

s u b j e c t s

selected portraits 2017-2019

Karl Halliday

Dear reader,

Thank you for supporting my practice by purchasing an edition of this archival collection of photographs. Produced between July 2017 and December 2019, these images were made during a period of transformation in my personal life. In this moment of introspection, I would like to bare my thoughts and offer some reflection upon what these portraits mean to me.

Upon migrating from Perth to Melbourne in mid-2017, my camera had taken on a new role as cartographer. In an attempt to make sense of the torrent of foreign places, faces and feelings, photography served as a tool of orientation, plotting a map of my navigation through the unfamiliar topography of life in an alien city. And like any map (or any photograph for that matter), the story told is invented, a fiction fantasised by the camera, the persuasive yet unreliable narrator of our image-saturated lives.

Photographic images are limited to describing what in essence can only be an impossible reality. Drawn from a space and time elapsed, photographic images are fixed to reproducing situations that no longer exist. Reciting the past not as it happened but as it *appeared*, photographs function as mythological tokens in mourning of moments lost in the tide of life's enduring thaw. In stubborn denial of the transit of time, the stillness of the photographic image reminds us of the mortal coil to which we are bound. To pirate the efficient expression of Susan

Sontag; "Life is a movie. Death is a photograph".

With the global reach of today's virtual image economy, photographs do more than just offer testimony of the past through the language of images. Moreover, they present an opportunity for us to devise and revise visual histories of our own, granting anyone with a smartphone and internet access the freedom to carve and chisel their public identities through the creation, exchange and control of symbolic representations.

Irrespective of whether photographic images can be accused of being factual or fictitious, the information we glean from them shapes our comprehension of the world. They are testament to the truths we live by, flattened, framed, facsimiled and fabricated with convincing resemblance to the real. By holding a mirror to the world, the camera reflects an inverted image that renders the original indistinguishable from its double, prompting doubt as to whether there was ever an original in the first place. Within photography, memory and image fold neatly into a singular synthetic index of experience.

With this in mind, the archive of selected portraits you are holding overlaps into this rhetoric of invention when one considers that all of these images are *staged*. In fact, the book's opening image was the first entirely staged photograph I created (and by extension the first to challenge the credibility of my life's documentation to date). In all of these staged portraits, the subjects are conscious of the presence of a camera and respond accordingly. Frozen in pose, their gaze reciprocates the camera's address, in some instances with subtle unease (and who can blame? The camera mimics a gun after all, through which we 'aim', 'shoot' and 'capture'...).

By staging a portrait, the subject becomes empowered as a co-author in the creation of the image. Unlike the voyeuristic larceny of 'candid' photography - in which the photographer does not 'make' images but 'takes' them - the staged portrait carries a unique authenticity by registering the subject's capacity to act in a process of dialogue. In the staged portrait, the subject anticipates their depiction with an expression, pose, gesture or disguise. Offering themselves to the camera, the staged portrait enables the subject to reclaim personal agency in retaliation to the camera's advantage of being privileged to a point of view of the subject that they do not have access to themselves. In this respect, my decision to stage these photographs was not foremost an aesthetic preference but an *ethical* one.

The etymology of the word 'portrait' traces back to the Latin *portrahere*, translating as "to drag out, reveal, expose". The aggression implied by these terms emphasises the threat of invasion posed by the camera's emphatic demand for visibility. For many, undercutting the camera's potential to lie is a far more pressing fear that it may unmask truths we so earnestly bid to keep from display. It then makes sense that the majority of people I photograph appear only flattered by their portrayal when they do not recognise themselves. I suspect this is because staging a portrait produces a distancing effect between the subject and their image. By acknowledging the conditions by which the image is a construction, staging encourages the subject to comfortably resign to the will and whim of the photographer's creative direction in a transfer of liability.

Staring back or turning away, most without so much as a smile, the portraits compiled in this book provide little to no clues about the personalities of the people depicted. Undressed of expression, these photographs speak only of what the camera sees; a *mise-en-scène* of mute bodies hollowed of context outside of the decorative staging of the image itself. The only identification afforded to the people in these pictures derives from the intimate projection of the photographer's prejudice, resulting in idealistic impressions of characters romantically crafted in honour of the subject's likeness.

The photographs in this archive can then be read individually, as a series of independent portraits, or collectively, as a mosaic of sentimental perspectives that together compose a kind of self-portrait or biography made up of newfound relationships with the dear friends who have enriched my life with their warmth, laughter, inspiration, spirit, compassion, love and grace. For that, I am truly very blessed.

I would like to give a heartfelt thanks to each of the people depicted for their permission to be included in this publication, with special tribute to Henry, Melanie, TJ, Lachlan, Rachel, Jack, Rory, Stephenie, Lia, Joseph, and my parents Eddie and Laura, for all of whom, without the generosity of their guidance and support over the years, this book would not have been possible. I hope you enjoy.

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All photographs were shot on 35mm or 120 film on the stolen lands of the native Boon Wurrung and Woiwurrung people of the Kulin nation, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, the muwinina people of the palawa nation, and the Arakwal people of the Bundjalung nation. Aboriginal sovereignty was never ceded.