

# Posing

September 18 – November 11, 2007

Curated by Andrea Cote and Joelle Jensen

**Artists:**

Yi Chen  
Nikhil Chopra  
Kate Clark  
Alex Forman  
Yoshio Itagaki  
Chris Kaczmarek  
Valerie Lamontagne  
Amy Talluto

Abrons Art Center at Henry Street Settlement 466 Grand Street  
New York, NY 10002

Our conversations about this exhibition stemmed from our studio practices. We were each visually investigating the vernaculars of poses, notions of time and the psychology embedded in certain postures. We were also both reading Craig Owens' essay, *Posing*, and in it found a foundation for the concepts we were exploring. We discussed both analogous and strikingly different approaches to representing and re-presenting the figure. It was from this dialogue that our curatorial project took shape.

We are thrilled to present this exhibition at the Henry Street Settlement Abrons Art Center and wish to thank Martin Dust, Susan Fleminger and Jay Wegman for giving us this opportunity. We extend our thanks to Wanda, Rose, and the Henry Street staff and interns. We'd like to thank the participating artists and the three panelists: Rebecca Schneider, Titia Hulst, and Valerie Lamontagne. Additionally, we thank the Center for Emerging Visual Artists, Marianne Boesky Gallery, Dede Young, Silvia Kolbowski, Adam Boxer, Kathryn Burns, Merrily Kerr, Kelly McEvers, Nathan Duel, Miriam Kienle, Penny Cray, Rachel Meuler, Sandi Jo Gordon, Margery Gordon, Jaimie Jensen, Jeremy Willis and Pierre Cote.

## Identifiable Gestures

By Andrea Cote and Joelle Jensen

The rhetoric of the pose is both visual and performative. Although it is activated on an instinctual level—as one scans another’s pose for signs of aggression, fear, authority or compatibility—it can also be indicative of a particular time, class or culture. Studied closely, a pose reveals confidence or insecurity, self-awareness or self-doubt, desire, joy or pain. Posing is a skill aided by visual technology. Young children begin to hone this skill as parents record images for family photo albums and video projects. We look to these documents for clues about our identities and we compare our captured images to those of our parents, celebrities and other role models. By mimicking those we want to align our selves with, we train our bodies to inhabit certain poses. We try them on like costumes until consciously or otherwise we find the ones that fit.

Posing maps a territory that spans from historical portraiture to flicker.com. The development of do-it-yourself websites democratizes modes of representation in media while allowing everyone to act as both artist and model. It became popular for artists in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to challenge traditional portraiture by incorporating appropriated imagery, constructed tableaux, candid snapshots, and surveillance. *Posing* takes its title from Craig Owens’ essay of the same name. In *Posing*, Owens discusses implications of the pose, systems of power and subject-object relations at length. He examines several artists who question modes of representation, including Barbara Kruger, Jeff Wall, Sherrie Levine and Sylvia Kolbowksi.<sup>1</sup> This exhibition expands discussions of image, power, mimicry and identity that many contemporary artists have participated in from Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons to Nikki S. Lee.

The emerging artists exhibiting in *Posing* follow the lineage of artists working subversively with the figure to engage the power and vulnerability of the pose. The artists unpack the current cultural condition by employing or rejecting today’s technologies while incorporating traditional techniques and approaches to the figure. Through frozen moments and acts of homage, the artists in this exhibition either reveal or circumvent the relationships—and inherent power structures—between artist, model, viewer, history, culture and media.

**Alex Forman** photographs miniature figurines of the American Presidents in her series, *Tall, Slim and Erect*. They share gestures of entitlement, stature and perfected public bearing. Her photographs hold the formation of masculinity up for scrutiny, embodying expectations about power and leadership. Her enlargements distort and exaggerate the figures, metaphorically reflecting societal expectations bestowed upon these men.

Forman takes her title for the series from a phrase repeatedly used to describe past presidents: “tall, slim and of erect carriage.” According to Forman, “in an uncanny way, they are a reflection on how the masculine image of the president is recorded and reproduced.” Forman’s dramatically lit figurines echo the staged dolls that frequently appear in the work of Laurie Simmons. Both artists examine American expectations, stereotypes and clichés. Where Simmons’ works examine stereotypical domestic (and in turn private) 1950s housewives, Forman’s images portray public men of accomplishment.

