

# Face and Outline: An Interview with Gina Osterloh

## David Lloyd

Gina Osterloh is a Filipina-American artist, until recently based in Los Angeles, California, whose work mixes performance, photography, drawing and film work. Osterloh's photographic practice embodies the printed image, drawing, film, and performance to explore the resonances between the physical body and its representational imprint, trace, or stand-in. Her photographs lay bare the perpetual juxtaposition between the artist's hand and the mechanical precision of the camera. While Osterloh has moved away from the multicultural city of Los Angeles, she cites her growing up as a mixed-race person in Ohio as presenting a set of formative experiences that led her to photography as a medium in which to pose larger questions of being, identity, and how a viewer perceives difference.

David Lloyd interviewed Gina Osterloh for *Enclave Review* the wake of her major solo exhibit ZONES (2016) at Silverlens in Manila, Philippines.

**DL:** You grew up in Ohio, then moved to California; was that far? And now, after many years working and living in Los Angeles, you have returned to teach in Ohio. What has that circuit meant for you personally, and for the work that you make?

**GO:** It's a wild circuit. A trip that in the present moment has opened up an incredible amount of opportunity and generative time and space. I first left Ohio for undergraduate study in Chicago, and then moved to San Francisco. I moved to San

Francisco in the mid-90s and found friendship and mentorship with artists and activists, artists such as Neo Bustamante and Tammy Rae Carland, as well as spaces like The Loggote Studio, a non-profit, artist-run multidisciplinary arts organization. Tammy Rae Carland, who is a professor at the California College of the Arts where I worked, suggested that I go to the University of California, Irvine for a MFA, and I did. UC Irvine was life changing. It was the first time I had my own studio, my own space. At first I made videos with slow and repetitive gestures, along with crude photo-tableaux scenes dealing with war and our image of the tropics. The summer before my third year, my work took a radical shift. I created my first monochrome room for the camera. In the room, I got on all fours and made a series of photographs that depicted my body vomiting pink paper and confetti exploding out of (or imploding into) my head.

Los Angeles will always be part of my life - my community, the landscape and atmospheric conditions, such as the quality of light. Recently I accepted a tenure-track professor position at The Ohio State University and for the first time in many years I have time to reflect on what I have done as well as radically imagine the future. I just had a solo show at Silverlens in Manila, which featured all of the work I created during my first year at Ohio State. Because of the support of the institution, as well as my new very short commute to the university (in LA my last commute was six to seven hours of driving in one day) I simply have more time to produce more labor intensive works such as ZONES.

ZONES is slow and tedious. It is a record of visual metaphors that have driven my work from the past decade - office, hair, the room, skin. It is also a series of frameworks that are portals, schemata that in terms of form and content will chart the next

decade of photographs and video.

**DL:** You mentioned that your earlier work consisted of large-scale photographic tableau works. I was interested in how the consequent sense of questioned identity informed some of that photographic work, the non-subjectifying portraits in which the figure is masked, disguised, sometimes using her or his own hair as a cover, or blending with a very specific space. How much was you were thinking of those early portraits, common in nineteenth-century photography, where the subjects are dressed up to occupy a studio diorama of exotic or mountain landscapes, for example? Isn't it interesting how 'staged' early photographic portraiture was?

**GO:** Early photographic portraiture was indeed staged and awkward - every time I teach an introduction to Photography class we spend time with some of those early portraits, by Nadar for example. With my students it is productive to imagine a time when the public did not know how to pose for the camera. And to then consider their own automatic pose or gesture for the camera. We are all born into the eye of the camera. Was I thinking of those early portraits? Not immediately, but I was trying to pare down what constitutes a gesture - what is the line between legibility and illegibility? In terms of portraiture, my early large scale tableau portraits that I began in 2005 pared down the main signifiers of a portrait - a face, the contour, head and shoulders. What is the contour between form and formlessness? What cultural and social projection do we ascribe to these portraits or even particular bodies that are represented in images? Photographs present a space that invites recognition - can a body in a photograph, unthrive this light interpretative space?

**DL:** Speaking of space and recognition, isn't there a strange and early link between portraits of colonized bodies and the exclusionary interpretive question, "What are you, where are you from?" today?

