The Other I

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My beginnings in photography occurred through a combination of luck and accident. During my freshman year of undergraduate school I was enrolled in a web design course. The class assistant generally brought his camera with him, and being the tech junkie that I am, I asked questions about his camera. Towards the end of the semester he offered me a job taking photos for the school’s website. After that I was hooked.

Concept

I have always been interested in the idea of duality. By this I am referring to the two sides, or personalities, of a person, the side that is presented to the world, and the side that is hidden. The term Alter Ego, which is Latin for “other I” began being used in the nineteenth century when psychologists first started diagnosing Dissociative Identity Disorder, or Multiple Personality Disorder. This disorder has the characteristics of having two or more different personalities that can take control of an individual’s character.¹

The concept of duality has been present in my work for quite some time. In my current body of work this idea of duality is expressed with the presence of an Alter Ego. This Alter Ego is

¹ Dell, Paul F. “A New Model of Dissociative Identity Disorder” *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 29 No. 1 (2006); 1-26
seen in the image with the subject, yet the subject of the Alter Ego is unaware of his or her presence. The Alter Ego tends to observe the subject from a distance or, in some cases, appears to be in communication with the subject.

In my self-portraits my Alter Ego is always presented in the same suit and tie, giving him a personality, as well as providing the visual connection in every image. My outfits change, as well as the environment in which they are shot, but the Alter Ego remains the same, always observing, and sometimes communicating. Why my Alter Ego is present is left up to the viewer. What is he doing? Why is he there? What is he saying to me? Is he pushing me to pursue something, or acting as a conscience? In Situation 15 my Alter Ego and I are sitting on a couch, possibly watching TV (Figure 1). The posture of the Alter Ego suggests he is uneasy, or
impatient, possibly about to get up off of the couch. I see this as the Alter Ego trying to get me up, off of the couch and out into the world.

The choice of environment and posing of the subjects is planned in advance before the images are shot. The environments that I choose usually relate personally to me, being places in which I spend a lot of time, or places where I have fond memories. As an example, Situation 8 (figure 2) was shot in a bar/restaurant that I frequent on a regular basis. It was the first establishment that I visited after moving to Terre Haute to begin Graduate School. Having made friends with the regulars, as well as the bartenders and servers, this place has become important to me, as a place to bond, release some stress, and have fun. The posing of the Alter Ego behind the bar shows the personal relationship I have built with this place.

In portraits of other subjects the appearance of the Alter Ego varies. Some images display the subject transforming into their Alter Ego, while others have them being observed. Unlike the self-portraits, these compositions are not personal to the subjects in them. With
these I create the narrative being told about the subject. In *Situation 23* (Figure 3) we see the subject and her Alter Ego on a grassy hillside, again, the question as to why the Alter Ego is present surfaces. Although the concepts in these are the same as in my self-portraits, they are executed differently, and therefore I feel that they project a different feeling or narrative.

In the transformation pieces I show the subject transforming, or becoming the Alter Ego (Figure 4). Usually shot deadpan style, these images were used to demonstrate the transition to, or the emerging of the Alter Ego. I see these as if the Alter Ego is trying to escape from the person, or trying to overtake the subject.
In earlier works the Alter Ego character was usually represented wearing a mask of some sort, often an old decayed Easter Bunny mask that I acquired during undergraduate studies (See Figures 3 and 4). As the body of work began to grow the use of the mask began to become too repetitive and overworked, so I determined I needed a new “mask”. This was a difficult decision. I had become attached to and sentimental toward this mask that I had used for so many years. Replacing it was much more difficult than I had anticipated. After searching extensively and not being able to find a mask that met my standards, I decided to attempt to create my own mask. Being an inexperienced seamster this task ended up being unsuccessful. After much more troubleshooting I approached the idea of blurring out the Alter Ego’s face instead of using a physical mask. This was achieved by using a long exposure time, and vigorously shaking my head while keeping my body still, or in cases where a flash was required for the shoot, blurring the face in post-editing using Photoshop, as seen in Figure 2. This method was successful, as it effectively obscured the Alter Ego’s face, and added variation between images so that none of the Alter Ego’s faces were identical.

