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Keith Cottingham: Fictitious Portraits (single, triplets, twins)
Digitally Constructed Photographic Images -
(color coupler prints from digitally exposed 8X10 transparencies)

In this current series, the computer serves as a tool to draw from traditional sculptures, models, photography, and drawings, and through the use of digital painting and montage, ideas materialize into finished photographic prints. The realism in my work serves as a revealing mirror into ourselves and our inventions, both beautiful and horrific.

The images themselves are portraits of a youth. By combining myself with others, these imaginary portraits expose the movement and development of the 'Self'. Seen not as a solidified being, the soul is exposed as multiple personalities, each expression a view of and onto itself.

In this series, I hope to simultaneously challenge what the viewer perceives as portraiture, and question the alienation and fragmentation of image from matter, soul from body.

Fictitious Portraits:

The Subject in the Age of Electronic Reproduction

"The soul is the prison of the body."

- Foucault

Keith Cottingham's work *Fictitious Portraits* gnaws away at two of the foundational myths of Modernism: *the scientific objectivity of the photograph, and the creative authenticity of subjectivity*. His photographic triptych demonstrates that both notions are merely social constructions. As he stated in a recent interview: "I am interested in exploring the construction of photographic referents that reflect how we define ourselves socially and individually."

Computer technology makes Cottingham's exploration technically possible. Through the techniques of electronic imaging he has literally loosened his photographs from their tether to a light-sensitive material's re-production of a spatio-temporal constellation--to what Modernity has labeled *reality*. Cottingham has cut the umbilical cord to the Modern and has entered into the imagined, virtual space which lies beyond the 'real.' As he himself states: "These images are constructed photographic documents, pictures of nowhere, of no time, of no- *body*. . . they are constructed possibilities." Yet, what is most exciting about *Fictitious Portraits*, what sets it apart from manufactured make-believe where effect serves as seductive escapism, is that this virtuality is folded back upon the *mysteries* -- both glamorous and terrifying--of 'Modern' society. "I am questioning the alienation and fragmentation of the image from matter, the soul from body. I want to produce what is social--what can't be seen or heard, but what is behind the appearance of all things."

Cottingham's *Fictitious Portraits* breaks out of the ghetto of computer art as canned novelties and explores larger social, and ultimately even ontological issues.

He wants us to know the "sterile field of modernist spaces. Cold and blank. Glimmering, with clinical hostility. A formal silence that seduces and engulfs us in a peaceful beauty which eventually collapses into vacuum and stillness, into nothingness." To reveal this seductive mode of existence, *Fictitious Portraits* exposes the "structures that structure our field of existence." Cottingham does this by undermining the myth of photographic realism, a myth that allows critics to speak of photography as unique from painting's genesis by hand because photographs are "cosubstantial with the objects they represent," they are "perfectly analogous," "stencils of the real," "traces," or "records" of objects that really exist. Simply, critics normally tell us that while paintings can, by genius or guile or conceit, manipulate or mutilate the "real," photographs can only record it. The photographic image, because it is not a product of the hand, is pictured as a non-arbitrary sign. Photographs are believed to be the exact copy of the thing itself.

Yet, by mimicking representational photography so craftily, *Fictitious Portraits* demonstrates that as a label 'realism' is remarkably elastic, and that just like painters, photographers invent rules and schemata for laying down visual signs. Photographs no more guarantee reality than paintings do. In the words of E.H. Gombrich, photography as well as painting is "something akin to visual hallucination." We find, then, that Cottingham's concern is not with "realism", but with what he calls *constructed realism* : "The realism in my work serves as a revealing mirror into ourselves and into our inventions, both charming and nauseating. Technique simply serves to project the imaginary reality." Through electronic reproduction Cottingham draws on what is imagined, and writes it upon the real. The illusion of photographic authenticity, then, allows him to combine otherwise discrete and even competing contexts. Yet, the artwork becomes not a collage of an image, but a collage of reality. This ability to construct the essence of the real and imagine its content is what gives Cottingham's work its unsettling power.

In *Fictitious Portraits*, electronic re-production allows Cottingham to use and abuse photography's myth, its privileged claim to the real; to critique what he calls "the most important invention of modern times--the subject." The self, the Modern notion of personhood, is what is being called into question by Cottingham's photographic triptych. By hybridizing himself with others, by creating characters out of clay, anatomical drawings and numerous photographs of different races, genders, and ages, instead of re-presenting subjects, Cottingham imagines bodies. These seemingly formal photographic portraits foreground human reality as construction, as the product of signifying activities which play upon the body. As Cottingham poetically describes the image. "There's the lifeless, external shell with its guilt, angrily questioning the viewer's responsibility, leaving body, blank eyes. Breath. Older, hard, intense--younger, innocent, relaxed. Unaware. Flux of warning, guilt, worried questioning. In the blink of an eye, the movement between life and stagnation."

Through the construction of bodies, made possible by electronic reproduction, Cottingham shows that selves, like *Fictitious Portraits*, are mental collages made from numerous images from the past, future, and the imagined. By creating a portrait as multiple personas, the 'self' is exposed not as a solidified being but as the product of social and interior interaction. Cottingham shows that discourse involves the 'match' of the signifiers 'I' and 'you' to ideal representation, and that it is through those representations that the subject finds itself. Or to skew Walter Benjamin's epitaph for the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, the ideal of the 'subject' is the Modern *aura* that is reproduced by photography. It is the exploitation of this Modernist *aura* that gives *Fictitious Portraits* its subversive and even horrifying beauty.

Greg Grieve

Keith Cottingham