

JEROEN NELEMANS

The Serial Portrait

08/21 - 09/29, 2023

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SOME OF HIS PARTS

During a recent internet flirtation with the torso of a gay man claiming to be a decade or so younger than me, the conversation drifted towards our respective “coming out” narratives. Interestingly, the young man said he had two: when he came out online and when he came out AFK, or away-from-keyboard. I was struck by his use of the acronym, which I had primarily only read in the context of a hybrid workplace. For him, AFK was a term preferred over IRL, or in-real-life, as the latter implies that life online isn’t “real” and, by extension, opens up a whole array of questions about the nature of reality that nobody really wants to get into anyway - at least not on Grindr.

Within his 2023 exhibition “The Serial Portrait” at Wichita State University, Jeroen Nelemans presents two bodies of work (I See You Too, Young Bear and The Serial Portrait) that crystalize certain particularities of what has become an increasingly common rite of passage for queer people finding themselves and each other during this advanced stage of techno-capitalism: the virtual sexual encounter. Though common, such rites of passage are nevertheless formative to the queer construction of one’s sexuality and selfhood. So it is only fitting that Nelemans would choose to embark upon creating his most personal and revealing work to date with a particular emphasis on form and figuration.

Queer theory questions and destabilizes categorizations of personhood once thought to be fixed (like gender or family), pointing towards the ways in which certain subjects or elements of our subjectivity are pre-authored, co-authored, authored over time, or (as we might say today) crowd-sourced.

Nelemans’s series of works titled I See You Too, Young Bear features images of the artist from nearly twenty years ago. More specifically, they are screenshots of Nelemans taken unbeknownst to him by a man he used to chat with on the early-internet cruising platform ICUII (pronounced “I See You, Too”). Nelemans’s former chat-mate shared the screenshots with him upon reconnecting online in 2018 and apparently the man had kept an elaborate digital archive of images captured during routine encounters on the ‘00s video messaging platform, titling the images with the date and time of their screen-capture. For Nelemans, who used the profile name “Young Bear,” the revelation was rife with poetic potential: the return of the not-so-repressed. There he was, presenting himself to himself nearly twenty years later, tantalizing and teasing with all the first-blush naiveté of the early internet itself. How could he not photograph the moment?

What we, the audience, see in the resulting I See You Too, Young Bear artworks is a digital photograph of Nelemans’s computer screen, upon which he has opened the original screenshots in Photoshop and photographed them one-by-one. Like a time-warp bringing us fully into the present, piercing through each of Nelemans’s images is the flash of his own digital camera glaring against the computer screen itself. Physical prints of these photographs were then produced, sandwiched between two acrylic sheets, and later placed upon small, handmade acrylic shelves in the gallery. The resulting works are not too dissimilar in scale or crisp, glossy texture to that of an iPad, an image-carrying device we regularly cradle or curl up with today. In reproducing and making tangible the original screenshots, Nelemans performs a lovingly restorative gesture towards his younger self; reclaiming the images as his own and publicly re-presenting the intimacy of these images not with shame, but as fully integrated into his own self-narrative and work as an artist.

It’s important to note that Nelemans hasn’t always made work like this. Known for his colorful LED light-boxes featuring geometric abstractions, Nelemans has only recently allowed himself to delve into more personal subject matter within his artwork. Relocating to Salina, Kansas, from Chicago allowed Nelemans the opportunity to shift his practice from a primarily commercial context to an academic one, emboldening Nelemans to embrace his queerness within his art practice.

Nelemans’s newfound directness in his exploration of queerness and autobiography at first struck me as ironic, particularly given the relative conservatism of the Kansas political climate surrounding gender and sexuality to that of Chicago. Could it be that we queer people become too comfortable when living in as open of a society as Chicago? Perhaps we forget the uniqueness of our existence, take for granted the likelihood of mutual recognition. Under more isolated circumstances, our cruising eye must sharpen. When queerness is more scarce, maybe its moments of emergence are more abrupt, torqued by surprise.

