

Unit 5: Portrait Photography



A portrait is a photograph (or a painting, or another artistic representation) of a person. Portraits are often simple “head shots” and are traditionally not overly elaborate or creative. This has changed somewhat in the twentieth century. The intent is to show the basic appearance of the person, and occasionally some artistic insight into his or her personality.

The art of the portrait dates back to the Roman era. In those days, sculpture was the most popular form of portrait. In those times, the sitters demanded realistic portraits, even unflattering ones. During the fourth century, the portrait began to retreat in favor of an idealized symbol of what that person looked like. As fresco pigments and oil paints became easier to obtain, painted portraiture became the norm. This changed with the advent of photography.

Since the dawn of photography people have been taking portraits. The popularity of the Daguerreotype in the middle of the nineteenth century was due in large part to the demand for inexpensive portraiture. Studios sprung up in cities around the world, some cranking out more than 500 plates a day. The style of these early works reflected the technical challenges associated with 30-second exposure times and the painterly aesthetic of the time. Subjects were generally seated against plain backgrounds and lit with the soft light of an overhead window and whatever else could be reflected with mirrors.

Image Sources: Constantine the Great (circa AD 315-30), Rembrandt Van Rijn, Self Portrait, 1640, Hand-tinted daguerreotype, Indian Merchant, 1850s



As photographic techniques developed, an intrepid group of portrait photographers took their talents out of the studio and onto battlefields, across oceans and into remote wilderness. In politics, portraits of the leader are often used as a symbol of the state. No matter where you are, in most countries it is common protocol for a portrait of the Head of State to appear in important government buildings.

Today, portrait photography is a popular commercial industry all over the world. Many people enjoy having professionally made family portraits to hang in their house, or special portraits to commemorate certain events, such as graduations or weddings.

Commercial photographers can make a living as a portrait photographer. Clients may include individuals and families as well as magazines and corporate clients. Some portrait photographers rent formal studios that individuals will visit for family portraits, actor head shots, or for corporate portraits. Others work solely on location, either by bringing a backdrop or by using the environment as the setting.

Image Sources: Image of JFK by unknown photographer. Wedding and Family Portrait by Sundance Photography.

**Mini Assignment: Take a photo of yourself.
No criteria. No limitations. Bring the photo
into class to edit.**

Unit 5.1: Self Portrait



Not everybody likes to be in front of the camera, and it may even be a reason we have chosen to work primarily behind the camera. There is a theory that each photographer puts a bit of him or herself into each photograph they take, especially if it is a portrait or an image containing people. The self-portrait is the extreme example of this theory.

Executing a self-portrait is a challenge, but can be very rewarding. The one subject that most photographers usually avoid is himself or herself, and this is even true of portrait photographers. However, taking self-portraits has several advantages: you'll always have a willing subject, and you may be able to interpret the "real you" better than others can. You can also use yourself as a test subject for experimenting with lighting or other creative techniques.

There are several ways to approach self-portraits. One way is to frame an interesting composition and then, with your camera mounted on a tripod or another means of support, use the self-timer (if your camera has one) to trip the shutter after you get into position in front of the lens. Just remember that a self-timer will give you a very limited amount of time to get in position (usually ten seconds). It helps if you can get a friend to be a stand-in until you can be there, or mark your spot with tape or chalk.

A mirror or some other reflective surface offers an even easier way to take a self-portrait. In most cases, the camera will be included in the scene (but this can help make a statement about your enthusiasm for photography).

Photographing your shadow is another way to do a self-portrait. Shoot early or late, when the sun is low in the sky. A light, stucco wall, a sidewalk, or any other simple background can suffice. Just be sure there aren't a lot of distractions around the surface you choose.

Image Sources: Alan Michael- Self Portrait in Mirror, Andre Kertesz Self-Portrait (Shadow).

Unit 5.1: Self Portrait Photography - Cindy Sherman



You can also capture a self-portrait by supporting your camera, then frame your picture and focus with a stand-in. Place a mirror just behind the camera, and do your final posing in the mirror. This method also requires a self-timer, or a remote triggering device if your camera has one. Once again, if you use a self-timer, you'll need to get into position quickly.

A self-portrait doesn't have to be of your face — the image of two hands holding a camera says a lot about the photographer who shot his own portrait. You can also aim the camera down your body from eye level. A picture like this will say a lot about your activities and surroundings.

