

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS
20 X 24: RECENT PORTRAITS



JUNE 6 - JULY 11, 1999
THE ALDRICH MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

MUSEUM COPY

INTRODUCTION

Lyle Ashton Harris - 20 x 24: *Recent Portraits* is the first major public presentation of a selection of images from the new series of unique Polaroid portraits begun by the photographer in the Fall of 1998. Approaching this exhibition as an installation, the artist has selected forty-eight photographs out of over two hundred images that currently comprise this ongoing series, double-hanging them around the circumference of the architecturally reconfigured exhibition space, the Museum's Erna D. Leir Gallery. The subjects of this series—drawn from a broad range of acquaintances and friends—include the artist's Yoga teacher, a patron, a friend's three-year-old child, and a variety of personalities from the worlds of art and fashion. These unadorned heads stand in stark contrast to some of Harris's past work, where there is a staged theatricality or complex narrative. Each subject has been captured in a moment of extraordinary vulnerability—at the instant of the opening of the eyes after a prolonged period of relaxation. By also photographing the back of each subject's head, character is further revealed through the particularities of skull, neck and hairstyle. This series of images raises the issue of just how descriptive of personality a photograph really can be—a topic that has interested not only the artist, but many who have analyzed photography's basic nature, including writers such as Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. As Barthes has written on the experience of being photographed: "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image." In revealing how the stark nudity of a face may result in the creation of yet another kind of mask, Harris's composite portraits, front and back, invariably create vivid readings that are at once intensely personal and archetypal.

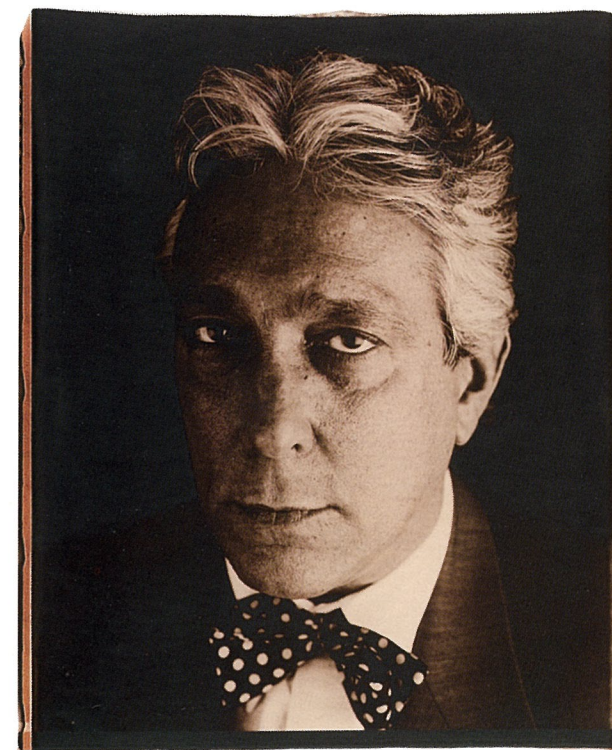
— Richard Klein



Untitled (Face #34 Mother Dear)
Courtesy of the artist



Untitled (Back #4 Agatha)
Collection of Helen Mangano and Fred Dunbar



Untitled (Face #33 Manuel)
Courtesy of the artist

Lyle Ashton Harris and Chuck Close – A Conversation

The following conversation took place at Harris's Chelsea studio in New York City, April 1999.



Untitled (Back #3 Lyle)
Collection of David Teplitzky and Peggy Scott

LAH Chuck, what's your experience of being photographed by me? Let's begin there.

CC For somebody who shoots as many people as I do, I have to occasionally submit myself to the process—it's only fair. But it's a really different experience. I've dealt with my own image through my self-portraits—which I've done way too many of! I'm used to posing myself, being in control of my own image, but it's very different to submit to someone else, to try and let someone else direct you. Of course, I wanted it to end up looking like your work.

It's the same problem I had when I did paintings of Francisco Clemente, Cindy Sherman, Lucas Samaras, and Alex Katz—all of whom we recognize through their own self-portraits. I wanted to make sure that they ended up looking like *my* work somehow. They're real professional posers, so they want to make it look like their work. Of all the people you've photographed, how many of them . . .

