Kelli Connell: Double Life, 20 Years
Kelli Connell
Double Life: 20 Years

ON VIEW JUNE - AUGUST 31 2021

Kelli Connell’s twenty-year project with one model represents an autobiographical questioning of sexuality and gender roles that shape the identity of the self in intimate relationships. The project explores polarities of identity such as the masculine and feminine psyche, the irrational and rational self, the exterior and interior self, and the motivated and resigned. By combining multiple photographic negatives of the same model in each image, the dualities of the self are defined by body language and clothing. The importance of these images lies in the representation of interior dilemmas portrayed as an external object: a photograph. Through these images, the audience is presented with “constructed realities”.

Picnic, 2002
Executive Director, Victoria Munro
Interviews Kelli Connell

HOW DID YOU COME TO PHOTOGRAPHY AS YOUR MEDIUM TO EXPLORE AND CREATE YOUR IDEAS/WORK?

I have always been drawn to directing. I used to direct the neighborhood kids in plays we would act out in our front yard. Once I learned that I could do this behind the camera it felt natural for me to express myself through the medium of photography, a medium that is believed to depict reality, yet is completely fabricated. In high school I took a photography class and found myself staging scenes with friends as characters, rather than being drawn to using photography as a means to document the world around me.

Photographs are simply ink on paper, yet they depict something from our “real” world. Our interpretations about what is depicted and the conversations around this depiction, especially in regards to truth or fiction, is fascinat-
Photography, for me, has been the perfect medium to raise important questions about what we consider to be “true”.

How was this project conceived and what were your initial aims for it when you began 20 years ago?

At that time, I was newly single after the relationship I had been in for more than five years had come to an end. I was questioning my identity, sexuality, and the roles that I had played in past relationships. I found that by using the same model as two separate “selves” Double Life, I was able to raise questions about the roles that our “selves” assume in regards to gender, sexuality, and identity. Making these photographs gave me a vehicle to express the self-questioning that was going on in my real life.
Carnival, 2006
Howdy Doody, 2006
I AM VERY INTERESTED IN YOUR PROCESS OF DIRECTION IN THIS SERIES. ALTHOUGH ALICE AUSTEN IS OFTEN DESCRIBED AS ONE OF THE EARLIEST WOMEN STREET PHOTOGRAPHERS, HER SUBJECTS ARE HIGHLY POSED AND WOULD HAVE OFTEN HAD TO REMAIN STILL FOR LONG EXPOSURE TIMES. THERE ARE INTERSECTIONS IN YOUR CREATIVE PROCESSES AND I WOULD LIKE YOU TALK TO THE ROLE THAT DIRECTION PLAYS IN YOUR WORK.

Taking photographs of someone can be an intimate experience. As Alice Austen often photographed her partner and friends, they shared a closeness through the slow process of photography. This closeness is something that I am interested in as well.
Yet, as someone who is drawn to photographing people, I often find myself conflicted about the power the photographer has over their subject, especially when making a portrait. In *Double Life*, I have found a way to negotiate this power through my process. For this work, I photograph with a medium format camera set on a tripod. I press the shutter to ignite the self-timer and then join the scene myself. The resulting images depict my model, Kiba Jacobson, with me as a stand-in, playing the characters in each scene. We continue this way, with one of us playing one role, and one playing the other until we then switch clothes and characters and act out the scene once again. In post-production I remove myself from the scene and make an image that depicts both roles played by Kiba. The images themselves are often made without a photographer behind the camera. I’m in front of the camera. I think this helps us both to feel a sense of collaboration and intimacy. I love the improvisation that takes place when we work together. This slow process, with the multiple “takes” involved, allows me to capture the emotional tone I am looking for in each photograph.
I HAVE ALWAYS QUESTIONED THE WAYS THAT AUSTEN HAS BEEN REPRESENTED IN THE PAST. OFTEN, SHE IS TIME LOCKED IN HER 20’S WITH LITTLE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF HER LIFE LONG PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK WHICH ENCOMPASSES SELF-PORTRAITS AND PORTRAITS OF PARTNER GERTRUDE TATE AS THEY AGE. HOW HAS WORKING WITH YOUR SAME MODEL, KIBA, FOR 20 YEARS INTRODUCED NEW NARRATIVES AROUND IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION IN THIS SERIES?

