

Drama Queen by Kristin Lindgren

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Influenced by artists ranging from the 17th-century Italian painter Caravaggio to the legendary drag performer RuPaul, Laura Swanson has long been drawn to thinking about how identity is structured, perceived, and performed. She recently shared with me a clip of an interview with RuPaul in which he proclaims: "You're not the things it says on your driver's license. You're way more. You are God in drag. Do you understand how grand that is, how many things you could do? It's outrageous! It's unlimited!"¹ In her artistic practice, Swanson takes up his invitation to explore these unlimited possibilities. She approaches her work as a form of serious play. Drag performance is a useful metaphor for understanding her practice because it highlights the performative nature of identity. Judith Butler has argued that the practice of drag reveals gender to be a set of cultural codes expressed by the repeated imitation of gestures, behaviors and styles. In Butler's view, the parodic performance of drag radically exposes the constructed nature of gender identity, undermining an essentialist understanding of gender and creating what she has famously termed "gender trouble."² Swanson makes trouble of many kinds, playing not only with gender but also with race, age, size, species, and other physical identity markers. Situating the performance of identity in the context of both everyday practices and art making, her work reveals and revels in the fluidity and unknowability of identity categories.

How does Caravaggio come into this? Swanson draws on art historical conventions of portraiture and self-portraiture as a framework, a kind of *mise-en-scène* for staging work that explores identity and challenges assumptions about the image as a representation of an authentic self. Her use of dramatic lighting is shaped by the stark, realistic *chiaroscuro* of paintings by Caravaggio and Francisco de Zurbarán, shadowy self-portraits by Rembrandt, and the light-suffused paintings of Vermeer. Her wide-ranging visual vocabulary references not only 17-century European artists but also Richard Avedon's minimalist portraits, Cindy Sherman's role-playing, and Jeff Wall's

staged, cinematic photographs. Swanson's attraction to imagery from popular culture—including Gap ads, television and film tropes, and selfies shared on social media—introduces a highbrow-meets-lowbrow aesthetic and infuses the formal and thematic seriousness of her work with a playful and at times campy style.

The earliest work in this exhibition, seven photographs from the series *Anti-Self-Portraits* and 20 from *Hope, NY*, disrupt viewer's expectations of self-portraiture by withholding much of the information we expect from a portrait. Describing *Anti-Self-Portraits*, Swanson writes: "The psychological play between the viewer and myself is what I am most interested in—I am drawing attention to the fact that I am denying something to the viewer."³ These carefully staged photographs obscure the face and sometimes the body of their subject, at once drawing the viewer's gaze and resisting it. In *Pillow*, the setting is an impersonal, neutral hotel room; a large pillow obstructs our view of the person holding it, asking the viewer to piece together an image of the person based on her hands and feet, parts that stand in for an elusive whole yet signal the impossibility of constructing a coherent picture of the subject. In *Peggy Lee*, the ostensible subject of the portrait eyes the viewer from behind the mask of celebrity, practicing a kind of visual karaoke.⁴ In the related series *Hope, NY*, a lighthearted critique of social media culture, Swanson explores the self-portrait in a context in which narcissism is acceptable and everyone is a celebrity. The photographs, which she describes as anti-selfies, were originally posted on Instagram for her family and friends. Blurring the boundaries between art photography and the casual selfie, the images undermine notions of transparent identity. In many of the photographs, she obscures her image with everyday objects: a square fan, a vase of flowers, a Darth Vader mask. Other images show a part of Swanson's body—her forehead, the sole of her foot—reflected in a mirror. Her anti-selfies parody the practice of curating a personal brand via social media and question the facile perceptions of identity in which this practice is grounded.

The striking life-size figures in *Uniforms* extend the themes of her earlier work while foregrounding the motif of protection. Swanson has constructed seven figures

whose face and body are concealed by uniforms designed to protect them from harm or to mark religious or cultural identity. The series includes a beekeeper, welder, fencer, plague doctor, and figures wearing a Shaker cloak, a burqa, and a black mourning dress and veil. These costumes announce a recognizable professional, religious, or personal identity even as they protect and conceal the individual body. The garments have been altered to fit mannequins built to represent Swanson's short stature. She writes: "While the work considers an imaginary desire to wear these garments in order to be fully concealed, it also asks the disheartening questions: If I wore these uniforms, would people think I had a useful profession or sacred subjectivity? Or, because of my size, would it actualize a detrimental spectacle?"⁵ The uniform—an important dimension of identity performance and role-playing—cannot protect its wearer from potentially harmful or limiting perceptions. Swanson's awareness of the impossibility of avoiding visual detection, even while wearing a full-body uniform, leads her to imagine a slapstick scenario in which she's performing a character who takes extreme measures not to be seen.⁶