Use your imagination! A self-portrait can reveal a lot about you, by including props and by paying attention to wardrobe, and even by including the people that are meaningful in your life. If you've never attempted to shoot a self-portrait, expand your creative horizons and give it a try.

Image Sources: Evgen Bancar, Self Portrait, Man Ray, Untitled (self-portrait cast in plaster with mannequin hands, angular ball and light bulb), 1933

Unit 5.1: Self Portrait Photography - Cindy Sherman



By turning the camera on herself, Cindy Sherman has built a name as one of the most respected photographers of the late twentieth century. Although, the majority of her photographs are pictures of her, Sherman uses herself as a vehicle for commentary on a variety of issues of the modern world: the role of the woman, the role of the artist.

"I'm trying to make other people recognize something of themselves rather than me."

Throughout her career, Sherman has appropriated numerous visual genres — including the film still, centerfold, fashion photograph, historical portrait, and soft-core sex image — while disrupting the operations that work to define and maintain their respective codes of representation.

It is through these ambiguous and eclectic photographs that Sherman has developed a distinct signature style. Through a number of different series of works, Sherman has raised challenging and important questions about the role and representation of women in society, the media, and the nature of the creation of art.

"I have this enormous fear of being misinterpreted, of people thinking the photos are about me, that I'm really vain and narcissistic. Then sometimes I wonder how it is I'm fooling so many people. I'm doing one of the most stupid things in the world which I can't even explain, dressing up like a child and posing in front of the camera trying to make beautiful pictures. And people seem to fall for it."

Image Sources: Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #21, 1978, Untitled Film Still #15, 1978.

Unit 5.1: Self Portrait Photography - Cindy Sherman



Sherman's life began in 1954, in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, a suburb of New York City. As a freshman, Sherman set out to study painting until one day, when she realized that she had enough. Frustrated with the limitations of painting and feeling like she had done all that she could, she gave it up. Sherman has said that she felt that "there was nothing more to say [through painting]. I was meticulously copying other art and then I realized I could just use a camera and put my time into an idea instead."

After Sherman's 1976 graduation, she decided to move to New York City to embark upon her career in art. Taking a loft on Fulton Street in lower Manhattan, Sherman began taking photographs of herself. These photographs would come to be known as the "Untitled Film Stills," perhaps the most well-known and recognizable work of Sherman's career thus far.

In these photographs, begun in 1977, Sherman places herself in the roles of B-movie actresses. Her photographs show her dressed up in wigs, hats, dresses, clothes unlike her own, playing the roles of characters. In each of these photographs, Sherman plays a type — not an actual person, but a self-fabricated fictional one. There is the archetypal housewife, the prostitute, the woman in distress, the woman in tears, the dancer, the actress; the malleable, chameleon-like Sherman plays all of these characters.

There are also very few clues as to Sherman's personality in the photographs. Each one is so unique and ambiguous that the viewer is left with more confusion than clarity over Sherman's true nature. Sherman completed the project three years later, in 1980, when she "ran out of clichés" with which to work.

Image Sources: Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still No. 96, 1981, Untitled Film Still No. 153, 1985.

Unit 5.1: Self Portrait Photography - Assignment

For this assignment you will be taking a two self portraits.

1. For the first, you should attempt to capture your true personality in the photo. Think about the environment you are in and what that says about you. Consider the lighting and colors surrounding you as well as your styling.
2. For the second photo, you should attempt to capture either a different version of your character or a false personality. Although the person in the photo will be you, it should represent a “you” that is not typically seen.

The two photos should work together as a collection as well as individual shots.

3. Bring both photos into photoshop, edit, and place together on one canvas.

Assessment:

Your first image portrays a distinct personality that is typically your own	5	4	3	2	1
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Your second image portrays a completely different persona than the first	5	4	3	2	1
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Both images work well individually	5	4	3	2	1
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The images can stand alone and tell a unique story.

Both images work well as a collection	5	4	3	2	1
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When placed together (juxtaposed) the images aren't competing with one another. They tell a different story together than they do apart. They share similar aspects such as color, shape, line, texture, lighting, composition, or cropping.

The images are edited in photoshop to show their best aesthetic	5	4	3	2	1
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The images are both 300 dpi, CMYK, and fit on a printable canvas. The images are color corrected, cropped, and removed of distractions.