



# I HADN'T MET CHELSEA IN PERSON

Hatty Nestor in conversation  
with Heather Dewey-Hagborg



# Hatty Nestor



One of the things I find most intriguing about forensic modelling is the way in which unknowable parts of another's life are amplified. Today, image modification/identification, composite imagery, E-FITS and postmortem drawings are all methods used by law enforcement to apprehend or identify those who cannot be found physically. In this economy of speculative images, impressions are presented as facts. Yet contained within any single forensic image are two different notions of the body: the body that is lost, either missing or wanted or dead, and the body produced by the imagination of the forensic artist. Such an image may perform a third function too, acting as a public memorial to those who are otherwise untraceable. In a law and order context in which forensic portraits are often circulated, it is easy to ignore the fact that forensic portraits are created by individuals, and are vulnerable to human biases.

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*Phone interview conducted between Hatty Nestor and Heather Dewey-Hagborg between New Mexico and Berlin, January 2018.*

Hatty Nestor: What was the process of removing Chelsea's DNA from prison?

Heather Dewey-Hagborg: I hadn't met Chelsea in person. She collected some hair clippings when she was getting her hair cut in prison. She also took two Q-tips and swabbed the inside of her mouth, and mailed these from prison to her lawyer. Then the lawyer sent me a Fed-Ex envelope with the materials. At the time I was working at a lab at the Art Institute of Chicago.

With the early portraits I made, I wanted to show the reductionism in relation to gender and sex in particular. After the first portraits commissioned by Paper Magazine in 2015, the 3rd prints then first were exhibited at the World Economic Forum in 2016, after which Chelsea and I stayed in touch, and worked together on a short graphic short story called Suppressed Images 2016 that we published as part of her clemency campaign. In the comic we forecast the idea of Obama commuting her sentence, and Chelsea being freed and being able to come and see an exhibition of portraits of herself for the first time. We published the comic on the morning of January 17, and then that afternoon





Obama commuted her sentence. It was an unbelievable and emotional experience.

After that, we began developing ideas, drawing on Chelsea's writing, and the discussions we had had in our letters about reductionism and biometric portraiture. Our ideas addressed ancestry and the social construction of race, what else can be produced with this kind of technology, and how to use it proactively. This led to the idea of showing even more variations of her portrait, showing just how subjective the interpretation of DNA data is, and how diverse she could look based on the same information.

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Forensic art's end product – whether a sculpture or image – is always a strange combination of factual scientific data and speculation. As an art-form, it is wide open to personal prejudices and demographic profiling. In 'Giving Remains a Face', a video produced by the television channel News 12, sketch artist Kelly Lawson discusses the emotional and practical elements of her job. Over footage of Lawson in her studio at the Georgia Bureau of

Remains holding a skull – 'not a replica', the viewer is told, 'but the actual skull' – a narrator announces that 'these people were real people, they had spirits, they had real personalities', but that 'who they really are, is a mystery'. Lawson proceeds to demonstrate her process, which involves attaching draft erasers (like an architect uses!) to the skull, and then applying clay to shape the face. 'I don't know sometimes,' she says, 'I just feel like this person had green eyes, so you go with it'. The honesty on Lawson's part is striking, and shows just how susceptible to change our identities are when produced through the eyes of others.

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Hatty Nestor: The first portraits were a pair called Radical Love (2015). After this, you made Probably Chelsea (2017): thirty portraits of Chelsea, which are all aesthetically different, exhibited in Becoming Resemblance at the Fridman Gallery, New York. Looking at them initially you wouldn't necessarily say they're reconstructions of the same subject. They show how identity isn't necessarily fixed to a single outer appearance, or prescribed gender.





Heather Dewey-Hagborg: The portraits are about exploding outmoded ideas of biologically inscribed identity, refuting stereotyped representations of phenotypical characteristics, and using a scientific and data-driven process to show how many different readings there are of the same data.

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In the world of online forensic resources, there are also government websites that function as archives of 'missing persons' for those whose physical status remains precarious. The Georgia Bureau of Remains (GBR), where Lawson works, is run by the State of Georgia's Bureau of Investigation. It was launched in 1940 with the intention of operating as a site of exposure, archive and evidence, where the public can come to view photographs of the missing. The GBR archive is comprised of sketches, photographs and models. While some individuals have substantial case files, many are only accounted for with a description of the last place they were seen. Scrolling through the entries feels like looking at an old-fashioned government website from the late 1990s. Six pages of clay sculptures and

drawings demonstrate the spectral territory forensic portraits occupy: as an important legal inquiry whilst embodying the status of being 'missing', the strange terrain of being neither lost nor found.

I often found myself thinking about shame, in between bouts of extreme nausea and discomfort, at some of the material I've encountered. Grinding my teeth, and feeling physically affected, I realised I was experiencing waves of anxiety over how I could present my findings in a way that did not further erase, subjugate, or define against their will subjects who may have already suffered that fate at the hands of the legal system. After all, there is a parallel that can be drawn between writing about forensic portraits and making them. Both oblige an artist or author to take ethical responsibility when trying to accurately represent the subject in question. And, when it comes to representing the identities of the incarcerated, a writer must take note of the bleak history of, encroachments upon, and manipulations of the body of the prisoner. In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Michel Foucault introduced the production of the 'docile body' within the prison system as 'one that may be subjected, used, transformed,





and improved.' Such a body, Foucault argued, 'can only be achieved through a strict regimen of disciplinary acts'. To improve a prisoner, to mould them into a particular image, the prison system must take from them their right to choose when, how, and if they wish to be seen, by enforcing a regime of compulsory surveillance. With this in mind, any act of representing or viewing images of prisoners, or the wanted, is necessarily fraught.

