

## On the Aesthetics of Compromise

Ashley Stull Meyers

Blue Sky Gallery's 2017 series of contemporary photography exhibitions is an exploration of identity (as shaped by love, personal and political loss, historical pain, and physical transformation) from six photographers of varied backgrounds. Two select series, from Nakeya Brown and Kris Sanford, differ in form and methodological underpinning, but both exemplify an aesthetic identity that is marred by the complex negotiations of compromise in action.

Nakeya Brown's photographs make visible the literal and conceptual tools Black women use to alter their natural features—particularly their hair—in compromise with centuries of historical degradation. Series like *The Refutation of "Good" Hair*, *Facade Objects*, and *Gestures of My Bio-Myth* detail the transformational hair methodologies the artist has encountered while grappling with societal constraints for female beauty and appropriateness. Hierarchical cultural systems that devalue African features have given birth to one of the highest-grossing commercial industries in the world—the manufacture of synthetic hair and chemical relaxers. "Good hair"—a comment on texture, length, and effortlessness—stands in opposition to hair that is coarse, kinky, and

more common among people of the African diaspora. Having so-called "good hair" may be a signifier of how far removed one is from that diaspora. Quips such as "Her mama was white" or "He's mixed" are used to justify a 2A curl where a 4C might otherwise have been expected. Chemical hair relaxers like Just for Me (marketed to children) give way to products for adults like Dark and Lovely, all of them intimating that "good hair" is discreetly possible if you have the will and purchasing power. Black women's hair can be made smooth and straight—more like that of the sexually desirable female archetypes portrayed on television and in magazines. In the United States, these archetypes are ubiquitously white.

A mimicry of pop-culturally applauded hair types is born from some of an unconscious desire for aesthetic assimilation. Physical transformation can make one's presentation into something more visually digestible to the dominant culture—something immediately recognizable as "like" or "kin." In *Hair Portrait #1* (2012) from her series *The Refutation of "Good" Hair*, Brown presents a literalized representation of that desire for digestibility in the form of a jarring performative gesture. In the portrait, a spool of dark, coarse



*Hair Portrait #1*, from *The Refutation of "Good" Hair*, 2012, p. 54



*Kanekalon on a Fork*, from *The Refutation of "Good" Hair*, 2012, p. 53

hair is woven through the fingers of a young Black woman. With her mouth, the portrait's subject separates the strands of the spool in a manner that recalls Francisco Goya's nineteenth-century painting *Saturn Devouring His Son*. The reminiscent gestures are reactionary, each a manifestation of fear and overly zealous strategy. The women pictured in this series devour hair as a way of making visible the problematic constructs of digestibility, or "goodness"; the arbitrary nature of appetizing, or "good," textures; and the viewers' complicity in these notions, made evident by their often visceral reactions.

*Kanekalon on a Fork* (2012), in which synthetic hair is wound around a fork like pasta, leverages the contrast between barbed and smooth, wiry and sleek. The weave-spun fork is placed alongside a butter knife, a utensil whose utility does not need to be demonstrated to feel evident. The butter knife in this image is ornamental—a tool appreciated more

for its striking form than its usefulness. The dichotomy between "good" versus natural hair is much the same. Coarse hair is utilitarian and protective, communicating beauty through its evolutionary and cultural power. Procuring "good" hair is an ornamental gesture for women

attempting escape from otherness. The hair tangled between the teeth of the fork resurrects memories of hair tangled between the teeth of a hot comb or bobby pin during efforts to subdue it—to lay it flat, the way it would behave if it were "good." The knife as boastful opposite lies flat and unfrenzied, effortless in the visual standard it perpetuates. Brown's image construction subtly suggests that the euro-normative standard (the knife) is praised not solely on grounds of merit or utility, but also for its appearance and the preconceived preferences therein.

Kris Sanford's series *Through the Lens of Desire* considers identity through an appreciation for subtlety and a contemporized imagining of the inner lives of the oppressed. Searching for a model for queerness in an era when such identities were discreet, downplayed, or denied, Sanford culls antique photographs that evidence the most understated and delicate moments of shared touch.