LAH Self-fashion themselves? It's quite obvious with artists such as Iké Udé, Venessa Beecroft, and Renée Cox. But I also think it extends to people like my grandmother, Joella Johnson [*Untitled (Face/Back #1 Joella)*], or Mother Dear, an amazing Jamaican woman with a *botanica* in the Bronx [*Untitled (Face/Back #34 Mother Dear)*]. I have observed that people have a strong desire to present themselves in a particular way.

It was interesting when you recently took my portrait for the painting you're doing and suggested that perhaps we should select one where I'm smiling. It sort of caught me off guard because I always imagine myself as being quite serious. Your comment made me realize that perhaps I smile more than I think I do.

CC You have had an interest in the back of the head for a long time, but it's never come to the fore as much as in this series.

LAH To me the back suggests a certain vulnerability. I'm also fascinated by indexical markings on the body, and how people come to acquire them. For example, *Untitled (Back #17 Mystery)* is a photograph of Mystery, an exotic dancer who acquired his scar in an accident during a performance. Another example would be *For Cleopatra, 1994*, a photograph of my cousin Peggy's back which bears the evidence of corrective surgery for scoliosis. While the back may imply vulnerability, there's also the suggestion of concealment.

CC It's also kind of an anti police mug shot, as nobody's interested in the back of the head!

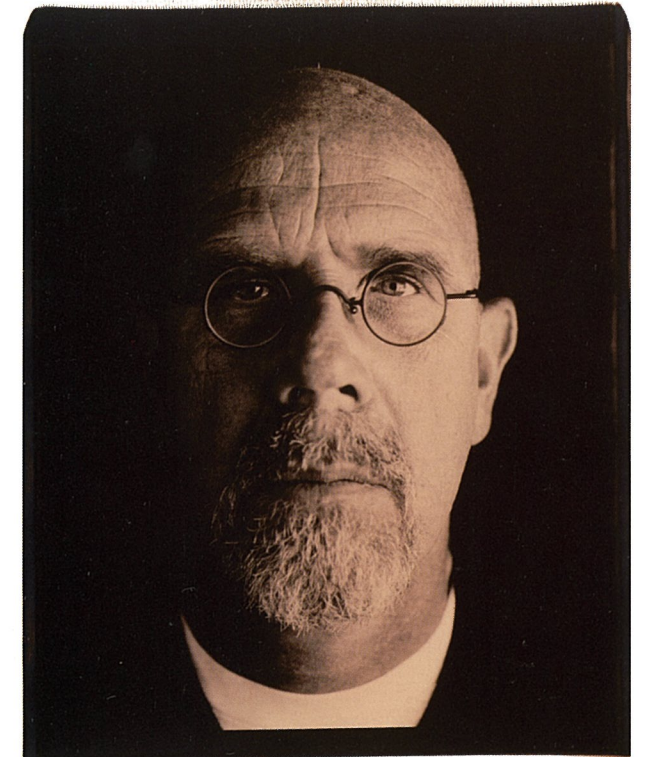
LAH These images also play on the discourse of ethnographic photography and the pseudo-science of phrenology with its history of cataloguing and pathologizing difference. I'm curious, where do you see this project vis-à-vis the history of painting and photography?

CC They are very painterly photographs, actually.

LAH I was thinking about an observation by Roland Barthes, that the best portraitists are mythologists—whether it's Nadar in terms of the French bourgeoisie, Sander in terms of pre-Nazi Germany, or Van Der Zee in terms of the African diaspora in Harlem.

CC One of the things that amazes me after making portraits for thirty years and looking at so many other portraits—particularly after the experience of doing the portrait show at MoMA in 1991, where I picked portraits and self-portraits from the Modern's collection—is that for something which seemed so bankrupt in the middle of the century, it's an incredibly elastic set of conventions and traditions. Portraiture always ends up being capable of embracing something else. And it's great to see somebody considerably younger than me who's finding new urgency and new reason to extend and expand the possibilities.

LAH When you say the portraits are painterly photographs, what do you mean?



