

In the Mirror

by Elizabeth Monaghan

***The Narcissists*, By Elizabeth Heyert, Sei Swann
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Photographers will go to lengths to remain unnoticed by the people they photograph, hoping to capture a quality that disappears when their subjects recognize that they are being viewed through a lens. Walker Evans shot subway riders through a buttonhole of his coat. Philip-Lorca diCorcia waited for passersby to step across a Times Square sidewalk, then released the shutter of his distant zoom lens and triggered his hidden flashes.

Elizabeth Heyert, a portraitist who started as an architectural photographer and photo historian, has joined the ranks of invisible photographers by way of a number of nifty strategies. Beginning with *The Sleepers* (Sei Swann, 2003), she positioned her camera on a balcony over a bed on which her subjects agreed to fall asleep naked, alone or with a partner. Later superimposed over the black and white texture of ancient stone, their guileless bodies float in darkness. Then came *The Travelers* (Sei Swann, 2006), a series of post-mortem portraits that Heyert made in a Harlem funeral parlor. In bright color against a black backdrop, these subjects are dressed to meet their Maker, though it's not clear that this is exactly how they would choose to be immortalized. Family members granted Heyert permission to shoot.

Those who posed for Heyert's latest collection, *The Narcissists*, were alive and conscious of being photographed. But they couldn't see the photographer or her camera behind the two-way mirror in which they studied their reflections. Standing in the attire (or absence thereof) of their choice, and lacking any further instruction, they examined themselves for fifteen minutes while Heyert peeped through a hole and exposed her film.

The camera did not register the mirror, so the resulting triptychs first seem like straightforward portraits of a person who desires to be seen and admired. "Elaine," an aging Marilyn Monroe impersonator, flirts in her rhinestones and elaborate gown. "Laura," a teenage beauty queen, stands rigid and blonde as a Barbie. "Marty and Jake," topless brothers, flex and tilt like Abercrombie models. Formally lit against a black background, their bodies are staged for scrutiny.

But something has shifted. These narcissists look at the camera—they look at us—but their eyes and their postures reveal that their minds are elsewhere, as though they've forgotten the circumstances that brought them before the mirror. They are alert, but lost in themselves and vulnerable. Caught searching their own eyes and contemplating their physical forms, they reveal the private collision of who they are and who they want to be.

A range of tics and mannerisms burst forth. Sucked-in cheeks, coy smiles, quarter-turns to see the hips; fantasies of being a real man, a pin-up, a seductress, or simply attractive. “Jim” is impassive in a garish fuschia suit, but in the next frame, his shoulders rise and fall in a tease that shakes loose his unbuttoned shirt. His gaze lands on a yellow bruise on his chest. In the end, he smiles at his doughy, naked body. “Shannah,” a bride-to-be, raises her chin defiantly. Adding a veil and necklace to her dress, her expression turns devilish. Finally, stripped down to mesh panties and her jewels, she squares her stance to the mirror and allows her face to soften.

No one is exempt from the toll of personal scrutiny, not the gigolo, not the schoolgirl. A woman’s eyes well up before her massive flesh. A socialite clutches her hands over her chest, hiding behind a drape of cashmere. A man stares over his bare shoulder and absorbs the meaning of the red cord he knotted around his torso.

This astonishing intimacy becomes hard to bear. Heyert must have thought so, too. “I felt I’d had enough,” she says in an accompanying interview with Stacey D’Erasmus. “I’ve been invisible too long. I had seen such a range of intimate things that I felt as if I couldn’t take any more, that I knew enough. For now.”

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