highlights and wearing a black shirt and gray pants, he observes from outside the activity. The photograph imagines a new setting for **The Night Revels of Han Xizai**, a Chinese scroll painting from the 900s. According to legend, the painting was made for the emperor by a court artist employed to spy on an official at decadent parties. Here the official is portrayed by Wang's friend Li Xianting, a Chinese art critic removed from his post in the 1980s for supporting experimental art.

Kahn & Selesnick



Columbarium, Series 2

2020-22

Archival pigment print
Courtesy the artist
and Yancey Richardson
Gallery, New York



Columbarium, Series 1

2020-22

Archival pigment print
Courtesy the artist
and Yancey Richardson
Gallery, New York

Artist team Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick started making these photographs in 2020, when the global pandemic transformed our world. Their character Mr. Buttons personifies death, wearing a suit and mask covered in pearly buttons. He travels

around performing the Danse Macabre—the dance of death—with people he meets in desolate landscapes.

Kahn & Selesnick write, “It was found that in the wake of the plague, a certain hysteria had bubbled up in the various places they traveled, and people seemed curiously eager to have their turn attempting to defy Mr. Buttons in the various dance-offs.”



Cao Fei
**The Fashions of
China Tracy 01, 02,
05, 05**

2009

C-prints

Courtesy of the artist

As a young artist, Cao Fei immersed herself in the flows of global pop culture—Cantonese pop, Japanese anime, and American hip-hop—and became fascinated by youth subcultures. In 2006, she discovered the three-dimensional, online virtual world Second Life. She constructed a fictional Chinese city and created the avatar China Tracy.

From 2009 to 2011, Second Life users visited the city and interacted with China Tracy during events, contests, and even mayoral inaugurations. Cao Fei said, “China Tracy is an active explorer and embodies a spirit of optimism ... I think for me as an artist, it’s more important to create space rather than giving conclusions.”



Azra Akšamija
**Hallucinating
Traditions**

2024

Video animation
screened on a
holographic fan
monitor

Courtesy of the artist

In this animation, artist Azra Akšamija becomes new versions of herself wearing imaginative headgear designs. The portraits were generated using artificial intelligence (AI) that was trained on an extensive database of images, including photographs of the artist's face and historical and regional attire. The resulting portraits fluidly transform in the animation, blending global fashions and blurring the boundaries between the past and the future. In this world, technology and tradition mix to generate new cultural forms.

Concept and artistic direction: Azra Akšamija

Project research and development: Merve Akdoğan

Production: Merve Akdoğan, Azra Akšamija, Shua Cho

[Mirror]

Who are you today?

Whose shoes do you want to step into?