

# Sources of Self-Regard

[nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/19/arts/black-photographers-self-portraits.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/19/arts/black-photographers-self-portraits.html)

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“I made these Instax images in the back bedroom of my home in the Mission in San Francisco. Before the lockdown, I’d never spent too much time in there; now it’s become a favorite space for meditation and self-reflection. I’ve found strength in being able to hold and see myself at this moment in time — emotionally, spiritually and physically.”

## Looking Inward and Outward

By Deborah Willis

As I write this essay, two events are changing our country — the Covid-19 pandemic, in which more than 100,000 Americans have died (including a disproportionately large number of people of color), and the brutal killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Tony McDade, which gained nationwide attention at a time when images serve as evidence. Against this backdrop of black death, is it even possible to tell a story about identity through photographic self-portraits?

The self-portraits in this collection, serving as a visual response to these unthinkable experiences, show that it is. As I look at these images, I can envision how the photographers shifted their focus to construct new works or culled their own archives to revisit ideas — seeking answers to their own questions about one’s sense of self and responsibility during this unspeakable time.

I learned much about photography and portraiture during my research for my upcoming book, “The Black Civil War Soldier: A Visual History of Conflict and Citizenship.” Having one’s picture taken during the 1860s was not as simple (or inexpensive) a task as it is today; it required planning and collaboration with the photographers. Black soldiers visited studios on campsites and cities to stand in their uniforms with backdrops of war scenes and rifles. They used photography to self-consciously portray their masculinity and bravery in front of the lens, but the very act of being photographed tied them not just to the country’s ideals of democracy and patriotism, but to the notion of freedom itself.

I often think about and reference work — sometimes artistic, sometimes political — when taking my own iPhone selfies or self-portraits with my Lumix. My son, the conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas, and I have spent our lifetime in photography making, critiquing, creating and questioning how images shape our world. In 2008, we collaborated on a self-portrait titled “Sometimes I See Myself in You,” affirming our connection to the camera as we recognize that we are doing the same work simultaneously — looking at beauty and injustice, exploring similar themes using the same lens and the same social justice archives at the same time.

Looking inward and outward at the same time allows me to think about my own responsibility and choices within our society. *Responsibility* — that word has become almost routine, so much in talks, panels and interviews, I am frequently asked about my

responsibility as artist, historian and teacher. Now, I find myself in Zoom meetings, reflecting on my response to the unnecessary racially motivated murders, the pandemic-caused deaths and illnesses, and the protesters striving for change here in the United States. Witnessing world events has become a process of self-reflection for this photographer, who has been “sheltering in place” for 95 days and counting.

In truth, we all have been forced to look at ourselves and our intimate spaces and environments, and to consider our feelings of pleasure, complacency, fear and loss. The self-portraiture genre exposes those moments of vulnerability and the desire to seek the idealized self. There are moments of gloom but hopefulness prevails as the camera is used to document the extremes of emotions.

The impressive range of images featured here overturn the notion of self-portraits as mirrored reflections of the body; they become more reflexive as each photographer engages with the issues of the time. They make an imagined existence legible, establish a sense of being known and transform moments of the past. They explore probing stories about the self, even as they deconstruct and reflect on how the last four months have changed and will continue to shape our world — as we struggle through a global pandemic, unemployment, health disparity and protests focusing on ending police brutality in black neighborhoods. These self-portraits fuse together uncertainty, loneliness, dislocation, joy and discovery, and the results make for deeply insightful storytelling.

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“All the Boys (Profile 1),” 2016, Carrie Mae Weems, via Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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