

Keys to Identity: Jonathan Goldman's "Stereotypical Evidence"

A Graduate Museum of Fine Arts Thesis Show at the Tufts University Gallery

"Portraits bring so much baggage. That's what I wanted to circumvent." So says 26-year-old artist Jonathan Goldman, a graduate student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts who is preparing to leave Boston with a post-modern dramatic flourish.

Having originally started this final exploration with a series of portraits taken in neighbors' apartments at 66 Westland Avenue, Jonathan Goldman has drastically redirected the focus of his Museum of Fine Arts thesis presentation and, in so doing, has redirected the way we see others and perhaps ourselves.

"I had been photographing people as a way to get to know them," Goldman says. "I came away not knowing them. These portraits were not communicating the information that I wanted the viewer to see."

In "Stereotypical Evidence: Documentary Portraits," Goldman eschews the common practice of allowing his subjects to pose and frame themselves as people and instead reveals their identities through their self descriptions and personal effects. "I had not wanted to create caricatures of my subjects as is so often done in documentary portraits," Goldman maintained. "Just the opposite. I had been trying to acknowledge our stereotypes and explore more deeply the extraordinary diversity of people in my building."

The first of this year's MFA Thesis show consists of eight artists, some of who have opted to get the thing over with rather than give themselves more time to fret. Goldman himself is looking forward to moving to Philadelphia to marry his long-time girlfriend. Among other entries are a daily chronicle of one artist's front doorstep, a documentary of a guerrilla postcard distribution project, Pleistocene interpretations of the Challenger disaster and various multi-media explorations.

"Most people will try to draw conclusions as to how the exhibits go together," Goldman says. "But they really don't." Goldman's part of the exhibit consists of a dozen three-paneled "portraits" which are made of personal questionnaires on which the subjects' keys, toothbrushes and watches have been superimposed through a series of digitized printing techniques.

As in so much of art, the media and process enhance the message. "Using a digital scanner makes these very personal objects binary," Goldman points out. "As humans, we see things and make them binary: black or white, rich or poor, smart or dumb. Through the use of binary codification, I'm trying to show that people are really full of contradictions."

That the objects also cover parts of the subjects' answers also contributes to the metaphor. "You can't ever truly know people," Goldman suggests. "Personal effects obscure the person." The title of the show, "Stereotypical Evidence," comes from Goldman's reasoning that, even from these common, simple personal effects, people will draw conclusions about their respective owners.

"They're not just simple personal effects, though," Goldman explains. "Keys are necessary as means of access to our lives. A toothbrush is very personal in that it goes in your mouth." And though one subject appears to be without a watch, the different styles owned by the other subjects often say a great deal about them by themselves.

"I'm getting people to look at ordinary objects in a way they are not used to," Goldman suggests. "I'm trying to put meaning back into the objects." Though this stereotypical evidence, Goldman hopes to offer metaphor or representation of the people he studied (all of whom are depicted in often strikingly honest photographs which will be displayed on the outer wall of Goldman's triangular gallery space).

"I think that people will try to match the photos to the descriptions," Goldman surmises. "And I'm allowing that, but I don't think they will be able to and I don't think they will learn anything from it. What I really want," he says, "is for the viewers to disprove the stereotypes."

Where were you born?
BROCKTON MA JUNE 1, 1946

social class would you say your family belonged when you grew up? (circle one & explain)

lower class b. working class c. middle class
 upper-middle class e. upper class f. other: _____

**SUBURBAN UPBRINGING, STEPFATHER
 PPCR - MIDDLE MANAGEMENT.**

social class do you belong now? (circle one & explain)

lower class b. working class c. middle class
 upper-middle class e. upper class f. other: _____

UNEMPLOYED (AT THE MOMENT) BY CHOICE

your education:
**2 HIGH SCHOOLS A PRON SCHOOL
 3 COLLEGES
 SERVICE (USN) RADAR "A" SCHOOL
 WELDING SCHOOL**

Though stereotypes are usually constructed within the mind and heart of the perceiver, in these cases, such deconstruction will be necessary. Instead of leaving a space for gallery visitors to write in what they think about the subjects, each subject has been given an opportunity to put into words how they think others perceive them. In fact, these self-proclaimed stereotypes are the titles of each subject's study, emblazoned on brass plaques beneath each triptych.

"I asked my subjects, 'How do you think others stereotype you?' This answer forms the title for each portrait, a title which contradicts, confirms and reveals the person documented."

Among Goldman's subjects are "Wannabe Tough Guy", "Aloof Gay Freak", "Bitch", "Goody-Goody", "Super Asian" (any relation to "Secret Asian Man"?), and the Baltimore-raised Princeton graduate's autobiographical exploration, "Elitist Jewish Rich Kid".

Although every item is different, each can be similar in many ways, both to each other and to their viewers. "Way-Too-Happy White Guy" had a pony as a child, but is now a retired steelworker apparently down on his luck but eternally hopeful. "Hard-working Black Woman" wants financial security. "Shy, Faggy Nerd" wanted to be a fighter pilot, but is now a music librarian. "I am you. You are me," says a subject who, due to an alleged lack of linguistic skills, left all other questions blank.

Though all of Goldman's subjects participated willingly, some seem to have brought especially germane political baggage to the arena. "Anyone who fits their own stereotype is inherently boring," suggests a neighbor defined as "Short Techno Geek".

Perhaps the greatest lesson, however, can be taken from a participant who remains self-named. "Do not judge a person without knowing the person." It's a lesson. It's a motto. But more than that, Goldman concludes, "It's so grad school."

- Matt Robinson

The Graduate MFA Thesis Show will run from September 14th-October 1st at the Tufts University Gallery in the Aldekman Arts Center at Tufts University. An opening reception will be held Thursday, September 14th from 5-8pm and an artists' talk will be presented Thursday, September 21st from 2-3:30pm. For information, call 627.3518 or go to www.tufts.edu/as/gallery.