The subjects in the photos caress as friends or affectionate acquaintances, standing just close enough for Sanford to read into the tension in the narrow points of light that show between clasped fingers and amid lingering postures. Within these points of light, the artist cultivates fairy tales and false memories of romances kept secret from disapproving eyes.

There is a double role-play happening here. However one imagines their inner lives, the subjects of the photographs act out the roles of the heteronormative. They dress appropriately for their genders: crossing their legs as a conservative lady is wont to do; broadening their chests as men of masculinity and measure naturally would. Their forms indicate that nothing is amiss—not in terms of gender identity or sexual expectation. Sanford in turn plays the role of the longing anthropologist-cum-poet. The artist's construction of the images, each one a round vignette, gives the viewer a tunnel-like lens on moments that feel distant both in terms of time and culture.

Communicating a sense of the faraway is something Sanford does well. Anthropological survey abuts poetry when married to the perfect dose of nostalgia. When that nostalgia is invented, amplified by the ambiguity in taciturn romances, the images become unstoppably compelling.

Sanford's pictures are ripe to be overlaid with personalized memories of queer encounters.



*Necklace, 2015, p. 43*

The poignant moment of insecure, sheepish, first physical contact is the emotional backdrop of many of the images in the *Desire* series. Such sheepishness and vulnerability transcends age to communicate a universal experience—one understood by nearly anyone who's battled unrequited or private affections. Therefore, the images act as mental keepsakes not once, but twice, capitalizing on the power of photographs as objects. The intimate action of revisiting a photograph tucked modestly into a secret pocket or drawer is recalled through the artist's decision to equate viewing the images with looking through a lens. The modesty implied in Sanford's framing of the narrative is both a physical and conceptual compromise to heteronormative culture.

Brown's and Sanford's projects identify the oft-hidden constructs that influence individuals with

marginalized identities to hide in plain sight or make subtle transformations to their person. In order to better blend in with societies that would otherwise antagonize their instinctive states, the subjects of these images make aesthetic and performative compromises. These compromises become the subject of images that remind us of moments that we too have either endured ourselves or been complicit in creating. The subjects of these photos (both seen and unseen) perform compromise in the hope of social, economic, and cultural mobility. They delicately negotiate a sort of whispered etiquette that is impolite to note candidly. The visual language used by both Brown and Sanford is one of appealing, marketable and nostalgic snapshots. Their meticulous construction of visual narratives serves to forefront concepts and realities not yet subject to a broader cultural reckoning. Nakeya Brown's works, with their candy-colored backdrops and quirkily posed

subjects, communicate within the language of the commercial fashion spread. Her assertively composed images make plain the compromise between African roots and an ironic American homogeneity (given the country's foundations as a cultural "melting pot"). The aesthetic of *A Refutation of "Good" Hair* makes a backhanded pitch—it's begging you to refuse what you're being sold. Kris Sanford's compositions, through similar means but with opposite aims, dare the viewer to believe in what they cannot irrefutably see—that the figures pictured are entwined in more ways than they allow to be visually evident. The couples may be coupled in imagination only, but the inconclusive nature of their poses leaves room for optimism regarding a history and future where queerness could be normalized. Together, the two sets of works manipulate the dominant culture's heteronormative and white-centric narratives to cleverly and inversely champion the narrative of the margins.

Ashley Stull Meyers is a writer and curatorial collaborator. She has curated exhibitions and programming for the Wattis Institute (San Francisco), the Oakland Museum of California, Newspace Center for Photography, and Bridge Productions (Seattle). She is a recurring contributor to *The Exhibitionist* and *Arts.Black*, and has written for *Bomb Magazine* and *Rhizome*. She has been in academic residency at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art (Omaha, NE) and the Banff Centre (Banff, Alberta). She currently serves as Director and Curator of the Art Gym and Belluschi Pavilion at Marylhurst University in Lake Oswego, OR.