

## Posing: Jamie Diamond's Uncanny Portraits

*We're a happy family*

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*Me mom and daddy*

...

*We ain't got no friends*

*Our troubles never end*

*No Christmas cards to send*

*Daddy likes men*

[The Ramones]

All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined on the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death.

[Roland Barthes - *Camera Lucida*]

From adverts exhorting amateurs to 'capture the moment', to critical clichés about freezing time, from Cartier Bresson's idea of the *instant décisif*, to the very word 'snapshot', the notion of an image snatched from the continuous flow of temporality has dominated our way of thinking about the photograph. Yet much photography is nothing of the kind. Photographs are often traces of activities that have taken place over long periods, from the still life painstakingly arranged in the studio, to the 'access' gained by a documentary photographer that allows her to produce a 'natural', 'spontaneous' picture. The photographic image elides its process of production, the assemblage of people and materials, the negotiations and social interactions that have allowed it to come into being, presenting instead a durationless instant, an illusion of immediacy.

Jamie Diamond is building a career out of a rigorous examination of photographic rhetoric, concentrating on that most essayed and least thought-about genre, the family portrait. Photography is frequently a social activity, a practice as much as an event or a moment, and nowhere is this clearer than in the documentation and celebration of the family, which involves photography in an uncanny tangle of intimacy and artificiality that would be startling, were we not so accustomed to it. Beneath the bland representations of the studio portrait, the bread and butter work of professional photographers around the world, Diamond excavates a stratum

of discomfort and unease, ultimately exposing a kind of horror, a metaphysical and moral vacancy that the smiles and flattering lighting strive - but never quite manage - to banish.

*"The best family portrait poses help reflect the emotional bond, closeness, and character of the family members."*

[[photography-tips-and-techniques.com](http://photography-tips-and-techniques.com)]

The invention of the daguerrotype in 1839 led to the democratisation of the portrait, previously the preserve of those who could afford to sit for a painter. At this time, there was no question of a 'moment' being captured. Ten to fifteen minute exposure times meant the experience was artificial, strained, effortful. The subject had to concentrate on their act of presentation, to will themselves into stillness. Usually they were held rigid by a 'posing stand', an apparatus of clamps and rods. As the nineteenth century progressed, technology improved and exposure times were reduced. George Eastman introduced the first Kodak camera in 1885, with the slogan "You press the button, we do the rest.". Technical improvements - smaller cameras, faster films and flash - brought more of the world of the family into the reach of the amateur photographer, producing images of greater intimacy and casualness. Such changes gradually led to our modern intuitive sense of photographic reproduction as durationless, '*instamatic*'.

So, the formal studio portrait, still part of the experience of families around the world, is one of the last remnants of an earlier régime of photography. The expense, the need to travel to the studio, the unfamiliar experience of lighting and make up, combine to make it a significant event, a small adventure for the subjects and an important act of self-presentation. The production of a family portrait is seen as a chance to fashion a public image, usually one of closeness and affection. Such an image is often a simplification (sometimes even a falsification) of actual family relations. Divorce, estrangement and infidelity are masked, to present an idealised, mutually-bonded group to the world. Often the artefacts produced in portrait studios are designed to give an air of permanence. Leather binders, gilt frames and even finishes that mimic the cracked surface of old oil paintings are all on offer. These services are designed to counteract the immateriality and disposability of the digital image, to return photography to the dignity of its predecessor, the oil painting, a dignity also conferred on the family whose image is represented.

Family dominates Jamie Diamond's work, in formal groups, couples and shots of parents and new babies. However they are all, in one way or another, fakes. What appear, on first glance to be conventional studio portraits, documents of genuine intimacy, are in fact confections, deliberately designed to fail closer inspection. Diamond's happy families are actually strangers, cast from Craigs List. They are taken to hotel rooms (and occasionally the artist's studio) where

they are posed by the artist in carefully chosen configurations. Often she exhibits the resulting photographs, but in her current show, *Portrait Histories*, she foregrounds the social engineering that has produced them, by dispensing with conventional still images altogether. The show's three components, taken together, form an anatomy of the family studio portrait. We are confronted, not just by images, but living people, a group posing for a camera that ought to be present, but isn't. Our unmediated gaze substitutes for the lens. This 'family' holds its collective pose, and we gradually discern the strain, the physical effort that goes into it. They are not a family, but the inheritors of the daguerrotype sitter, clamped into the gallery space, uncomfortably displayed for our pleasure and curiosity. This is photography without photography, the 'exhibition' as anthropological display, a cold (even potentially cruel) view of human beings attempting to present themselves through the pose. As Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, "I constitute myself in the process of 'posing'. I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image." Posing is a strain, not just physically, but existentially. These people are striving to create themselves, to 'show themselves in the best possible light', enduring an experience which ought to last seconds, instead of minutes or hours. The instant has been extended, given duration. It's an uneasy spectacle.

The living portrait is accompanied by a series of Video pieces showing couples arranging themselves to have their pictures taken. We see fragments, hands awkwardly moving over shoulders, fingers interlacing, smiles being fixed on faces. We know these people are not really lovers. They've just met in the studio. Do they like each other? Do they find each other attractive? How do they feel about the intimacy enforced on them by the photographer? As viewers we are also implicated in an act of mild duplicity. They have agreed to pose for a still image, and don't know that the camera is shooting video. The act of posing, of constituting themselves, is now the end product. The image itself is discarded. The portrait is falling apart.

*There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions  
And for a hundred visions and revisions  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.*

[TS Eliot The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock]

Diamond's most audacious move is to remove her Prufrockian subjects from view altogether. In the five monumental images in the main space, all the nervous self-fashioning, the brave endurance, the striving to project dignity or happiness or attractiveness or intimacy, has been erased. We see nothing but a frame and a ground stretching back into a pitchy darkness that leads us, inevitably, to think about death. The large scale of these works is reminiscent of other grand images of absence and vacancy – one thinks of Rothko, Sugimoto's seascapes, or James Turrell's sky-spaces. However, significant differences emerge. For one thing, these are interiors. The ground appears to be wood veneer flooring. We are looking, perhaps, at a stage, or a grand hall stretching away beyond the limits of vision. Close examination suggests that this is not the case. The veneer has an odd low-resolution quality, and in some places, repetitions can be detected in its pattern. In fact, Diamond has produced another kind of veneer altogether, a set of fake spaces. These are scaled-up images of small models. The 'floor' is contact paper, taped to a board; the woodgrain was produced by a commercial designer using drawing tools; the inky shadows were generated by the artist in post-production. Nothing about this is real. The grandeur is just an effect, produced at a humble scale, with the humblest of materials.

Now photography is beginning to speak about itself, revealing the lies it tells about duration and permanence and dignity. The portrait, as Barthes writes, is "a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, the one I want others to think I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art." These voids are still family portraits, except the family has been removed. The darkness banished by the lights of the studio comes flooding back. The repressed returns to the surface. Out of that familial shadow, anything may emerge – abuse, incest, violence - or just the mundane problems the veneer of the studio portrait is designed to mask – the hours spent at work, the money worries, the arguments. Diamond has hollowed out this most familiar form. Now all that remains is an eye, straining to see into the dark.

- Hari Kunzru