Untitled (Face #2 Chuck)
Collection of David Teplitzky and Peggy Scott

CC I suppose that I think they're painterly because I bring as much painting baggage with me when I look at them as I do photographic baggage. It's interesting that photography was supposed to put painting out of business. In some ways it did. There was no reason to make slavishly duplicated images. In fact, painting started going to all those places that are very different from what a camera can do. It was black and white, so paintings became much more about color. There were these long, static, fixed poses—so we got impressionism, post-impressionism, futurism, various kinds of flickering impressions or effects rather than detail. Lots of things drove painting somewhere else, but at this point, at the end of this century, it's interesting to see how photography has been affected by painting. So it's all come full circle; I think there's a dialogue happening.

LAH Yes, I would agree.

CC What do you think are the differences between your use of the back of the head and Lorna Simpson's?

LAH I have gained tremendously from her sharp linguistic play, her investigations of the body and how—through her use of the back—she refuses a demand on the part of the viewer to offer the "identity" of the subject. Yet I'm interested in exploring the body as a site of both pain and pleasure in all of its ambivalence. I'm engaged in a democratization of the subject matter—equivalence, if you will—whether it's photographing Agnes Gund's granddaughter Sadie or Mystery, who dances for a dollar to make his living [*Untitled (Face/Back #11 Sadie)* and *Untitled (Face/Back #17 Mystery)*]. I am drawing from a diverse population and treating each person in the same fashion.

CC One of the things that I've been struck by in your work is that it has a gentle quality. I was thinking about it in terms of the way you've used your family members and portrayed family. And how probably those people who are interested in so-called "family values" would feel that you are flaunting something else—that you would be kind of an anti family values candidate! Yet it seems to me that you

have this really loving, gentle way of portraying another kind of family, another attitude towards interpersonal relationships. It's something for me that is just as moving and a lot more authentic than a lot of the so-called traditional presentations of the family.

LAH I see the family as a site of negotiation and interrogation. I think my work clearly reflects a degree of gentleness, but at the same time it also engages deep ambivalence and deprivation.

CC And that's real intimacy in a family too—that negotiation you're talking about and struggle within a family—that's real intimacy as well. Describing your "family" in an extended sense, how do you choose whom you are going to work with, out of all the possibilities out there?

LAH I guess it's just people that I'm drawn to, people I'm attracted to in some way.

CC You're attracted to a lot of folks!

LAH I'm attracted to my subjects in a lot of different ways: in relationship to form, to power, to desire, and in relationship to the transgression of class. For me the process of portraiture is a way of negotiating intimacy.

