Composite Identities

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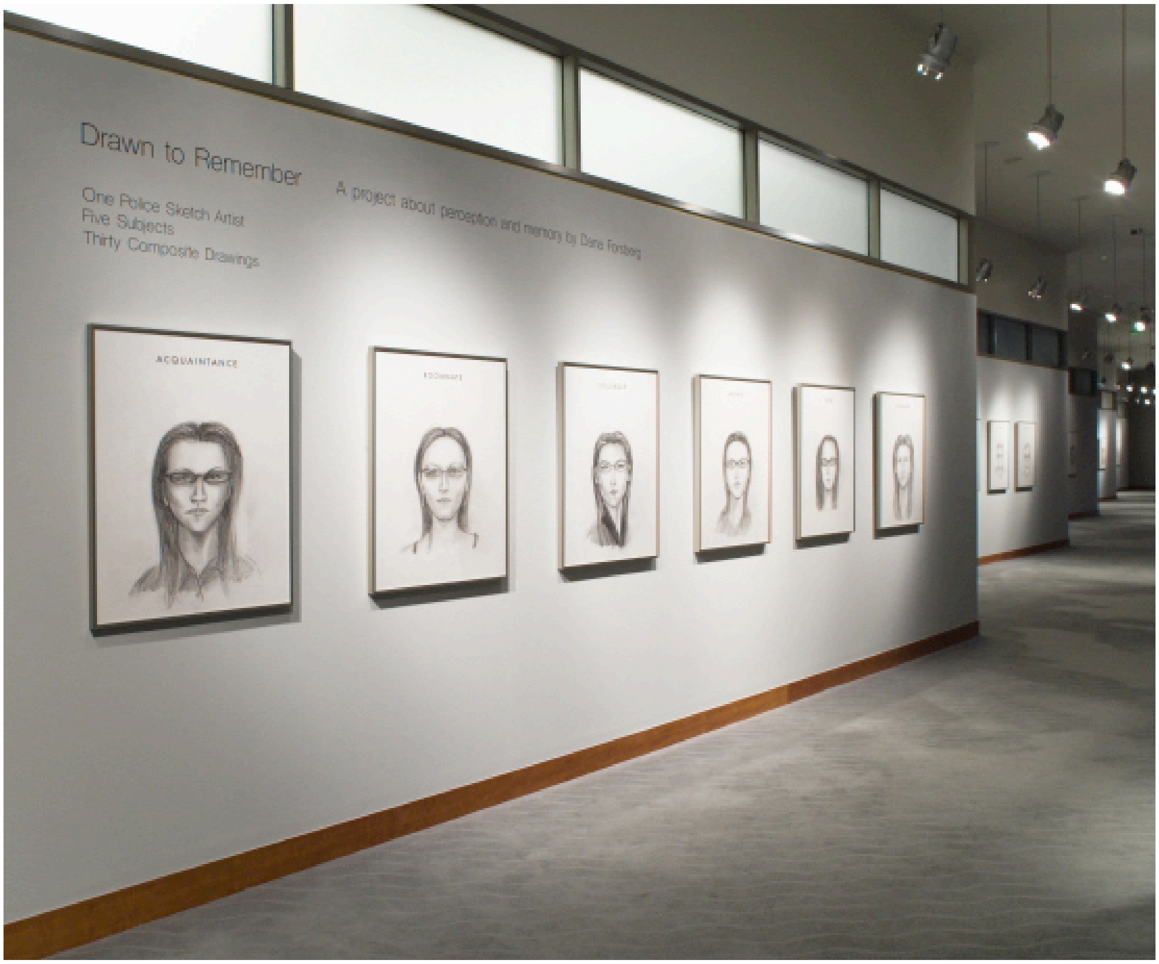
Drawn to Remember
One Police Sketch Artist
Five Subjects
Thirty Composite Drawings
A project about perception and memory by Dana Forsberg
ACQUAINTANCE

