

Art, Diversity and the Human Race

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by Christine Buckley



When it comes to Donald Trump, emotions run extreme on both ends of the political spectrum. For many, his very name has come to evoke a fundamental pain that cuts like a personal affront. His comments have shown a disrespect and lack of tolerance for diversity in gender, race and religion. Many feel Mr. Trump is a bully, the bossy kid on the playground who spews hateful words and gleefully encourages violence against those who don't look or think like him. With extreme emotions like these swirling around, it's no surprise that angry renegade artists are using their mediums to create Trump-themed messages. New York street artist Hanksy depicted him as a pile of poo. Houston artist Phillip Kremer portrayed him as having a grossly distorted face, all mouth and not much of anything else. The art collective t.Rutt purchased a used Trump campaign bus on Craig's List and transformed it into a rolling campaign protest. Portland artist Sarah Levy used her own menstrual blood to paint a portrait of Trump as a way to protest his comments about Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly and undocumented immigrants. And then there is the artist who just placed a Trump Tombstone in Central Park with the inscription Made America Hate Again.

There is one artist who has taken a radically different and more thoughtful approach when it comes to Trump. **Nancy Burson**, whose work is currently on display at both LACMA and ROSEGALLERY at Bergamot Station, is an acclaimed photographer/artist probably best known for The Age Machine, which creates age-enhanced photos of the human face using a computer morphing process. Her technology has been used by the FBI to find missing children and adults.

Another of Burson's projects is the provocative *Human Race Machine*, which she created as a public art project commissioned by the London Millennium Dome in 2000. Burson's Human Race Machines continue to tour the country at colleges and universities and allow people to view themselves as another race. It is her hope that the project will challenge people to change perspectives on how they view human race. As recently reported by Popular Science, current research shows that the experience of oneself as another race can create cross-racial empathy within the mirror neurons of the brain. This is important, really, because the concept of race is not genetic, it is social. In 2005 scientists discovered

just one gene controls skin color. Put another way, that is just one tiny letter of DNA code out of the 3.1 billion letters in the human genome. Yes folks, we are all 99.99% alike.

In her recent and timely work utilizing the Human Race Machine, *What if He were: Black-Asian-Hispanic-Middle Eastern-Indian*, Burson created images of Donald Trump as each of these races. Originally commissioned by a prominent magazine, which ultimately decided not to publish it, Burson said she was spurred to produce the work. "The question in my mind was whether Donald Trump's brain would be affected with an empathetic response upon viewing the work," explained Burson.

While art and politics don't always mix, Burson's project is one that goes beyond politics and delves deep into the psychology of a person's sense of self. One has to wonder if Trump sat with the image of himself as Middle Eastern, would he at all feel empathy and reconsider his position of banning Muslims from entering the United States? Or if he visually experienced himself as Hispanic, would he still fiercely advocate building a wall with Mexico? Would he at all feel compassion for others, if even on a subconscious level?

Most likely Trump is too much of a textbook narcissist for these images to make a difference. However what about the rest of us? If we view Trump as different races, would it make us think, if even for a moment? Perhaps we'd hear a little voice in our heads pointing out to us that we aren't so different after all. Because really, when it comes down to it, we are all part of the same race: the human race.

Burson's large scale five part image of *What If He Were: Black-Asian-Hispanic-Middle Eastern-Indian* is on exhibit until April 20, 2016 at ROSEGALLERY, Bergamot Station Arts Center, 2525 Michigan Avenue, G5, Santa Monica, CA 90404. Burson's work *One of the First Age Transformations from M.I.T.* is showing at LACMA until July 31, 2016 as part of the exhibit *Physical: Sex and the Body in the 1980s* which is organized as a companion exhibition to *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium*.

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Work by Nancy Burson on exhibit at LACMA

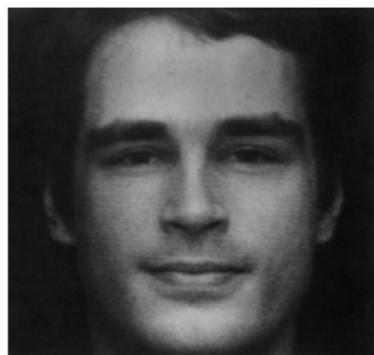


Image: Nancy Burson, "The Image and Apparatus for Producing an Image of a Person's Face at a Different Age [One of the First Transformations from MIT]," 1979, Three gelatin silver prints, 2.5 x 2.5 inches, each.

