

REGEN PROJECTS

Wearing, G. and Rabinowitz, C. S., "Gillian Wearing on her Album Series (2003)," *Parkett*, Issue 70, pp. 124 – 131, ill.



GILLIAN WEARING, *SELF PORTRAIT AS MY MOTHER JEAN GREGORY (ALBUM)*, 2003, black-and-white print, framed, 58⁵/₈ x 51³/₁₆" /
SELBSTPORTRÄT ALS MEINE MUTTER JEAN GREGORY, Schwarzweissabzug, gerahmt, 149 x 130 cm.

ALBUM SERIES (2003)

GILLIAN WEARING ON HER

GILLIAN WEARING & CAY SOPHIE RABINOWITZ

CAY SOPHIE RABINOWITZ: Tell me about ALBUM.

GILLIAN WEARING: When I was sorting through some old photographs I came across an image of my mother as a twenty-three-year-old. I've had the image for about twenty years. I noticed that my memory of the photo was very different from what I was looking at when I rediscovered the photograph in 2001. It was through this re-evaluation that I began to think about what I had projected onto the image of her and my consciousness of her age. It was strange that when I was younger I thought of her as older in the picture and when I returned to it, I realized that hers was the face of a young woman that I didn't recognize and hadn't seen before! It took my own aging to make me really appreciate and understand my mother as her younger self. I could see in the photograph my mother, myself, and someone I could never have known at that age.

It was a puzzle that motivated me to want to "be her" at that age and investigate the missing link concerning me, her, and that picture.

CSR: So you thought to construct a mask of her younger face and be her for your portrait of her?

GW: There was something she possessed in the picture that had to do with innocence. I guess it was this quality that I hoped to capture. It was a delicate procedure to try and convey the fragile, hopeful sense of innocence as well as the optimism of her life stretching before her. The mask that I had made of her face was in many ways the opposite of innocent, but my hope was that I could internalize her state of being at that age and, mainly with my eyes, posture and bearing, convince the viewer that I was her.

CSR: So you weren't only concerned with the photo as such, you were more concerned with the state of being?

GW: Definitely both. I needed the photo as an anchor or talisman, but I also wanted to explore something extra, something more than the photo. There was a level of empathy that I wanted to feel.

CAY SOPHIE RABINOWITZ is the Senior Editor of *Parkett* in New York.

CSR: Did that extend to some of the other images?

GW: My first concern was to work closely with the picture of my mum and it was truly the starting point that I felt the most connection to, having spent so much time thinking of this image. However, once I had begun working on it, and after two years of research as well as the extended production, I realized that I wanted to take the whole thing further and widen it to include the closest members of my family. The cohesion that held the work together for me was the age that everyone, including myself, was in the photographs I had selected.

CSR: So everyone was younger in the pictures you chose?

GW: Yeah, especially my mum, dad, and uncle. They were all at an age where they seemed hopeful and in some ways undefined by life's pressures. I mean with fewer responsibilities, a little more self-centered. They projected a more optimistic or idealized face to the world. At that time, particularly in studio portraits, this was expected and was more what would be conventionally portrayed. And having portraits of everyone at around the same age helped to equalize the relationship between all the family members and destroy the hierarchy.

CSR: So what about your brother and sister?

GW: My brother was taken from a snapshot that had been taken by my mother in 1991. I was fascinated by this picture and managed to keep hold of it for years, always wanting to make a work about it. It fulfils something I always wanted to investigate. This to me is a *vanitas* image.

It has something very classical as well as contemporary about it. It has all these incidental props which help create the narrative and portrait of the subject, in this case my brother. I worked with an excellent technical crew to construct a body suit of my brother and have a mask and wig made to enact this. It was the most physically demanding photo I created, as I had to wear the very heavy body suit for hours as well as adopt a very particular posture and gesture. All this, including the tattoo being painted on the arm of the body cast, was undertaken just to remake what was in effect a casual snapshot! Nothing could have been further from the truth—I was hot, in pain, and contorted for hours, as well as having to direct the whole shoot.

The picture of my sister was based on an amateur photographer's sitting. All through my teens I wanted to be my sister. So here was the opportunity to be her as I had idealized her, and the photographer had.

CSR: You are not only looking at your family; you're also looking at the nature of photography and its genres?

GW: Yes, that had always been a parallel interest for me whilst working on this. You can see how much photography has changed both technically and in relation to the form that had become acceptable as a mode of practice when each of the original pictures was taken.

CSR: Can you say more about that?

GW: In my parents' lifetime fewer cameras were available. In order to document oneself it was necessary to employ a studio photographer, and an air of formality as well as a standard convention of posing and presentation was expected. By the seventies the whole photographic process had become more accessible, making a snapshot aesthetic more accepted. So by the time my mother took the picture of my brother she could do so without censoring, or judging it too casual or familiar. Yet at his age she would have only considered being photographed within the conventions of the photograph in which I present her.

CSR: So the series of works assesses the state of photography as well as the emotional state of your family?

GW: Diane Arbus was taught by Lizette Model that the more specific you could be about yourself and the subjects you choose to photograph, the more universal you are. So for me this is an album of my family, but I think it also represents a family album that can be recognized by everyone. It's this aspect that also interests me. It's all the archetypes coming together, and in this case it's the element of each image being a "self-portrait" that gives it deeper meaning.

GILLIAN WEARING, SELF PORTRAIT AS MY SISTER JANE WEARING (ALBUM), 2003, digital c-type print, framed, 55 1/2 x 45 3/8" / SELBSTPORTRÄT ALS MEINE SCHWESTER JANE WEARING, digitaler C-Print, gerahmt, 141 x 116 cm.