Drawn to Remember Installation view

When we look at a photograph of a person, what can we really tell about them? We all realize that the photograph cannot penetrate the depths of our souls. Yet, somehow, we still fall sway to its aura of "was-there-ness;" we still expect the photograph to tell us quite a lot about a person. Honolulu-based artist Dana Forsberg has been examining this assumption for quite some time. In an early series titled *What do we really know?* (1997) Forsberg plays with our common impulse to scrutinize a photograph as if it could unlock the mystery of the people captured in its photochemical matrix. We look at their faces, clothes, gestures, and gazes as clues that will let us in on their stories and personalities. If we are let down by how so much information can still bear so little understanding, Forsberg offers an additional, tantalizing tidbit of textual description. Though this extra information seems to give a more "complete" picture, the play between the visual information and the written description in What do we really know? undermines both the seeming wholeness of the image and the authority of the text. There is no real sense of fulfillment; only a desire to know more. So in the end the question becomes, as Forsberg suggests, what do we really know about a person simply by examining their appearance? And then, why do we so commonly assume that we do know something just by looking? How does our faith in the visible world and in the power of description enable us to think of our personal, biased, and incomplete perceptions about other people as concrete evidence, as objective material fact?

Dana Forsberg *What do we really know?* (1997)

The play between personal perception and objective evidence is also at the heart of Drawn to Remember, Forsberg's newest project, recently on display at the Contemporary Museum's First Hawaiian Center Gallery (and at Tinfish Press' virtual gallery). The project consists of enlarged digital prints of thirty police artist sketches executed by Joseph Aragon, a forensic artist at the Honolulu police department. The drawings are divided into five groups of portraits. Each group consists of six different composite sketches of the same person, or "subject," every one of them unique versions constructed from the memory of a family member or friend. The end result is a very simple, elegant, and powerful exposition on the nuances of memory and perception. The project subtly exposes the way identity is shaped by both the complicated performative nature of description and our reliance on photographic objectivity (even when it comes to looking at drawings).

After choosing her initial "subjects," Forsberg spent two years soliciting and coordinating times when their respective "describers" (family, friends and acquaintances) could go down to the Honolulu Police Station's interrogation chambers in order to meet with Aragon. Forsberg recounts that this process became an unexpectedly important aspect of the piece. By setting up this project so that the describers and viewers remember loved ones through the framework of criminality, Forsberg forces a subtle performance of our "culture of surveillance" (as theorist Michel Foucault describes it). Each portrait is more than simply a translation from memory, but a result of the frustrating experience of trying to translate a mental and seemingly more "private" image into a more "public" one. This comes across in viewing the series as well. We are left with the "evidence" of each describer's unique perception and are drawn into comparing one portrait to the next as we move down the row, experiencing the portraits as if they were a police line-up, looking for the tell-tale differences in each version of the subject.

Forsberg chose the police sketch artist, as opposed to a traditional artist, or a caricaturist, to mediate the personal memories of her participants' because she liked the idea of the artist's "perceived authority" and entanglement with the law's objective, omniscient point of view. Because of this, Forsberg's project is rife with implications about the politics and power of visual technology, even the somewhat outdated technology of pencil and paper.(i) Forsberg uses drawing in a paradoxical way, playing up its subjective, processual, and seemingly intimate qualities, but also exposing its generic, composite qualities as well. This tension indicates how our "unique" perceptions are fundamentally rooted in our culture of identification. The drawings have a somewhat nostalgic, eerily familiar feel because the easily recognizable composite style of the portraits references more sophisticated biometrics that are increasingly part of our everyday lives: identity cards, voice recognition, iris scanning, and digital fingerprinting. The drawings also reference a whole score of more contemporary digital composite software programs, including the popular FaceMorpher, and the two programs used by law enforcement agencies world-wide, FACES and Smith and Wesson's identi-kit®. The ways that Forsberg allows the composite sketches to waver between the subjective process of remembering and our current social systems of visibility and identification beg us to consider how our perceptions about each other are caught up in our culture's photo-laden, digitally reproducible visual databank.