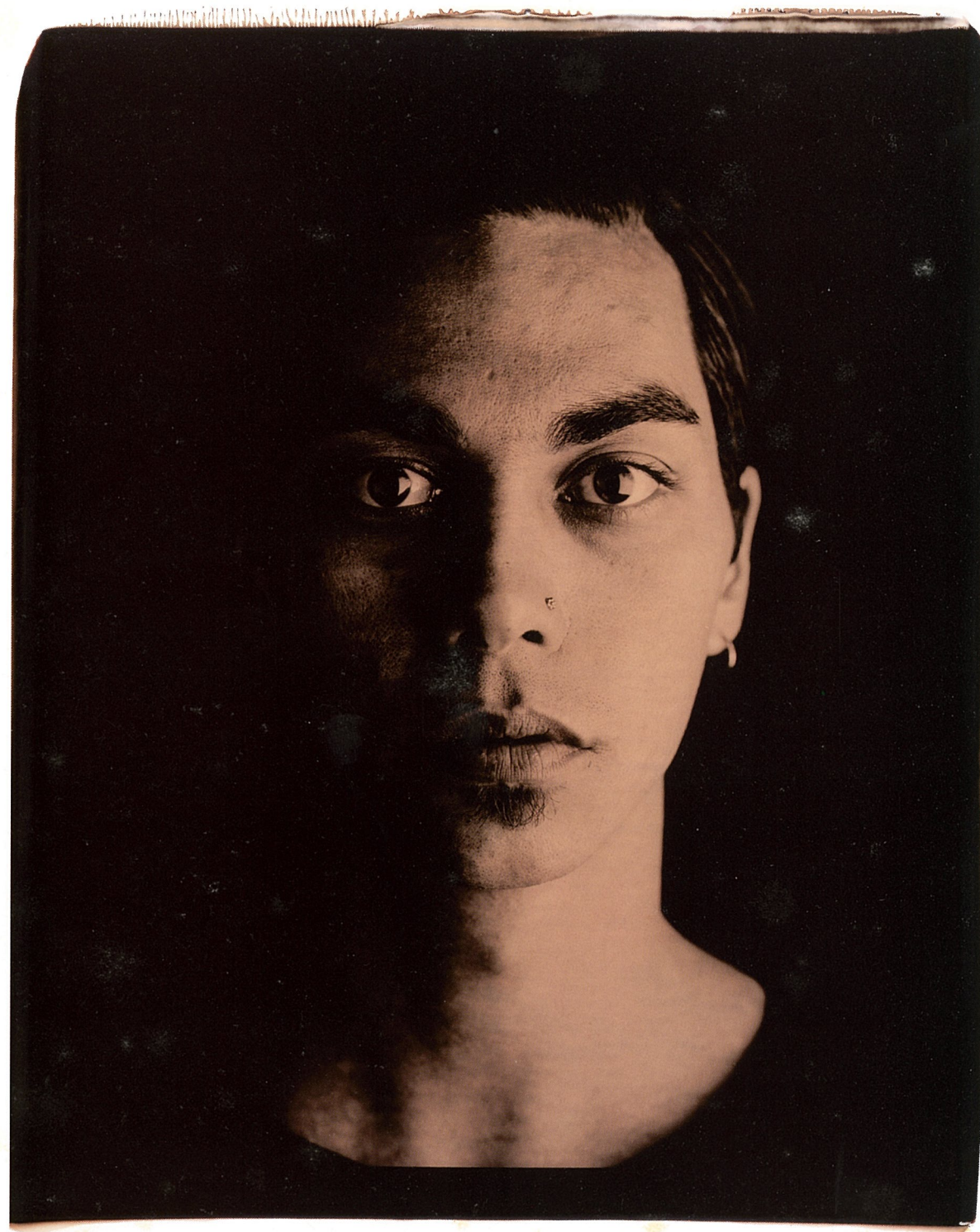
CC It's a great way to get to know people, doing portraits. I have a problem because most everyone I photograph believes that I've entered into a contract with them, and that I'm eventually going to do a painting. All I'm really doing, you know, is just jotting down information, some of which will be useful and some of which won't. So I don't think that there's an implied contract, but I've gotten myself in trouble because of that. I'm sure if you don't use somebody after you've photographed them it's the same.

LAH It has been intense recently in terms of getting calls from people—be it a collector or a friend—wanting to know whether or not they're going to be in the Aldrich show.

CC Did I make the cut, Lyle?



Untitled (Face #7 Steve)
Collection of James Wagner and Barry Hoggard



Untitled (Face #35 Duncan)
Courtesy of the artist

LAH What do you think?

CC I don't know! You see, more pressure—even here there's pressure! How many people have you shot with the 20" x 24" Polaroid?

LAH So far, over one hundred people. This show features twenty-four subjects; in total it will have forty-eight pieces. Looking over the work, I've come to realize how much this project is about my return to New York, a way of acknowledging and documenting relationships that are important to me. And I'm very interested in going beyond a superficial rendering of the face to engage character. In one way or another, all of my subjects have dealt with a certain amount of pain—I think we all have. It's part of the human condition.

CC I find you *build* the photograph with the Polaroid, which is very different from *taking* the photograph.

LAH Very much so. That's a wonderful way of putting it. It's about the collaborative nature of having people involved in the process of building the portrait, which can be quite dramatic. Furthermore, it's not just you and the subject, but one must also contend with the presence of this huge Polaroid camera.

CC The camera is a big, aggressive, in-your-face thing—like shoving something the size of a Volkswagen in someone's face! The Polaroid process really does change things.

Before I started using a Polaroid back in the mid-seventies, I never knew that I had the shot I wanted, so I took the same photograph over and over to make sure. Then I switched to Polaroid and once I got something, there was no need to repeat it. I would do something else. And the sitter is really involved in a very different way in the styling of the image. It's really made for a totally different experience, for both me and the people in front of the camera.

LAH I agree.

CC Why did you decide on the sepia? What do they call it, chocolate?

