

AVERTING THE GAZE

An Anti-Self-Portrait of the Disabled Female Body

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THIS ARTICLE AIMS TO EXPLORE VISUAL ARTIST LAURA SWANSON'S "ANTI-SELF-PORTRAIT" AS A RESPONSE TO TRADITIONAL READINGS OF THE DISABLED BODY IN VISUAL ARTS. SHE RESISTS THE VISUAL RHETORICS THAT FOUNDING DISABILITY STUDIES SCHOLAR ROSEMARIE GARLAND-THOMSON IDENTIFIES IN HER ESSAY THE POLITICS OF STARING: VISUAL RHETORICS OF DISABILITY IN POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY. SWANSON'S "ANTI-SELF-PORTRAIT" TITLED PEGGY LEE REALIZES GARLAND-THOMSON'S CALL FOR AN INTEGRATION OF FEMINIST CRITICAL THEORY AND DISABILITY STUDIES. THE WORK INTENTIONALLY ENGAGES THE CONVENTIONAL READING OF DISABILITY, WHICH NARROWLY DEFINES AS AN EXOTIC STATE OF DIFFERENCE. THOUGH DECEPTIVELY STRAIGHTFORWARD, PEGGY LEE EXPLOITS SPACE AND POSITION TO REVERSE THE TRADITIONAL POWER DYNAMIC WHICH PRIVILEGES THE VIEWER'S GAZE OVER THE DEPICTED SUBJECT. BY OBSCURING HER FACE BEHIND AN OSTENSIBLE SYMBOL OF SOCIETAL BEAUTY STANDARDS, SWANSON RECLAIMS THE SOCIAL RITUAL OF STARING AT DISABILITY.

Minnesota-born artist Laura Swanson is one of seven adopted children in her family, and one of three with a physical disability. She credits her artistic exploration of identity to her mother, who “wanted [her] to experience a full life without inhibition”.¹ In her collection of photographs titled *Anti-Self-Portraits*, Swanson explores her identity as a woman with a physical disability. Her artist statement reads:

Her work centers around a critical exploration of the behavior of looking at difference: how physical difference is visually depicted and objectified in culture, the consequent behaviors that cause discrimination in everyday life, and the psychological effects of being socially marginalized.²

Influenced by images in popular culture, from the “visual tactics used by the advertising and retail industries” to the films of director Wes Anderson, to TV sitcoms like *Friends*, Swanson’s work can also be read more generally as a response to the visual rhetoric of popular photography that disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines in her essay *The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography*. In her response to these visual rhetorics in her “anti-self-portrait” called “Peggy Lee”, Swanson resists a traditional reading of a disabled body and reclaims her identity through self-representation.



PHOTO OF PEGGY LEE FROM AD ON MAY 5, 1945 FROM BILLBOARD MAGAZINE (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

A self-representation (or self-portrait) of the disabled, female body provides a visual response to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s call for the integration of feminist critical theory and disability studies. She writes, “Disability—like gender—is a concept that pervades all aspects of culture: its structuring institutions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment.”³ Further, Garland-Thomson’s work on “the politics of staring” takes into account the feminist principle of the “gaze” in relation to images of people with disabilities, thereby introducing a shared language between feminist discourses and disability studies. Swanson’s revision to the genre of the “self-portrait” calls for the consideration of the female body, pushing back against the form of a traditional portrait—a posed, formal drawing or painting that shows only the face or the head and shoulders of a person. The title of Swanson’s self-portrait, “Peggy Lee”, references the name of the singer on the album that covers the subject’s face. Drawing on the archive of popular images, Swanson adopts the doe-eyed, flaxen-haired singer’s face and name as a critique of beauty standards. Garland-Thomson writes, “The twin ideologies of normalcy and beauty posit female and disabled bodies, particularly, as not only spectacles to be looked at, but as pliable bodies to be shaped infinitely so as to conform to a set of standards called normal and beautiful.”⁴ Swanson’s image of herself is split: she adopts society’s beauty standards in her face, but her body contrasts the “mask” she holds, as she is unable to change her body to fulfill the standards of beauty and normalcy. There is an ironic frankness in the self-presentation. Swanson teases the audience with what they want to see: a conventionally beautiful woman. In doing so she draws attention to her own inability to reflect these standards due to the circumstances of her human embodiment.

