

13 ICONIC PHOTOGRAPHERS ON THE SELF PORTRAIT

FRANCESCA WOODMAN
ARNO RAFAEL MIKKINEN
ELLEN CARNEY
ALYSON BEICHER
HELMUT NEWTON
SHEN WEI
ANDREAS BENTSCH
FRED CHAY
ANNU PALAKUNHATHU MATTHEW
ANTHONY GOICOEÇA
MICHAL MACKO
MINU KIM
VERONICA CERNA

Right from the time of Robert Cornelius and Hippolyte Bayard to the likes of Lee Friedlander, Cindy Sherman and Vivian Maier carrying the mantle, self portraiture has come a long way. How do different practitioners examine their thoughts and experiences? What makes their articulation of these feelings, approach and practice unique to themselves?

Sakshi Parikh shares stories of imagemakers who have looked inwards, examined their lives and made themselves the protagonists of their own story.

Helmut Newton

“...what I try to do is a good bad picture.”

LE PETIT TAILLEUR GRIS

Blouson court à taille surpliquée sur jupe ronde et froncée, en flanelle pure laine peignée de Lelieu. Poches incrustées. Longues jambes marine. Lanvin.

LES GRANDS CARREAUX

Veste très longue, encadrée d'un biais, sur jupe très courte en lainage de Gerondeau à grands carreaux marron et blanc. Blouse en piqué. Ceinture à boucle-cible. Cardin.

Photograph by Helmut Newton. Image Courtesy: Helmut Newton Estate



One of the most influential voices of the last century (1920–2004), Helmut Newton's iconic work is enveloped with sex, sensuality and surrealism. His use of fetish imagery has both, been criticised and celebrated by feminists and commentators, and has inspired a generation of fashion photographers. An ongoing exhibition of his work, titled *Pages from the Glossies and Greg Gorman's Colour Works*, offers us a new perspective on many of his images. The show is on view till 22 May 2016 at the Museum of Photography, Helmut Newton Foundation, Jebensstr, 210623 Berlin.

Helmut Newton, *Self portrait with model, Elle, Paris 1969*

If the theme has something to do with my life, past or present, it seems a nice idea to put myself in it.

There are moments when I am photographing, when the picture goes beyond the photographed, and starts becoming about me. It's at times like these when including myself within the frame, in a mirror, or through a timed remote release, becomes an interesting exercise. These personal photographs speak about how my life has evolved over the years. Elements come in that allude to the little signals of my life—my models, my cameras, my wife, the studio. That is what I call an autobiographical picture.

Anthony Goicolea

“I wish to depict a semi artificial world, which is humorous as well as horrific.”



Anthony made his artistic debut in the late nineties with a series of provocative multiple self portraits. The images feature him as groups of young boys on the threshold of adolescence, acting out childhood fables and social taboos in highly staged domestic or institutional settings, revealing a playful self consciousness.



Photograph by Anthony Goicolea

➤ *Window Washers, 2001:* I wish to take narcissistic fantasies a step further into the realm of the impossible and the absurd. My effort is to soften the drama and grossness of what's happening within the frame, through subdued aesthetics of imagemaking.

By creating childlike, vulnerable and idiosyncratic situations, I try to question and stir empathy with the very idea of growing up.

My self portraits address social conventions of age and gender by embodying childhood myths and exploring the awkward journey towards adulthood. The photographs are snapshots from a nonsensical narrative derived from disordered cultural fragments of countless stories and fantasies which I arbitrarily fuse together. I usually play more than one character, cloning myself within the frame. Simultaneously rooted in nostalgia and science fiction, I act out childhood incidents such as fights, first kisses and deranged play dates. By creating a fairytale-like feel, I wish to convey that scenes that would normally be considered threatening or repulsive are actually more complex.

Verónica Cerna

“I always look at my subjects as if they were me, so there's a link of identification.”



Through her practice, Verónica wishes to explore aspects of physical and psychological identity and performance, through an element of surreal obscurity. Her work, she says, is a response to the fact that she's aware of being watched and committed to the act of looking.

As the photographer and subject, I choose every single detail of the image, and yet when I am in front of the camera, I can never see the actual shot. The duality of both having and losing control fascinates me.

My work is a performance of something private, but exposed, as in a scenario, where the viewer can feel both invited and rejected at the same time, like staring at someone else's window. But then again, everything is a performance, even when it's for the mirror or for an invisible audience in our minds.