For me, the work speaks about how identity can be fluid, not as easily fixed and prescribed as one might think. I am interested in raising questions in my work about our social constructs, fantasies tied to identity of the self and relationships, and how women are portrayed in contemporary culture. As my ideas about relationships and identity have evolved over the years,
so have the images in *Double Life*. Early on, as I was figuring out my own queer identity, the images depicted scenes of the early stages in a relationship, such as two women flirting in a bar or making out in a car. After years of being in a long-term relationship, the photographs have depicted scenes of comfortability and partnership, as well as scenes of struggle and hardship, all things that long term relationships endure.

Kiba and I never knew that this project would last as long as it has. We have witnessed each other’s lives unfold: relationships coming to an end, the birth of Kiba’s son, my marriage to my wife, Betsy, and her marriage to her husband, Justin. We have supported each other through grief and hardships and celebrated moments of joy.

What I have had to say about relationships, the self, and a woman’s body is very different now that I am in my forties than when I was in my twenties. I can only imagine that this will continue to evolve. It is important that our
definitions of women do not narrow as they get older. Uncovering the desires of older women is something that needs to be represented more in the art world.

Women are all too often only celebrated in their youth.

**VIEWERS MAY INTERPRET THESE PHOTOGRAPHS AS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL. YOU WILL HAVE EXPERIENCED MANY PERSONAL SHIFTS OVER THIS PERIOD, DO YOUR CHANGING LIVED EXPERIENCES INFORM THE CONTENT AND SETTINGS OF THE WORKS?**

This work is autobiographical in many ways. It starts from a place of truth, a place of vulnerability is at its core. These images explore questions and content from my own relationships. And yet, these images do not fit the traditional definition of self-portraiture. In this work, my model plays characters based on myself. In a sense, she is a medium I work though. As a photographer I enjoy directing and making compositions behind the camera. One of the main reasons I decided to use a model was to be able to have control over this, especially because I needed to make sure that eye contact and physical touching would need to look believable between the two “selves” in each scene. So, the resulting images are loosely based on my life.
“For me, the work speaks about how identity can be fluid, not as easily fixed and prescribed as one might think. I am interested in raising questions in my work about our social constructs, fantasies tied to identity of the self and relationships, and how women are portrayed in contemporary culture”

KELLI CONNELL
On Second Thought, 2019
Embrace, 2020
THIS HOME, NOW A NATIONALLY DESIGNATED SITE OF LGBTQ+ HISTORY WAS THE STUDIO AND MUSE OF AUSTEN AND OFTEN SERVED AS THE PHOTOGRAPHIC BACKDROP FOR MANY OF AUSTEN’S MOST CELEBRATED PHOTOGRAPHS. THESE COLLECTIONS ENCOMPASS INTIMATE PORTRAITS OF AUSTEN’S SOCIAL CIRCLE OF VICTORIAN WOMEN AND HER LOVERS. WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOU TO PRESENT THIS 20 YEAR PROJECT AT THE ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE?
I cannot think of a better place to show this work at its twenty-year mark. All too often women are written out of history. Women like Alice Austen and other amazing photographers of their time were not given the credit that they deserve. It is a true honor to have work shown in this house, a place that was a haven for the love that Austen shared her partner as well as her close friends.

Many of the images in *Double Life* are made in the domestic sphere. I often photograph indoors or directly outside of a home. Showing these photographs at the Alice Austen House speaks to the role of domesticity in the work. A close relationship with someone else is often experienced indoors within a house such as this, and I imagine the closeness Alice felt for her partner, Gertrude, in this place years ago.