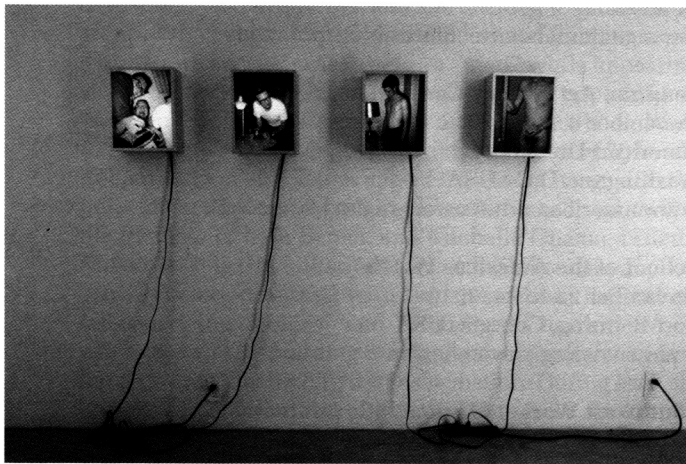


MILLIE WILSON: ON BOTH SIDES AND IN BETWEEN

Comparing *The Family of Man*, Edward Steichen's 1955 photography exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, with the same museum's 1972 retrospective of Diane Arbus's work, Susan Sontag observed that Arbus "lined up assorted monsters and borderline cases—most of them ugly" rather than "people whose appearance pleases, representative folk, doing their human thing." Conjuring the discomfort Sontag found in each of these contrasting exhibitions, Millie Wilson's recent photo projects employ appropriated vernacular images to turn the viewer's gaze to what the artist describes as "liminal spaces of hybridity and flux," on both sides of the threshold of so-called monstrous and normal. While *The Family of Man* argued that we are bound by universal traits, and Arbus's retrospective affirmed our feelings of hopeless alienation, Wilson's project does not make mockery of, or establish distance from, *The Other*. Rather, her sagacious subjects repose in a place between normal and freakish, absurd and everyday.



Combed from a hefty archive of more than 20,000 found photos, Wilson's *Some People*, the third exhibition in an ongoing project, scrutinizes what the artist terms the "family romance." Begun as a playful artist's game in which the artist reconstructed remembered family photo albums using thrift-store surrogates of familial look-alikes, Wilson was struck by the similarities among poses and settings in the disparate photos she found. In *I Am Not Here Anymore, But I Am Fine* at Las Cienegas Projects in Los Angeles (2010), *Looks Bad* at Chicago's Iceberg Projects (2011), and most recently in *Some People* at Maloney Fine Art in Los Angeles, Wilson has carefully selected exemplars from her collection, then cleaned, trimmed, and enlarged them as unique transparencies displayed in practical light-box frames. In each iteration of the project, Wilson's critique of American normalcy very literally illuminates what we have taken for granted, been trained to see, and learned to look past.



Some People exhibition, Maloney Fine Art, Los Angeles, April 27 to June 1, 2013. Photographs by Julie Shafer.

As a regular faculty member at the California Institute of the Arts since 1985, she surely honed this practice in the classroom. In courses such as "Merely Detected: Masculinity and Crime" and "Femme Fatales: Noir and Its Double," Wilson cultivates what Hannah Higgins defines as core Fluxus pedagogy: experiential learning, collaborative engagement, and interdisciplinary discovery founded staunchly on a principle of nonhierarchical exchange. With sure-footed innuendo and conscious subtext, Wilson's work, like her teaching space, critiques the very institutions we operate under with adept insight.

In *Untitled (Jacuzzi)* from *Some People*, a George H. W. look-alike's disembodied head floats just above the surface of frothy, semen-like water. The image ponders the very nature of post-post-modern representation, while complicating the severe order of modernity with the theater of the body. Meanwhile, across the room, in *Untitled (Men with Paint)*, a young man in a *Rebel Without a Cause* windbreaker seemingly strangles a submissive, who grasps for a floating gallon of paint while shrieking. We are tempted to recall Plato and Jim's risky flirtations, strictly prohibited by Motion Picture Production Code officers. Each subject is frozen in a state of epiphanic contemplation, surrounded by the potential for action, but forever fixed in a state of in-between.

Born in 1948 in Hot Springs, Arkansas (where Bill Clinton grew up), the artist's own background wryly remarks on Baby Boomer Americana. Suave and commanding in presence, a whip-smart, dandy woman with curly red hair and a piercing gaze, Wilson herself subverts the code of happiness that family photo albums are meant to affirm, while whisking away the curtain on our manufactured domestic sets through her artistic practice. The spaces in which Wilson's subjects lunge, stumble, and gasp through static rites consistently ask us to question accepted knowledge as she surely had to do growing up, as she phrases it, "to denaturalize the status quo." Drawing attention throughout her work to the confusion of gender codes, the artist employs happenstance humor "to propose a secret history of modernity, informed by queer subjectivity." As she elaborates, "The work presumes a place in the canon of modernist art, with the intention of revealing some of what is overlooked in the historicizing of the artist as subject and citizen."

In this period of incomparable globalism, extreme natural disasters, growing international discontent, unthinkable economic collapse, and intensifying anxiety over the governing of the body, Wilson's photo illuminations question the very structures by which narrow definitions of identity are bound. Like her fragmented subjects, Wilson's work asks us to linger in in-betweenness with the promise of "imagining something else." A message that could come at no better time.

—Denise Johnson