**GO:** Yes - it is the automatic regulation of false binary recognition that I've been exploring. "You are an alien, can I poke you?" - I belong and you are foreign. I am speaking, and you are mute. Growing up in the Midwest, there was always that question. Nothing I could reply with ever satisfied the questioner's viewer, so I started to insert a really awkward silence before I would reply. I wanted to respond with a blank. When I started to create photo tableaux much later in grad school, I realized that photography is an ideal platform to create both a physical and psychological blank or tear in this perpetual and violent interpretive relationship. The blank or void has become both a physical and conceptual space to deny facial recognition in my portraits. I first started with simply turning my head away from the camera, covering my face with hair, and when I saw the printed photographs on my studio walls became disoriented with my head turned the shape of relief. I then started to extend the metaphor of the blank/white void - to the entire body, by simply wearing a black leotard such as in *Press* and *Erse* (2007).

There is also a deep sorrow, both in the portraits of colonized bodies and the question, "What are you, where are you from." Both employ phenotypical racial classification and hierarchies, the projection of eery and erroneous assumptions onto a body. There is a violent eclipse in this process, an erasure of personhood, as well as a foreclosure of knowing.

**DL:** How does this early work in portraiture evolve or morph into the exploration of camouflage that has preoccupied you for a long time? At the *Queer Sites and Sounds Symposium* at the University of California, Riverside in 2014, you mentioned your interest in Roger Caillois' work and his work on mimicry and camouflage, and invoked his sense of camouflage as an abandonment of individuality in order to allow the environment to take over. So camouflage would not be, for you, a predatory or military ruse, but an extension of your interest in processes of 'de/subjectifying'?

**GO:** Because I was interested in the body as a site of refusal (refusal to be identified), to be summarized,

lately named), my early work in portraiture began to look at ways in which the figure could create an unstable viewing ground. I quickly saw that camouflage, mimicry of color and pattern, was one way to achieve this. My first question was how to take camouflage beyond military war connotations, so I put on a bright turquoise blue sweater to match the blue room. I was also trying to figure out ways to present a figure, particularly a woman's body, that could enact a visceral invasion of space, an interruption of the muteness and silencing of a photograph.

As my photo-tableau work evolved, I wanted to see how I could push the operation of camouflage. The result was a series of photographs that further pulled apart the subjectifying operations of photography and portraiture. As I saw that camouflage was a way to create an anonymous subject, I began to trace silhouettes of friends and present them as cardboard cutouts, torsos of head and shoulders sitting for the camera. The silhouettes were also a way to push what photography already does, a flattening of three-dimensional space. In *Anonymous Front* (2010) I also added the repetition of pattern through spray painted dots, both on the group portrait of silhouettes and the paper room. It's a strange visual flickering, almost equivalence, between figures and space.

**DL:** Your camouflage series don't seem to have much to do, then, with blending into natural environments. Mostly they seem to be staged in the photographic studio with artificial light and bright, even gaudy color. The figure is taken over by the surrounding color and we are never for the camera. Are there hangings, shreds, and so forth - becoming almost a stage prop itself. Sometimes you even stage that integration with the landscape by having the subject seem to vomit out shreds of colored paper, as you mentioned, or be gradually buried in them. And the space becomes very ambiguous, uncertain, both in terms of scale and of depth. Is this something about camouflage that we often forget, that it is not so much about mimicking a natural environment as about dissolving the relation of figure to ground or blurring the edges by which we can tell what is foreground and what is background?

**GO:** My first response is 'Yes! In my photographs, camouflage isn't mimicking a natural environment - it's mimicking a constructed environment. In my work, photographic frame equals wall. It's about the history of the technical apparatus, as well as a stand-in for larger ideologies that frame, organize, and position subjects in their particular place. Linear perspective creates the organized spatial depth of foreground, middleground, background. In my early photo-tableaux and later works and their stages are driven to interrupt this fixed relationship.

