



ARTIST

Clarissa Sligh

TITLE

Jake in Transition from Female to Male Series, or Through the Mirror and What Clarissa Found There

DATE

2000

DIMENSIONS

18 in H x 14 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

IMAGE NOTES

sheet 19 x 15"

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2006.026

CURRENT LOCATION

1620-6D

CLARISSA SLIGH

BORN

1939

BIRTHPLACE

Washington, DC

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

African-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1989
Fine Print Program, 1992
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 1991
Clarissa Sligh: The Presence of Memory Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2018
Be Strong and Do Not Betray Your Soul

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 67
Contact Sheet 97
Contact Sheet 112
Menschel Gallery Catalogue 24
Contact Sheet 173
Contact Sheet 198

BIOGRAPHY

Clarissa Sligh lives in New York City and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program, for the second time, in January 2000.

ESSAYS

The American Dream promises that if you work hard and persevere there are no limits to what you can accomplish. Clarissa Sligh rode the crest of the dream through an education that includes an MBA, and a successful career as a financial analyst on Wall Street. The dream did not reveal that hard work would not overcome the sexist attitudes and token gestures of inclusion she experienced in the corporate world. Her burgeoning understanding of how her own growing internalized sexism and racism were helping perpetuate these attitudes eventually convinced her to leave the business world to return to her art work. This search for identity began with a reexamination of her past. As the keeper of her family album of photographs, Sligh began to explore the differences between the impression projected in the best-foot-forward posture of her family snapshots, and her memories of the secrets that were hidden among those images. Sligh began to remember a shared bed with a brother, the illicit intentions of an uncle, the comfort of her grandmother's kitchen and the confusing wonder of a home birth. By combining the snapshots that these memories referenced with hand written words Sligh creates a new framework for her memories and identifies a starting point to gain a richer scope of the influences and attitudes that designed her identity. The high contrast of her cyanotype and Van Dyke brown prints obscures the nuances present in the original snapshots. Words replace those missing details with verbal pictures that often force us to read around corners or follow the flow of text as it winds across the surface of the picture, underscoring that getting the right information is often a struggle. Abstracted from their original place in her family album and embellished with the words of the artist they become a record that accepts the frailties and secrets of her family. By presenting this completed, yet still fractured picture of herself and her family, Sligh creates an empowering sense of self connection that offers a full and rich view of the human condition, moving beyond the crippled identity that society had reserved for her specifically and for African Americans in general. Extending her inquiries beyond the family Sligh also investigates formative materials from her past. In her reworking of the universal reading primer Dick and Jane, Sligh questions the values and expectations inherent in the exploits, the dress, the language, and the class and race exclusions presented in this passive but influential learner. She refocuses Dick and Jane, as an obstruction to self knowledge and learning, revealing the saccharine life of Dick and Jane and Spot as an inevitable measure that she and countless others were destined to fall short of. The Dick and Jane series takes many forms from small edition books to large gallery installations. The series, like the process of learning the book is supposed to encourage, continues to evolve and change. One of Sligh's more ambitious undertakings is a suite of large cyanotype prints titled 'Reading Dick and Jane With Me.' The prints from the series reproduced in this catalogue were exhibited at galleries from New York to San Francisco. At each site the prints were pinned to the wall and gallery patrons were provided crayons to write on the prints. The anonymous additions of drawings and words extend and further personalize the notion of identity that Sligh began, adding evidence to the confusion we encounter in our search for an identity. Sligh invites us to look closer at the posed facades and readymade ideals in the pictures that make up the memories of our lives. Her work tells us that we often see who we are told to see, feel what we are told to feel, and know what we are told to know. She also tells us that when we are told these things often enough, we become convinced that they are true. In this process of false fulfillment the substance of our memories is disengaged and we are restricted by the images we are forced to accept. Jeffrey Hoone (c) 1991 Jake in Transition from Female to Male Series, or, Through the Mirror and What Clarissa Found There About a year ago I went to a movie and found myself seated next to a twenty-something man and woman. They were talking about the movies they had each recently seen-he had seen Boys Don't Cry; she said she and a friend meant to go and see it soon. He started to tell his date about the movie, saying he didn't want to give away the plot but that the main character gets raped toward the end of the film. She dutifully winces. 'No, but see, all through the movie you just think it's a guy, you never think it's a woman, and then there's this rape scene, and I could not watch a guy being raped,' he explained to his date. I was dumfounded, waiting to hear what I expected, from either of them, that they couldn't stand to see a woman raped on screen, either. But neither one seemed to really hear or mind what he'd said; she agreed and quickly decided that it was no longer a movie she wanted to see. I don't know where it comes from, this gender thing, the association of particular behavior, good and bad, with one's biologically assigned sex. Men rape but are not raped. Women are naturally the victims. Men like being men and women like being women. It's God's will. But what if gender isn't a given? What if it's chosen? 'Any FTM [female to male] will tell you that we basically live in front of the mirror when we're first transitioning... It is indescribably gratifying to finally see that the image in the mirror reflects the image of myself that I've always carried inside.'¹ Jake's own complicated disassembly and reassembly brought Clarissa Sligh along for the journey as she documented the transition from Deb, a lesbian, to Jake, a heterosexual male. Jake, a sculptor whose early artwork includes a barbed wire enclosure, asked Sligh to photograph him; but what did he believe the photographs would show? What can they show? In fact, Sligh's camera is Jake's public