⊕ Growing up in a Catholic family made me build an image an omniscient vigilant God, and after my father passed away, thinking of both these figures as my constant observers, I grew fascinated with the idea of vigilance and surveillance. With this work, I have tried to explore the lack of private spaces that I have in my mind. I am interested in the intersection of what's public and private.

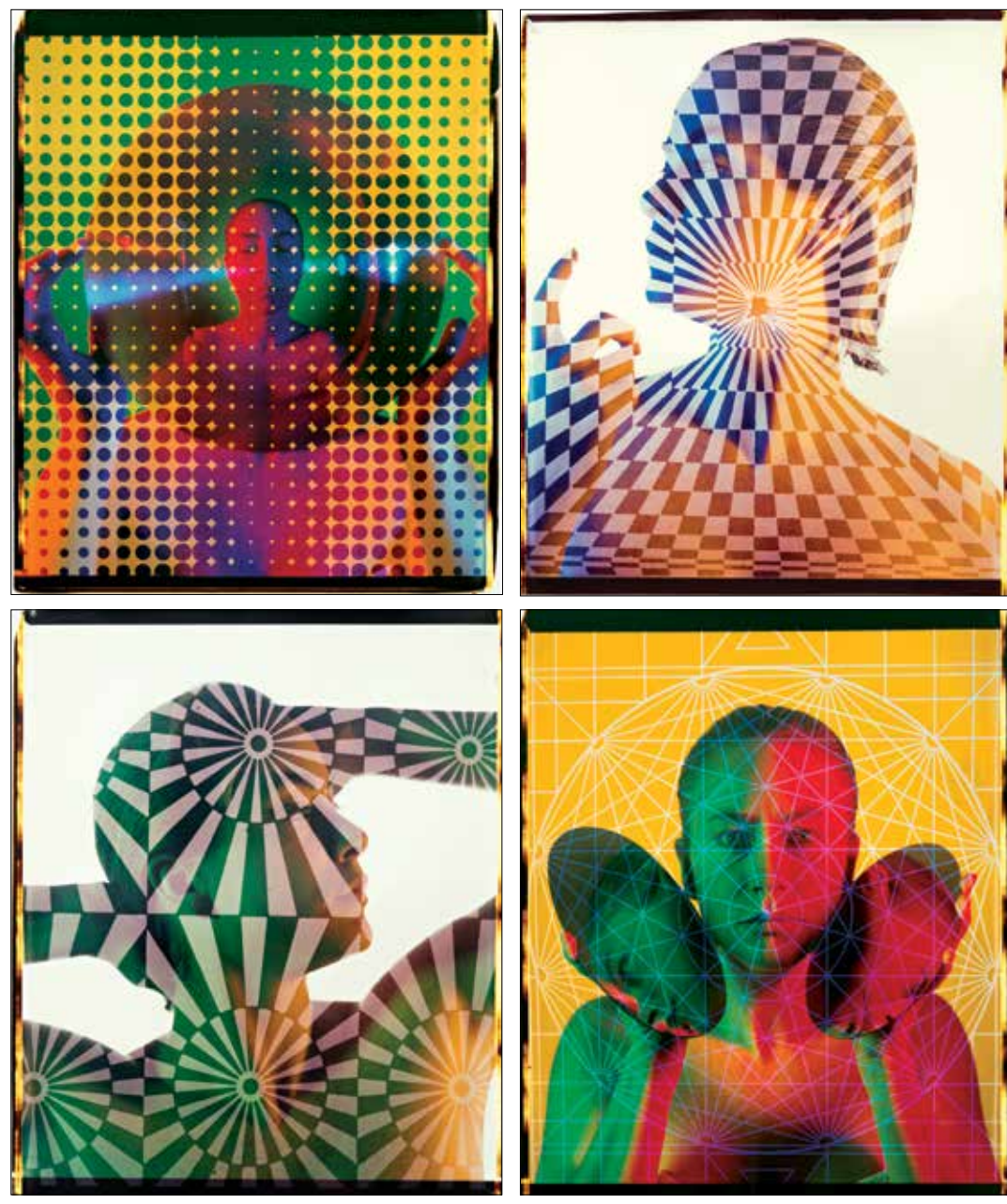
Photograph by Verónica Cerna

Ellen Carey

“These colour photographs are the artifacts of my imaginary wanderings.”



Ellen Carey's work highlights the use of experimentation and colour. She believes that her Catholic upbringing has subconsciously contributed to the stained glass look in the photos, which she made with a large format Polaroid 20 x 24, one of five in the world.