**DL:** Lately you have been very concerned with the conditions of seeing and of representing seeing in photography. You remain at the *Queer Sites and Sounds Symposium* that I mentioned for events to recognize a photograph, there must be a fold, a shift in perspective or dimension. In many of the works you have been exhibiting, the photo is stripped down to the minimal condition of a vertical plane of paper that fails to indicate the body to indicate the perspectival shift that designates a face. You have been incorporating into this stage-like space hand-drawn representations of grids that, at once, allude to the fundamental perspectival grids that dominated Western art since the Renaissance, and refuse the geometrical exactitude that we associate with the grid. On the contrary, your work seems fluid, tentative, exploratory, provisional - anything but a trap for the eye. What do you think these photos reveal about our 'ways of seeing' or about your own process as an artist?

**GO:** When I am constructing a space or a drawing for the camera, I am keeping in mind the perspective of the camera. But beyond just what happens from 3D to 2D space through a monocular lens, I am always thinking of the construction of photographic space that frames or holds a figure. As I mentioned before, I'm always seeing with my meta way of seeing - the perpetual binary relationship between observer and subject, viewer and recipient of a gaze. How

in portraiture, the subject is often the definition of end-point of desire for the eye.

Recently (2018), I presented at the College Art Association in Los Angeles and I returned to Santa Echeverra's book *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino-American Art and Performance* (2009) and her chapter about Paul Pfeiffer. In this chapter Santa Rae eloquently posits the Cartesian Grid as a method of translating space and bodies that is inherently violent, misogynist, and racist. These concepts and realties are articulated in her analysis of Albrecht Dürer's *Draughtsmen Making a Perspective Drawing of a Woman* (1525), which she calls 'a high misogynist moment in the development of one-point perspective and "geometrical optics"'. She connects the Cartesian grid of perspective - and for me this is the lineage of the camera - to acts of colonial possession:



Gina Osterloh, *Anonymous Front* (Copy Fall 2010). Pigment print with UV lamination. 30 x 45 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

With this said, my grids are similar to the figures in my portraits. They are unified, they are visually in motion. In terms of my process, they are incredibly slow and strangely intimate. With my first *Drawing for the Camera* (2014) I wanted to traverse photographic space itself. So I created a series of continuous line drawings on paper pressed into a wall and set against a wall.

As with the body in my portraits (or anti-portraits) I want to create an optical space that is inviting to look at, yet can't be easily identified. Knowing and easily recognizable signifiers are thrown into question. I like to think of the relationship between my photographs and the viewer as a shared history of the camera. Creating a radical space where we can unthrive the eye of the camera and the social constructs we are all born into.

While a great deal of my work is in response to the photographic frame and the grid as a violent framing device, I am equally collaborative with this technology and incredibly infatuated with the role of the eye and photographic space itself.

**DL:** The provisionality of your line in drawing, whether in the grids that you desire to be photographic objects or in your new series ZONES that depict passageways, the framework of rooms, and offices. In some ways, such lines seem like the trace of a kind of action painting, recalling the movement of the hand in its experimental explorations of space, and as they do almost self-reflexively, they seem to have been talking of and to the notion of 'outline' by which figure is demarcated from ground. What for you is the process and the point of such free-style compositions? What is the relation between photography and drawing? Why are so many of your recent works photos of drawings?

**GO:** I once looks at the arc of my work chronologically, eventually the body dissipates and with my own hand I traverse photographic space itself, drawing unstable and unreliable grids that I pull, bend, and ooze off the page. This isn't to say the body is absent from my work, the drawings are markings of my body's presence. When I began the drawings for the camera, I literally wanted to traverse and intimately traverse photographic space itself with my own body. I wanted ZONES, in terms of my process as an artist, the drawings are a way for me to extend and slow down time. ZONES involves a great deal of repetition - patterns, dots and lines. I am highly aware of my eye, my breath, my hand when I am making the drawings. They are opening up a meditative space in my practice.

**DL:** This leads me to want to talk about another site

of your work as an artist, which is your training and work in live performance, including a performance that is ongoing and has been presented at spaces such as Francis Chabauty Gallery in Los Angeles (2014) or the Arizona State University Museum of Art (2016) in which you followed the commands of an audience to strike, slice, prick or slash a huge red paper screen, through which you finally dove, leaving a body-sized hole. It reminded me of some of your earlier photos in which the subject is disappearing through the wall of the set, or more recent ones, like the *Office and Color Field Series*, where a tiny mouth appears, scarcely visible, through a hole in the expanse of a single color-field. Only in performance, rather than disappearing back into the ground, you burst through it, as if, for once, the body could take violent revenge on its own effacement or erasure. What value for you is the relation between your continuing work as a performance artist and your thinking about the relation between body and photography in your visual work?