mirror, his enduring affirmation that he is becoming what he believes he is. A man. Male. After all, he's starting to look like one. But why Sligh? Maybe Jake initially thought that a photographer just composes the frame and snaps the shutter. But Jake chose extremely well. As an African-American woman raised in the South during the Civil Rights Movement who was then living in a small town in North Texas, Sligh agreed to photograph the sex change of a white man whose parents, upset over his imminent transformation, tell him they 'felt [they] were willing to accept or could take almost anything except [his] bringing home a black.' Well, guess who's coming to dinner with her camera? A few years earlier Sligh had begun to explore the concept of 'maleness' in a series about her father. Like most of us, she had assumed that someone like Jake who had himself endured the lonely agony of carrying around a 'deep, dark secret' would be sympathetic to someone else not of the cultural mainstream. How can a transgendered person be misogynistic and racist? And who would choose 'the enemy' or 'the unknown' to trust with the intimate details of one of the most important passages of one's life? Who confronts their fears by making those fears visible through the eyes of someone with whom he feels uneasy, with whom he has no connection? Or doesn't he? Breasts get cut off, nipples are remade, every ten days (for the rest of his life) testosterone is injected, body hair grows, voice cracks, silicone balls are inserted, a penis is constructed, the silicone ruptures—Sligh is present for all of it, and her photographs take us through that frequently painful journey, and yet the hard part is not physical. As Jake's body changed, did Jake? Legally he has—he looks and sounds like a man, so why confuse the folks in the bathroom up at work? Yet he becomes more of a stereotype, the kind of man who desperately needs to get in touch with his feminine side. Normal as a man; didn't work as a woman. Jake seems happy; we're kind of stunned. What does being a man mean to him? Eventually Sligh included her own journal's words and self-images in the visual construction of Jake's story. By participating as both documentarian and as doppelganger, Sligh complicates his process, actually and metaphorically, reflecting Jake's fears and triumphs through her own transformation from hired observer to visibly affected. What the viewer ultimately discovers through Sligh's work is that the photographs aren't so much about the process of changing genders, or of visualizing desire, but of coming to terms with difference. His and ours. It isn't always what you think it should be. Carla Williams (c) 2001 1. Sean Gardner, 'On Seeing Boys Don't Cry,' Santa Fe Reporter, April 12-18, 2000, p.22. Clarissa Sligh lives in New York City and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program, for the second time, in January 2000. Carla Williams is a photographer and writer who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in 1994. Un/Common Threads In organizing the exhibition "Un/Common Threads: Selections from the Light Work Collection," curator Kaylen Williams went beyond a superficial perception of diversity that has become pervasive in the United States. As a 2007 study by the sociology department at University of Minnesota revealed, many Americans happily endorse diversity as a nebulous concept; however, many are still at a loss to discuss the specifics of diversity and its related sub-topics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, and sexual orientation. (1) "Un/Common Threads" harnessed the power of photographs, using a visual language to voice these all-important specifics of diversity. Williams used the visual language that coalesced among the various images to stimulate dialogue about the complex challenges of a pluralist culture in ways that addressed both broad and personal implications. Exhibiting together the work of artists such as Myra Greene, Dawoud Bey, Clarissa Sligh, Yuri Marder, Hank Willis Thomas, and Binh Danh, among others, certainly highlighted the individuality of their concerns and aesthetic choices. Yet this varied grouping also served a common goal by giving voice to specific, possibly contentious topics surrounding diversity. To emphasize this unity of purpose, Williams combined the "Un/" in the exhibition title with "Common Threads," acknowledging the connections that can occur between diverse artists and the viewers of their work. Many of the photographs in "Un/Common Threads" manage to evoke the idea of connections and also simultaneously turn it on its head by asking viewers to re-examine preconceptions that they may bring with them into the gallery. Ellen M. Blalock's photograph, "Jermane," a portrait of a black teenage father pictured full-frame in an intimate embrace with his baby daughter, may provide a good example of this phenomenon. Those who find themselves jarred by the tender presence of emotion displayed by the young African American father must question and explore the sources of any biases regarding age, race, and gender. This is the inherent power of such photographs—when a viewer accepts involvement in questioning such preconceived connections, he or she is more inclined to get involved in talk of answers that can lead to a deeper understanding of identity and diversity. Many of the artists whose work curator Kaylen Williams, a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, selected for "Un/Common Threads" engaged the topic of diversity from a personal perspective. Regarding her impetus for organizing the exhibition, Williams explains, "This project was of particular interest to me because of my own ethnic background of Japanese and Western European ancestors. Many students on campus are, like me, a mix of diverse cultural backgrounds. My Japanese mother was adopted by Americans and never had an opportunity or the encouragement to explore her racial identity." In culling this selection of images from the Light Work Collection, Williams invited viewers of Un/Common Threads to explore the diversity of identity and to participate in the critical mass that follows an expansion of consciousness. Laura A. Guth (c)2008 1. Joyce M. Bell and Douglas Hartmann, "Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of 'Happy Talk.'" American Sociological Association: American Sociological Review 72, no. 6 (December 2007): 895–914. The exhibition was on view in the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery from January 16 to April 19, 2007. It was curated by Kaylen Williams. The exhibition included work by the following artists: Don Gregorio Antón, Dawoud Bey, Ellen M. Blalock, Binh Danh, Sylvia de Swaan, Lonnie Graham, Myra Greene, Saiman Li, Yuri Marder, Nzingah Muhammad, Osamu James Nakagawa, Suzanne Opton, Kanako Sasaki, Clarissa Sligh, Tone Stockenström, Lida Suchý, Hank Willis Thomas, Linn Underhill, and Carrie Mae Weems. When she curated the exhibition, Kaylen Williams was a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University. She graduated in 2007. Laura A. Guth is an artist and educator. She lives in Manlius, NY.