

M+B

frieze

Ellen Carey

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By Jonathan Griffin

Ellen Carey studied at The State University of New York at Buffalo in the late 1970s alongside Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo and other pictures generation luminaries. Not that you would guess that by looking at her work. The series of Polaroid self-portraits in this exhibition, each simply titled Self-Portrait and made between 1984 and 1988, have none of the pictures generation's caustic punk attitude or processual directness. They are gloriously hued, effulgent photographic apparitions in which the artist's head and shoulders are melded with psychedelic patterns, waveforms, spirals, checkerboards, diagrams of sacred geometries and fractals. They entrance the eye long before they announce their critical or ideological agenda – if they ever announce it at all.

In 1983, the legendary Polaroid Artist Support Program invited Carey to experiment with their 20 x 24 inch format camera; since only five of the hulking contraptions were ever built, she had to travel to the camera in order to operate it. The first series of pictures she made, shown here, are unique multiple-exposures free of darkroom trickery. Beyond some obvious visual clues – the artist lit herself with contrasting coloured lights, and sometimes posed behind lenses – it is very hard to fathom how such heavily manipulated images were produced pre-Photoshop.

This aura of mystery is essential to their visual and conceptual power. On the one hand, the Polaroid prints reveal themselves as photographs: their raw, uncropped edges show how their images are fixed in layers of once-wet emulsion. On the other hand, their bold fields of textureless colour and graphic punch render them more akin to collages or screen prints.

Mystery could be seen to constitute the theme of the series; the self, ostensibly captured by high definition photographs, is suggested to be as infinitely complex as such mathematical wonders as fractals or the Golden Section. In a text accompanying the exhibition, frieze contributing editor Chris Wiley places great emphasis on this purported implication of psychological depth. According to a view that gathered popularity through the mid-century writings of Carl Jung and, later, through the popularization of psychedelic drugs, Wiley writes, 'behind our everyday masks lies something far greater than ourselves, which, if it cannot be called "God" in a sense that would be popularly understood, is at the very least an unimaginably rich set of ordering principles whose origin and purpose may remain forever mysterious.'

The idea of metaphysical unknowability, however, is not actually what Carey ends up with. The kinds of off-the-shelf diagrams and designs that she appropriates are mostly demonstrations of mathematical order rather than chaos. (One marbled pattern, a yellow self-portrait from 1985, is an exception.) While they might look trippy to the stoned eye, most are in fact just the graphic solutions of equations. Despite their countercultural associations, they are more concerned with the sober mapping of information than with wonderment.



Self-Portrait, 1984, Polaroid, 84 × 66 cm. All images courtesy M+B Gallery, Los Angeles

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Self-Portrait, 1987, Polaroid, 84 × 66 cm



Self-Portrait, 1987, Polaroid, 84 × 66 cm

Instead of a sense of depth or density, the photographs have a plastic flatness that is redolent of the technology that produced them, and which anticipates the backlit quality of digital, screen-based imagery. These works, which now seem so in tune with the practices of younger photo-conceptualist artists working today, might have seemed rather dated to Carey's peers. By the mid-1980s, the mind-expansionism popular in the 1960s and early '70s was receding fast in Western society's rear-view mirror. New Age culture survived only in desiccated tropes, either in concentrated pockets of pedantic obscurantism or diluted into the mainstream. Carey, who turned 18 in 1970, was in her mid-30s when she made this series of self-portraits. Old enough, that is, to maintain a degree of objective distance from the experiences of her formative years, but perhaps not quite old enough to be free from their influence.

The photographs show a fractured self: in one work from 1987 her face is reflected in two circular mirrors held to her cheeks, and in others it is shrunk and scattered across a grid of small lenses. Carey seems to share with Sherman an awareness of the cultural construct of selfhood, and a critical understanding of the way we forge unique identities from a miasma of readymade forms. That conception is not necessarily any less mysterious than the notion of an inherently fathomless soul. In Carey's photographs, however, the mystery is arrayed across the surface rather than buried beneath it.