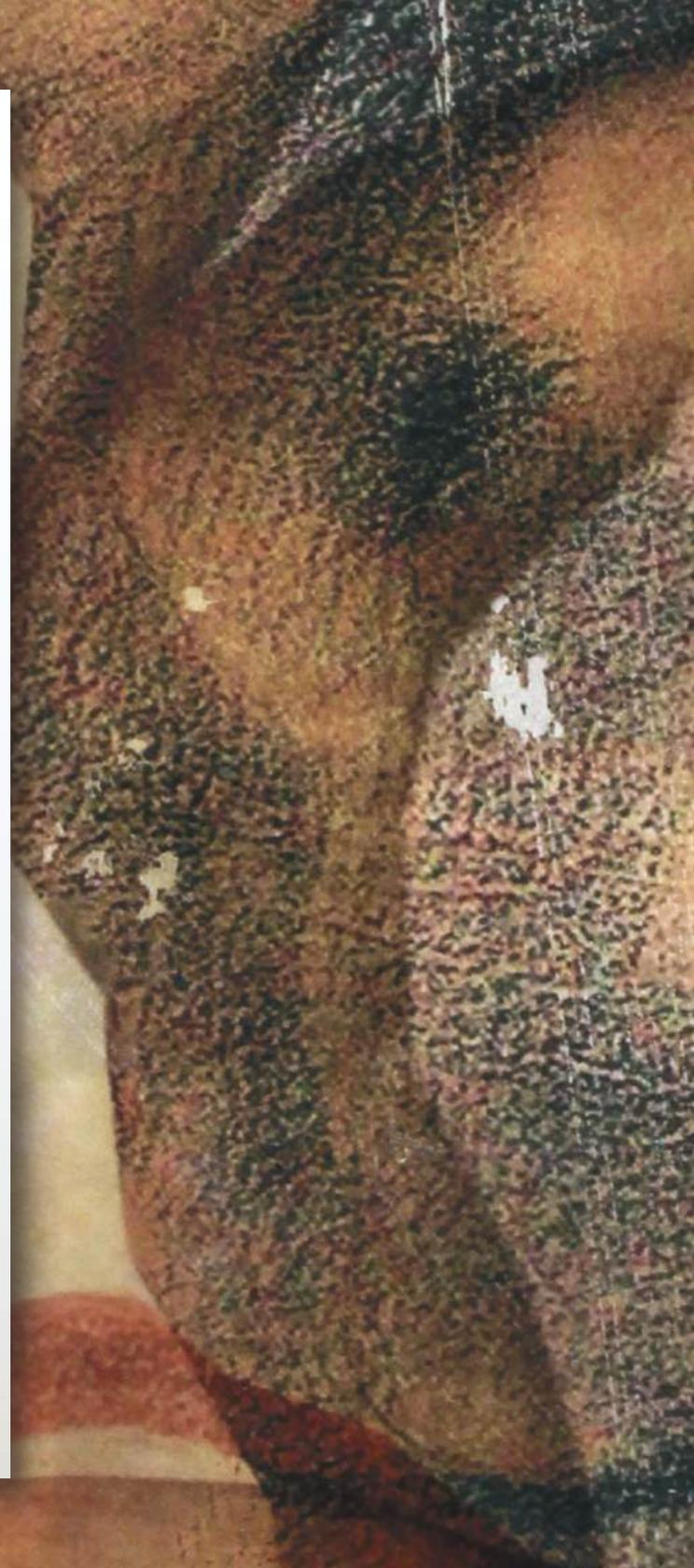
It is with this keen cruising sensibility that Nelemans accumulated a small archive of digital material that would later figure into his other recent body of work, The Serial Portrait. Fascinated by the Google Art Project upon its launch in 2011, a platform which allows for Google Earth style meanderings through museums all over the world, in 2013 Nelemans began collecting his own screen-grabs off the platform of the all-too-rare artworks that depict nude men interacting with each other in some capacity - discovering only nine such artworks across all of his virtual wanderings.

Nelemans came across this small archive of appropriated Google Art Project imagery while living in Kansas, nearly a decade later. In 2019, perhaps inspired by the re-emergence of his own image from the archives of another, Nelemans felt compelled to render these forgotten digital nomads anew, as well. Instead of subjecting the images to additional rounds of digital manipulation, however, Nelemans has opted for an analogue approach - printing the images on paper and utilizing an acrylic-medium photo-transfer technique to begin excerpting and collaging their parts upon wooden board. Printing the images at different opacities has allowed Nelemans the ability to merge and hybridize bodies, giving the forms an orgiastic feeling underscored by the sensation of being animate, or at some stage of fetal-like mutation. The resulting figures are fleshy and muscular, sexy and grotesque, psychological and intensely physical.

