

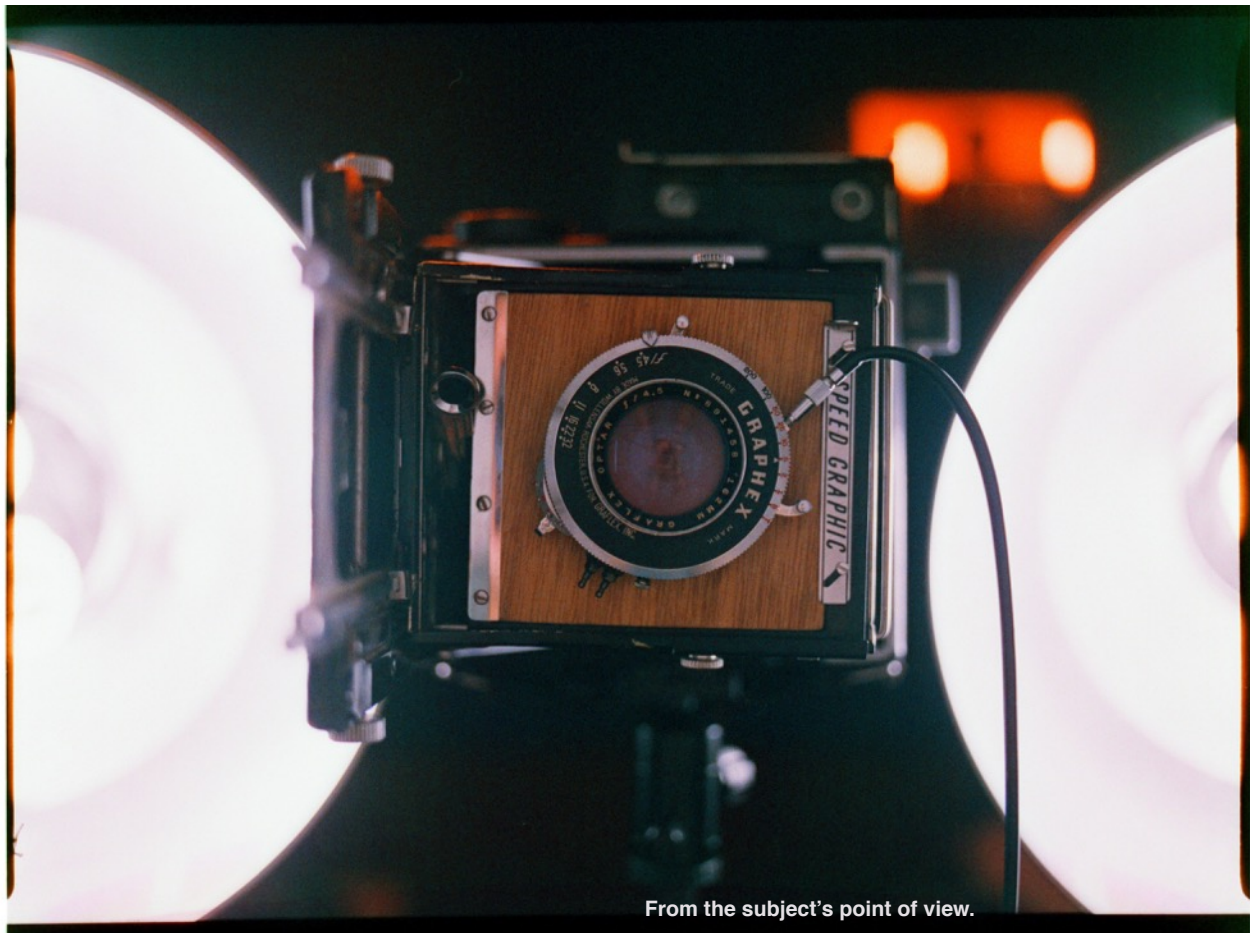
## **Faces:** An AHS Capstone Essay by Forrest Bourke

Through our faces, we express emotions, form relationships, and sense the world. It's natural for humans to want to reproduce this critical element of our identities, and portraiture photography is a popular art genre centered around the face. We live in an age of digitally massaged portraits designed to flatter the subject in the context of the society's beauty standards. In my series, *Faces*, I've subverted this model—nobody's pores have been edited out, nobody's face has been manipulated. Here, I have deliberately taken up methods and techniques that are foreign to the digitally "perfected" image and alien to my "digital native" age. In this essay, I describe some of my technical and artistic choices in documenting faces and I suggest how they engage with the tradition of portraiture. The unvarnished, unretouched examination of people's faces is novel for the subjects of *Faces*, leading one of the subjects to remark that she "didn't know [her] face looked like" what was reproduced in the picture I took of her.