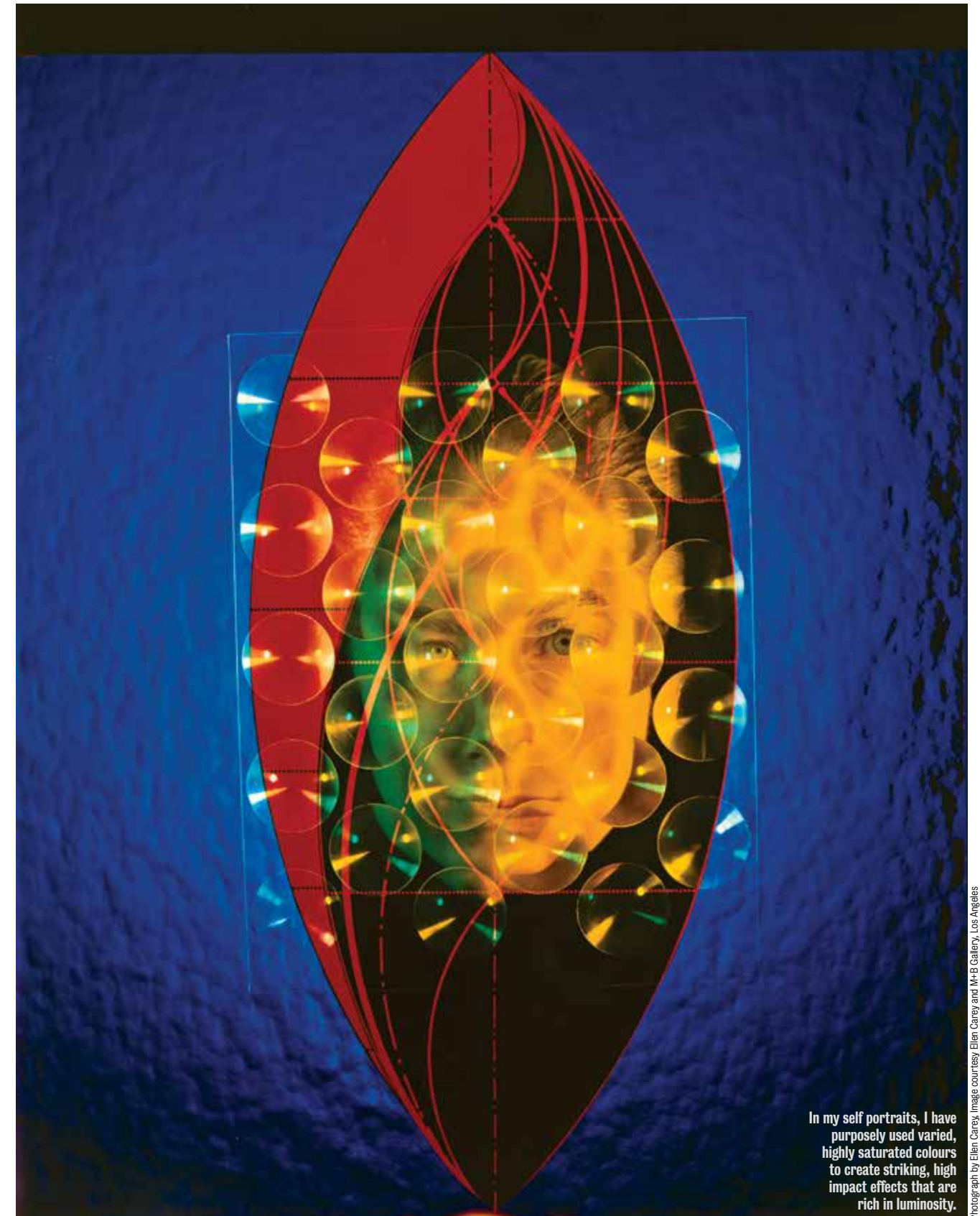


➔ Reflections on being and having a 'self' are paired with the Polaroid process. Polaroid's tagline *See What Develops* has multifaceted meanings, and is a fitting metaphor for my practice.

My self portraits, simultaneously me and not me, are purposely posed as head and shoulders, to camouflage and/or 'expose' my gender, to borrow a photographic term.

In the late seventies and early eighties, questions of identity, of "Who am I?" and "What is the Self?" seemed natural for a young artist, a search that was one aspect of the 'artist's struggle'.

While acknowledging the 'self' as a small part in relation to a much larger, unknowable whole, I moved away from standard notions of selfhood, which involved roleplay, gender identity, dress up, and disguise. Instead, I focused on utopian ideologies of transformation and transcendence embedded in the philosophy of being and nothingness, as theorised by the founder of existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre.



