



Jamie Diamond, Untitled, from the series 'I Promise to Be a Good Mother'
20" x 28", 2012, Archival Pigment Print

Jamie Diamond brings 'the family'

New York based artist [Jamie Diamond](#) works with the photograph at its most banal – the family portrait as executed in a shopping mall studio. In her portraits, the visual artifice of the studio is laid out with surgical precision, a taxonomy of flat backdrops, fluorescent lighting and props. That artifice floods into the subjects themselves, who are reduced to a list of bodily

gestures - the hand placed on the shoulder, the unnatural tilt of the head, the white teeth encased in a smile.

That careful precision is backed by a conceit that is ingenious in its simplicity. In her series *Constructed Family Portraits*, Diamond – an MFA graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and a recent fellow at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council – recruits her photographic subjects online, inviting them to pose for a family portrait with other strangers. The result is immediately jarring, a kind of visual and cerebral joke; trained in the reading of family portraits, we scan the faces of the subjects, seeking out physical resemblance or creating narratives (adoption? divorce?) to explain apparent anomalies.

But Diamond does more than ask the viewer to question the visual conceit of the family portrait, the assumptions that underpin the codified language of the image. She uses the distance between the recruited strangers, their underlying awkwardness, to represent the alienation that can stalk even the closest of families. In this way, she questions the structure and stability of the family unit; the very nature of the portrait genre, with its performative aspect, emphasises the way a family comes into being through its public identity.

This interest in the performative nature of the family is repeated in her ongoing series, *I Promise to be a Good Mother*. Here, Diamond appears in the guise of a picture perfect mother, coddling an incongruously plastic baby. She places herself in a variety of locations, each of which denote a specific social context: a pristine bedroom or opulent bathroom, the country club, beach or park. In some photographs, Diamond strains at motherhood, her face a rictus of ecstasy and love. In others, she creates a desolate portrait of the forfeiture of the title's promise, a dead-eyed depiction of isolation and disconnect.

"Initially, I was examining the relationship with my own mother

and started staging specific memories from my childhood, playing on my fears and desires," Diamond tells Phaidon. "I would assume the role of subject and photographer by dressing up in mother's clothes and interacting with life-like baby dolls. Eventually this performance evolved into an exploration of the complexities surrounding the mother/child relationship, investigating both vernacular and art historical depictions of motherhood."

In places, the series evokes the photographs of [Jeff Wall](#), with its formal composition of figures in landscape. But the central reference is almost certainly [Cindy Sherman](#), and like Sherman, Diamond uses the rituals of role-play and costume in order to delve into the pathologies of female behavior. *I Promise to be a Good Mother* is about the social identity of the mother, with its rules and expectations. But it's also a raw portrayal of post-natal depression. In one photograph, Diamond is seen from the back, holding up her plastic doll before a stark wall of concrete – an image that recollects the bleak danger that haunts Michaelangelo Antonioni's films.

Diamond is also exploring the fantasy of motherhood, and the pleasures of dressing up; she describes the series as one in which, "Using mimicry and playacting, I put on the mask of motherhood by dressing up in mother's clothes." Diamond captures the promises that lure us into playing our designated social roles, even as she depicts their eventual claustrophobia. That duality lies at the heart of her photographs. Still, it's crucial to note they carry it lightly – not unlike French artist [Sophie Calle](#), Jamie Diamond's work is full of wicked humour.

Jamie Diamond will be exhibiting in Berlin in late April. Watch this space for more details.