With my portraits, I wanted to capture the minute details of my subjects faces while they were cast in a bright, almost harsh, light. To achieve these effects, I chose large format Kodalith film, a black and white film designed for reproducing documents and known for its high contrast. Kodalith was not originally designed to be used directly in the camera—it was designed for the linework on blueprints and similar documentation. As a result, it is very slow with an approximate ISO rating of 12 (meaning it requires about eight times more light than a "normal" outdoor film). It is also not sensitive to the red end of the spectrum, which makes skin contrast stand out more than a universally sensitive film would. I set up extremely bright fluorescent lights in my makeshift studio to compensate for the film's lack of sensitivity. This produced the harsh direct I desired, as well as eliminated any influence from external lighting. I used a large format 4x5" camera at a relatively open aperture (most of the portraits were at f/5.6). This, combined with the a focal length of 157mm provides a very shallow depth of field—millimeters, at most. The 4x5" film area reproduces immense detail, and enables large prints of the photographs.

While this makes focusing the camera more difficult, it also serves to direct the viewer to the two most expressive features of the face: the eyes and the mouth. Generally speaking, when communicating with others, we use our eyes and mouths, and look for both voluntary and involuntary responses in the eyes and mouths of others. In my photographs, there's an honesty communicated by these features with a clarity that comes from focusing exclusively on these portions of the face; by having the rest of the face fade into blurriness, I don't allow anything to distract from the face.

"I try to get my focus right so the eyes and the lips are in focus... I'm concentrating the [face] more by having everything else look out of focus" - Martin Schoeller, Photographer



From the subject's point of view.

My 'studio' setup was an imposing one in some ways similar to the setups Chuck Close has employed. Of the 20x24" camera he used for his Vanity Fair project, he says: "[the camera is] the size of a Volkswagen, and you shove this baby right down their throat." In my studio, I set up both the camera and the two lights very close to the subject. I look behind the camera to focus, instruct the subject not to move once the camera is focused, and then have to quickly insert a sheet of film (which blocks the focusing screen) and look over the camera to actually pick the moment of the picture and trigger the shutter.

My 4x5" camera is a Speed Graphic, a relic of 1940s press photography and the two fluorescent light fixtures were borrowed, both of which were less than a meter away from the subject on a stool. The bright lights and large camera bellows contributed to the imposing nature of the setup, and this certainly affected the results I produced. Since the subjects are slightly put off by the camera and lights, it's easier to convince them that this isn't a traditional portrait and to get the neutral expressions appropriate for the project. It achieves a similar effect to Chuck Close's work on his 20x24" camera. Interestingly, Chuck Close has described his "Heads" series of paintings as "mug shots," as did the mother of one of my subjects. The pictures themselves have no spontaneity, as the person must sit very still, but they show a side of my subjects that isn't normally seen, even by the subjects themselves. The portraits show an unpracticed look on the subject's faces—the pictures are not candid, but they



My setup, with the silhouettes of the lights and my speed graphic.

don't look like posed portraits either. There is a vulnerability in the expressions, a trust the subjects have given the camera and me. The combination of bright, sterile lighting and vulnerable trust evokes a more effective metaphor than the "mug shot"—these portraits appear as if they were in a hospital's patient records.

"I think people realize I'm trustworthy... being photographed is an act of generosity and faith on the part of the subject" - Chuck Close

I chose a tight, square crop for my images to minimize distractions. The visual context for the photo is lost—it's not apparent what the subject is wearing, or where the subject is located. I don't consider these great losses, they work to the advantage of the photo for the same reason as the exceedingly shallow depth of field—they draw the viewer's focus exclusively to the subject and exclude other artifacts, like the paint on the wall or the subject's clothes. That said, the tight framing also contributes to the discomfort of the series. The framing, especially when combined with the detail of the portraits, forces the viewer to enter a hyper-personal space with the subject. There is nothing to distract the viewer from the most personal parts of the subject—the viewer feels like they're looking into the viewer's eyes in a vulnerable moment, and it's uncomfortable to deal with that feeling.