In my self portraits, I have purposely used varied, highly saturated colours to create striking, high impact effects that are rich in luminosity.

Photograph by Ellen Carey. Image courtesy Ellen Carey and M+B Gallery, Los Angeles

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew

“When a photo is made, the moment that is frozen, is instantly also the past.”



Annu sees herself as being a transcultural artist rather than a diasporic artist. Her series *An Indian from India* reflects on the questions of rootlessness in postmodern times. Of this work, Holland Cotter wrote in the *New York Times*, “it’s about photography as document and fiction: souvenir, re-enactment and imaginative projection.”



NOBLE SAVAGE

Photograph by S.B. Curtis



SAVAGE NOBLE

Photograph by S.B. Curtis

➔ *An Indian from India—Noble Savage/Savage Noble 2001*: Original photo courtesy Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL



FEATHER INDIAN

Photograph by S.B. Curtis



DOT INDIAN

Photograph by S.B. Curtis

➔ *An Indian from India—Feather/Dot 2004*: Original photo courtesy The Library of Congress, Washington, DC



NATIVE SMILE

Photograph by S.B. Curtis



MALAYALEE SMILE

Photograph by S.B. Curtis

➔ *An Indian from India—Belles 2001*: Original photo courtesy The Library of Congress, Washington, DC

➔ *An Indian from India—Smiles 2001*: Original photo courtesy The Library of Congress, Washington, DC

As an immigrant in the US, I am often asked where I am 'really from'. When I say that I am Indian, I often have to clarify that I am an Indian from India.

It is strange that all this confusion started because Christopher Columbus thought he had found the Indies and called the native people of America collectively as Indians. And so, I look at the other 'Indian'. I play on my own 'otherness', using photos of Native Americans from the nineteenth and early twentieth century that perpetuated and reinforced stereotypes paired with self portraits. I find similarities in how the photographers back then looked at what they called the primitive natives, similar to the colonial gaze of the 19th century British photographers working in India.



THE BELLE OF THE YAKIMAS



THE BELLE OF THE DECCAN PLATEAU

Miru Kim**“The strange paradox is that I, in my daily life, am quite afraid of dirt and germs.”**

A New York-based artist and explorer, Miru Kim was featured as one of America's Best and Brightest 2007, in *Esquire* magazine. She is currently working on a book that is based on her blog www.callmenoora.com, that is based on her two-year-long adventure in the Arabian desert.



Born with a blank canvas enveloping us, we accumulate more and more brushstrokes of memories as years pass, on our garment that cannot be literally cast off until death.

Nevertheless, at some point in our lives, we must experience the emblematic process of flaying our skin and offering it up for others to see, hear, and feel through art, music, and poetry. I put my flayed skin on display in the form of a photograph—a paper skin that is touched by light—from which emanates the aura of mingled bodies.

Bodies (IA) 5, The Pig That Therefore I Am, 2010: There was no language to bridge this disparity. But when I conjoined my skin with the pigs, the gap momentarily closed in, as if I had forgotten my own voice.

Photograph by Miru Kim

Francesca Woodman “I was inventing a language for people to see the everyday things that I also see.”



Born into a family of artists, Francesca Woodman (1958–1981) started making self-portraits in high school. Her interest in female subjectivity and seriality influenced her work. Her photographs are often compared to surrealists such as Salvador Dalí and Man Ray. The failure of her work to attract attention and a broken relationship led her to depression, which eventually resulted in her committing suicide, at 22. Ironically, though her work was ignored in life, it has been celebrated after her death, with her substantial body of work created between 14 and 22, being one of the most influential archives of the century.



it must be time for lunch now

1979

➔ *It must be time for lunch now, New York 1979*



➔ *From Angel Series, Rome, Italy 1977*

Photographs by Francesca Woodman. Image Courtesy George and Betty Woodman

Am I in the picture? Am I getting in or out of it? I could be a ghost, an animal or a dead body, not just a girl standing in a corner.

Things looked funny because my pictures depend on an emotional state. I know this is true and I have thought about it for a long time. Somehow, it made me feel very, very good. A lot of photography is making records of people, as objects or simply as friends. It is like organising a wardrobe—in terms of size, pattern and so on. The effort to bring my attitude towards my work has strange effects on my life. It has made think that my art is about me.

Andreas Rentsch “The process has become more and more important in my art practice.”



Andreas has been fascinated with alternative photographic practices since a very young age. His work shares a close aesthetic relationship with performance, drawing and painting. He seeks inspiration from the daily interactions he had with convicts in a prison compound, where his father was a warden. Such experiences have nurtured a sense of empathy that reflects in his work.



Photograph by Andreas Rentsch

➔ **X-Ray 5, 2012:** My interest in the discourse of the medium's potential cannot hide the fact that my work is anchored in a moral sensibility that relates to my upbringing.

Experimentation and chance... a large part of my methodology has been to abandon considerable control and allow the material to take over.

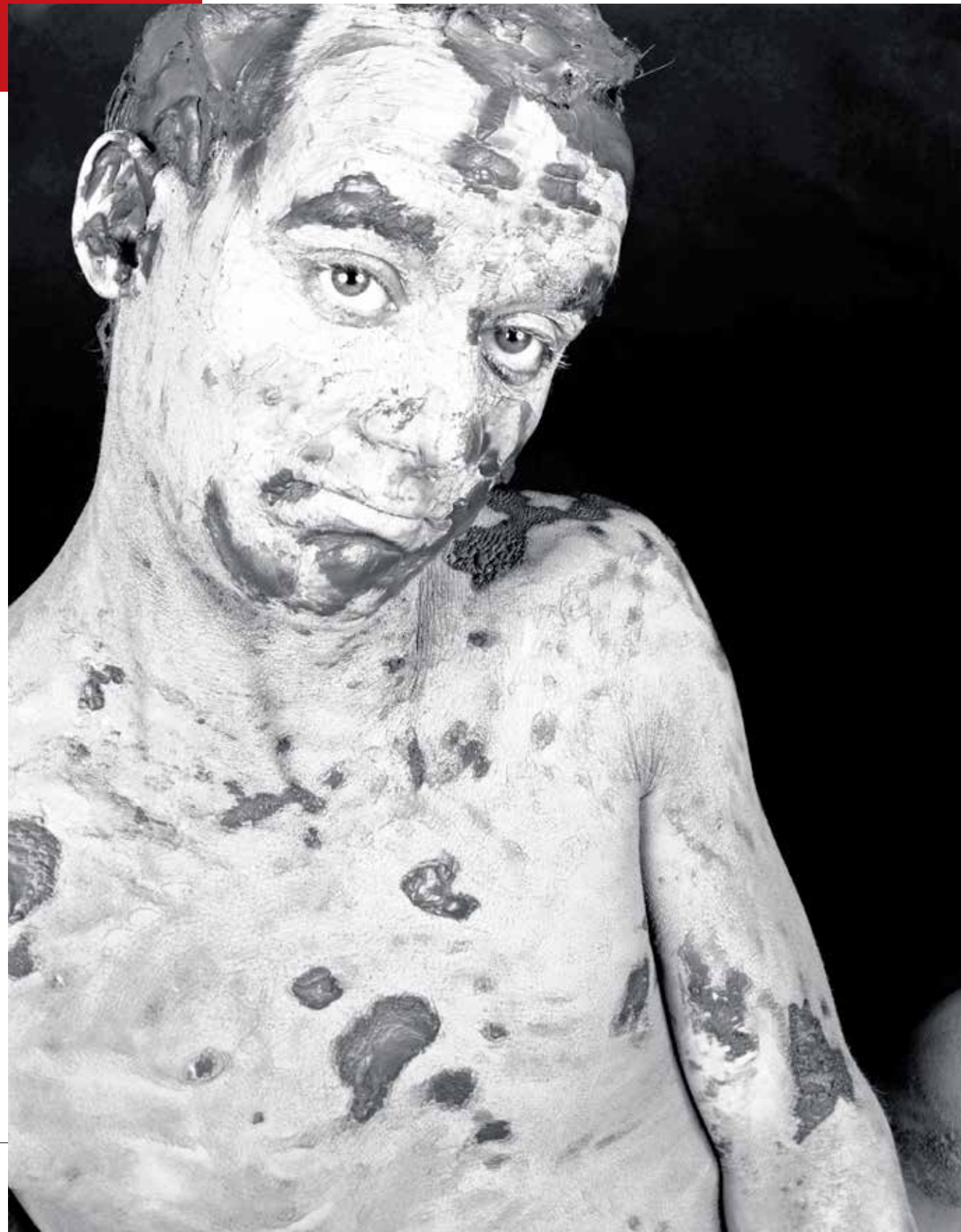
My series *X-Ray* was triggered upon seeing the horrifying video of a loving couple being publicly stoned in Afghanistan by their own community. It continues to be an ongoing exploration of the connection of fate, geography and politics in the direction of justice. The mark making is created through my application of traditional black and white photographic chemicals by hand onto the film's surfaces. Its temporality is an integral part of the process, as the evidence of my actions is often revealed after several days or weeks, or is completely deconstructed by the chemistry. By allowing the chemical phenomena to randomly and arbitrarily impact the once available information in the image, the resulting shapes and forms in essence become metaphors for our own unpredictable existence.