**GO:** Prick is inspired by questions grounded in photography. With this performance I wanted to create a visual record of actions that break through the flat field - a large paper frame - with slices, strikes, and eventually my entire body puncturing the paper. I also like the additional interpretive layer of the audience shouting 'prick!' Like many conceptual photo artists, I was thinking of Roland Barthes' punctum. As in my photographs, I consider the entire body to be a possible site for punctum. In the live performance work, I am entranced by the idea that punctum can move, that a body has action and agency.

**DL:** Why minimal or fundamental structures? Why fundamental gestures?

**GO:** I am interested in the colour - a line, that might be one degree away from not being that thing. I suppose it's the line between presence and absence. I am interested in the boundary between form and formlessness. I see the minimal structures and fundamental gestures as a space of resistance - to question coded language, to unthrive the gestures and postures that we all perform.

**DL:** To go back to performance, you have a tremendous film-loop work, *Press and Outline* (2014), which you also exhibited this summer at the ICP (International Center of Photography) in New York City. It seemed to bring together many of your preoccupations, including your long-standing meditation on the origins of photography in capturing the shadow of the self on the other. The film depicts a figure in a leotard pressed up against her own shadow, both backlit into a wall, and seeking to draw the outline of that shadow.

It's an astonishing mix of erotic intimacy and tragic clowning as the figure's every move frustrates its effort to capture an outline and yet seems to mime the most frantic or eager embrace of the shadow in an unending dance. That recalls your remark in the note on the *Office and Color Field Series* about the intimacy needed to "read" images: "as if you were performing something of the relation between producing and reading the image. It's comic, moving, self-reflexive, and philosophical all at once, seeming to render in mime the impossible quest for self-capture. In that, it's also very reminiscent of Beckett's *nine-pieces* and his debt to the clowning traditions of silent film (and I couldn't help feeling that the clockwork sound of the projector or 'topee' was intrinsic to the total effect, reminding me of the sound of home-movie projectors on which my father used to on the screen silent movies of Laurel and Hardy or Charlie Chaplin when I was a child). What were you trying to do in making this piece?"

**GO:** Interspersion - the call-and-response relationship between the individual and another force - is an ever present relationship throughout all of my work. In *Press and Outline*, I wanted to create an intimate and odd relationship between physical body and fleeting shadow. The title of the work serves as the directive: my body and hands press into and outline my shadow. The shadow is created from a single light source projected onto my body and then a wall. As a result, the shadow is slightly larger than my own body. This has been interpreted in a few ways, but one is that the shadow is masculine, or other. There are moments in the film when the two - body and shadow - become indistinguishable, for a feeling moment they

join. Caught in a continuous loop, it is a slow dance together, an impossible joining of the two, as my hand traces my shadow, the shadow moves away.

**DL:** You speak of your work as a very physical, intimately bodily process, which might seem strange for a photographer. What is your process like as you actually produce your work?

**GO:** From my large scale photo tableaux that deal with the volume of a room, to works such as ZONES which involve a great deal of repetition and mark-making, in one word I would say that my process is slow. I am always very aware of the relationship between my hand, breath and body, as I move across the constructed spaces that I create. I can't listen to music when I'm working.

I wish I could say I've had the same studio for the past decade, but I've been in a state of transience when it comes to both living and studio. With my position at The Ohio State University, I finally have a quiet space of my own to sleep, but I am still working on the studio space for me. As a result of transience, while my constructed spaces are very labor intensive and usually large, I make constructions for the camera that can be dismantled, rolled up, and stored away.

When I am working, I feel that I am looking along with something larger, a meta-eye. I am aware that this is not for me, but rather for the camera, a system that translates and codifies - and that my work is both a product of and a participant in - the practice and politics of looking.

David Lloyd is a writer, critic and teacher based in Los Angeles. His latest work on visual art is *Beckett's Thing: Painting and Theatre* (2016). Gina Osterloh is currently working on new photographs that depict women carving out space in rooms filled with repetitive patterns. She is also working on visual literacy education through her photography classes at The Ohio State University, Columbus.