Though there is not one single photograph in the exhibition, its technology is implied everywhere. First, the series invites the impulse to want a photograph of each of the five subjects so that we can compare the drawings to what we assume would be a more accurate representation. (Yes, the photograph has the advantage of being a physical index of a person, but would it be any more complete than the drawings? Don't our photographs also expose endless "versions" of ourselves depending on the time, the angle, the lighting, the mood, and the photographer? Don't we often comment on how this or that photograph doesn't look like us, or doesn't capture who we think we are?) In the photograph's absence, we are drawn into comparing the differences among the drawings themselves. The sketches of the first "subject" (Forsberg herself) for instance, as remembered by her sister, roommate, mother, colleague, acquaintance, and ex-husband, present some fascinating divergences. In some of the sketches, Forsberg is shown with larger lips, while in others she has a longer nose, and in yet others, a wider jaw. In one portrait (created by Forsberg's ex-husband), her glasses are completely absent, giving the face a completely different topography. These are fairly small differences but amazingly important in the way they change the nature of her face and projected personality. The same is true of the series of drawings of subject two (Trevor Taveres). We are left wondering: Is this person sort of scrawny and young, as his friend depicts, or does he have a more robust frame that reads as a "regular Joe" as insinuated by his employer's memory? What do we do with the fact that the subject's grandfather makes him look more like some clean-shaven youthful male of a 1950s advertisement while the ex-girlfriend makes him look more bookish and baby-faced? I also found myself wanting to know who "got the hair right." How does Trevor's mother's memory of a receding hairline jive with his employer's memory of a slightly more substantial crop of Drew Carey hair? The differences in the versions of subject four (Konrad Ng) are even more astonishing. What do we make of the sort of romantic, long-haired islander remembered by Konrad's colleague in comparison to his wife's more clean-cut (and modern) version? And in the last series of portraits (Katherine Love), we might ask: how has our culture's fascination with Michelle Pfeiffer's (or insert other appropriate movie star here) soft, liquid and round "bedroom eyes," affected the memories of the describers?

This brings us to the second and even more important implication of the photograph in *Drawn to Remember*, its use as both direct and indirect source material in the construction of all thirty of the composite drawings. Aragon asked each of the describers to focus on major points of physiognomic definition – the head shape, eyes, eyebrows, ears, mouth, nose, and chin of the subject. He sat them down with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Facial Identification Catalogue and some sticky notes, asking them to mark photos that might be helpful for referencing particular facial features. The catalogue is filled with photos that are classified and designated with a number that corresponds to a specific kind of shape of each feature. Instead of using new software programs like FACES in which the photographs are digitized and can then be selected to create a composite digital image, common to most law enforcement offices on the continental US, the Honolulu police department still depends on this FBI file, published in 1988, of almost exclusively male subjects. This specific visual database of mustached, side-burn-wearing "criminal types" undoubtedly impacted the memories and descriptions, and ultimately, the drawings of Forsberg's chosen subjects.

The FBI catalogue is the most obvious visual archive to influence the memories of the describers, but beyond those images, there is also the vast mental databank we all keep of ads, TV shows, magazines and other visual culture that could also potentially influence our memories. My descriptions above, for example, as they reference media personalities and stereotypical assumptions about body type and facial structure, are perfect indicators of this process. The implication here is that the making and reading of these drawings are not so much about the accuracy of memory as much as they are about the cultural conformity of description, the common references that we all use and depend on. More than ever, we are translating what we see and how we see it through our collective digital archive, now so easily accessible with Google™ image and YouTube™. This has a huge impact on the limits of our language, our visual imagination, and our ability to poetically describe. It also points to how important it is to remember that the way we read people's physical appearance is deeply entangled with the interpersonal (and deeply cultural) structures of perception.

