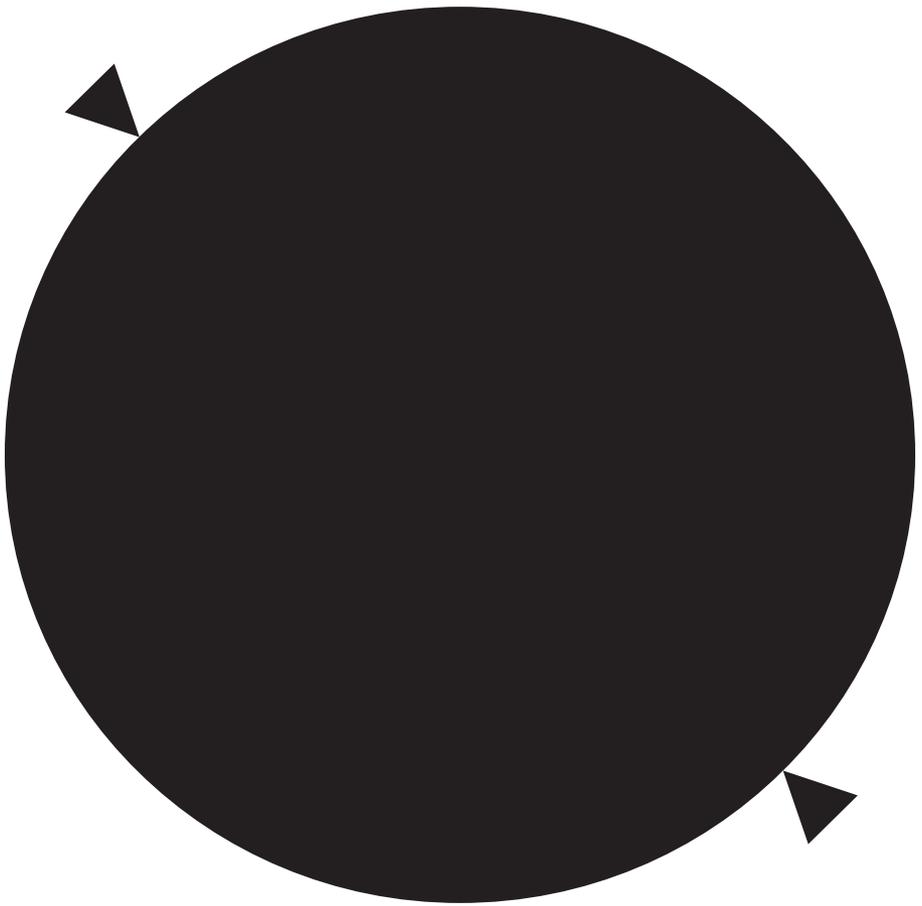


You & me, right here,  
right now & forever  
Jason Stoneking





You and me. Right here, right now, and forever. That's all there is, that's all there's ever been, and there's no getting out of it. We can try to put up all kinds of walls between selves and others; we can erect borders, classes and faiths to administer and mediate our interfaces; but in the end there will always only ever be us. All stuck together on this planet, forever staring into each other uneasily. Over whichever line, across whichever table, through whichever horrifically distorted looking glass. Unless you're on the god trip (which I'm not) or the alien life trip (which I'm not on today, anyway) none of us has any reliable sentient witness to the fact of our being except for one another. And what is being without witness? The tree falling in the forest. The unread book. The unheard song. The unexamined life. So that leaves us with two lenses on the experience of existence to choose from. The self and the other. But which one are we more afraid of?

Do we worry, when we look at someone else, that we are only seeing projections of ourselves? Imagining our intents behind their gestures, and assuming our own pains behind their grimaces? Casting them as the parade of method actors and ourselves as the eternal archetypal character? Or is it worse than that? Even more destabilizing? Do we look at others and take their expressions for something so real and foreign that we fear for our own existence? That we suddenly become terrified that we are not conveying anything powerfully enough to merit being legitimized by witness at all? When the Lone Ranger says to his sidekick Tonto, "We have a problem," Tonto famously inquires in response, "What do you mean 'we'?" And that's the question that Hansen's double portrait series seems to be asking, not only of its subjects but also of the viewer. Who exactly constitutes this "we" and do we have the same problem or not? I often find myself looking at another's face and thinking:

What are you? Are you just another permutation of me? Something I could imagine myself becoming if I were subjected to a different history, or faced with a different set of circumstances? Or are you something else entirely? Something I could never be fully equipped to access with any real understanding? And if you are that totally different thing, then does that mean that nobody could ever really access me?

Because I want to be accessed, to be felt, to have my terror consoled and my love appreciated. I want to be accepted for who I truly, deeply am. But however I want that, I can't see how it would even be possible to get it from anyone who was completely outside my experience.

This begins to test the limits of that mysterious thing people call empathy. I need you to exist, to be other, to play witness, or I cannot be. But if you really are other, then to what extent can you know me or understand what you see? Can I only be comprehended when witnessed from the inside? Perhaps the trick is that we are all somehow inside the same consciousness, but not quite experiencing the same facets of it at once. Maybe none of us truly, deeply, individually is at all, except as an endless series of masks being worn on the same tender, lonely and frightened face.

Our interactions boil down to a trade-off. It's only so much as we are alike that we can recognize each other, but only so much as we differ that we can verify one another's genuine presence as independently functioning beings. We recognize each other's identity and autonomy only in the confused lack of understanding that it occasionally provokes. We make each other feel more alive by virtue of that scary sense of estrangement that we cause when our outward behavior is not rooted in an easily recognizable mutual intent.

One's personal brand of that terrible, crushing loneliness may well be the only singular identifying characteristic that any of us can call our own, the only proof that we are indeed ourselves and not just projections of the next poor sap. But we are always working on swapping that problem for an even less manageable one, gradually erasing ourselves into the public fabric, exchanging our fragile individuality for a deeper participation in some group reality. You know: love, religion, politics, fashion, publishing. It might be the best deal we can get around here, this idea that we can let go of some of the self and be rewarded with a reassuring dose of acceptance. That's what we're looking for from spouses, families, and friends:

The unconditional togetherness that's worth more than our shaky, anonymous little selves and egos were on their own. And Markus Hansen is up there on the wall, with all the others he can find, mapping out the territory of that exchange for us.

In these portraits, he is looking for himself within the other, looking for the other within himself. Trying to determine how different he is or isn't from those around him. And perhaps, in his title, he is reassuring himself that even if we are separate creatures, we are all much more alike than we may fear, and that our sometimes unfamiliar expressions are all just telling different versions of the same fundamental human stories. He is willingly erasing some of that which might seem to be exclusively "Markus" in exchange for some more clues about what might be universal to the species at large.

There are moments in the series when Markus and his model are subtly missing something from each other, seemingly proving on some level that they both exist as independent entities who don't fully grasp each other's motives. But there are other moments when Markus disappears so thoroughly into the reality of his model that it makes me wonder if any of us exist at all. It makes me wonder if Markus exists, or if he is just a projection of my own fear that I don't.

If Markus Hansen is, in fact, some singular entity, outside of me and different from me in ways I will never understand, then I am comforted that at least I recognize some of our shared intentions and fears. In looking at his portraits, I feel the expression of my own most deeply held doubts about being. And if he is just me looking back at myself, another version of me in an endless lineup of me, all asking each other frantically what we should do about the possibility that we are just one being, all alone out here floating through a black frigid space, then I have to say he's doing a bang-up job. He's much more perceptive and empathetic than the me who's sitting in front of this computer screen right now cursing under my breath about the noise being made by the neighbours.