

IMAGE MAKER



Vintage-looking photos in a Light Work Gallery exhibit challenge our assumptions about the subjects

By Carl Mellor

Past and present come together in (hyphen) Americans, Keliy Anderson-Staley's one-person show at the Light Work Gallery. The show features more than 100 portraits of contemporary Americans, all done in a tintype format introduced in 1856 and little used after the 1930s. The images have an archival quality but easily capture the viewer's attention. And they both depict individuals and a few couples and challenge assumptions based on a person's dress or facial features.

Tintypes were once popular because they were cheap, pretty durable and quickly produced. Some portraits were processed in roughly 10 minutes. To contemporary eyes, tintypes seem faded, gray, quaint. A few images look bleached out.

Yet the contrast between tintypes and contemporary photos is only a starting point for Anderson-Staley's exhibition. She's created a series of portraits that are far from mono-tonal. Various images generate intensity, with that quality coming primarily from a subject's gaze. Some are moody, in a way not usually

associated with photos. Even though virtually no one is seen smiling, this isn't a depressing set of photos. There is vitality in many of the images, especially the larger portraits.

Moreover, the portraits' composition encourages viewers to see the images from a different perspective. One man, with long hair and a flowing beard, wouldn't look exceptional in a current-day photo. In Anderson-Staley's portrait, a new visual possibility emerges: the subject as a biblical figure. Similarly, a shot of a baby isn't the cheery type of photo one sends to relatives. However, the photo's texture doesn't determine the baby's status; she or he is still a precious creature.

In addition, the subjects whose portraits appear in the exhibit represent a cross-section of people living in today's United States: persons whose ancestors came from Europe, Africa and Asia, as well as indigenous people. The images don't minimize differences in the subjects, and there certainly is no goal of conveying sameness. The photos do document diversity in American society and do touch on how we perceive and communicate with each other.

Anderson-Staley employed several strategies within the show. Subjects generally wore everyday clothes, resulting in few of them wearing fancy dresses or jackets and ties. That contrasts with portraits taken during the era when tintypes were popular. Indeed, the exhibition documents that period by displaying a small selection of tintypes from long ago; they are on loan from the Onondaga Historical Association.

Photos of a few subjects appear in various guises. One man, for example, is seen in a suit jacket and also bare-chested. Those two images portray an individual and also focus on context, as we see a person possibly dressed for work in an office and then in a different pose.

In such photos, Anderson-Staley has created a portrait while also raising the issue of the power inherent in photography or another visual medium. Who creates an image and who distributes it? What impact does this have on our view of other people?

The overall show communicates two major points: the essential humanity of the subjects and the lens through which we view other people. By using a photographic format most viewers haven't seen, Anderson-Staley is able to discuss the notion of a lens in a subtle and effective manner. The show both presents many portraits and reflects on how we see other people.

Anderson-Staley will be feted at a reception Thursday, Oct. 6, 5 to 7 p.m., at Light Work, 316 Waverly Ave. The show runs through Oct. 14 and can be viewed Sundays through Fridays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. For more information, call 443-1300.