This lesson has an insidious underside in the historical relationship between the photograph, the composite technique, physiognomic categorization, and stereotyping. As Allan Sekula and John Tagg have both independently asserted long ago, the very birth of photography was linked with the systemization of visibility as a way of disciplining normative behavior and appearance.(ii) In the late nineteenth century, photography was used in anthropological discourse to measure and chart differences of racial types as a way of enforcing imperialist agendas. Quantifying the different physiques between Europeans and Asians by visualizing the body against a grid, for example, was a way of "objectively" defending eugenics theories.(iii) Similarly, composite photography, in which a number of negatives were exposed onto the same image, was used in a pseudoscientific fashion to create generic physiognomic "types" of criminals – murderers, thieves, etc. The photograph was used to equate physical appearance with psychotic impulses, as if the light reflecting off our physical bodies could capture our interior thoughts and inclinations. These are just two examples of the uses of early photography in emphasizing the physical and visible aspects of identity. But even today, as Allan Sekula puts it, photography is still haunted by this "chattering ghost of nineteenth century science" which "goes on about the truth of appearances, about the world reduced to a positive ensemble of facts, to a constellation of knowable and possessable objects."(iv) If the pseudoscientific techniques of the nineteenth century have been thoroughly debunked, photography still plays a key role in organizing and enforcing normative behavior, as the FBI catalogue and the newer FACES database attests. With the reproduction of criminal photographs and composite sketches on posters, milk cartons, and TV shows, the whole world now participates in the vigil of identification as a way of policing the border between normativity and deviance.(v) Perhaps in a more prevalent (and relevant) way, we are known, and often understand ourselves, according to the vital statistics of our citizenship: our race, weight, height, fingerprints, annual income, and of course, our facial characteristics (reproduced on passports, licenses and memberships). Although Forsberg's portraits are decidedly more personal, the visual language of the composite, its reliance on an already extant visual archive, brings the dynamic of her six "subjects" and normative subjectivity to the fore.

As the artist herself attests, much of her interest in photography and perception stems from having to deal with Asian stereotypes while growing up in the continental U.S. Forsberg was born in Korea, but was adopted by an American woman and grew up in Polish-American family, living for a time in Belgium, Germany and Holland, and then in Virginia, California, and Colorado. In moving from place to place along with her family, she has grappled with cultural assumptions about who she was in relation to her multi-racial family. Part of the reason she moved to Hawaii, she has said, was to be able to experience and feel what it was to look like the majority of the population rather than the minority. Stereotypes play an important, if subtle, function in *Drawn to Remember*. A "composite" or forensic sketch has always been the result of the quantification and cataloguing of facial "types" organized according to generic visual tropes of race and gender. (FACES recently advertised newly expanded databases that were labeled respectively "Latin, African-American, and Asian."(vi)) Forsberg's chosen "subjects" end up representing a diversity of typical racial and gender types -- an "Asian female," "white male," "black female," "Asian male," "white female."

The "subject" (and the fact that she calls her participants that) of each series of portraits, becomes a loose collection of quasi-stereotypical assumptions held in tension by the describer, the source imagery, and the sketch artist. Although all of the sketches in *Drawn to Remember* are obviously recurring images of individual people, there is a strong sense that each one could be charted according to degrees with which they do or do not correspond to "white" or "Asian" or "black" features. The images of Forsberg as "subject one," interestingly, describe the condition of passing that is related to her own personal history growing up in a multi-racial household. Of the five subjects, her portraits are the hardest to pin down in terms of ethnic stereotyping. There are no consistent obvious indicators of "Asian-ness;" the medium of drawing and the reductive nature of the composite drawing technique renders typical features such as hair or skin tone, in this particular case, hard to read. The racial signifiers for "subject three," (Elisa White) on the other hand, indicate the way in which the generic formulas of the composite technique really exaggerate certain ethnic features. A few of the portraits end up accentuating the "black" features more than others. Dread-locked hair, broader noses, darker and larger eye sockets, and fuller mouths beg to be compared to the "whiter" versions. This uncomfortable dynamic recalls two other important art pieces which also address stereotyping and profiling, Adrian Piper's famous *Self-Portrait Exaggerating my Negroid Features* (1981) in which she purposely drew a portrait of herself using the stereotypical facial indicators of blackness and Glenn Ligon's *Runaways* (1993) in which he used formulaic language based on fugitive slave posters of the mid-nineteenth century to describe himself.(vii) In all three cases (Forsberg, Piper, and Ligon), these artists are exposing the weighty cultural frameworks that operate in forming our perceptions. Piper and Ligon, who use themselves as mutable physical surfaces, are raising questions about how culture informs self-perception, how race becomes internalized. Forsberg's drawings, in their performative description and their mediated production, address the processes by which we project stereotypes onto others, even as we are unaware of it happening or in denial that it has happened. When looking at the series, we don't know how each of the "subjects" feel about their portraits, or how frustrated the describers may have felt at not having the image conform to their more subtle idea of their loved-one or acquaintance. What it does forcefully indicate is that the simple visual language of the composite sketch can transform a singular personality into a somewhat generic image of, say, a black woman "subject."

