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RIVA LEHRER

Pandemic Portraits

October 10 – November 28, 2020

For over twenty-five years, I've documenting overlapping cultural movements: the formation of Disability Culture, the burgeoning complexities of sexuality and gender in the queer and transgender communities; and the intersection of these identities with the experiences of people of color. My focus has been on working with those who have experienced stigma and/or trauma, though those narratives may or may not form the basis for a portrait image. Because I work with people who have been made to feel bad or uncomfortable about their physical embodiments, my practice centers on a clear ethical structure based in informed consent.

Creating these portraits demands mutual trust, confidentiality, and patience. My collaborator and I begin with long interviews on the relationship between their physical life and professional production. Participants include artists, dancers, writers, performers, and academics. I create a series of narrative

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sketches based on the interviews; these allow us to discuss the nuances of representation. I work to hand over a significant level of control over how they'll be depicted. None of these works are commissions.

Above all, I try to engender forms of parity between myself and my subject. My recent series, "*Risk Pictures*," begins with 3-hour sittings. I walk out at 2 hours, leaving my subject alone in my house with total control of my home for one to two hours. They can do anything, take anything—I'll never ask. In exchange for this trust, I insist they alter their portraits while I'm gone, with no interference or guidance from me. I can't erase their actions, only respond to their choices.

My portraiture is a form of activism, though through techniques of intimacy, not agitprop. "Political" imagery, especially blatantly angry images, often reduce their subjects to cartoons. I employ metaphor and symbol to depict the private person; to bridge diverse identities; and to render the complicated truth of biography.

Much of my life's work has been to make Disability Culture more visible to mainstream America. Towards that end, I've written *Golem Girl: a memoir*. The book will be published on October 6, 2020

- Riva Lehrer, 2020