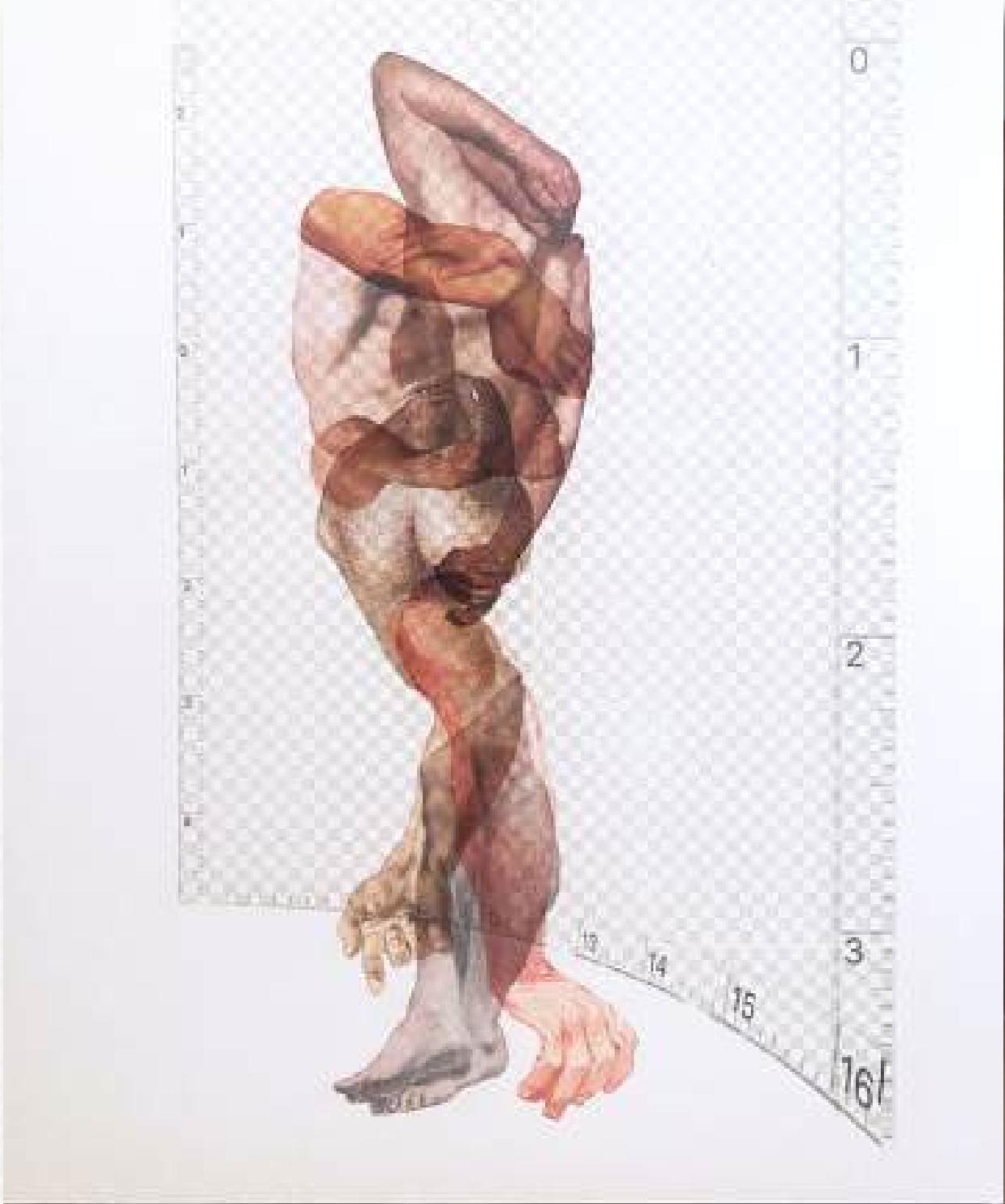
Appearing in several of the works is the presence of the greyscale grid of a digital Photoshop workspace, what is known as “the translucent layer” - a visual indicator of nothingness, a void. Rendered and positioned differently within individual artworks, the checker-board pattern becomes an engulfing figure in of itself, while also having the paradoxical effect of grounding and giving shape to the space surrounding each figure. That space, however, is entirely virtual and interchangeable, as the translucent layer also implies transportability or the endless allowance for overlay. It is here that Nelemans finds an apt visual metaphor for not only our virtual realms of mutual-discovery, but for the queer, messy process of evolution, transience, and becoming that our virtual lives allow for.

After all, for how many have I, too, twisted and contorted myself into impossible images? To how many have I also been a curated assortment of parts and potential? And, from all that, what have I learned and experienced, who have I become, AFK, IRL?

