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At a Glance

Exhibit looks at where self resides

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The bad thing about most photographic portraits is that they freeze their subjects in time and space, confining them to a single expression, thought or mood rather than the changeable, sometimes contradictory array of traits that identifies a human.



[Mark St. John Erickson](#)

Not so, however, in the ingenious self portraits of Vibeke Tandberg, whose thoughts, feelings and experiences loom so large that she refuses to be pigeonholed into just one, largely illusory persona.

Using digital technology, Tandberg pairs various pictures of herself into a single photograph, almost as she were documenting the interaction of twins rather than plumbing the complexities of a single person. What results is a revealing album of scenes in which Tandberg appears to be hiking, swimming, sleeping and even arguing over a drink with herself - all in the name of a provocatively act of artistic self-exploration called "Living Together."

Tandberg pursues this theme of identity even further in a series of portraits called "Faces," where she fuses her own facial features with those of her family and friends in order to create a tribe of near-identical yet strangely different beings.

Yet she's just one of 18 artists beset by questions about the nature of self in the new Contemporary Art Center of Virginia exhibit "Portrait as Performance."

Organized by CACV curator Carla Hanzal in conjunction with Ashley Kistler, curator at the Hand Workshop in Richmond, the exhibit pairs two of the state's most thoughtful observers of the contemporary art scene. It also traces the brief history of this new kind of portrait, linking the pioneers of the late 1970s with the newest and often most provocative examples from the early 21st century.

Self-exploration marked the groundbreaking work of Cindy Sherman from the beginning. But the theatrical, Hollywood-inspired guises she assumed for a landmark series of late-1970s portraits called "Untitled Film Stills" brought a new and unexpected cultural bent as well as an existentialist twist to her subject.

Assuming such stereotypical B-movie roles as the femme fatale, the virtuous nurse and the unfaithful wife, Sherman challenged not only traditional notions about women but also the idea of a constant, immutable identity. Shifting back and forth beneath her wigs, costumes, props and lighting like a human chameleon, she often seems to disappear - as if the trappings of her characters had become a sort of changeable shell that functioned as both camouflage and armor.

WANT TO GO?

"Portrait as Performance" runs through Aug. 11 at the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday and noon-4 p.m. Sunday. The center is located at 2200 Parks Ave., Virginia Beach, just north of I-264. Admission is \$3. For more info, visit the center's Web site at www.cacv.org or call 425-0000.

Indeed, questions about self-negation and self-revelation [coverlet exhibit](#) abound in these images, all of them left unanswered. What's certain is that they make you look - and that they add up to a notion of self that's as rich and mysterious as it is perplexing.

Similar experiences can be found in Tandberg's work, which uses digital technology to take the idea of a complex, even contradictory identity even further. In "Living Together," especially, she conjures up such realistic images of herself interacting with herself that you might not suspect you're looking at the same person.

In one picture, Tandberg and Tandberg stand together in a bathroom, talking casually as they brush their teeth after taking a shower. In another, they share a booth and a drink at a tavern, leaning forward to insure that each can hear the other in an unusually close conversation.

A third image captures the pair as they turn back toward the camera, frowning in unison at the viewer. You might even feel the need to retreat from this annoyed double gaze - which pushes you away with all the unspoken power that two halves of one person can level at an outsider.

Richmond sculptor Elizabeth King, a former art instructor at the College of William and Mary, pursues the problem of identity down a different path, using a meticulously constructed mechanical self-portrait to explore the links between consciousness and the physical self.

Confronted with both dramatic photographs and a startling video animation of this exquisitely crafted, half-size figure, most viewers will be astonished by its exacting realism. Some also may be stunned by the engineering skills that King employs to give her glass eyes, metal joints and wooden fingers the capacity for lifelike movement.

All these visual and mechanical achievements are simply a breathtaking preamble, however, to the artist's questions about where the self resides. Though the video, in particular, shows a creation so full of soul and expression that it seems ready to start a conversation, there's nothing inside.

Even when you see it look back at you as if it were paying attention.

Mark St. John Erickson can be reached at 247-4783 or by e-mail at merickson@dailypress.com

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