Work by Nancy Burson is on display through July 31, 2016, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as part of the exhibition "Physical: Sex and The Body in the 1980s":

Culled entirely from LACMA's permanent collection, this installation explores how the body was at the center of creative consciousness in the 1980s. During that decade, artists engaged the language of advertising and media, feminist and identity politics, and as the decade wore on, an increasingly urgent response to the AIDS crisis, to produce work that commented on the power and the fragility of the human body.

Organized as a companion to the exhibition "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium," this installation places Mapplethorpe's art in dialogue with a selection of work by other artists made during his decade of greatest productivity. Many of the featured artists were friends or acquaintances of Mapplethorpe, and like him, they placed issues of the body and sexuality at the center of their practice.

Nancy Burson's work will be on view alongside artworks by Nan Goldin, Sherrie Levine, Sarah Charlesworth, Marina Abramović, Tina Barney, Andres Serrano, Peter Hujar, and Kiki Smith.

"Physical: Sex and The Body in the 1980s"

March 20, 2016 – July 31, 2016

The New York Times

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW; A Brew of Faces for Mixing and Aging

By SARAH BOXER

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If the rest of Nancy Burson's retrospective at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University doesn't unsettle you, maybe this will: At the end of the exhibition you'll find Ms. Burson's computerized "Age Machine," where you can sit back and see how you could look in 25 years. You also have the option of seeing what you might look like as an African, Asian, Caucasian, Indian or Hispanic (in the "Human Race Machine") or with various facial deformities (the "Anomaly Machine").

Worried? Relax. This exhibition teaches you not to be too harsh on your own face or anyone else's. The human face, as Ms. Burson's work suggests, is a strange and malleable thing. Nothing is sacred or fixed about it, not beauty, youth, race, power, sex, family, species or godliness.

It is all about mixing. In fact, "Seeing and Believing: The Art of Nancy Burson," a show of 100 photographs, composite photographs, computer-altered photographs and drawings organized by Lynn Gumpert and Terrie Sultan, could just as well be called "The Art of Mixing a Shadow."

This retrospective starts where Ms. Burson started: on her own face. In 1976 she aged her face with makeup and photographed herself at five stages of life. You can see the ham-handed results. At 70 she looks like a hag in a high-school play.

The illusions got better when Ms. Burson teamed up with some computer programmers to make an aging program, which would stretch and warp digital portraits. She aged the faces of Brooke Shields, John Travolta and Prince William. (Unfortunately, you cannot check those pictures now for accuracy; they are not in the show.) She also reversed the aging process to produce fake baby pictures of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe.

In the mid-1980's Ms. Burson helped the F.B.I. search for missing children by envisioning what they would look like years after they had disappeared. The digital aging of Etan Patz, a boy kidnapped in SoHo in 1979, is in the show. In the "updated" picture, circa 1984, his eyes are less distinct and shiny, his hair has grown dark, his smile has dimmed. This kind of visualization process, Ms. Burson says in the retrospective catalog, "actually brought home four kids in the first year."

Then there were the composites. Ms. Burson depicted the face of mankind, a composite of Asian, Caucasian and black people weighted according to their proportions in the world's population. She imagined the face of world power in a work titled "Warhead I" by merging head shots of Ronald Reagan (55 percent) and Leonid I. Brezhnev (45 percent) with bits of Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterrand and Deng Xiaoping thrown in. (Oddly, the face of Mr. Reagan, the main ingredient, is barely detectable.)

She showed the essence of the primate class by morphing the faces of chimp and man (chimp is dominant). She did the same for movie beauties by combining the faces of Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren and Marilyn Monroe (Davis is dominant) and then, in a separate composite, the faces of Jane Fonda, Jacqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields and Meryl Streep (Bisset is dominant).

She imagined universal godliness by morphing religious portraits of Jesus, Muhammad and Buddha. Then, years later, she made a composite portrait called "Guys Who Look Like Jesus" and compared that picture with a composite of Jesus paintings. (The old, painted Jesus pulls back his hair and wears a red-patterned top, while the new Jesus keeps his hair loose, wears a white T-shirt and resembles Charles Manson.)

Ms. Burson's obsession with the malleability of the human face took its most personal turn when she was pregnant and worried about the possible deformities of the baby she was carrying. In 1988 and 1989 she made computer-altered photographs of various possible facial deformities: bug eyes, doll's eyes, extrawide noses and cone-heads.