LAH Chocolate, yes. Our friend Brenda Zlamany recently remarked that I have created a chocolate Chuck Close. [Untitled (Face/Back #2 Chuck)]

CC Am I semi-sweet or bittersweet?

LAH [Laughs] I love the color. I think it's a way of having my own little brown set of folks, if you want to call them that! I think people come in shades of brown, so I like it.

The new Polaroid cross-process technique I'm using for these portraits is quite sensitive to environmental factors such as temperature, so there's always an element of surprise in the resulting nuance of color and solarization. I also love the unforgiving detail that comes with the absence of intense highlights. They're not pretty pictures by any stretch of the imagination, but they possess a timeless quality reminiscent of nineteenth century toned albumen prints.

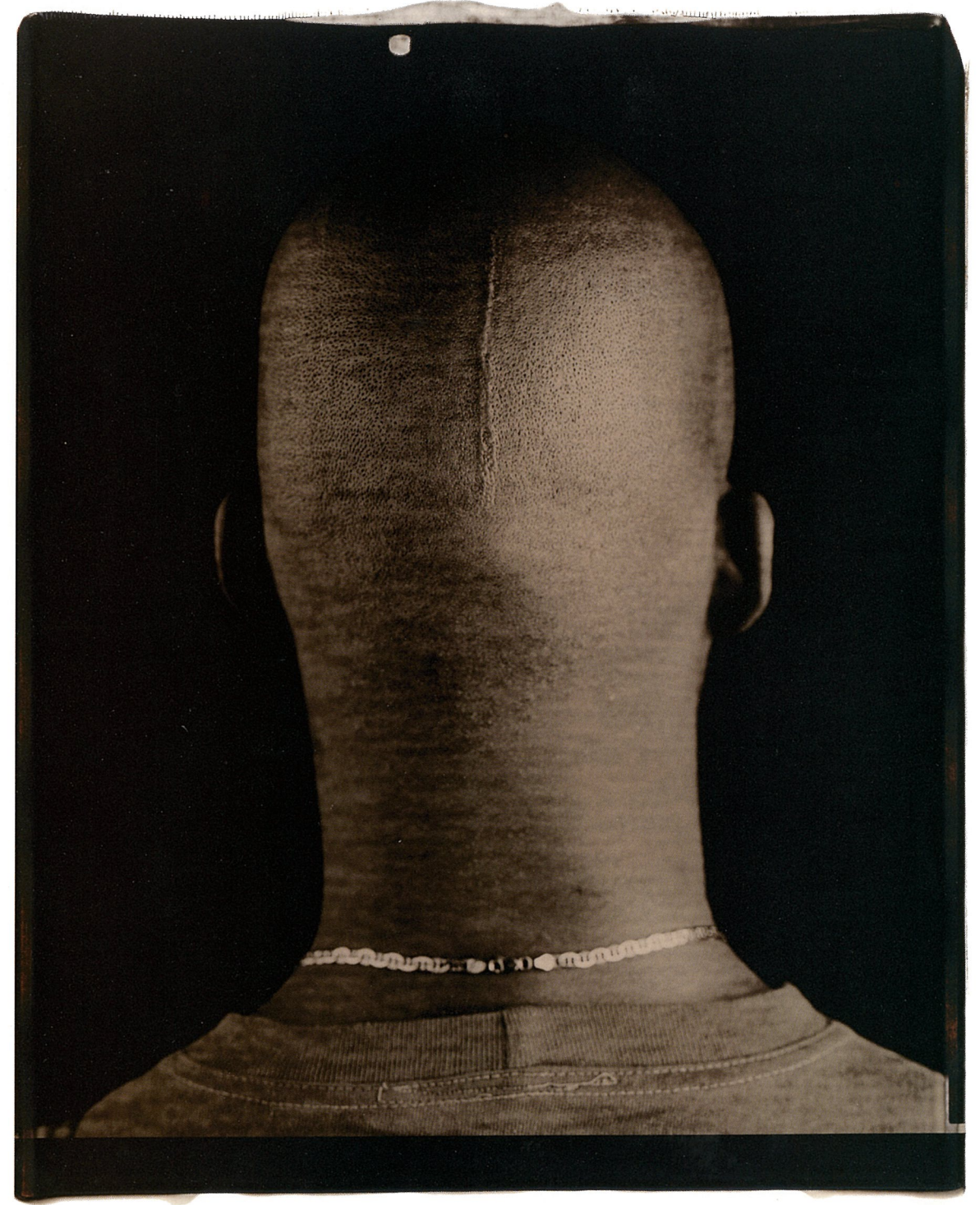
I can appreciate the shock some of my subjects have upon seeing their portraits for the first time. I began taking self-portraits in the 1980s to explore the dissonance and ambivalence I experienced in relation to my own image. About a year ago I started photographing myself using this Polaroid technique and initially had difficulty dealing with the result—it seemed somewhat heavy. When I looked at the photograph again after several weeks, I said to myself, "If I'm going to be subjected to this, I'm bringing in my friends as sitters!" That's when I began the project and invited you down to the studio.

