

RESISTANCE

LAURA SWANSON

CURATED BY AMANDA L. CACHIA
THE LAURIE M. TISCH GALLERY | ON VIEW MARCH 10–APRIL 27

Resistance is a solo exhibition of recent work by New York-based artist Laura Swanson. Over the past decade, Swanson has become known for her examination of the behavior of looking at physical difference and dwarfism, working across various media, including drawing, installation, photography, and sculpture. Four feet tall in stature, the artist often depicts herself in both inviting and disrupting portraits, where she attempts to conceal herself in order to simultaneously resist and call attention to the viewer's gaze. Swanson's work confronts and twists the relationship between subject and viewer to question bias toward the sameness and size of bodies, expectations of portraiture, histories of looking at difference, and assumptions when encountering people with disabilities in everyday life.

The title of Swanson's exhibition, *Resistance*, immediately sheds lights on the artist's practice, where she aims to resist reductive meanings stereotypically associated with representations of people with dwarfism in art history, photography, and popular culture. Her work can also be framed within a history and theory of looking and the oppositional gaze. The concept of the oppositional gaze, first put forward by critical race theorist and activist bell hooks, is where the traditionally passive marginalized subject, who is objectified under a white, male gaze, will instead return that gaze to claim agency.¹ Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has also focused on the power of the gaze, particularly as it is oppressively directed toward disabled bodies.² Swanson's work offers a visual play on the complexities of redirecting this gaze.

Anti-Self-Portraits (2005-2008) is the first in Swanson's portrait series that begins to grapple with the complexity of the gaze. In each photograph, the artist has partially obscured or covered over her face and body in different domestic scenes, denying permission for the viewer to make eye contact, but also to shield and protect Swanson herself. In one photograph, we see her standing in a hallway, almost completely covered from head to thigh by a large brown coat attached to a coat hook on a wall. In another, a large red-and-white-checkered bedroom pillow covers her entire body as she sits on a bed. In what has become one of the artist's most iconic images to date, we also see her face and upper torso covered by shaving cream as she rests in a bathtub in another photograph. Through these images, Swanson counters the long history of exploitation of people with marginalized bodies to be looked upon as a human curiosity. The artist denies her identity through concealment and thus questions the conventions and expectations of portraiture that typically allow the viewer to gaze upon the open face of a posed sitter. She does this through humorous and theatrical staging of her body as it engages with various objects, quickly dismissing the suggestion that her body might be passive in these images. *Anti-Self-Portraits* is actually the antithesis of this, as Swanson performs her body in rather inviting contexts and guises in order to playfully control the exchange of looking.

Swanson's continued interest in reframing the composition of people with dwarfism by using her own body fed into her next series, *Hope, NY* (2011-2015), which began as a personal collection of anti-selfies that she created for her friends and family on social media. All of the images in this series were taken in places where the artist has lived, visited, or worked, as indicated by the title, which is a portmanteau-like expression combining her former and current residences of Hope, RI, and New York, NY. She used aspects from *Anti-Self-Portraits* to amuse her friends and mock the "selfie," which has become a ubiquitous format

of immediate self-expression activated through our mobile phone culture. Art historian Derek Conrad Murray has said that the selfie is “popularly regarded as a shallow expression of online narcissism...yet it flourishes as one of the most effective outlets for self-definition.” By drawing on a critical history of feminist representational politics, Conrad Murray suggests that the selfie is in fact a “politically oppositional and aesthetic form of resistance.”³ In the case of *Hope, NY*, Swanson once again resists the conventions of portraiture by humorously critiquing the present-day phenomenon of the selfie.

In *Uniforms* (2014-2015), a series of drawings, portraits, and life-sized mannequin figures, Swanson is depicted wearing seven uniforms altered to fit her body. The artist’s choice of uniforms traditionally fully cover the body for functional reasons or cultural significance, and they include garments for a fencer, welder, shaker, plague doctor, and beekeeper, in addition to a burqa and what one would conventionally wear in a time of mourning in Western social and cultural contexts. She chose to dress in these specific uniforms as they offered this maximum coverage of her body, which illustrates the desire for ultimate privacy and agency. Through *Uniforms*, Swanson examines whether a reduction in scale can transform iconic uniforms into visual amusement when worn by a body with dwarfism. She asks, “In their respective contexts, like an adult male welding in a workshop or an adult woman wearing a black dress and veil at a funeral, would anyone question the utilitarian or cultural value of their uniforms? So if a short-statured adult, such as one with dwarfism, was seen wearing the same uniforms, does it transform into a humorous costume? I find it compelling that a simple shift of scale could change something from serious and significant to entertaining and illogical.”⁴

While Swanson’s uniformed mannequins are set up on pedestals against a standard white gallery wall, or float in two-dimensional space as drawings on white paper, the photographs of the artist dressed in these same uniforms are a striking contrast. This theatrical series experiments with idealistic clichés found in portraiture, most often seen in editorials and commercial promotion, or taken for special occasions, including the high school senior portrait. Referencing both contemporary portraits and Romantic-era paintings of a figure set against a dramatic landscape, Swanson digitally composited herself wearing the uniforms in front of images she found on Google by searching for “epic landscapes.” By appropriating these visual conventions in the *Uniforms* portraits, she examines the ways in which art history, photography, and popular culture have established idealistic notions (such as beauty, power, and prominence) as the standard practice in portraiture. Swanson further complicates the desires and expectations of the portrait by depicting her own idealized reality—one in which an atypical body is protected from the gaze through the atypical strategy of wearing uniforms that shield the entire body.

By continuing to conspicuously conceal her body to the viewer, Laura Swanson's humorous and poignant works in *Resistance* question our habits and motives behind looking at difference.

Written by Amanda L. Cachia

For more information, visit: lauraswanson.com and amandacachia.com

¹ bell hooks, “The Oppositional gaze: Black female spectators” in *Black looks: Race and representation*, Boston: South End Press, 1992.

² Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How we look*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

³ Derek Conrad Murray, “Notes to self: the visual culture of selfies in the age of social media,” *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 2015, Vol. 18, No. 6, pp. 490-516.

⁴ Amanda L. Cachia, “Interview with the artist,” 2015.