Fred Cray

“Photography can either be extremely specific or open to multiple interpretations.”



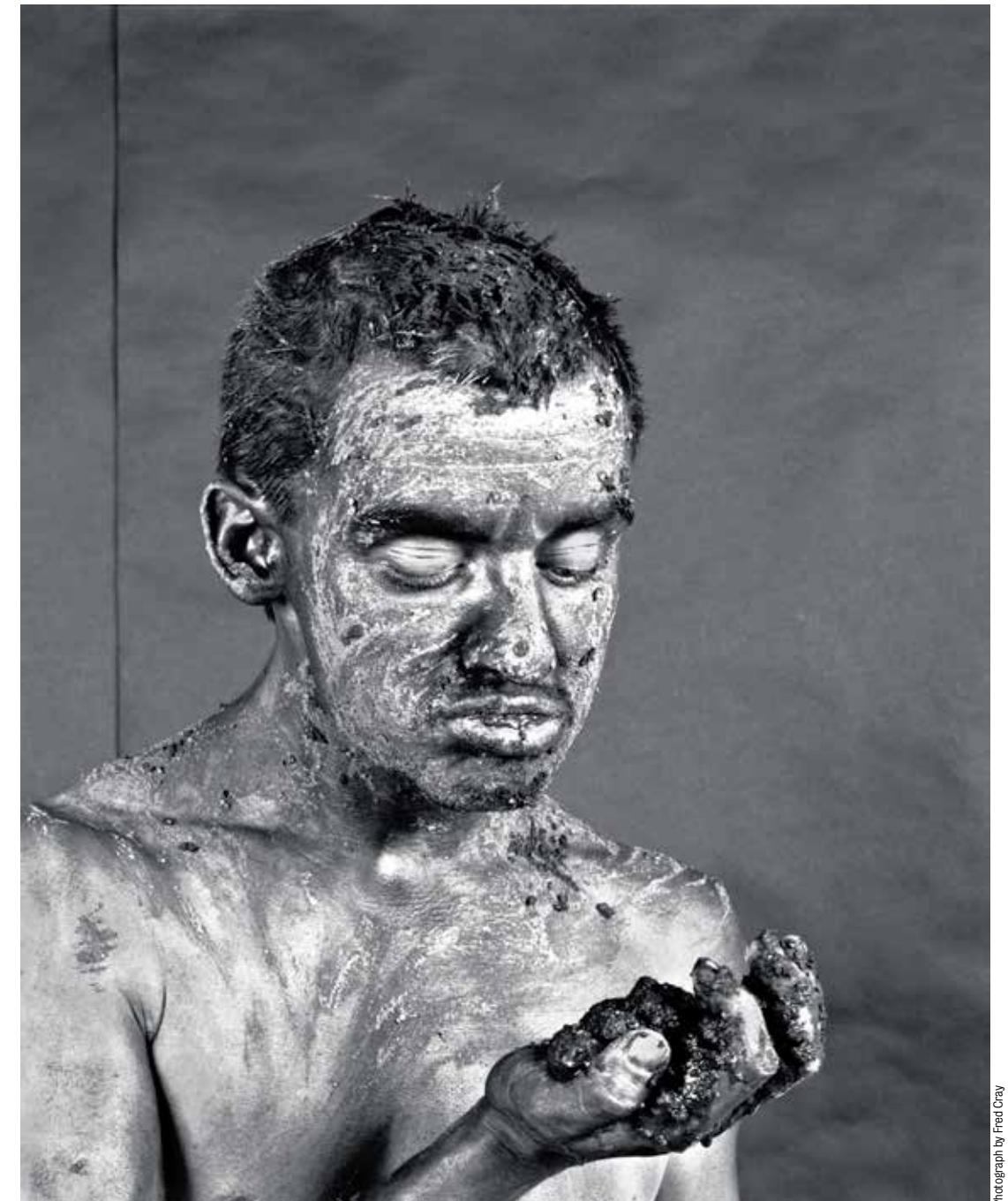
Fred is known for his work titled *Unique Photographs*, where he leaves and hides stamped and signed photographic prints all over USA. A large selection of his work can be seen at www.tumblr.com/blog/fredcray.