Even after her child was born, Ms. Burson continued to probe the what-if as if it were her own future. She made photographs (unaltered) of children with cranio-facial disorders. She also pictured an alternative past and future for herself. That is, she altered her family photographs by morphing the faces in them with the face of a cousin to create a new, fictional biography. She then mounted each photograph in the bottom of a paperweight globe, as if it were part of some unreachable history.

What are we to make of this odd body of work?

Composites are nothing new and, historically speaking, nothing nice. In 1877, Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics and one of Charles Darwin's cousins, began making composite photographs to define, categorize and illustrate different types of people. He wanted to encourage the fit to propagate and the unfit to stop, but first he had to define who was which.

By overlaying many criminals' mug shots, Galton constructed "a purely optical apparition of the criminal type," as Allan Sekula writes in his 1986 essay "The Body and the Archive." Galton made composite portraits of intelligent faces (using ancient Greek busts as representatives of the highest intelligence) and a composite he called "The Jewish Type."

Is Ms. Burson as dangerous as Galton? Ms. Burson has been attacked by Mr. Sekula, who accused her of "smug scientism." But isn't her aim the opposite of Galton's -- not to define and categorize but to blur and upset categories? As Ms. Burson herself put it, she is "imaging the paradigm shift from 'I-ness' to 'we-ness.' "

In the interest of we-ness, Ms. Burson mixed portraits of six men and six women to see whether the human race looks more feminine or masculine. (It is feminine.) And in the late 1990's Ms. Burson made a series of he/she photographs. Against a black background she photographed the faces of people who cultivate an androgynous appearance: men who pass as women and women who pass as men. She didn't label them but left viewers to try to guess the sex of the sitters. The message? "We are all composites."

Benign, isn't it? And yet a spooky naïveté permeates much of the show, which comes through in the title, "Seeing and Believing." In 1976, when Ms. Burson started fiddling with photographs, she also made paintings by crying on paper, as if that could capture her grief. This kind of credulity is reflected in much of the show. But in her case spiritual credulity mixes with positivist credulity. And it is an unsettling combination indeed.

Ms. Burson, whose mother was a bacteriologist, used to do fake experiments with blood. And there is still something of the quack scientist in her. She has tried to capture the difference between people's positive and negative thoughts and between love and anger by photographing the heat emanating from them.

Then there is Ms. Burson's recent work on healing. To catch the therapeutic touch on film, she took pictures of healers laying on hands. She focused particularly on the healer Anatoli Kashpirovski. What she got were blurry pictures of people thrashing around. On visual grounds alone, it is hard to tell whether she thinks those pictures are of actual healing or of sick people being taken for a ride. But the wall text clears up the matter: Ms. Burson says that when a streak of light appears in such a picture, "it's energy," presumably the healing kind.

This puts Ms. Burson in a class of her own. While other contemporary artists who alter photographs seem to be questioning and testing the limits of photographic believability, she seems to be cultivating a new kind of credulity: the idea that we can see the auras of healing, of positive and negative thought, of the human race, even of blackness and whiteness.

Think about Ms. Burson's "Human Race Machine," one of her most recent creations. You scan your face and then the computer program alters it to look African, Asian, Indian, whatever. To make that machine, Ms. Burson must have started with pictures of Africans, Asians, Indians and gleaned from them the kinds of features she believed were endemic to those races. That is, she must have come up with a typical African, Asian, Indian. How different is this from Galton's attempt to pin down the Jewish type?

The spooky part, the Galton part, is what Mr. Sekula called "a faith in the objectivity of the camera," the idea that the camera really captures essences and, as Galton put it, that composites are "real generalizations."

Still, Ms. Burson's work cannot be dismissed. It remains strangely indeterminate, as blurry as a composite. As the wall text says, if seeing is believing, then in Ms. Burson's world, "believing is also a means of seeing." What saves these photographs is that they let you glimpse how the world would look if you believed in healing, auras and human types.

"Seeing and Believing: The Art of Nancy Burson" remains at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village, (212) 998-6780, through April 20.

Photo: "Warhead I" (1982) by Nancy Burson is a composite of Ronald Reagan (55 percent) and Leonid I. Brezhnev (45 percent), with traces of Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterrand and Deng Xiaoping. (Grey Art Gallery)