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*From the Los Angeles Times*

## ART REVIEW

### 'Body Double': Through a lens starkly

The Cal State L.A. exhibition features self-portraits by 16 young female photographers and video artists.

By Holly Myers

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There probably isn't a female photographer in the last two or three generations who hasn't turned her camera on herself at one time or another. In a world inundated with images of women, most fashioned by men and tailored to their interests (or those of capitalism), the female self-portrait is a rite of passage: an act of reckoning with this problematic legacy. In taking control of her own image -- exploring it, manipulating it, grappling with it -- the photographer begins to address her place in that tradition, as an individual as well as an artist.

Much of this work goes the way of the undergraduate portfolio, laying a foundation for future endeavors without amounting to much in itself -- if for no other reason than it is, like most earnest, youthful explorations, so ripe for narcissism and cliché.

But "Body Double," at Cal State L.A.'s Luckman Gallery, features 16 young female photographers and video artists who take the self-portrait impulse to the next level, using the self -- or more specifically, the body -- as a tool rather than a subject, a vehicle for the exploration of broader situations and themes. In most cases, the artist might have just as easily used a model, but the authenticity of her presence, even when disguised or playing a role, lends the work the intensity of lived experience.

Among the dozens of works on display, there is one classic girl-camera-mirror scenario: a suite of images taken by Los Angeles artist Haruko Tanaka in various department store dressing rooms. But the cliché is easy to forgive, given the work's complete lack of pretension or guile. The title, "Fit In Room," conveys some sense of its poignancy.

In general, however, the strength of this thoughtfully organized show is the variety of approaches it reveals.

Many of the works have a theatrical air. The most flat-out delightful is Shannon Plumb's "Olympics (Track & Field)," an 18-minute video shot in the spirit of silent-movie slapstick. It's a parody of the Olympic Games in which the artist portrays an impressive assortment of ridiculous characters. The handlebar-mustachioed announcer, who mumbles into a microphone between bites from a sandwich, is particularly priceless.

Caitlin Atkinson's photographs also evoke the movies, suggesting frozen moments in an elusive narrative: a woman smiling into a mirror, calling into the fog in a park or collapsed beneath a tree. Barbara Probst achieves a similar effect in an elegant quartet of images of her on a New York rooftop.

Several of the other artists play with racial and cultural stereotypes. Wendy Red Star -- a recent UCLA grad who is half Crow Indian and half Irish -- appears in her "Four Seasons" series in full souvenir-shop Native American regalia, posing in a sequence of wonderfully corny, museum-like dioramas, complete with painted backdrops, artificial turf and inflatable deer.

Then there's Liz Cohen, whose photographs "Roof" and "Hood" come from a project in which she built a lowrider

-- a Frankenstein-ish fusion of a German Trabant and an American El Camino -- and made herself into a swimsuit model for showing it off in photographs, on calendars and at lowrider shows.

Desiree Holman photographs herself as a woman and as men in handmade, somewhat grotesque masks and bodysuits, enacting various courtship rituals.

By contrast, several of the artists, rather than playing out roles, approach the body as an artistic object, pushing it toward a sort of abstraction.

Susan Lee-Chun's series "Camouflage" depicts the artist in a black-and-red plaid dress against a backdrop of the same pattern. Gina Osterloh also portrays herself disappearing into a constructed environment -- as a black splotch against red paper in one photograph, showered in confetti in another.

Kristine Thompson appears in her photographs wrapped in a white sheet, curled up or crouching in domestic spaces that appear to have been abandoned: behind a curtain, in a sink or in a hole cut into an old mattress.

German artist Daniela Steinfeld distorts her body with lumpy, nylon hose appendages or crouches inside a cardboard box like some kind of turtle. Roya Falahi photographs herself with wiry coils of black hair over her face.

One of the most curious threads in the show is a distinct preoccupation with death. In the video "Eight Dying Scenes," Kara Hearn, who just finished her MFA at UC Berkeley, reenacts the death sequences in "The Outsiders," "Titanic," "The Hours" and other films with an almost embarrassing, though ultimately moving, sincerity, each in ordinary street clothes, in what looks like her apartment. (The slow-motion, bullet-riddled combat scene from "Platoon" is especially memorable.)

New York-based Janaina Tschäpe's haunting series "100 Little Deaths" depicts the artist sprawled face down in a variety of cinematic locations: on a balcony overlooking the ocean, in a grand, Baroque hallway, on a New York rooftop.

Berlin-based Mathilde ter Heijne's "Mathilde, Mathilde," one of the most powerful works in the show, is a 4 1/2 - minute video that opens on a scene of the artist on a bridge struggling with a life-sized dummy of herself, then flinging this double into the river below. (An equally haunting video called "Suicide Bomb," exhibited at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects in 2002, involved her blowing up a similar dummy on a city sidewalk.)

The alarmingly beautiful photographs of Carlee Fernandez fuse death and life, depicting the artist's body on a polished concrete floor, nude and partly draped in a bearskin. In one of the images, the head of the bear envelops the artist's -- a jarring contrast to her delicate shoulders and breasts, though the bear's expression is in fact placid and peaceful.

The picture is thrilling and terrifying, magical and grotesque in equal measure. One of the simplest in the show, it speaks more powerfully than perhaps any other to the sense of mystery that haunts any pursuit of the self. However long we gaze into that mirror, it suggests, however many pictures we take or memoirs we write, the real essence is inexplicable.

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