

A WORK BY JAMIE DIAMOND MIGHT TYPICALLY START WITH AN ONLINE AD, OR A SIDEWALK SOLICITATION. STRANGERS WILL BE INVITED TO TAKE PART IN SOME PLAINLY DESCRIBED ACTIVITY—SITTING FOR A PORTRAIT, OR GIVING A GIFT. THEY WILL BE BROUGHT INTO DIRECT CONTACT, WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH THE ARTIST. ALONG THE WAY, A PHOTOGRAPH WILL BE TAKEN, AND A VIDEO MIGHT BE SHOT

But this process is mere prelude to the art object itself. The photographs by Jamie Diamond do not simply document a work of performance or relational art—they are very often performances in themselves. Employing the language of shopping mall photo studios blown up to near life-size proportions, they produce portraits of families, couples, brides, and mothers—portraits that are at once deeply familiar, and also deeply disconcerting.

Diamond's work delves into the logistics of staging with casting call advertisements, with the selection of a backdrop and a set, with the directing of the actors. That interest in logistics is part of the larger way in which the work examines the apparatuses of social life: the rituals, the social contracts, and codes that regulate our behavior.

For this reason, Diamond's subject matter is chosen with precision. Family portraits, weddings, the exchanging of gifts—she selects rituals that tie people into symbolic relationships, both with other people and with society as a whole. The symbolic strength of these rituals is crucial, because Diamond subsequently proceeds to reference and also undercut her chosen social rites.

The series *I Promise To Be A Good Mother* (2007) examines the power of certain received images. In the series, Diamond stages herself as a young mother with a baby child. From the park to the street to the beach, Diamond enacts a familiar script of tenderness, intimacy, and playfulness. With the aid of her camera, she creates idyllic images of mother and child—except the baby is a plastic doll.

Diamond composes each image as a study in contrasts; in amongst all the palpable rightness of the image, from the youth of the mother to the blissful nature of the setting, there is something discernibly wrong. The best images in the series are those in which the uneasiness of the photograph is felt before its source is identified, as in *Summer* (2007). In the photograph, Diamond stands on a sunlit patch of grass, exultantly holding up her baby; the plastic inanimateness of the child is understood before it is seen.

And in *Constructed Portraits* (ongoing), which is her most extensive series to date, that wrongness is even more strongly felt, and its source even more difficult to ascertain. Here Diamond records a series of what appear to be entirely authentic family portraits, with all the stiffness and awkwardness common to that genre of photographs.

A nuclear family of three pose, framed on either side by an American flag and a potted plant. Further family portraits sit on the desk. The mother and daughter sit in eerily synchronous poses, legs and arms crossed in unison. The father stands proudly behind, arm propped behind his wife, head cocked to one side. These are *The Westerns*.

*The Harmonies* stand in front of a fireplace bedizened in orchids. Crystal chandeliers hang overhead; the geometric pattern of the carpet completes the backdrop. Four children stand behind their mother, arms draped around each other and broad smiles clicked in place. The mother sits, slightly detached from her offspring, faintly smiling, hands folded together.

In both images, the ostensibly normal slowly begins to feel palpably wrong. At first glance, each image creates its own narrative: the narrative of an adored single child perhaps, in *The Westerns*, or a single mother in *The Harmonies*. But the narrative that ties all the portraits in the series together is one of performing

intimacy. In each photograph, the subjects actively work to demonstrate their closeness and their comfort with each other.

But in fact what is taking place in each portrait is the performing of the performing of intimacy. Each of Diamond's families is composed of strangers, individually recruited through advertisements, chance encounters, and friends. Diamond assembles each of these fictional families, and coaxes them into performing the most dangerous of fictional narratives: intimacy.

The result is a portrait of intimacy that is subtly off, and that gives life to a whole raft of narratives that are equally alive in every family: awkwardness and discomfort, alienation, distrust and occasionally dislike. The curious results are fictional family portraits more honest than anything you are likely to get in real life, images that act as documents to all the complexities and compromises of family life.

Diamond's work is caught up in the exchange between the fake and the authentic, the way in which the artificial can dodge representation and breed the authentic. She tracks the course of that exchange with almost mathematical precision. In this way, each of her works is a carefully hatched experiment, in social interaction and personal vulnerability.

Perhaps one of the most telling things about Diamond's mother and child series is in the title itself: *I Promise To Be A Good Mother*. Diamond's work is filled with promises—and not simply with promises made or broken, but with our longing to give promises. A forthcoming series features women in their wedding dresses, and like *I Promise To Be A Good Mother*, gives a visual image of the longing to bestow a promise.

Of course, what that longing is really about is an absence. The women in their wedding dresses stand alone; the fake mother twirls a plastic doll. Everything that is lacking in our lives is inscribed in what we wish we could promise, rather than what we do. Diamond's work gives life to the fantasy we use to fill, however temporarily, that absence in our lives.

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