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The(y)

Michael Oliver

Thesis submitted
to the College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in
Photography

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School of Art and Design

Morgantown, West Virginia
2018

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Media

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Abstract

The(y)

Michael Oliver

This MFA thesis addresses work completed and presented in a thesis exhibition at West Virginia University. It expresses the personal motivations, the process and the inspirations behind the exhibit. Through the use of abstraction, I was searching for a personal change in perspective, and a way to identify with people on a level that mirrors my long-term experience in the military. This was explored by uniformly adding Adobe Photoshop filters, in a step by step manner, to a selected series of portraits., to a selected series of portraits. The hope was by removing the surface characteristics of an individual what was left would add humanity to the faceless crowd, or *the they*.

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I would like to thank my committee for helping and pushing me through these long three years. Professor Michael Sherwin deserves a special thank you for helping me with my writing and understanding of the greater photographic world. Thank you to my fellow third floor grads Jake, Tierra, Feliks, Alison, Tessa and Stephanie for helping, listening and encouraging me throughout the many days I didn't believe that making it was possible. Thank you to Professor Joe Lupo for always seeming to have time to talk about anything and your kindness. On a more personal note, I would like to thank my friends and family for standing by me for the last six years of my college career. To my parents, thank you for raising me right I love you both more than you know. To my sister and brother-in-law, Glenda and Dr. Paul Tennis, thank you for giving me a room for three years. I may not always know how to say or show it, but I love, respect, and miss you both. To my nieces Jessica and Jaden, thanks for teaching an old dog new tricks and for modeling for me when I needed it. To my nephew Jon, though I had very little to do with how you turned out, I am proud of you. Now to my friends Arron and Tina Poindexter, thank you for the many months you have let me stay on your couch, live in your basement, modeling, encouraging, mocking me, and most of all treating me like family. To the boys Drake, Kyle, and Liam, I love you and miss you. Thank you for modeling and just being you. To anyone I left out, I apologize. The truth is nothing ever gets done alone, or in a bubble. There is no possible way for me to include everyone who has touched my life in the last three years here at WVU.

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Personal Background

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”¹

John Donne

At age nineteen I joined the United States Navy. It was January of 1991, and I had just graduated from high school six months prior to leaving for boot camp. I went on to serve for the next twenty years. During that time, I had a variety of jobs from carpentry to a Hospital Corpsman, but the majority of my time was spent as a medical photographer. As a medical photographer, I photographed surgeries, legal cases and portraits. Each photograph had a practical purpose. Some were used for education in the classroom, or in publications, and some were used for documentation and, public relations. Every job had purpose and through them I had a purpose. My life was dominated by work, and I was focused on doing the best job I could to make the next rank.

¹Donne, John. 2000-2018. *Meditation XVII*.

Furthermore, because of my long-term service, most of my friends were also fellow service members. We shared common experiences that the civilians I knew could not understand. For example, every enlisted person in the military shares one key experience, boot camp. Boot camp is different from branch to branch, but we have all made it through this arduous event. Secondly, we all wore the uniform. We may not have all gotten along on an individual level, but the uniform let us know we were on the same team. The uniform erased race, gender and religion, leaving a sailor where an individual used to be. In short, my whole world revolved around the Navy and my job.

In 2011, I retired from the Navy. This transition from one life to another happened literally overnight. One day I woke up and put on my uniform and went to work, and the next day I did not. In truth, I underestimated the impact that this transition would have on me. "It is ironic that many future retirees look forward to being free of their jobs, but once retired, they begin to appreciate how much of their identity, especially for males, was intertwined with their work."²

The ensuing year was spent trying to figure out where I belonged. I struggled to find employment and further questioned where I fit in the larger world. Wanting to expand my interest in photography, I decided to attend The Art Institute of Charlotte. While studying at the Institute I discovered that my technical photography skills did, in fact, transfer to the larger world. The bigger challenge I faced was my social skills. How do I communicate with people in the civilian world? I began to realize that at the

² Osborne, John W. 2009. "Commentary on Retirement, Identity, and Erikson's Developmental Stage Model." *Project Muse*. December 4. Accessed April 03, 2018. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/366058>.

heart of the problem I still saw them as civilians, and not as individuals. To communicate better, I needed to see people differently.

Influences

“Each human being has infinite reality, and it is pride and arrogance in a person not to honor his fellow-man.... It is a paralogism that one thousand human beings are worth more than one... The central point about being human is that the unit “1” is the highest; “1000” counts for less”³

Søren Kierkegaard

The inspiration behind my exhibit, *The(y)*, is to change the way I see humanity from the 1000 to the 1. After retirement, I discovered that using a universal approach to everyone was not what equality meant. What I needed was a new way to see and understand the new world in which I found myself.