The images of upright and authoritative male figures are a stark contrast to the common reclining poses often held by female models throughout a variety of media. Because representations of women as inactive, sexual objects continue to permeate the media today, artists continue to address, expose and sometimes reconcile their participation in these modes of representation.

**Amy Talluto** takes on the poses of models in *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issues*. These stock cheesecake poses present the female body as a willing and consumable sexual object. Her skillful renderings use humor and frank realism to investigate how her own body measures up to the ideals of beauty, sexual object-hood and youth enforced by advertising and culture in general. As she vulnerably exposes her own “imperfections,” Talluto subverts accepted cultural standards and re-possesses the female figure. The absent heads force us to read the language of her body. Her gestures are sexual, confident, playful and inviting.

Talluto both challenges and utilizes historical precedent; she empowers herself as both artist and model, while she employs academic practices to create classical-looking figure drawings. Her choice of photographic source material points not only to its ubiquitous presence in our culture, but is representative of its influence in much artwork of all mediums being produced today.

Both Amy Talluto and Valerie Lamontagne like many artists, most famously Cindy Sherman, use themselves as vehicles to infiltrate various disciplines and challenge accepted standards. By placing herself into this once impenetrable field, “Sherman literally inserts herself, as both model and artist, into the tradition of Western painting, overwhelmingly male. And since she is a photographer, this constitutes a double interloping: not only the woman, but also the ‘lesser’ art invades the hallowed precincts of oil painting.”<sup>2</sup>

In her series, *Becoming Balthus*, Valerie Lamontagne questions the roles of controversial painter Count Balthus Klossowski de Rola, his pubescent young models, and by extension the viewers and institutions that take scopophilic pleasure in these works. Lamontagne recreates the models’ poses, overlaying photographs of her own figure onto images of Balthus’ paintings of adolescent women. As the viewer searches to find distinctions between photographs of Lamontagne’s “real” body and the painted models’, the artificiality of the pose and the construction of the entire painting are highlighted. The artist addresses perceptions of female sexuality and the fluid boundaries of the gaze. In her book, which examines self-representation of women artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Meskimmon points out that “attempts to break through this simple binarism often lead women artists to contend with the multifaceted nature of female sexuality as it develops through both subject and object positions; they renegotiate the concepts of passivity and submission to find forms which simultaneously visualize the pleasures of activity *and* passivity, dominance *and* submission.”<sup>3</sup>

Both **Kate Clark** and **Nikhil Chopra** also utilize conventions of portraiture, drawing on the genre’s seductive attempts to extend time and mortality. In Chopra’s series of *Sir Raja* tableaux, the space between performance, painting, and photography collapses. In his performance, Chopra, dressed in full regalia, sits motionless in a Victorian chair before a sumptuous banquet of roast goose, oysters, lobster, mangos, raspberries and chocolate cake displayed on fine silver. The exquisite scene is a live *Vanitas* painting, a reminder of the death present in every moment’s passing. In contrast to these classic treatises on mortality, Chopra’s character sits without judgment as he challenges the viewer to confront past and present issues of colonialism, exoticism, and excess.

Henry M. Sayre, in his essay *The Rhetoric of the Pose: Photography and the Portrait as Performance*, points out that “there has always been a sense of the staged in portraiture, a sense that what we see is a *tableau vivant* its characters have chosen to perform.”<sup>4</sup> Chopra’s performances

point not only to the staged nature of portraiture, but also the gluttony and extravagance of the aristocracy that could afford to have such portraits made.

Kate Clark is inspired by the evolution of human facial expression as portrayed through historical portraiture. Clark reconstructs the faces and postures of animals that have undergone taxidermy to mimic human gestures and expressions. In the process, she challenges the physical and interpretive limitations imposed by the taxidermist through both the animals' stiff positioning and currency as symbols of conquest and/or décor. She reignites them with life and personality. The sculptures appear to be frozen moments—like film stills that exist as summaries for larger narratives—commanding the attention of the viewer with an arresting presence. The sculptures reveal moments of confrontation and awe while they evoke the surrealist interest in the sublime; they encourage the viewer to examine his or her mortality in the face of the natural world.