☞ I seek to create darker characters for my narratives. This also helps me provide a sense of ambiguity.

I have always been intrigued by the transformation of the self that is possible with photography.

Despite being uncomfortable being photographed by others, I have been making self portraits for more than thirty five years. I like to paint myself black and deal with the nuances of the figure and darkness. Literature and basic human rights are referenced as diseases and death. Working with the self is easier... there are some materials like mud, dirt, tar and worms, that I am more comfortable applying to myself than to others. It's also more immediate. There is no need to call up a friend or wait until the next morning.



Arno Rafael Minkkinen

“Braque's words, that out of limited means, new forms emerge, anchored my path.”



Arno has been capturing self portraits of his nude body in natural surroundings for more than fifty years. Other than just shooting in these scenic locations, he effortlessly merges his limbs and torso, blurring the lines between where the world ends and his body begins.

What happens inside your mind can happen inside a camera.

It was the headline I wrote in 1970 as a copywriter for Minolta, before I became the kind of photographer that I am to this day. It was akin to writing an artist statement before making the art, buying oars before buying the boat, trusting the eye in my mind to be capable of imagining a reality I could stage in front of the viewfinder before seeing it there in reality, in short, making the picture before taking it. Back then, the self portrait as we know it today was nonexistent. The idea to let the camera become the photographer is the primal idea of the self portrait. If there was a teacher who taught me that, it was the camera itself, that little lever you could push down with your finger and press the little silver button that said, “Watch and see what happens in nine seconds.”



➔ *Continental Divide at Independence Pass, Aspen, Colorado, 2013: I work alone.*

I see the image in the viewfinder without me and imagine what the lens will see some nine seconds later. I trust my camera to finish what my imagination started. Whether analogue or digital, negative or RAW file, the unequivocal truth of the reality in the viewfinder rules, and yet, in the best ones, mystery still prevails.

Photograph by Arno Rafael Minkkinen, image courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York

Alyson Belcher

“Like most people, I am not comfortable in front of the camera.”



Alyson was a competitive springboard diver from the age of six until about twenty five, and belongs to a family of dancers, something that has greatly influenced her thought process. She is inclined more towards the process than the result as she finds that the imagemaking process takes on a life of its own. “When I am able to let go of expectations and leave room for the unexpected, the results are filled with mystery and magic,” she says.



Photograph by Alyson Belcher

While photographing yourself, you have to totally trust your body and you have to have a keen sense of kinesthetic awareness, knowing where you are in time and space.

While shooting self portraits with a pinhole camera, there are a lot of variables, but that's what I love about working this way. I have drawn some lessons from my diving days that have allowed me to embrace the element of uncertainty. In diving, you have to learn how to balance relaxation and control. You have to be relaxed enough to let your body do the dive, yet you also have to maintain control to execute the dive correctly. Initially, I photographed divers, but over the years I realised that I am trying to convey something more subjective—the experience of diving, of being in that body flying through the air. This eventually led me into making self portraits with a pinhole camera using movement and multiplicity.