I decided to show my work using large, 40x40" prints because I think there's a dearth of large-scale art on campus. I was constrained by the resources



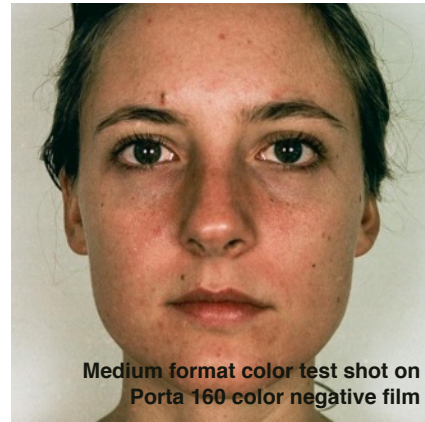
available, namely the HP T1100ps printer and HP semigloss paper. My prints are installed in the reading room of the library, which offers viewers a glimpse of the prints from about 35' away, and invites them to move into the room and get a closer look. I also produced a photo book on super gloss paper which shows the minute detail and texture in my pictures better than a more matte paper. The photo book allowed me to choose more options such as the paper and the size, though I chose 8x8" for cost and portability.

In this project, I wanted to consciously situate my work with the work of other artists, as well as find a type of photography with which I identified. I concentrated on the work of two artists: Chuck Close, a renowned photorealistic painter who produced a series of photographs for Vanity Fair, and Martin Schoeller, a portrait photographer who works on commission as well as his own art of hyper-detailed close-up photographs.

My relationship to 4x5" film is similar to Chuck Close's relationship to the daguerrotype. Colin Westerbeck, in his essay *Photogranosia: Chuck Close's Career with the Camera* describes Close's progression through photographic media as a reverse chronological process. He started with the modern (in it's time) 20x24" Polaroid, and eventually moved backwards in time to the daguerreotype, though he continued to work with the instant photography, including the 40x80" Polaroid installed at the Museum of Fine Arts. In reading about Close's work, I can't help but marvel at the immense cost of his creations. 20x24" Polaroids, for example, cost hundreds of dollars *per exposure*—I can't



imagine what the 40x80” Polaroids cost, especially when he uses four or five to capture one face. This is one way in which Close and I differ—I didn’t even flirt with the idea of doing this project in color since color film costs \$4 and processing costs \$4, bringing the cost to \$8 for every picture I take. I shot some medium format test shots in color, and I don’t think they’re nearly as powerful as the large format shots. They lack the detail that the large format provides, they lack the emphasis the extremely limited depth of field provides, and the distortion of the lens is more apparent. Chuck Close didn’t even bother trying smaller formats. As soon as he started working with daguerrotypes, he pushed their size as far as he could, since he was dissatisfied with the small size of the first daguerrotypes he produced.