While I have often struggled with identifying the conceptual threads in my work, I feel that I have begun to recognize how the content of my work relies on the particular application of the processes I choose. Additionally, I now recognize the importance of the conceptual thoughts involved in creating my work. I feel I have overcome the struggle of placing technique ahead of concept.
Technical Approach

Process is an important aspect of the creation of my work. I have always been very process orientated; I believe that is one of the reasons that I was drawn to photography. The methodical steps involved in my work, shooting, cropping, printing, and transferring, give me a feeling of calmness. I appreciate the fact that there are steps involved, and that there is a definite end. As explained above, I learned, while working on my current body of work that the methodical steps I am so comfortable with had been the priority, leaving my conceptual ideas behind. It has been a struggle but I am beginning to let chance and accidents happen in my work, something I would have not been able to do in the past.

The process involved in my current body of work is called “emulsion transfer”. This process involves taking images on Fuji FP-100c, a peel-apart instant film, and adhering them to another surface. This process is begun by placing the instant photograph in hot water, after a few minutes the image will begin to lift from the original substrate. Because the film can be somewhat fragile, if it is left in the hot water for too long it may be damaged, so constant attention is required for this step. Once the image has softened, it is placed in a container of cold water. This stops the separation of the image from the substrate. It is in this cold water bath that the image is physically removed from the substrate. Once removed the image is transparent and can be adhered to any surface desired using acrylic medium. For this series I adhered the image to a good quality heavy weight paper, usually either Rives BFK, or Stonehenge.
My current body of work consists of two different sizes of images, small images, consisting of anywhere between two and five transfers, and large images, usually around one hundred transfers. The process for creating each size is different. With the smaller works the images used for transfer are produced in camera, shooting with either a Polaroid 600se, or a Polaroid Land 420. These cameras shoot directly onto the instant film. Creating the larger works is a bit more complicated. As it would be extremely difficult to shoot ninety-eight different photos in camera and have them align the way that I envision, I begin my larger works by shooting digitally. After the image has been shot and I am pleased with the outcome, I begin working on the image in Photoshop. It is here that the image is enlarged to 42”x28”, and cropped into the ninety-eight or ninety-nine small images that are needed. After the cropping is completed I send the image files to a company that will print each image on a piece of slide film. Using an old Polaroid Daylab 35+ Slide Printer I am able to print each slide onto a piece of the Fuji FP-100c instant film. Once I have my images, either from shooting in camera, or from the Daylab, I begin the transfer process.

**Influence**

When looking at other artists for inspiration I am drawn towards artists that produce more surreal, dreamlike imagery, as well as artists that use grids or multiple images to create a narrative. Duane Michaels fits into both of these categories (Figure 5).

The narratives that he creates with his images have captivated me since I first discovered his work. His use of motion blur further enhances the dream-like qualities of the composition, but also gives the feeling of movement. I believe it is fairly obvious that his works have influenced the Transformation series. Another photographer that I draw inspiration from is David Hockney. Hockney’s photographic work has been very influential in the way I compose my photographs (Figure 6). His works were the first photographs that I found that were composed of numerous photographs to produce a larger piece of artwork. This approach had a profound effect on me, and has been a great inspiration for my work. His influence is quite obvious in my current pieces. Rene Magritte has also had a significant impact on my work. His surreal dream-like compositions, and specifically the work Son of Man, were influential when I created the Alter Ego character (Figure 7). Magritte has numerous works in which the subject’s face is obscured, or sometimes absent. The
 omission of the subject’s face, in addition to the style of his wardrobe, raises many questions as to what the imagery is about. I feel the influence of all three of these artists’ work is visible in mine, yet combining these influences with my own ideas has led me to my own unique body of work.
Bibliography