It's amazing how shooting portraits has affected my relationship with people in the street, because now I'm constantly looking at people's faces. I'm like a kid in a candy store, watching people in public. I've become much more observant of physiognomy and how people engage with one another. I'm often asked when this portrait project is going to be finished, but I can really see it going on for quite a while.

CC Jeez, stop making portraits—why would you ever want to do that?



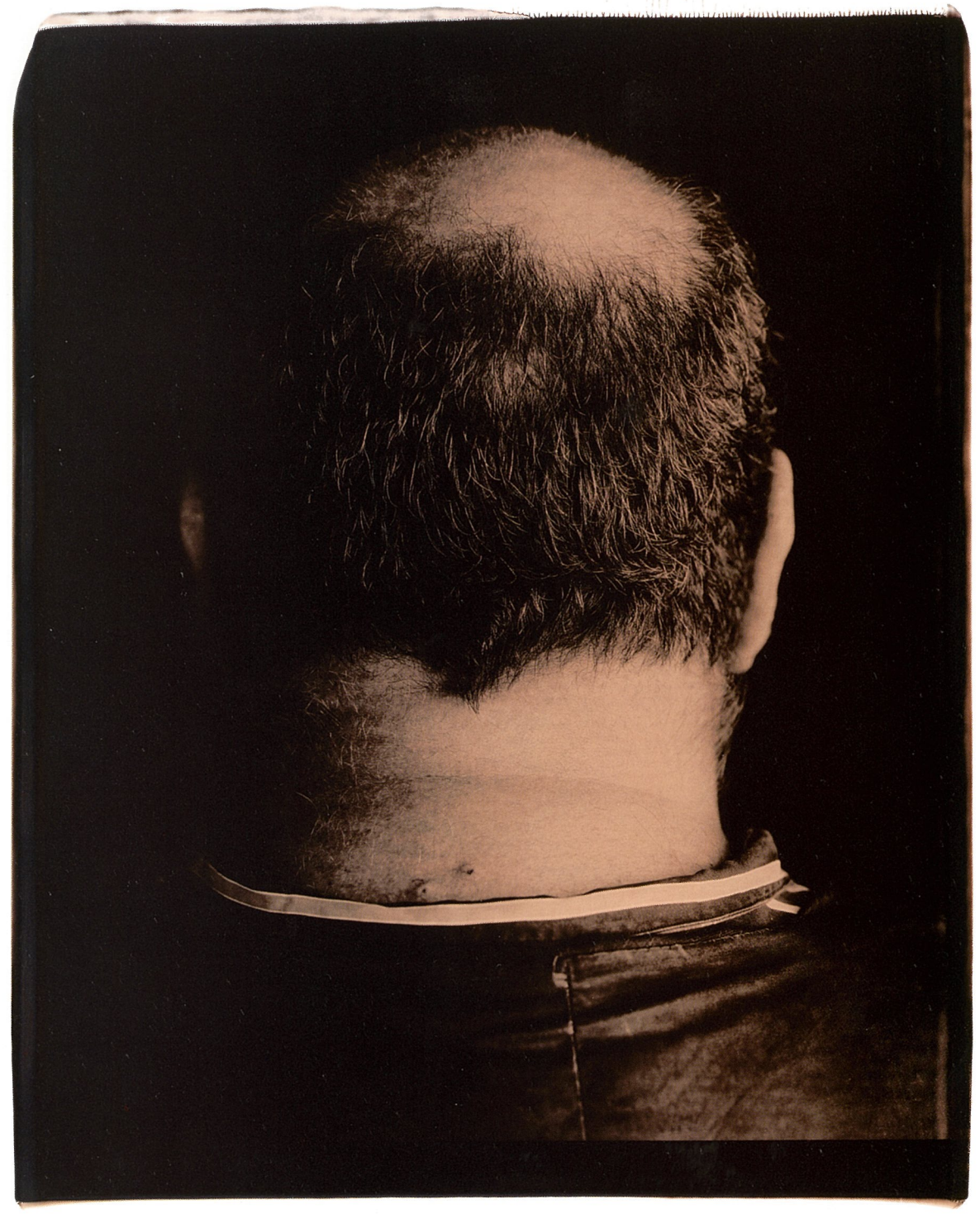
Untitled (Back #12 Jane)
Collection of Jane Hart