“What do I do when I pose for a photograph?... I freeze, as if anticipating the still I am about to become; mimicking its opacity, its still-ness; inscribing, across the surface of my body, photography's ‘mortification’ of the flesh.”<sup>5</sup> Craig Owens

In the mid-nineteenth century, with the proliferation and access to photographic technology, for the bourgeoisie, “to have one's self portrayed was a sign of individual importance.”<sup>6</sup> Before widespread access, only the upper classes could afford to have their likenesses portrayed in painting (often to commemorate an important event such as a marriage or commencement). Sitters had to remain still for extended periods of time while the painter and later the daguerreotype, recorded their resemblance. First in studios before plain or painted backdrops, and later before scenery in the theatre of the outdoors, subjects stood before the camera to be reproduced. While Chopra's performances reclaim and pronounce the stillness initially involved in portraiture, **Yoshio Itagaki** exploits the less-invested snap.

Itagaki uses computer montage to exaggerate the disconnect between person, place, and presentation in our document-obsessed society. He places his smiling subjects in the exotic and incongruous locale of the moon. The bride and groom in wedding dress and tuxedo, and the geisha in a bright pink kimono and wig, signify their participation in culturally defined roles. Itagaki's images highlight the fabrication of experience.

“But it is not sufficient to say that the portrait is the unmediated record of a self-projection, a self constituted as it faces the camera. Clearly, the very presence of the camera alters its object; it is the camera that defines and requires the moment’s very staginess.”<sup>7</sup> Henry M. Sayre

Like Itagaki, **Yi Chen** explores image and the individual in the age of Globalization. Chen witnessed the effects of the economic boom that followed the Chinese Cultural Revolution and its continuing influence on popular culture. In his series, *Generation E*, he paints the images taken from the back pages of popular Chinese magazines in which teens pose for street photographers. Chen refers to this generation as “*packaged* in trendy clothing.” After he downplays their individuality, Chen believes that “all that remains is fashionable attire and the ‘outer shell’ of their transfigured human forms.” However, despite their blurred faces, westernized clothing and postures, the young teens appear fragile in their purchased identities. Their gestures and awkward attempts at posturing are emblematic of the identity-seeking phase of adolescence. They try on various products and empty trends instead of looking inward or to their political ideals.

Foucault proclaims that “our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance.”<sup>8</sup> **Chris Kaczmarek’s** interactive video installation ruptures the relationship between observer and observed. Kaczmarek’s timely project provokes questions about current surveillance methods. *Push Button* incites consideration of the ways in which citizens participate (knowingly or otherwise) in the collection of information and the undefined parameters of how that information can be used.

Upon entering the seemingly private “photo booth” the viewer finds his/her image is being fed into an eye-level monitor with a slight delay. The camera’s bird’s-eye-view recalls the hierarchal and the self-regulatory surveillance methods suggested by Foucault in his prescient observations of our increasingly voyeuristic society. The pleasure of seeing one’s own image from another viewpoint turns to anxiety upon pushing a shiny red button, which causes the screen to flash “recording 15 seconds” as a clock begins to countdown. Like the figures in Chen’s paintings, we are given a moment to pose for our “15 seconds of fame.” Because of the delay, the viewer cannot simultaneously pose for the camera and catch sight of what he or she looks like on the screen. Kaczmarek thwarts the participant’s ability to master his or her own image. The viewer never sees the final tape and is left to wonder about its fate.

Cameras are omnipresent, infiltrating both the public and private domain. We share, spy and self-reflect while posting on Flickr and broadcasting over Youtube, Myspace and Facebook. Digital technologies offer new control as we continue to photograph ourselves until we've perfected the appearance we want to project. Our images become avatars, personifying ideals as they stand-in for the corporeal self.

