



ARTIST

Kelli Connell

TITLE

Eden

DATE

2008

DIMENSIONS

30 in H x 40 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2009.001

CURRENT LOCATION

Warehouse

KELLI CONNELL

BORN

1974

BIRTHPLACE

Oklahoma City, OK

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2008

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

BIOGRAPHY

Kelli Connell plans to use her residency at Light Work to scan and digitally print images from her Double Life series. The photographs from this series depict the same model appearing multiple times in one image. According to Connell, "This work represents an autobiographical questioning of sexuality and gender roles that shape the identity of the self in intimate relationships." The work looks at different polarities of identity, such as the exterior and interior self, the irrational and rational self, the masculine and feminine psyche, and the motivated and resigned self. Connell combines multiple negatives featuring the same model, depicting the different polarities through the use of clothing and body language. The work in this series has been exhibited in New York and San Francisco, as well as included in various publications.

Connell received her MFA in photography from Texas Woman's University, and her BFA in both photography and visual art studies from the University of North Texas. Her work has been exhibited nationwide. Connell has also received various awards and residencies, and given lectures and workshops across the country. Connell currently teaches at Columbia College in Chicago.

ESSAYS

In the series Double Life, Kelli Connell creates an open, cinematic portrayal of what appears to be a young lesbian couple that generally enjoys each other and the world around them. Most of the situations depicted in the images are banal—the women go on road trips, stop for coffee and cigarettes, have picnics, hang their laundry out to dry. Sometimes the events are more dramatic—they fight, embrace, have sex. Each picture offers a glimpse into their relationship but does not provide a detailed narrative. Rather, most of the images are emotive and feel common to the human experience. For Connell, the photographs are less about a specific relationship than about the situations one encounters in every coupling, regardless of the partner. And yet, there is a moment when the viewer becomes aware that this is not a typical couple going through the ordinary moments of life together. Provocatively, the two women are identical; one model, seamlessly placed in the images using digital tools, plays both of two female characters. With this realization, the viewer becomes acutely aware of how in these images Connell addresses concepts of narcissism in relationships and speaks to the politics of sexual identity, while exploring universally poignant themes of love, lust, and companionship. In Connell's pictures, the protagonist never appears alone; she is always mirrored by her double, suggesting the possibility that they are one in the same. Like Narcissus, the mythical boy who falls in love with his own reflection, Connell's women are clearly enraptured by the image they see in the face of the other. However, Connell is not interested in literally illustrating the myth. The women in her photographs are not identical images of one another. Connell varies her model's appearance through clothing, hairstyle, and expression within each frame. In this way, she addresses the idea of self-love in a more general manner and explores how it manifests itself as vanity in relationships. Ultimately Connell asks us to reconsider what we think we know about relationships on many levels, including the extent to which we look for ourselves in our partners, the experience of our partners in their commitment to us, and the loss of a portion of identity as a requisite for a relationship. On a more political level, by denying her protagonist a distinct identity, Connell hints at the schism between private and public lives that homosexuals experience when they feel pressure from society to conform. For Connell, the series represents an autobiographical questioning of sexuality and gender roles in intimate relationships. She states, "This work is an honest representation of the duality or multiplicity of the self in regards to decisions about intimate relationships, family, belief systems, and lifestyle options . . . I am interested in not only what the subject matter says about myself, but also what the viewers' responses to these images say about their own identities and social constructs." ¹ As an investigation of intimacy, Connell's work is reminiscent of photographs by Eleanor Carucci and Tracey Baran, who record their friends and family in private, often tender moments. In Connell's case, of course, the moments are fictitious. The fact that they are still powerful and provocative attests not only to our entrenched faith in photographic truth, but also to our natural predilection for voyeurism and romance. Connell began the series in 2001 and has had the good fortune to work with the same model, Kiba Jacobson, for the past eight years. The longevity of the project has given it a tangible sense of time passing. In the more recent pictures the women have aged, and we can see that they have developed wrinkles. Their choices in fashion are more upscale, and the settings have moved from bars and university-like cafés to more mainstream condominium and suburban terraces. This sense of history that has entered the series begs the question of the future. For now we can only wonder what will come next. At present the two women seem quite content to grow old together. Karen Irvine ¹. Kelli Connell, artist statement. Kelli Connell teaches photography at Columbia College Chicago. She participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence Program in July 2008. Her work can be seen at www.kelliconnell.com. Karen Irvine is curator at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago.