

**NEWS**

## The world's a stage: New exhibition at BMoCA explores self-identity in the digital age

In a world where images define our perceptions of ourselves and others, "Performing Self" offers a profound exploration of how performance serves as a tool for self-discovery and expression.



Tobias Fike talks about his work at the museum. Performing Self is the Spring Exhibition at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. (Cliff Grassmick/Staff Photographer)

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It's hard to imagine that human beings have evolved to perceive themselves as intensely and frequently as we do in the digital age.

Between updating resumes on LinkedIn, uploading morning jogs to Strava and posting a carefully posed selfie on Instagram, it seems as if in 2024, having a perfectly curated personal image is almost as important as possessing a good personality.

And while it's extremely hard to be a normal person in this time, it's twice as hard for artists. They constantly have to serve their work — and their entire personhood — on a silver platter for viewers to compliment, grumble at, pick apart, or simply misunderstand.

This notion is at the crux of the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art (BMOCA)'s newest exhibit, "Performing Self," a thought-provoking showcase that delves into the intricate world of self-identity and artistic expression through the lens of seven multidisciplinary artists.

In a world where images define our perceptions of ourselves and others, this exhibition offers a profound exploration of how performance serves as a tool for self-discovery and expression.



Jane Burke is the curator for the project, "Performing Self," the Spring Exhibition at Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. (Cliff Grassmick/Staff Photographer)

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Through a multitude of mediums, including photography, video, painting, and installation, artists Tobias Fike, Noa Fodrie, Laura Lee Shill, Louis Trujillo, Eriko Tsogo, and the collaborative efforts of Sherry Wiggins and Luís Filipe Branco invite visitors to explore the transformative power of performance in shaping one's self-portrayal in a self-centric society.

After realizing that everybody — artists and viewers alike — could do with some introspection. At the entrance of the exhibit, Burke specifically chose to greet guests with a massive mirror, prompting them to take a moment to self-reflect before diving into the installations.

"All of our identities are sort of being constructed as we speak, and I think especially in the era of social media, where we're very image conscious, we're very much an active participant in the way we portray ourselves," Burke explained. "I think 'Performing Self' is a way for people to understand that we're all constantly performing in our day-to-day lives. It presents a philosophical approach to self-reflection, with these artists being a portal into different ways of complicating the ways we see ourselves. We all perform, even if we all do it differently."



Artist Laura Shill talks about her work at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. (Cliff Grassmick/Staff Photographer)

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While the exhibit features work from artists of different ages, races, genders, and sexualities, one revealing thread can be followed throughout the space: that vulnerability is a universal experience.

“Performing Self” explores the idea that personas, whether online, on canvas, imaged, or lived, allow for humans to express different aspects of themselves that they may not feel comfortable revealing otherwise.

The exhibit is both contemplative and lighthearted, creating a space to laugh, let your guard down, and acknowledge the absurd notion that being a human in the 21st century means you are always on display.

Interdisciplinary artist Laura Shill explores the importance of humility in her piece “Still available for parties,” in which she portrays a clown, floating face down in a lake with a handful of red party balloons, defeated, humiliated, but still hopeful to perform again. The photo, which features the artist herself dressed in a delicate powder blue suit and a red curly wig, is profoundly beautiful while at the same time uncomfortably intimate.



Detail of artist Laura Shill's installation at "Performing Self," on display now until April 28 at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. (Laura Shill/Courtesy photo)

"I had some grief that I thought I had passed through circle back on me, and when I went to visit my parents in Florida, I spray painted my wig, packed my clown suit (as one does), and I had this idea for an image that I wanted to make. I asked my friend, Jenny Fine, who was dealing with some grief on her own, to collaborate with the performance.

**"We went out to this lake, and I face-planted into it holding these balloons that are floating skyward despite my gesture, and Jenny photographed me. Through that act, it did a lot of things — it kind of bound me to that person who is in that humiliating moment with you, and it took me out of my space of grief and**

The sad clown, according to Shill, is a response to the rampant narcissism that permeates through our social media feeds, underscoring the idea that self-humiliation is a way to foster feelings of empathy between one another.

"I think about the soft power of the digital, panoptical gaze, and this idea that we're always expected to be performing this version of ourselves that exudes status and achievement and success and happiness, and is exhausting," Shill said.



An example of the work of Laura Shill on display. (Cliff Grassmick/Staff Photographer)

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Shill's installation also features sculptures cast from her own body, as well as some truly incredible textile work – the clown suit, designed and sewn by the artist, hangs next to the photograph, while massive theatrical curtains indicating a “stage right” and “stage left” within the space give the viewer the impression that, even when one is backstage, they're still performing in front of a crowd.

