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Character Studies: Whitney Hubbs Interviewed by Kim Beil

Investigating the photographic portrait



Whitney Hubbs is a professor of photography at Alfred University in Western New York, but she grew up in Los Angeles. Before college Hubbs was involved in the feminist punk rock movement Riot Grrrl. Her photographs extend this legacy by troubling the genre of women's self-representation. For her 2016 series, *Body Doubles*, Hubbs hired actors of a similar stature and complexion to play her in photographs. Sometimes their nude bodies are anonymized and fragmented, their heads just out of frame and faces turned away. In subsequent series, Hubbs has introduced other elements that subvert the viewer's gaze and hide the figure. In the more recent *Stutter Shutter* (2018), the familiar tools of the portrait studio take on lives of their own as the backdrops step forward to

envelop the figure, while tinfoil, plastic tarps, and heavy-duty electrical tape further obscure her subjects. In her latest work, on view at SITUATIONS in New York City until February 16, Hubbs shows pictures of herself for the first time.

—Kim Beil

Kim Beil: I'm interested in the fact that you include Riot Grrrl in your art bio. Why is it still there?

Whitney Hubbs: I didn't go to art school out of high school. I didn't know art schools existed. Prior to finding out about Riot Grrrl or punk, I was this '90s, square, Gap-wearing kid, but also an artist. And I didn't know how to navigate that divide. Learning about Riot Grrrl, it was such a relief to find other people who felt weird and alienated just like me. So I just went off and did the punk thing until I was like twenty-three. It taught me I didn't have to go and have the "normal" way of life.

KB: For me, it reads in your bio like a school, almost like another degree.

WH: Yeah, I was hanging out with all these other people of the same age, and we were sort of schooling each other. That experience really informs how I teach and how I keep navigating life. I know I can follow a different path. It also taught me that I can make art about ideas. For me, Riot Grrrl was about the ideas, about self-expression and self-representation more than anything else.

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KB: When I saw your prints in *Stutter Shutter* at Casemore Kirkeby, I felt like they were sort of resisting me. I think I've been trained by the iPhone to expect an incredible level of detail; you can always zoom in to see more. But getting close to your recent prints, I found I couldn't really see more. Many of them are sixteen by twenty inches, so a pretty conservative size. There are small details that I wanted to see more closely, but can't get them to resolve.

WH: With the new pictures I'm making, I'm trying to be a little more lo-fi about it. I'm making smaller prints. I want that obstruction to occur, the feeling that you can't

get closer. There was this great unraveling post-grad school. It's been ten years since I was in school, and now I'm like, Wait! I could do this all myself! They don't have to be absolutely perfect prints.

KB: I suspect media representations of women were equally formative, even before grad school. Those pictures also resist detail—with airbrushing, or Photoshop, or studio lighting. Looking good in pictures often means not looking real.

WH: I think about advertising and pop culture a little bit in terms of looking good because, you know, we're all vain. But I turned forty a couple of years ago, and I started letting go of the idea of vanity, and then it started getting more fun in the studio. I kind of want to humiliate myself, make fun of myself, debase myself, and be sexy at the same time. That, to me, would make a good picture.

With the *Body Doubles* (2016) work or the *Woman in Motion* (2017) book, because they were other women who were modeling for me, I was more cautious about how they would look on film. And then things changed this March. It was the longest winter ever in Alfred. It's isolated. There was constant snow and a lack of sun, so seeing myself in the studio without clothes on was something new. Up here, you're always layered! But it was also that I was getting more comfortable with myself and not caring as much, which happens as we all get older.



KB: That's such an interesting transition to experience when you're always around people who are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Do you see yourself, or your former self, in any of your students?

WH: I'm bad at growing up! Obviously there's a huge divide, but I still feel like I can empathize and sympathize with what these younger students are going through. But they've also been raised in such a different way. They have Instagram and all this stuff that I can't even comprehend growing up with access to. I gave a talk at Pittsburgh Photo Fair with

SITUATIONS, and there were a lot of younger women there. They were excited to see the work. A lot of photography is by men; traditionally it's a male-dominated field. And it was interesting to see men walk by and kind of not know how to react. So in that way, I felt really punk.

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KB: I'm reminded of Kathleen Hanna's description of the origins of her band Le Tigre in the documentary *Who Took the Bomp?* (2010). She felt like feminism was being erased in the late '90s. She says she was being the person whom she had wanted to be there for her.

WH: relate to that. I had Cindy Sherman growing up, but that was about it. I saw the Sherman show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1993, and that blew my mind because I was like, Oh, my God, I relate to this. I didn't have the words to describe how I related to it, but I felt it in my body.



KB: Some of your new pictures seem like send-ups of established tropes, like Sherman, or as if they're rejecting the pleasure and ease of conventional imagery, maybe in the vein of Laura Mulvey.

WH: I sometimes feel like I should update my references, but I keep going back to Mulvey's essay, too. I've actually been taking pictures of myself since high school photo classes, but recently I started taking these more seriously. I think I would get insecure if I had a studio assistant or if someone was posing for me, and I

said, "Hey, can I bind your wrists and put a balloon in your mouth?" I'd feel really bad! So if I just do it alone, there's no one there watching, and I kind of get a little weirder.

KB: Yeah, I get the sense in your latest work that you're like a character participating in these tropes but not necessarily enjoying them. There are references to the abject in these pictures, but they're also slightly humorous. There's a kind of ambivalence in them for me. How would you describe your interest in this kind of imagery, in these questions?

WH: Making this work has allowed me to understand that life can be open, ambiguous. And then that helps me see the nuances in terms of looking at pictures and taking pictures. There's a section of Maggie Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty* (2011) that really speaks to me. She writes, "Who would want ... a world in which everything nice were partitioned off from everything horrible, thereby draining the world of its wild, nearly unnavigable paradoxes? And who would want a feminism—or any form of social justice—that lessened our apprehension of such difficult coexistences, or diminished our access to this electrical current?"

I think when I was younger I wanted more answers and less paradoxes. But I'm realizing now that it's okay to not have answers. It's okay to explore your sexuality in humorous, sort of weird and abject ways. It's not all so black and white or good and bad. It's just about these ideas. We don't have to find the answers. That's really why I keep taking pictures.

Whitney Hubbs: *Animal, Hole, Selfie* is on view at *SITUATIONS* in New York City until February 16.