

BROOKLYN RAIL

Gillian Wearing: *Life*

By [Osman Can Yerebakan](#)



Gillian Wearing, *Me as Dürer*, 2018. Framed chromogenic print. © Gillian Wearing. Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles, Maureen Paley, London, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Cincinnati Art Museum

October 5 – December 30

Cincinnati, OH

The word “life” is a fine title for any exhibition because, in the end, isn’t everything surrounding us simply *life*? But in the case of Gillian Wearing’s *Life*, which is the largest exhibition of the artist’s work by a U.S. institution, it proves to be a perfectly fitting title right from the beginning. One of the earliest works in Wearing’s career, *Dancing in Peckham* (1994) shows the artist zealously dancing in the middle of a South London mall amidst clueless passersby. The world of commerce encircling her continues to churn as she raises her arms and moves her hips determined in her decision, contributing to the continuous flow of her environment in her detached way. The show-opener demonstrates the British artist’s ability to scrutinize our inherent performance of normalcy behind identities we adopt, a trait which would later define her career as a conceptual photographer.

Presented as part of FotoFocus, Cincinnati’s month-long lens-based art biennial, the exhibition continues with *Snapshot* (2005), a seven-screen installation in which each six-minute-and-fifty-five-second video runs inside a brightly colored large-scale frame, not unlike one protecting a memory captured inside a photograph. The screens overall constitute the sequence of a woman’s life, starting with childhood and ultimately reaching to her final years. Each sequence stars a different actress and the videos fluctuate between moving image and photography, showing their figures posing with slight movements unlike a portrait, but with a certain serenity slower than the regular pace of life. The little girl in the initial film plays a violin, reminding Wearing’s determination to dance in *Dancing in Peckham*, followed in consecutive screens by a demure teenage girl, a seductive young woman by a pool, a mother caressing her baby at her home, a middle-aged woman carrying her remaining willingness for life on her face, an aloof woman in her sixties compulsively eating inside a car, and, eventually, an aged woman sitting on her chair, weary yet peaceful. An old woman narrating parts of her life accompanies the installation, delivering her version of the life we try to grasp through the screens. Her accounts echo with exhaustion and discontent about aging, shaking us with our helplessness towards the passage of time and its irreversibility, but also question the role of photography as a chronicler of life.



Gillian Wearing, *Me as Madame and Monsieur Duchamp*, 2018. Bromide prints in articulated frame. © Gillian Wearing. Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles, Maureen Paley, London, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

The adjacent gallery houses a selection of Wearing's auto-photographs in which she dons different identities through masks, make-up, and costumes. While the characters she previously adopted have ranged from herself in various stages of her life to her own parents, the selection of new works look at art history itself, presenting the artist as Duchamp or O'Keeffe. *Me as Madame and Monsieur Duchamp* (2018) gives Wearing an opportunity to further complicate identity roles and personalities we feel comfortable with only behind props. Presented in the form an enormous two-piece frame necklace, the work presents the artist as Duchamp on one side and his alter ego Rose Sélavy on the other. In line with FotoFocus's open archive theme for this year, the artist replicates two widely-known images of the Dadaist, who embarked on a similar disruption of societal roles by adopting his feminine character. Reenacting Man Ray's photograph of Rose, Wearing piles identities as a woman becoming a man becoming a woman, adding another layer of complexity to what Duchamp had initiated by assuming his woman alter ego in 1920. Combined with a mesmerizingly skillful use of masks and props, the artist becomes the man and the woman he occasionally chose to become. Rose's signature clutching of her coat collar with seduction and Duchamp's mischievously piercing gaze reappear in the artist's body, one that she uses as a blank canvas to paint identities onto.



Gillian Waering, *Me as O'Keeffe*, 2018. Framed bromide print. © Gillian Wearing. Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles, Maureen Paley, London, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

After assuming other identities in her photographs, the artist reverses the idea in *Wearing, Gillian* (2018). For this work, participants who responded to an open call appear before a white background and act out “being Gillian,” donning her signature long flat black hair and her talking face, which is digitally implemented. Created in collaboration with Oregon-based advertisement firm Wieden+Kennedy, the five-minute video delivers the rapid and direct nature of a television ad; however, the slightly haphazard nature of the production and somewhat eerie

presence of the actors with Wearing's face twists the commercial vibe. Throughout the footage, participants, including men and women from different ages and body types, talk about Gillian from a first-person point of view, revealing public and private details about her life. The audience is bombarded with information about an artist who is presented in the video as if she were a well-known celebrity. For an artist who was making work about the ways we publicize our identities long before social media, her most recent work taps onto social dynamics dictated by Facebook posts and Twitter rants, adding a face to the otherwise anonymous declarations of the self behind computer screens.

Contributor

Osman Can Yerebakan

OSMAN CAN YEREBAKAN is a curator and art writer based in New York. Osman holds an MA in Art Management from the Fashion Institute of Technology. Among his fields of interest are fluid states of audience interaction, kinship between literature and fine arts, and performance of identity as political declaration.