



look don't look

BARRIE JONES

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by Christine May

Long before the invention of photography, portraiture flourished as one of the most important genres in the history of art. Traditionally meant to empower and memorialize the elite, portraits have evolved from a luxury product to one that is instantly accessible to anyone with a smartphone. In the exhibition *look don't look*, artist Barrie Jones' vibrant, animated portraits focus on the human figure as a site of complex personal and collective identities. In these videos Jones underscores the way technology mediates our social connections and relationships, and explores the way social media has changed how we express ourselves.

Throughout his career, Jones has experimented with various forms of photography and portraiture and his recent video work is undoubtedly derived from his past projects. For these works, Jones has drawn influence from a range of both contemporary and historical artists, including the early twentieth century German photographer August Sander; both artists sharing an ability to capture the complexity and universality of the subjects of their portraits. Another major influence is the English photographer Eadweard Muybridge whose innovative animated stills inspired the staged, compressed narrative style found in Jones' work. Jones also credits Andy Warhol's portraits and infamous *Screen Tests* (1964 – 66) as a source of inspiration that still resonates deeply with him and continues to influence his own video portraits.

As part of the Vancouver conceptual photography movement of the 1970s and 1980s, Jones has built a diverse career in exploring the spirit and attitudes of young people. This new body of work exudes a natural evolution of his past projects, continuing the exploration of human emotions and the complicated dynamics of relationships, while creating interventions between the subject and the viewer. Using video and projection, *look don't look* features young people, often hired actors, who were asked to perform different emotions or expressions, leaving the audience to wonder if the resulting imagery is staged or authentic.

***Young people, in this particular demographic
especially, embody the present and the future.***

– Barrie Jones

In *COUPLES* (2017 – 2021), 22 real-life couples were asked to address the camera while in a physical circumstance that worked to complicate their ability to stand still and concentrate. For this dual monitor video installation, each couple attempted to compose themselves separately while posing for a portrait together, each exhibiting subtle movements that both strengthen and break their physical connection. As the viewer, we are invited watch this hypnotic narrative as their physical space is disrupted, despite their urge to remain close. By positioning himself as a bystander, Jones comments on the unifying dynamics of romantic relationships that so often can present as disconnected and out of sync.

In **SCREAM DON'T SCREAM** (2017 – 2022), Jones hired young subjects and instructed them when to scream and when to not scream. Presented on two vertical monitors, visitors are able to see contrasting versions of the scream attempt in intense bursts of emotion that last only a few seconds, before returning to their stoic state. As is the case with all of Jones' video work there is no sound, thus intensifying the actor's performed feelings of fear, anger, or terror. Similarly, in **SMILE DON'T SMILE** (2018 – 2022), actors were given the simple directions of when to smile and when not to smile. As the actors work through the many variations of a smile one can have – excited, nervous, silly, forced – Jones underscores the power of the human face to move a viewer, even when the viewer understands that the subject is an actor performing. Both **SCREAM** and **SMILE** beg the question: can an acted emotion be authentic? This question is especially significant within portraiture, a medium typically considered to be an honest or biographical representation of its subject.

In **YOUNG ACTORS EMOTE** (2018 – 2022), actors were instructed to act out various emoji symbols as facial expressions. Jones explains "I found it somewhat ironic and a little humorous having professional actors putting all their acting chops into performing emoji pictograms. In a way, I am asking them to turn those stylized, pictographic emotions back into the authentic human expressions from which they were derived." The overwhelming presence of social media has undeniably impacted human representation, especially self-representation. In this work Jones reminds us how technology has become an indispensable part of our everyday lives, and how real-life emotions are played out by using social platforms.

YOUNG ACTORS CRY (2019 – 2022) is presented on a single monitor located in a small, private room in the north end of the Gallery. For this video, actors were left alone in a studio with directions to bring themselves to tears and to end the work when they chose. Each person took a different approach; some building slowly to eventual tears, while others bursting into tears within 60-seconds. Through these demonstrated feelings, both real and powerful, Jones is asking us to consider the setting in which the heightened emotion takes place. What is real and what is fake?

The Kelowna Art Gallery is thrilled to present *look don't look*, which serves as an invitation to explore the playful, intimate, and multifaceted work of contemporary artist Barrie Jones. The five video works featured in this exhibition highlight the complexities of portraiture and human identity, while driving connections between the subject and the viewer. Through eye-catching visuals and performed environments, Jones remarkably maintains the authenticity and originality of his subjects. The body of work in *look don't look* provides a much-needed public context for visitors to explore the relationship between artist and subject, actor and audience, and the many ways technology continues to impact our social connections.

About the Artist

Barrie Jones

Barrie Jones holds a BFA from the University of British Columbia and an MFA from York University, Toronto. His practice focuses on the human figure as a site of complex personal and collective identities, and on the urban environment and its many intersecting layers of social, economic and personal histories. Jones has long been associated with Vancouver and spent many years teaching photography in the University of British Columbia's department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory. Jones has an extensive exhibition record, and his work is held in numerous collections across Canada.

www.barriejones.ca

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