In her new portrait series *Beauty*, created for this exhibition, Swanson explores the hybridization or alteration of identity on social media platforms. Inspired by appearance-altering mobile apps and face sheet selfies, these photographs meld the lowbrow, everyday genre of the selfie with highly aestheticized and theatrical images. Observing that viewers have been trained to have distinct affective responses to particular styles of portraiture, she uses as source material Baroque portraits that evoke dark beauty, mystery, and implicit narrative.⁷ The sitters are personal friends of Swanson, a more intimate version of the friend communities that populate social media. Her longstanding interest in masking and disguise is expressed here by the use of ready-made face masks with kabuki makeup, animal features, or animated characters, masks that alter the appearance of her friends and emphasize the twinned construction of appearance and identity. The portraits suggest that representations can be at once formal and casual, realistic and cartoonish, straightforward and parodic. Kabuki theater, with its stylized gestures, dramatic makeup, elaborate costumes, and cross-gender

impersonation, is one of the historical sources of contemporary drag performance.⁸ Swanson heightens the effect of the selfie masks' kabuki makeup through theatrical lighting. She notes that the lighting in these portraits is influenced by film noir, particularly by an interrogation scene in the neo-noir film *The Usual Suspects* in which the spotlight is on the suspects. In this scene, Dean Keaton says in his defense: "I mean I've been walking around with the same face, the same name. . . ." ⁹ He implies that a stable identity is an alibi and identity transformation is a tool of criminals. Borrowing formal elements from many sources, Swanson challenges the illusion of stability and suggests that masking reveals identity itself to be a performance. At the same time, she subtly critiques the facile nature of impersonation on social media. She writes: "*Beauty* elevates and prolongs the ephemerality of the selfie to question the ease of borrowing, concealing, and performing identity in a social media obsessed culture."¹⁰

The hybridized images in *Beauty* serve as a bridge to the new work in *Recluse*, also created for this exhibition. *Recluse* features seven beautifully crafted self-portraits in which Swanson poses as artists known both for their cultural influence and their intense desire for privacy. This series marks a new direction in her work as well as a fresh entry point to her persistent themes of concealing, protecting, and transforming identities presumed to be stable and transparent. She observes: "Today, the public desire for unfettered access to the lives of anyone in a public-facing career further stigmatizes the role of the recluse. Artists are expected to be brand managers or spokespersons for their own work, which can result in being defined by perceived identities (construed by biographical or physical characteristics) rather than by the work they make."¹¹ *Recluse* reflects her personal frustration with these expectations and her desire to be in a position where, like these seven figures, she can make art without cultivating a public presence. In these images, she reclaims the figure of the recluse and embraces it as signifying liberation from social and cultural expectations. The pictures are at once self-portraits in the guise of celebrated artists and riffs on well-known portraits of these artists, including the widely circulated daguerreotype of a young Emily Dickinson, an iconic Stieglitz photograph of Georgia O'Keeffe, and a photograph of

Stanley Kubrick on the set of *A Clockwork Orange*. Drawing on these earlier images, Swanson gestures toward the history of photographic portraiture even as she reimagines the photographs for her own purposes. Adding digitally painted makeup, hair, and clothing to photographs of herself, she borrows the identities of these artists and they borrow hers. The result is a surprising visual remix of features and clothing that crosses perceived boundaries of gender, age, race, and era and represents celebrated public identity as a burden, a mask, and a performance. The juxtaposition of celebrity and reclusiveness, and Swanson's awareness of how each ironically produces the other, recalls the dynamic of her *Anti-Self-Portraits* and anti-selfies, in which she offers for public consumption an image of self that conceals as much as it reveals.

Swanson's body of work, with its serious-playful, high-low exploration of the possibilities and pitfalls that accompany the performance of identity, establishes her as a highly inventive artist and cultural critic invested in exploring how we have historically imagined, represented and performed the self, and how contemporary social practices and media culture are reshaping our self-imaginings.

¹ RuPaul Charles, interview with Marc Maron, *WTF Podcast* Episode 498, 19 October, 2014.

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990 and 1999.

³ Laura Swanson, www.lauraswanson.com.

⁴ Kristin Lindgren, "Looking at Difference: Laura Swanson's Anti-Self-Portraits, Diane Arbus's Portraits, and the Viewer's Gaze." *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 9.3 (2015), 277-294.

⁵ Laura Swanson, www.lauraswanson.com.

⁶ Laura Swanson, email communication with author.

⁷ Laura Swanson, personal interview with author, 16 June, 2017.

⁸ Cameron Robertson, "Kabuki Theater: a Drag Act with a Difference." www.theguardian.com, 21 July 2010.

⁹ *The Usual Suspects*, dir. Bryan Singer, Gramercy Pictures, 1995.

¹⁰ Laura Swanson, email communication with author.

¹¹ Laura Swanson, email communication with author.

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