Despite the efforts of the describers to capture the essence of a particular and known person, the portraits do begin to reveal an eerie standardized quality. This comes not just from the technique of compositing physical typologies from a limited database, but also from the quality of the drawings themselves. How does the disciplined, forensic, and at times, mechanical nature of this particular type of drawing affect the consistency of the imagery? These are not lovingly doted-upon idealizations of individuals, but fast, furious efforts by Aragon to transform verbal description into a type of image usually used for the very mundane purpose of identifying and finding people. The evidence of quick execution is present everywhere: the lines of the cheekbones are often heavy and muddy, the eyes are often slightly askew, and the hair is usually a bundle of lines. There is no real attempt to hide erasures and adjustments. In fact, the quickness of both the shading and the erasures has left odd oscillating patches of brightness and darkness across all the faces. While the smaller original sketches might have hidden some of this, the blown up prints expose and even accentuate the stylization and anonymity of the composite sketch. The scribble of the pencil on paper, the trace of the hand and some of the evidence of the personal conversation between the describer and artist is diminished with the copy. Now a bit larger than life-size, the portraits can be viewed more obviously as hastily executed approximations: a face without a body, eyes without back stories, lips that don't easily divulge personal experiences. They are not at all as innocent or subjective as they at first appear. Identity is shown to be a composite of fragmented and partial information.

The important lesson of *Drawn to Remember* is that our culture of surveillance is not so obviously Orwellian, but operates on much more subtle levels to create a constant correlation between physical appearance and identity. The drawings remind me that the normalizing gaze operates everywhere, not just in the police department interrogation chamber. We are all subject to a kind of normative behavior and appearance that is patrolled and enforced even beyond the pervasive technology of the camera. Through our interpersonal relationships and social structures -- our family, our friends, our workplace -- we become visible, meaningful, subjects. Through recognition, perception, and memory, we become daughters, sons, friends, colleagues, and lovers - this is, in part, what gives us our identity. Whether at work or at home, we keep tabs on each other. We not only remember each others' appearances, but we also powerfully and subtly establish and aid how others see themselves and adjust their appearance to conform to situations and relationships. No one wants to be reduced to systematic visual description, and certainly we are not solely what others can see. Yet Forsberg's exploration of perception and memory provides an opportunity for contemplating how powerfully entwined our identities are to the composite, collective, and generic descriptors that people (and the law) use to describe us. We can start to recognize how features that we have come to think of as individual and unique parts of ourselves could be translated into generic measurements and shapes that are part of our contemporary culture's vast statistical and visual archives. In exploring our fascination with surface description in *Drawn to Remember*, perhaps we can begin to search the ramifications (or the depths) of our embodied and composite identity.

Footnotes

i. One good recent overview of the literature on facial composite technology was recently published by Kelly Gates, "The Past Perfect Promise of Facial Recognition Technology," Program in Arms Control, Disarmament, and International Security, University of Illinois at Urbana-Campaign (June 2004). http://www.acdis.uiuc.edu/Research/OPs/Gates/cover.html.

See also Jordan Bear, “Looking with Conviction: Two Ways of Apprehending the Criminal in the Nineteenth Century,” Part 11, http://dsc.gc.cuny.edu/part/part11/articles/bear.html; Simon Cole, Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Irma van der Ploeg, “Biometrics and the Body as Information: Normative Issues of the Socio-Technical Coding of the Body” in Surveillance as Social Sorting: Privacy, Risk and Digital Discrimination, ed. David Lyon, (New York: Rutledge, 2003), 57-73.

ii. John Tagg, The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) and Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” October 39 (Winter 1986): 3-64.

iii. David Green, “Classified Subjects,” Ten-8 (1984): 30-37.

iv. Allan Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs” Art Journal, v. 41, No. 1(Spring, 1981): 15-25.

v. Jane Caplan and John Torpey, eds., Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

vi. http://www.iqbiometrix.com/products_faces_40.html

vii. Richard Meyer, “Borrowed Voices: Glenn Ligon and the Force of Language,” http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/Ligon/LigonEssay.html