“Humanism is a belief in the value, freedom, and independence of human beings. For a humanist, all human beings are born with moral value, and have a responsibility to help one another live better lives. Humanism emphasizes reason and science over scripture (religious texts) and tradition and believes that human beings are flawed but capable of improvement... Humanism is usually very individualistic, seeing each person as important in his or her own right, regardless of the needs of the community.”⁴

³ *Philosophy Terms*. Accessed April 06, 2018. <http://philosophyterms.com/humanism/>.

⁴ Ibid.

Works like *City Square* in 1948 by Alberto Giacometti (figure 1), simultaneously speak of the person and the individual as part of a larger whole. The sculpture of five humanoid figures are placed in such a way as to suggest closeness and separation. Giacometti was reacting to a post war society, but his art could just as easily speak of life today. "That intimate sense of how the world looks to one person and not another, combined with the paradoxical need to communicate that uniqueness to others, is translated into the sliding spaces of Giacometti's experience of art..."⁵

Another intriguing aspect of Giacometti is a search for the understanding of both reality and perception. His sculptures are uniquely abstracted humanoid forms. Some appear to be more masculine, or feminine, while others are hard to discern. In *Woman from Venice II* (1956), the sculpture is of a woman though the torso is exaggerated, and the head shrunk, (Figure 2). The volume of the figure is also much smaller than a typical woman. This lets us read the sculpture as a woman, yet the reality is that no human could have these proportions.

In other pieces, the human forms seem to be expressing closeness, yet, the overall feeling is one of isolation. This conflict of ideas merges to create the feeling of living in a complex urban landscape.

These sculptures helped define the overall appearance of my work. I was looking for a way to alter the appearance of the human form to force a change in my own perspective of the masses. Through abstractions of the human form, I was able to

⁵ "Alberto Giacometti." *The Art Story*. <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-giacometti-alberto.htm>.

disregard the identity and commonalities of my subjects. What was left is the essence of the human, allowing for the perspective change I was seeking.

The artist Adam Fuss continues to inspire me, while using some of photography's oldest forms. He uses daguerreotypes, cyanotypes and other forms of contact printing to create, unique, poetic imagery. "Adam Fuss is a distinguished international artist whose body of work is notable, not only for its continued concerns with themes of life, death and transcendence, but also for its utilization of historical photographic methods such photograms and daguerreotypes."⁶ In Fuss's image *from the series My Ghost 2000* (Figure 3), he photographs a swan with an ethereal quality using a historical daguerreotype process. "The use of the daguerreotype technique references the idea of a 'mirror with a memory' or, in a discursive sense, a presence through absence."⁷ While Fuss's preferred photographic methods are rooted in the history of photography, mine is in the digital realm. My images like *Arron, 2018* (Figure 4) are more pixelated than ethereal. However, the key similarity in the images is in the abstraction. When a viewer knows the subject of the imagery, they start to see through the veil. It is this idea of presence through absence, that further defined the aesthetics of *The(y)*.

Lori Hepner is a photographer who explores issues of identity and geography through cutting edge technology and abstraction. Her work in the series, *#Crowdsourced Landscape*, was intriguing to me in terms of its production, technique

⁶ "Adam Fuss." *Art Gallery of New South Wales*. Accessed April 7, 2018.
<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/193.2015/>.

⁷ Ibid.

and finished form. She uses a light bar (a device that resembles a scanner bar, but uses LEDs to transmit the light instead of an array of CCDs reading the reflected light). The images captured and then projected with the light bar were her own pictures of far north landscapes. She then has a model move the light bar in various patterns, almost dance-like, to create the final image, (Figure 5). With Hepner's work there is an illusion of a person through the movement of the lightbar. It is possible to not realize there is a human element in Hepner's work when first encountering it. It was this unknown element of the work that I found most interesting. Once you know that the movement was created by a person the viewer can start to see where the person is creating a new layer to an already beautiful image. The human gesture and form is evident even in the mystery of abstraction.

Hepner's work also introduced the idea of using technology as a tool to create work, or as a basis for content. From discussions with various professors, it became clear my still imagery needed an intangible, or more fluid companion. To address this element, I decided to use a programming platform called Processing. This is a Java based platform with libraries of code specifically designed for the visual artist. The libraries allowed me a shorthand method to capture video and manipulate the image after capture. I was able to use this software to create an interactive media installation, called *Collective Pixelization*. This piece explored the idea of abstraction and identity in a complementary way to my still images and allowed for more intimacy with my work and ideas.

