Curtis M. Kularski
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Instructor: David Tinapple

The Gaze: Comparing Self-Portraits and Photographing Others

In photography there is nothing so frightening as the portrait. Mention you have a camera and it seems like anyone who knows you wants to hide in the darkest space around. I can't say I blame my potential subjects for their need to hide. Staged portraits are horrible things to do with people. As discovered in the "difficult lighting situations" assignment, some people are very hard to create portraits of. My subjects become very stiff and the portrait becomes of a depressed statue.

During this assignment I found myself observing people for several hours before getting a single shot in, making them feel comfortable with the presence of the camera. The subjects were informed in advance of my intentions. This method seemed to do well with getting reasonably natural shots. Adults are very self-conscious about having this picture taken. Social trends have led people to be concerned about their appearance. The most surprising thing I have discovered is that people who are very comfortable with themselves become extremely self conscious when there is a camera present. I can not logically find a reason why this occurs. Children are a different subject entirely. Children will pose, or they will ignore the camera entirely. In general, children are my favorite portrait subject because they don't complain, and they don't have to be tricked into appearing interesting in a photograph.

When starting the portrait project I assumed that subjects would be of difficulty

in the order they were listed, self being easiest, familiar people next, and then strangers being the most difficult. I found the truth to be the complete opposite. I had great difficulty getting people who are close to me to consent to being photographed, and even more difficulty getting them to just function normally while I was holding the camera. It is a challenge to get people who know me well to not think of themselves as a "project", they act like an assignment and not like people. When people don't know me, or I have a chance to introduce photography as a hobby and not as a course, then people act more natural and the level of seriousness drops, making much better portraits.

I found portraits were easiest at a social event. I attended an outdoor Independence day party. The atmosphere of it was very relaxed and the presence of the camera was hardly acknowledged, even though I was using a tripod and the camera was always in view of everyone. It seems as though the complexities of portrait photography are beyond the scope of this course. It is more a matter of psychology.

Photographing myself is even more difficult. Nothing seems natural. Setting the timer and standing in front of the camera doesn't work well. The shot seems staged. Having a friend take control of the shutter and attempt to get a photo of me doesn't work out because my friends don't really know how I wish for myself to be portrayed in the pictures, and I just can't relax with someone else having to make adjustments, or asking me about the adjustments to make. It is a highly nervous situation. I have always been the one behind a camera, never in front of one. My position of comfort is behind the camera.