To avoid being voyeuristic, it felt important to ask myself ethical questions of position, interest and intent. Voyeurism, when aligned with criminality (particularly in popular media), is a discussion often raised within the realm of true crime dramas; death; violence; grievability. It seems we participate in the watching, reading and discussion of such material in part as morbid curiosity which is somewhat primal, whilst also enjoying the political and intellectual frameworks which accompany these topics. Is it the stance of the voyeur to be a dispassionate observer, gripping without demanding emotional labour, consuming true crime from a safe, removed position? Or to quote Sontag, 'a seriousness that fails'? This is not to permit either as a problem per se, but perhaps to note the perversion

it might grant and necessity to acknowledge myself. And indeed many I know are advocates of such material and to remember real, lived lives are central to this consumption. But perhaps the unruly intervention of true crime has important things to tell us about subsistence, contamination and indeed relationality to what can be closest to us.

These questions became most apparent to me when I heard that S-Town, a podcast created in 2017 hosted by Brian Reed which follows the horologist John B. McLemore and apparent associated murder in Woodstock, Alabama, was commissioned to be made into a documentary simply by merit of success. What hard fast role does this podcast play in illuminating the 'criminal' as the archetype of eccentricity, or in this case, perhaps bearer of abuse? What role does the reporter, writer or storyteller bear here? It seemed the assumed abuse of Tyler Goodson in relation to McLemore was omitted and is the complexity central to this story, as opposed to focusing solely on 'true-crime'. If S-town was a straightforward murder mystery, it would be fruitful for adaptation. Yet what need is there to translate the format to the visual image? Is this a signpost of voyeurism, that entertainment of such topics demands further





visibility? Is this transformation a form of neglect?

Once again, the role of these images societally pose questions of value, worth and recognition. If representation is always implicated in and by an ethical framework of the depicted and depicter, how did I contribute to this process through the act of writing? I wanted to use my writing to disrupt and question a system which constructs and governs selfhood of those who are lost; to present the material as something, on the one hand, morally unquantifiable, yet a vital legal method for solving crime.

With the above in mind, I approached the The Georgia Bureau of Remains website cautiously, as it seemed to sit in an ambivalent territory: an unsettling archive of those who might never be found, and a testament to the government's blunt treatment of bodies, archiving them in a database so public it felt almost intrusive. Scrolling through the records, one in particular stuck out: a drawing, and what appears to be a school photograph of a young black man, taken in 1978. Most other individuals only had one image, yet here were two, and I was struck by how similar the drawing was to the photograph. If I had known this individual, I certainly would have been able

correlate the features, and indeed characteristics.

In *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag writes that 'to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.' The clear disparity between the drawing and the photograph made me wonder how, if and when the forensic sketches fulfil their function and help to locate the designated missing, those depicted on such a website would feel about their portrayal. Would the missing man from 1978, as Sontag suggests, feel his identity to be violated by the images that have represented him in his absence? Perhaps, I wonder, this is in part because of the historical moment we live in: a time in which we often come to know ourselves and others intimately through visual imagery, but often also feel alienated by images of our person, and are vulnerable to insecurities over how such depictions may function as stand-ins for our social status, history, likes and dislikes – for our entire lives.





Looking at the gap between the drawing and photograph of the missing man, I was also reminded of Julia Kristeva's reflections on states of foreignness where she describes the strange limbo state between familiarising and not recognising someone as 'foreign': 'At first, one is struck by his peculiarity – those eyes, those lips, those cheekbones, that skin unlike others, all that distinguishes him and reminds one that there is someone there', writes Kristeva in her book, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988). 'The difference in that face reveals in paroxysmic fashion what any face should reveal to a careful glance: the nonexistence of banality in human beings. Forensic portraiture suspends an extreme state of otherness: its spectral creations remind us that 'there is someone there', as Kristeva writes, someone to look for, but that they are also someone who is yet to be found, and may never be.

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Hatty Nestor: How were the portraits received? Do you think you raised a lot of the questions that you wanted it to, about gender and the prison-industrial complex?

Heather Dewey-Hagborg: Radical Love premiered at the World Economic Forum in January of 2016, if I remember correctly. That, especially from an activist angle, was a practical place to begin. The later work, *Probably Chelsea*, is in a way a kind of celebration. It's a celebration of Chelsea's release. It's a celebration of the genetic commonality that we all share. In a sense, it's much lighter and more playful and fun. It's more of an art installation, and also an opportunity for Chelsea to enter into being an artist, and being seen as an artist. In answer to the question, the reception has been positive. The new piece with the thirty portraits is just beginning to travel, so let's see what kind of impact it has. It's a little too early to say, since we've only shown it once for the opening in New York. Now it'll go to Berlin, and Frankfurt, and all over the place after that. So let's see what kind of impact that has.

Heather-Dewey Hagborg is a transdisciplinary artist and educator who is interested in art as research, technology, biopolitics and genetics. She has shown work internationally at the World Economic Forum, the Daejeon Biennale, the Guangzhou Triennial, and the Shenzhen Urbanism and Architecture Biennale. Heather lives in Berlin.