The more I research and learn about Thomas Ruff's work the more I see my own direction in photography. The first series by Ruff I encountered was his series *Porträts*.

This series is made up of massive (approximately 63 x 47 in.) images of people on a plain white background, facing directly forward with an emotionless face, (figure 6). As Ruff describes it, "I believe that photography can only reproduce the surface of things. The same applies to a portrait. I take photos of people the same way I would take photos of a plaster bust."⁸ I agree with Ruff's description of photography as a descriptive and object recording device.

However, on the larger scale of inter-personal relationships, I also believe that the surface, or outer appearance of an individual, effects how we react to each other. I know that we can overcome and move past this initial judgement, but at least in those first few moments of encountering people we tend have biases and react accordingly. This bias was what I was trying remove by abstracting the surface of the person. While biases are seen as good or bad based upon a personal viewpoint or societal norm, my work addresses changing the viewers seeing. This removes the biases based on the outer appearance of a person. Ruff left his images nameless to remove the identity of the person sitting for his portraits. Since my subjects were already abstracted, I felt that naming them would add humanity back into the work. The titles being names instead of a sequence of digits or untitled adds a personal element to a work devoid of personal identifiers. While different in approach, we are both trying to change the way the viewer sees and perceives an individual.

⁸ Dickson, Andrew. 2017. "Passport Photos and Online Porn: The Dizzying World of Thomas Ruff." *New York Times*. October 5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/arts/design/thomas-ruff-whitechapel-gallery.html>.

Process

“That all our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent”⁹

David Hume

The process behind how the images are made is integral to the understanding of the ideas behind the work. It all started as a technical exercise. I wanted to know how the Adobe Photoshop filter gallery changes an image. It is my nature to try and understand how things work. In my first experiment, I applied numerous filters to an image and tried saving and opening the file multiple times. This caused the image to degrade rapidly. While the filter in Photoshop is typically used to add a unique style, or texture, to an image, I was more interested in the abstraction that multiple processing steps can cause, breaking an image down to its nuts and bolts. This caused the image to degrade rapidly. I printed the three-series and bound them as books then set them on my bookshelf, (Figures 7,8).

A couple of months passed, and I was still looking for a way to communicate through imagery what I was feeling about humanity. I decided to play around with the level of filtration further. The idea was to remove identity uniformly, making everyone the same. I tried several different versions of the process of layering filters to achieve

⁹ Hume, David. 2005. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc

this goal. This did reveal some positive results. I learned that the order mattered. I eventually created a system that held on to the color of the image and the form of a person through a minimum of twenty-nine different filters.

For the final process I photographed subjects using a consistent dark background and same lighting set up. I then created an action to apply the filters in the same order, and with the same intensity. What I created was a sort of “uniform” to apply to my subjects. Because of my military background, this helped me relate to them from a place of comfort and familiarity. However, even though the “uniform” was applied, the results were not identical. Though the human form is camouflaged to the point that they are unrecognizable, there are the slightest differences in the grey of the image, hinting at the individuality of the subject. It is in these unique differences that I found a new way to see.

Exhibit

“The only real life is the collective life of the race; individual life has no existence except as an abstraction.”¹⁰

Auguste Comte

The exhibit *The(y)* was held from 26th until the 30th March, 2018 in the Paul Mesaros Gallery at West Virginia University. It consisted of eight 16x20 inch framed pigment prints. The prints were made on matte surface Hahnemühle paper and

¹⁰ Popova, Maria. n.d. *Brain Pickings*. Accessed April 05, 2018. <https://www.brainpickings.org/>.

varnished. The frames are a low profile black metal. The exhibit also included an interactive media installation and projection covering the back wall of the gallery, titled *Collective Pixelization*.

When the viewer enters the gallery, they are greeted by two images titled *Dee*, (Figure 7). It is the only piece in the exhibit that consist of two images together. When running the portrait of Dee through the Photoshop action something unexpected happened. While the rest of this set of portraits reached the desired level of abstraction in step thirty-one of the process, Dee's portrait reached desired abstraction in step thirty. (*Sherri* in step 30 and 31 are included for clarification, (Figure 9,10). The visual difference of *Dee* to the rest of the show is the brightness and color blocks. In terms of learning to see, this image represents the individual in the crowd, and inspired the basic idea of the exhibit.