Untitled (Back #17 Mystery)
Courtesy of the artist



Untitled (Face #21 Shaway)
Courtesy of the artist



Untitled (Back #30 Bill)
Courtesy of the artist



Untitled (Face #37 Patrick)
Courtesy of the artist



Untitled (Face #1 Joella)
Collection of Rudean Leinaeng

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are unique Polaroids, 24" x 20" - 1998/99

Untitled (Face #1 Joella) & Untitled (Back #1 Joella)

Collection of Rudean Leinaeng

Untitled (Face #2 Chuck) & Untitled (Back #2 Chuck)

Collection of David Teplitzky and Peggy Scott

Untitled (Face #3 Lyle) & Untitled (Back #3 Lyle)

Collection David Teplitzky and Peggy Scott

Untitled (Face #7 Steve)

Collection of James Wagner and Barry Hoggard

Untitled (Back #7 Steve)

Untitled (Face #9 Vanessa) & Untitled (Back #9 Vanessa)

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Analix, Geneva

Untitled (Face #11 Sadie) & Untitled (Back #11 Sadie)

Private Collection, New York

Untitled (Face #12 Jane) AP

Untitled (Back # 12 Jane)

Collection of Jane Hart

Untitled (Face #13 Andrew)

Collection of Andrew Weinstein

Untitled (Back #13 Andrew)

Untitled (Face #16 George) & Untitled (Back #16 George)

Collection of George J. and Linda J. Kurz

Untitled (Face #17 Mystery) & Untitled (Back #17 Mystery)

Untitled (Face #18 Glenn) & Untitled (Back #18 Glenn)

Collection of Greg Miller

Untitled (Face #19 Shirley) & Untitled (Back #19 Shirley)

Collection of Robert Crane and Shirley Muñoz

Untitled (Face #21 Shaway) & Untitled (Back #21 Shaway)

Untitled (Face #30 Bill) & Untitled (Back #30 Bill)

Untitled (Face #31 Courtney) & Untitled (Back #31 Courtney)

Untitled (Face #32 Paula) & Untitled (Back #32 Paula)

Untitled (Face #33 Manuel) & Untitled (Back #33 Manuel)

Untitled (Face #34 Mother Dear) & Untitled (Back #34 Mother Dear)

Untitled (Face #35 Duncan) & Untitled (Back #35 Duncan)

Untitled (Face #36 Michael) & Untitled (Back #36 Michael)

Untitled (Face #39 Nancy) & Untitled (Back #39 Nancy)

Untitled (Face #41 Iké) & Untitled (Back #41 Iké)

Untitled (Face #42 Linda) & Untitled (Back #42 Linda)

Collection of George J. and Linda J. Kurz

Untitled (Face #43 Bobby) & Untitled (Back #43 Bobby)

All works courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Cover photograph: *Untitled (Face #11 Sadie)*

Private Collection, New York

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The Aldrich Museum's special appreciation goes to Chuck Close for generously participating in a dialogue with the artist, a portion of which has been transcribed for this brochure. Close's focus on the portrait over the last three decades has not only broadened the genre's definition, but has breathed new relevancy into the subject for an emerging generation. It is fitting that Chuck has brought his insight to this dialogue on Lyle Ashton Harris's new work.

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Conversation © 1999 Lyle Ashton Harris and Chuck Close

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