Touches of Burke's keen eye for all things fabric – she arrived at BMOCA in 2022 on the heels of a curatorial fellowship in the Textile Art and Fashion Department at the Denver Art Museum – can be seen throughout the exhibition.

“I think a lot about how clothing changes us. Our moods are reflected in what we wear, and our identities can completely transform with what we decide to put on ourselves,” Burke said.

Contemporary artist Tobias Fike is a man who wears many hats. As a father, artist, professor, husband and son of a theater actor, Fike explores his varying and many-changing roles through the employ of costuming.





Tobias Fike talks about his work at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. (Cliff Grassmick/Staff Photographer)

Inspired by the paper dolls that he would play with his young daughters, Fike's installation features the artist wearing different cutout outfits on a silver screen, while a rack of clothes in the center of the space displays varying garments including a football jersey, a graduation cap and a couple of flowery aprons.

"I looked at all the different positions I hold in life, and each part sort of has its own job in the greater whole that becomes the entirety of me. The people I am with, in any given circumstance or situation, are what really dictate which person or persona you are," said Fike.

"So in some ways, I don't have an alter ego, and in other ways, you could look at it as if there are several alter egos, all for different parts of my life. You're still yourself at any given moment, but I'm going to be different in class with students than I am at the bowling league, although some might say, not different enough."



Artist Tobias Fike takes a closer look at the work of Sherry Wiggins. (Cliff Grassmick/Staff Photographer)

As a child, Fike's father not only performed as an actor in the theater, but also took on a fair portion of the cooking, cleaning and chores around the house. Raised to flout conventional masculine stereotypes, Fike's work seeks to push the boundaries of what typical gender roles in domesticity can look like.

"My contribution, perhaps in some ways, brings attention to the most mundane of identities. I love looking at the everyday aspects of daily life that are often overlooked and ignored in my work. I think my identity as a white suburban dad is pretty ubiquitous and easy to look past when out in the world. It certainly isn't glamorous or "rock-n-roll," but damn if it isn't amazing when you are in it," said Fike.



Artist Noa Fodrie's paintings explore themes of identity in "Performing Self," on display now at BMOCA. (BMOCA/Courtesy photo)

Similarly to Fike, artist Sherry Wiggins embodies various personas using costume, capturing the likeness of iconic women in literature and history in her photographic series titled "The Heroines Project." Viewers can see Wiggins bring characters like Cleopatra and Isis to life in staged photographs captured by Portuguese collaborator and photographer Luís Branco.

As a 60-something-year-old woman, Wiggins questions our understanding of these female figures, which are often portrayed as young, beautiful and innocent; Or otherwise vilified and condemned by the male gaze.

In one series of photos, Wiggins is dressed as an angry Cleopatra, seen wrangling a snake while leaning over a balcony. Wiggins, in all of her glory, towers above the viewer wearing gold jewelry, a scowl and some heavy-handed kohl eyeliner.





Artist Sherry Wiggins pictured with her photo series, "Cleopatra at the Café." Wiggins' work is featured in BMOCA's new exhibition, "Performing Self," on display until April 28. (Robert Kittila/Courtesy photo)

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In another, Wiggins plays a weary, over-your-bullshit Cleopatra, having an early morning coffee at a cafe, perhaps trying to regain the energy to rule one of the most powerful kingdoms in the ancient world.

"Even in her own time, Cleopatra was thought to be this seductress and kind of this evil woman, where in reality, she was pretty remarkable. But how stories are poured on all of us women, that sort of demean our power and our sexuality. She's a potent subject," Wiggins said.

Wiggins' performative work presents a character who is formidable, alluring, confident, challenging stereotypical notions of aging and the often overlooked older woman.



Portraits by artist Louis Trujillo. "Performing Self" is the Spring Exhibition at Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. (Cliff Grassmick/Staff Photographer)

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"I've been an artist my whole life, but this idea of using myself as the performer in photographs has presented itself in the past three years, and I see it as an exploration of female identity — especially the identity of the aging woman. We've been influenced by the representation and misrepresentation of all of these heroines in our patriarchal world, and now I'm trying to flip the script and rewrite that story," Wiggins said.

Stop by the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, located at 1750 13th Street, Boulder, CO to see "Performing Self." The exhibition is open until April 28, 2024. For more information about the exhibition, artists, tickets and visiting hours, visit the BMoCA website.



Closeup of artist Eriko Tsogo's instillation at "Performing Self," BMOCA's current exhibition which takes a look into how seven multidisciplinary artists celebrate the mutability of self-identity through the embodiment of alter egos or personae. (Wes Magyar/Courtesy photo)

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