

Derosia

Sarah Valdez, Garage, March 22, 2018

GARAGE

MoMA's New Photography Show Is a Testament to Being Human

SARAH VALDEZ
Mar 22 2018, 5:27pm

“Being: New Photography 2018” is comprised of work by 17 photographers, all under 45, from eight countries.

“Being,” as perhaps the broadest imaginable subject for an exhibition, would seem to have unmatched potential for falling flat. Fortunately, this isn't the case with the revelatory *Being: New Photography 2018*. Organized by MoMA assistant curator Lucy Gallun, this latest installment in the museum's ongoing series of biannual photo surveys considers nothing less than what it means, right now, to be human. And according to the 80 new and recent works included—by 17 artists, all under 45, from eight countries—personhood is defined by fragmentation, for the potential to become other and more than oneself.

Among the standouts is Aida Muleneh, whose 2016 inkjet print *All in One* portrays a woman in electric blue posing frontally, gesturing in a highly mannered, quasi-religious style. The dark skin around her eyes is visible through a patina of white makeup, which otherwise covers her body. Black dots run vertically from her forehead down her neck; they look at once tribal and futuristic, à la *Black Panther*. Other fantastical, stylized portraits by Muleneh include one of a figure in profile wearing a mask, and others glimpsed through windows in a bus or train car. All have sculptured Afros. The series is titled *The World Is Nine*, after an enigmatic but comforting saying of Muleneh's grandmother's: “The world is nine; it is never complete, and it is never perfect.”

A series by Andrzej Steinbach on the other hand, takes its title, *Gesellschaft beginnt mit drei* (Society begins with Three) from German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling, famous for his assertion that competition for power, money, health, and youth create a cultural problem of malaise characterized by excessive, endless striving. Steinbach's photographs of disaffected young people dressed in black are reminiscent of a Calvin Klein ad campaign from 1993, except here, various individuals have been conspicuously cropped out. Shilpa Gupa, for her part, simply cuts photographs of individuals in two—specifically a hundred people who have changed their names for political, familial, and/or emotional reasons—and displays their halves separately in the same room (not all are included in the show), again representing a splintering of the self.

As Gallun says, regarding “being” having the capacity to function as either a noun or a verb, “I like that capacity, that capaciousness, in that there are representations of beings in this show—different types of figures, but then there are also representations of lived experiences and circumstances going from birth through political experiences, and even death.” Matthew Connors's photographs of people and charged symbols in North Korea emphasize a pronounced disconnect between state-controlled narratives and lived experience, such as a shot of a hand holding a paper mask with eyeholes, the visage of whomever it represents visible only from behind.

Yazan Khalili, however, deploys technological means in her video *Hiding Our Faces Like a Dancing Wind* (2016), blurring lines between distortion and recognition by manipulating Google facial-recognition software's use of physical characteristics to “place” and “identify” people, mainly herself. Stephanie Syjuco's related low-tech project involves passport-style portraits in the tradition of

Derosia

Sarah Valdez, Garage, March 22, 2018

19th-century cartes de visites, used popularly as calling cards and ethnographic markers. Her black-and-white *Applicant Photos* and *Cargo Cults* may appear to be images from *National Geographic*, but are in fact expertly styled with boldly patterned clothes acquired from big-box stores in American shopping malls. (She left the price tags on, and later returned them.)

Huong Ngo and Hong-An Truong, working as a duo, assemble collections of 1970s-era scenes of their mothers, both of whom had immigrated from Vietnam, and pair them with transcribed text from US congressional hearings about “aliens” and “illegals” that makes them seem like otherworldly outlaws. Similarly focusing on an aspect of maternal being, Carmen Winant compiles images of women preparing for and in the process of childbirth: a universal experience generally hidden from view. Creating altar-like assemblages with found photos and small objects like books, charms and key chains, Em Rooney directs attention to the very attention paid to photographs as aids to memory and ritual.

Herold Mendez’s *Consent not to be a single being* (2017–18), one of many photographs he took at the Necrópolis Cristóbal Colon in Havana, could describe Being as a whole. In this close-up photo, a faded bullseye painted on a rock is surrounded by other imprinted fragments of bygone elements, like fossils and signs of erosion. Mendez echoes the sentiment shared by all artists in the exhibition: being isn’t, after all, about just one individual, or a lone act.

[Being: New Photography 2018](#) is on view at the *Museum of Modern Art* through August 19.