As the viewer continues into the gallery, their attention is drawn to the back wall where a large 20 by 15-foot-wide image is projected, filling most of the wall. *Collective Pixelization* was designed to be an interactive art experience where the participant can choose different levels of abstraction for their own self portrait. There is a limit to the clarity of the image. The software I created slowly populates the image one pixel at a time, using an enlarged version of each pixel of an image. Each pixel is also outlined by a stroke weight based on the color of the pixel. This outline ties the piece to the still images in the exhibit, which contain color outlined rectangles created by the filtering process.

For the installation, *Collective Pixelization*, I created a reproduction of most of the elements of the photographic set up. Using a small webcam placed in front of the

subject, participants could click a mouse button to take a still capture of themselves at various levels of pixelization. The longer one sits in front of the camera, the more pixels populate the frame and the less abstract the image becomes. Pressing 'g' on the keyboard allows the participant to take and save a screenshot at various stages of abstraction. These screenshots, were automatically uploaded them to the Instagram page, (@ollie_the_they), so a larger audience can view the work.

Collective pixelization was created to help as a complement and contrast to the still images in the exhibit. My hope was that the participant would watch an image of themselves form from a handful of single pixels to something that more resembles their appearance, adding humanity back to the abstracted image one pixel at a time, (Figures 11-16).

On the wall perpendicular to my *Collective Pixelization* piece, hang six 16x20 inch portraits. The title of the prints from right to left were *Arron, Kyle, Tina, Liam, Drake, and Jaden*, (Figures 3,17-23). These images are my attempt to force a perspective change in myself by applying a "uniform" to my friends and family; to camouflage their surface appearance through abstraction. This perspective change resides in the unique qualities that persist in each of the images as opposed to the surface similarities of the unique images. Instead of making everyone the same, it was the subtle differences in each image that I was most drawn to. These images created a new view of the larger crowd, or *the they*. The individuality that appears even after applying a universal algorithmic digital formula helps me to see people as individuals on more than a surface level restoring a sense of humanity to them.

Conclusion

The(y) was an exhibit made up of abstracted portraits and an interactive media installation. It was an attempt to change my perspective on how I saw, and interacted with people outside of my peer and family group. The abstraction was used from a place of comfort and familiarity, by applying a “uniform” to portraits through the use of Adobe Photoshop’s filter gallery. This abstraction camouflaged an individual’s surface appearance, but left unique images. Instead of removing what made the individuals human, what I discovered was a way to see people devoid of my personal biases based on outer appearance. It was my hope that by adding a piece to reverse the process of abstraction, or *Collective Pixelization*, the viewer would see their own selves in the work. Through viewing themselves differently, I am hoping the viewer can experience their own perspective shift. What I discovered in the pixels and process was a new way to relate to humanity, another step forward in my struggle to identify with life beyond the military.

Illustrations

Figure 1. *City Square*
Alberto Giacometti
Painted bronze
1948

Figure 2. *Woman From Venice*
Alberto Giacometti
Bronze
1956

Figure 3. *from the series My ghost*
Adam Fuss
Daguerreotype
2000

Figure 4 *Arron*
Archival pigment print (16x20in)
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 5 *Walk #6671, Kemijärvi, Finland,*
Lori Hepner
Archival pigment print
2017

Figure 6 *M. Roeser*
Thomas Ruff

Chromogenic print, face-mounted to acrylic

1999

Figure 7 *Tiera*
Reticulation Half Slider digital image
Michael Oliver
2017

Figure 8 *Tiera*
Reticulation Full Slider digital image
Michael Oliver
2017

Figure 9 *Dee*
Archival pigment print (16x20)
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 10,11 *Sherri step 30 Sherri step 31*
Archival pigment print (16x20in)
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure12 *Collective Pixelization*
Interactive media installation, gallery view
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 13 *Collective Pixelization*
Interactive media installation, gallery view
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 14 *Collective Pixelization*
Screen shot of interactive media installation
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 15 *Collective Pixelization*
Screen shot of interactive media installation
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 16 *Collective Pixelization*
Screen shot of interactive media installation
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 17 *Collective Pixelization*
Screen shot of interactive media installation
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 18 *The(y)*
Digital photograph
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 19 *The(y)*, installation view
Digital photograph
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 20 *Kyle*
Archival pigment print (16x20in)
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 21 *Tina*
Archival pigment print (16x20in)
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 22 *Liam*
Archival pigment print (16x20in)
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 23 *Drake*
Archival pigment print (16x20in)
Michael Oliver
2018

Figure 24 *Jaden*
Archival pigment print (16x20in)
Michael Oliver
2018

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