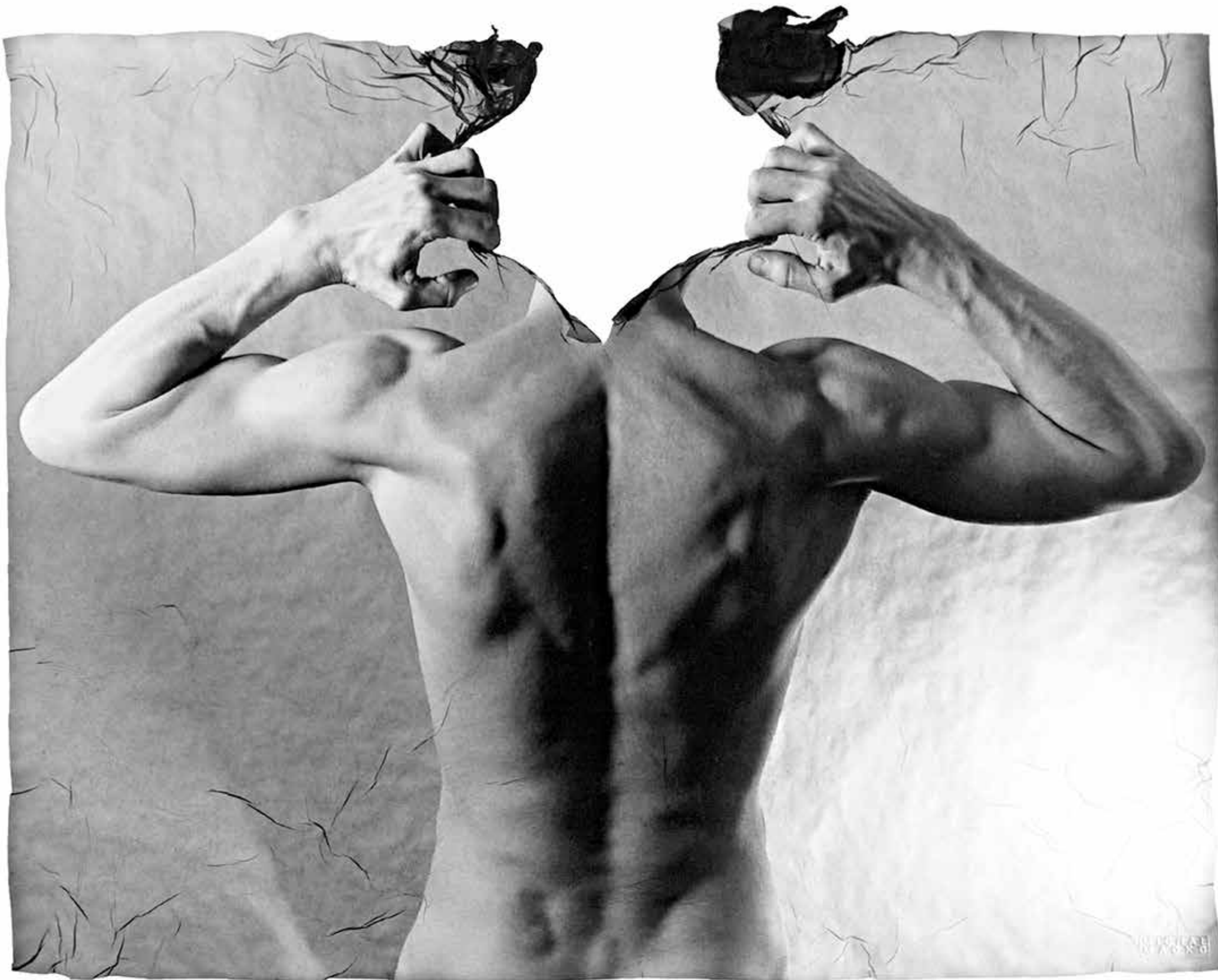
➔ **Self Portrait #27C, 2008:** One of the themes that has emerged in my self portraits is the relationship between stillness and movement. Where does a movement or a gesture originate internally? Is it possible to ever be completely still?

Michal Macku

“It is crucial, for me, to be aware of the history of a picture.”



A research engineer by profession, Michal has been creating his own photographic techniques since many years. In 1989, he came up with a method called Gellage that is a mix of gelatin and collage. Through this process, he tried to merge the human body with abstract surroundings and distortions.



Photograph by Michal Macku

The technique of Gellage helps me take one of these ‘time sheets’ and release a figure, a human body, from it, causing it to depend on time again.

The connection between the body and the surrounding is most exciting for me and helps me find new levels of humanness in the work. The technique consists of transferring the exposed and fixed photographic emulsion from its original base on paper. This transparent and plastic gelatin substance makes it possible to reshape and reform the original images, changing their relationships and endowing them with new meanings during the transfer. I am always seeking new means of expression and step by step, I discover unlimited possibilities through my work with loosened gelatin. I start with a concrete intention, but the result is often different. And there, I believe, lies a hitch. One creates to communicate what cannot be expressed in any other way. Then comes the need to describe, to define.”

➔ My work places ‘body pictures’ in new situations, new contexts, new realities, causing their ‘authentic’ reality to become relative.

Shen Wei

“These photos are like a diary to me, documenting everything, from where I go to how I feel.”



A conservative upbringing in China inspired Shen Wei to make these pictures that talk about the process of self discovery and reflection. His images explore his sense of security through understanding the tension between freedom and limits.



Self portraiture, for me, is an experience of emotional release, a way to express my desire for openness and possibility, as well as a step towards learning acceptance.

Each image from *I Miss You Already* is a moment of introspection and rebellion, brought about by memory, fantasy, anxiety, seduction and emptiness. While this project is my response to liberation and hope, it also represents a universal search for our place in nature and society.

➔ **Self Portrait (Air), 2011:** While relentlessly documenting everything in a diaristic tradition, I try to bring balance by keeping each image open ended and mysterious.