The act of posing emphasizes an awareness of being observed. Culled from the collective image bank, a pose portrays the desire for self-realization and display. From labor-intensive portrait painting to assembled digital imagery the impulse is the same—to extend our likeness into the public realm, to challenge the passing of time, to create a record of ourselves as flawed, shallow or vulnerable as we may be.

“In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one others want to think I am, the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.”<sup>9</sup>  
Roland Barthes



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Craig Owens, "Posing," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Rubin Suleman, "Dialogue and Double Allegiance: Some Contemporary Woman Artists and the Historical Avant-Garde," in *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press 1998), p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> Henry M. Sayre, "The Rhetoric of the Pose," in *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Owens, "Posing," p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> John Pultz, *The Body and the Lens: Photography 1839 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1995), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Sayre, "The Rhetoric of the Pose," p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 217.

<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 13.





**Alex Forman**

*Theodore Roosevelt, 32nd*, 2004, Carbon Pigment Paper, various sizes



**Amy Talluto**  
*Bottoms Up in Costa Rica*, 2005, Pencil on Paper, 11 1/2 x 18 inches



**Valerie Lamontagne**  
*Becoming Balthus: Les beaux jours*, 2004, Ink Jet Print, 34 x 26 inches



**Kate Clark**  
*The Widower*, 2006, Mixed Media, variable dimensions



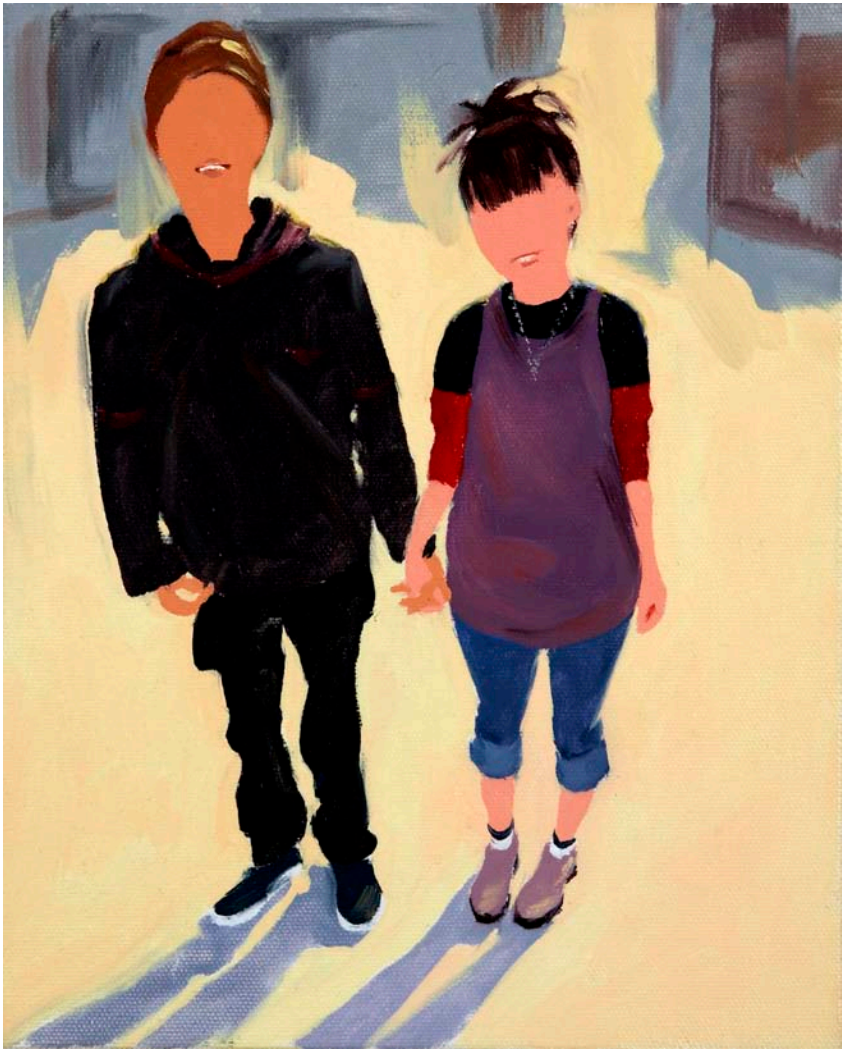
**Nikhil Chopra**  
*Sir Raja II*, 2003, Archival Ink Jet Print, 21 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches



**Yoshio Itagaki**

*Tommy Girl*, 2004, Fuji-Flex Archival Photograph, 40 x 30 inches





**Yi Chen**  
*Generation E*, 2001-2002, Oil on Canvas, 12 x 8 inches



**Chris Kaczmarek**  
*Push Button*, 2006, Video Installation, variable dimensions

## Exhibition checklist:

- 1) **Yi Chen**, *Generation E*, 2001-2002, Oil on Canvas, 12 paintings each 12 x 8 inches, courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery
- 2) **Nikhil Chopra**, *Sir Raja II*, 2003, DVD documenting performance
- 3) **Nikhil Chopra**, *Sir Raja II* 2003, 3 Ink Jet Prints each 21 1/2 inches x 14 1/2 inches
- 4) **Kate Clark**, *Night After Night*, 2007, Mounted Blackbuck & Mixed Media 48 x 32 x 43
- 5) **Kate Clark**, *The Widower*, 2006 Mounted Wildebeest & Mixed Media, variable dimensions
- 6) **Alex Forman**, *Tall, Slim, and Erect: TRUMAN, 33rd, 1945-53*, 2004, Carbon Pigment Print with frame, 50 x 72 inches
- 7) **Alex Forman**, *Tall, Slim, and Erect*, 2004, a selection of medium format contact prints
- 8) **Yoshio Itagaki**, *HoneyMoon: JALPAK*, 2004, Fuji-Flex Archival Color Photograph, 40 x 30 inches
- 9) **Yoshio Itagaki**, *Tommy Girl*, 2004, Fuji-Flex Archival Color Photograph, 40 x 30 inches
- 10) **Chris Kaczmarek**, *Push Button*, 2006, Video Installation, variable dimensions
- 11) **Valerie Lamontagne**, *Alice*, from the series, *Becoming Balthus*, 2004, Archival Ink Jet Prints, various sizes\*
- 12) **Valerie Lamontagne**, *Les beaux jours*, from the series, *Becoming Balthus*, 2004, Archival Ink Jet Prints, various sizes
- 13) **Valerie Lamontagne**, *Cathie*, from the series, *Becoming Balthus*, 2004, Archival Ink Jet Prints, various sizes
- 14) **Valerie Lamontagne**, *Nu jouant avec un chat*, from the series, *Becoming Balthus*, 2004, Archival Ink Jet Prints, various sizes
- 15) **Valerie Lamontagne**, *Nu au repos*, from the series, *Becoming Balthus*, 2004, Archival Ink Jet Prints, various sizes
- 16) **Valerie Lamontagne**, *Thérèse rêvant*, from the series, *Becoming Balthus*, 2004, Archival Ink Jet Prints, various sizes
- 17) **Amy Talluto**, *Bottoms Up in Costa Rica*, 2005, Pencil on Paper, 11 1/2 x 18 inches
- 18) **Amy Talluto**, *Greetings from the Beaches of the Bahamas*, 2005, Pencil on Paper, 14 x 14 inches
- 19) **Amy Talluto**, *Hot Fun in Exotic Belize*, 2005, Pencil on Paper, 11 1/2 x 14 inches
- 20) **Amy Talluto**, *I'll be Waiting for You.....in Hawaii*, 2005, Pencil on Paper, 11 1/2 x 18 inches
- 21) **Amy Talluto**, *Seeing Double in Bermuda*, 2005, Pencil on Paper, 18 x 20 inches

\* produced with support from Banff New Media Institute and the Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec

**Cover:**

Yoshio Itagaki, *Tommy Girl*, 2004 (detail)  
Fuji-Flex Archival Photograph 40 x 30 inches

**Design:**

Andrea Cote and Joelle Jensen

**Catalog available:**

<http://www.lulu.com/content/1078020>

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