The frankness of self-presentation asserts the artist’s power to command how she is perceived, and is negotiated through the gazes working in the photograph. Visually, the frank and sometimes eye-level gazes of artists on album covers surround the subject, but the subject withholds her own gaze by hiding her face with the album cover. Staring, then, becomes the subject of this photograph. The fragmentation of an otherwise essential process in photography disrupts the power relations that normally dictate the subject-viewer relationship. Garland-Thomson writes in her aforementioned essay,

Staring thus creates disability as a state of absolute difference rather than simply one more variation in human form. At the

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same time, staring constitutes disability identity by manifesting the power relations between the subject positions of disabled and able-bodied.⁵

In Swanson’s anti-self-portrait, power relations between the subject and the viewer are inverted; the subject wields the power to be seen or not to be seen. She wears a mask, hidden from the viewer, but the mask gives the illusion that she returns the gaze, even as she rejects it. Swanson is dressed in casual, loose-fitting clothes, which resists the sexualization of the female body and the fetishization of the disabled body at once. Swanson’s red shirt stands out against the otherwise neutral and cluttered background, but it neither draws attention to the shape of her body, nor hides it among the background. By positioning Peggy Lee’s face over her own, the artist asserts control over the terms of the stare and in defining her own identity. The image—one that pairs the ideal standard of beauty with the physically disabled body—asserts human variation over “absolute difference,” as the lines between subject and viewer and subject and subject are blurred.

Whereas the categories of visual rhetoric that Garland-Thomson defines in popular photography draw attention to disability as a state of difference, Swanson’s anti-self-portrait falls into none of those categories. It therefore does not perpetuate a representation of “the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic and the realistic.”⁶ The domestic setting belies the careful construction of the image. Geometry plays an important role, as the rectangles in the image help to guide the viewer’s eye. Swanson’s body can be read as a rectangle that fills in the gap between the two rectangular speakers. In this way, the image addresses Garland-Thomson’s formulation of the “wondrous” in which “disability operates visually by juxtaposing the singular (therefore strange) mark of impairment in a surrounding context of the expected (therefore familiar).”⁷ Swanson’s body, however, is positioned so that it blends rather seamlessly into the background, not drawing attention to her body, but not hiding it either. Coupled with the verbal play of the title, “Anti-Self-Portrait,” Swanson, herself (and her body), nearly disappears from the image. The image is also static, barring the “supercrip” character in the “wondrous”

image. That is, Swanson is doing nothing out of the ordinary; in fact, she is doing nothing at all.⁸ Because the image indicates no movement or action, Swanson draws attention to the fact that it was posed. Barring the possibility of the “wondrous,” the closest mode “Peggy Lee” comes to is the realistic, as it is placed in a mundane, domestic setting. The trick of the eye of the Peggy Lee record, however, lends itself to the surreal, which is characterized by the whimsical and irrational juxtaposition of images, unbridled by traditional societal constraints.⁹ The visual manipulation of the body to blend in with everyday objects is reminiscent of the work of Surrealist photographers, such as Man Ray.¹⁰ By adopting this new category of image to represent her body and her identity, Swanson challenges expectations of self-representation, adding another possibility for reading the collection title, “Anti-Self-Portraits.”

Swanson resists traditional images of disability, and in doing so, avoids the role of “spectacle” in her own image and reverses the power relations of staring in photography, reclaiming what Garland-Thomson calls “the social ritual of staring at disability.”¹¹ She asserts her own identity as the artist in refusing to conform to the visual rhetorics that would define her identity as a woman with a disability. In producing these images, Swanson also adds to the archive of images of people with disabilities, allowing for new categories of images to add to a fuller understanding of individual experience. In this way, Swanson’s photography collection can be read as a form of activism, as it promotes different ways of viewing the disabled body. The collection, then, fulfills all of the domains of feminist disability theory that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines: representation, body, identity and activism.

ENDNOTES

1. "CA+T Interview with Laura Swanson," last modified March 14, 2014, <http://centerforartandthought.org/cat-interviews-laura-swanson>.
2. "Laura Swanson," <http://www.centerforartandthought.org/work/contributor/laura-swanson>.
3. Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," *NWSA Journal* (2002): 4.
4. Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability," 11.
5. Garland-Thomson, "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (2002): 56.
6. Garland-Thomson, "Politics of Staring," 58.
7. Garland-Thomson, "Politics of Staring," 59-60.
8. Garland-Thomson, "Politics of Staring," 60.
9. Voorhies, "Surrealism," last modified October 2004, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/surr/hd_surr.htm.
10. See the images *The Coat-Stand* (1920)—which bears thematic resemblance to Swanson's *Coat* (2005)—and *Ingre's Violin* (1924).
11. Garland-Thomson. "Politics of Staring," 57.

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