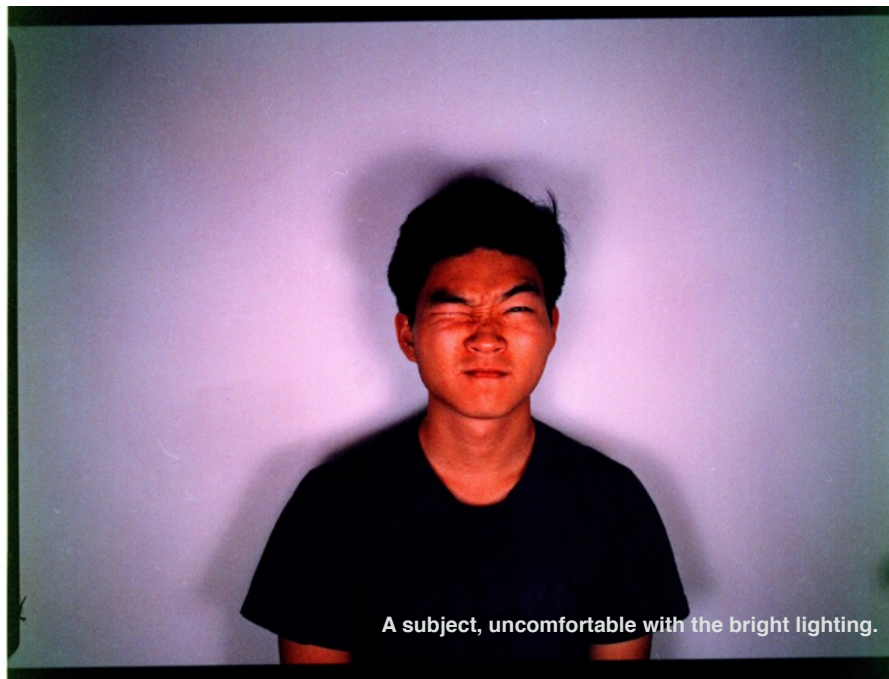


Medium format color test shot on Porta 160 color negative film

My approach to film is similar to Close’s approach to daguerrotypes. In addition to the interesting technical challenge, “[Close] intuited from the beginning that this process [the daguerreotype] and its heyday in the first half of the nineteenth century were...alien to his time and culture.” I found similar unfamiliarity in the processing of film, having grown up in the heyday of digital cameras. The daguerreotype is, like my Kodalith film, only sensitive to the blue end of the spectrum. They also require a even more light than Kodalith, due to the low sensitivity of the chemicals. The lack of red-sensitivity puts emphasis on the skin in both my portraits and Close’s daguerreotypes—Westerbeck muses that “[Kate Moss’ headshots] are shocking because they reveal how cratered out her pores are after years of being made up for fashion shoots.” Kate Moss is certainly a more famous subject than any of mine, so my images can’t compete in the way that Close’s views of Moss offer a compelling “new look” at a usually glamorous subject. My images are valuable instead as studies of all of the technical facets of my medium, but they’re compelling to someone “off the street” because of the deep human connection to the face I discussed earlier, as well as the recognition of something familiar in the viewer the subjects’ looks provide.

In both my work and Close’s photographs, a significant portion of the interaction is driven by the studio setup, which is in turn driven by the medium. For this daguerrotypes, Close uses a strobe that is “formidable, ferocious in its effect” which “slams shut the sitter’s eyes and can leave the odor of singed hair in its wake.” This strobe “turns having your picture taken into a physical challenge.” I did not use strobe lighting, since I would have difficulty synchronizing the strobe flash to the antiquated shutter of my speed graphic. My lights were what is referred to as “hot lights,” meaning that they’re on for the duration of the portrait sitting. Though the fluorescent bulbs did not put out very much heat, they made it difficult for the subjects to keep their eyes open. The “ordeal” of being photographed was apparent during the shoots, though not injurious to the

subjects, meant I needed to work quickly to avoid arousing (too much) ire from anyone sitting to be photographed.



In this project, I was primarily interested in exploring the medium and the concept; the subjects were almost incidental. I wanted to see what the older media of large format and tools make possible, I care less about any individual subject. This is another similarity to Chuck Close's goal in many of his photographs, as "smiles are rare in photographs on which Close's paintings have been based, and therefore in his work in other media, because he doesn't want the personality of the sitter to be the subject of the picture. A serious demeanor better serves his desire to make the medium the subject of his work."



I have struggled in the past with controlling the medium that I'm using in my art. With drawing or painting, for example, even if I have a particular line in my head, I often have difficulty reproducing that particular line on the paper. Part of this is simply my lack of skill and ability in other art forms—but it is frustrating not to be able to transfer my mental visualization of the idea onto the paper. With photography, I am able to resolve this problem much more easily. If I make an error that is technical in nature, it's an interesting left-brain problem to solve. If I don't get the result I am looking for because of a non-technical issue (composition or the "wrong" facial expression were two issues I ran into), then I can repeat the process with knowledge of the error and avoid making it again. The technical aspect of this project was something on which I could concentrate intensely which I find allows me to realize a vision more concretely than with a less tool-centric artform. I enjoy the process much more because to me, the

issue I have with the work predicates my solution—I can find my way to the result I want.



Testing composition with a medium-format camera

I have been quite hesitant in the past to ground my work with that of other artists. This project has informed my work in the scope of “fine art” as a genre distinct from casual photography (which, though casual, can still involve tens of thousands of dollars of “gear” and require considerable expertise). Because of my past struggles with photography and other art forms, I’ve had difficulty expressing myself via artistic media. This project allowed me to (begin to) overcome this difficulty.



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