- Danny Orendorf, Art Writer and Senior Director of Programs & Engagement at The Contemporary Austin

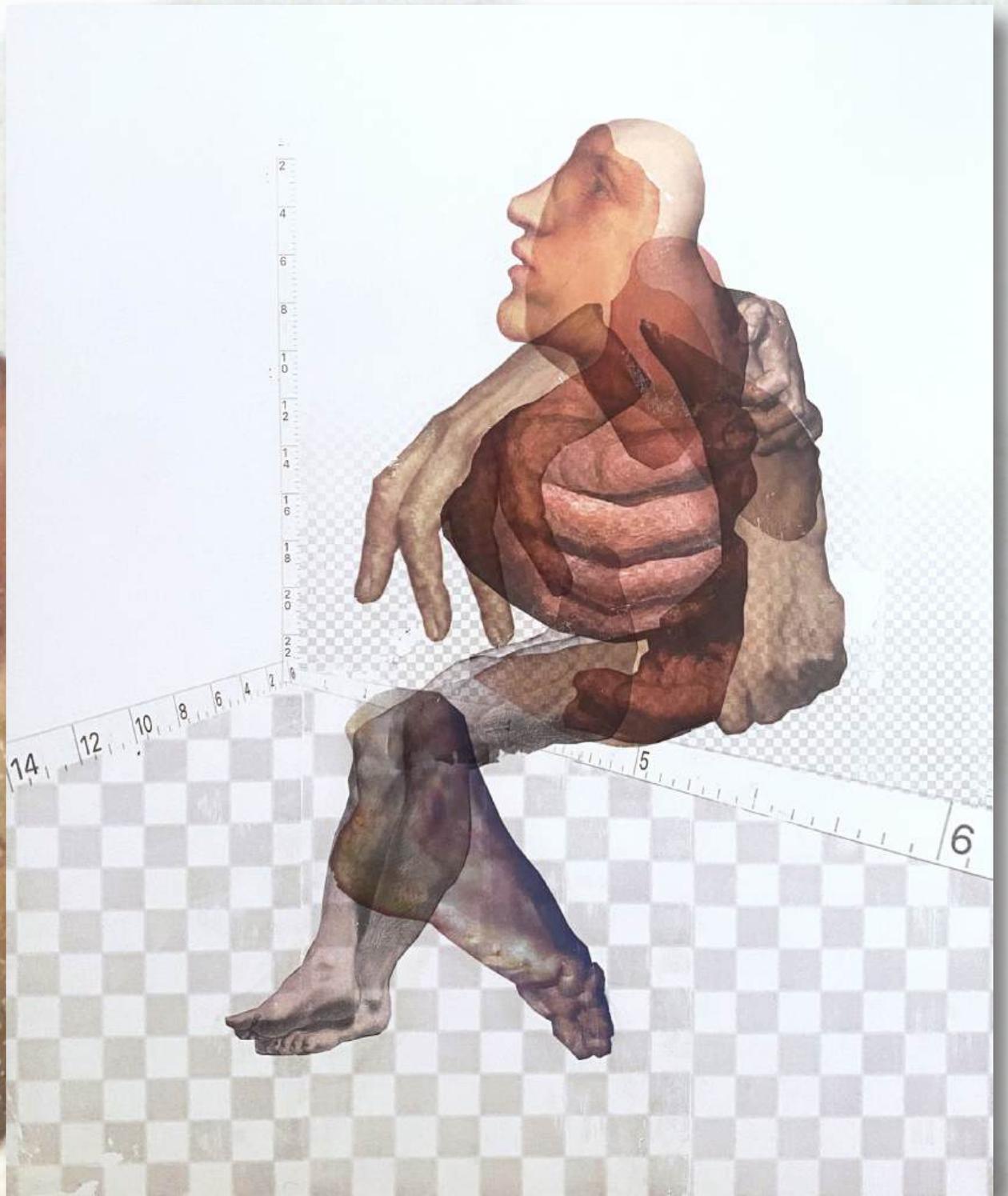








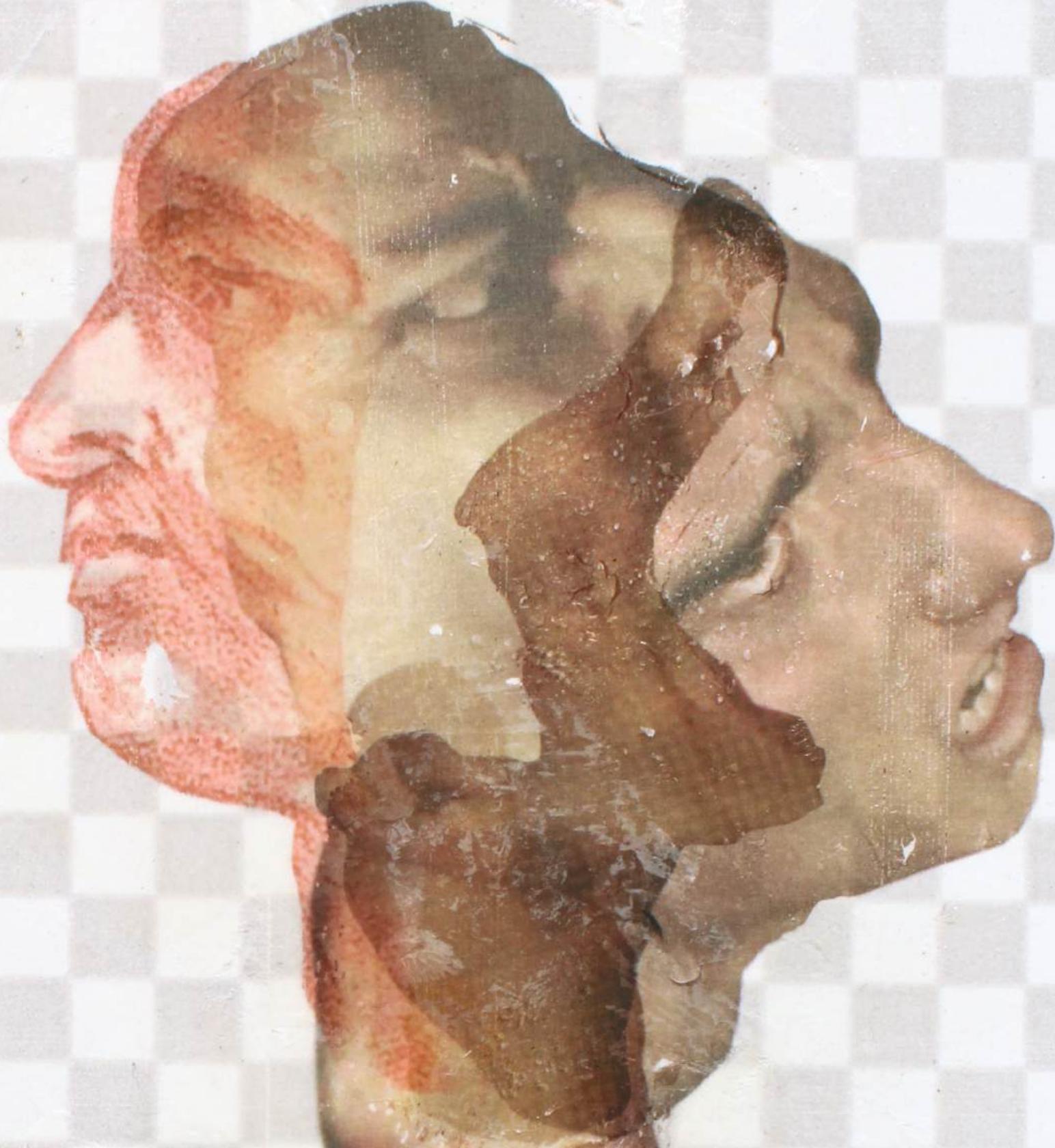












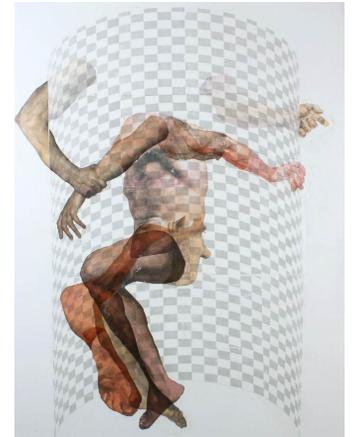
THE SERIAL PORTRAIT



The Serial Portrait - June 4
24 x 20 x 1 in
Wooden Board,
Image Transfers, Acrylic Medium



The Serial Portrait - June 9
24 x 20 x 1 in
Wooden Board,
Image Transfers, Acrylic Medium



The Serial Portrait - July 12
48 x 36 x 2.5 in
Wooden Board,
Image Transfers, Acrylic Medium



The Serial Portrait - June 5
24 x 20 x 1 in
Wooden Board,
Image Transfers, Acrylic Medium



The Serial Portrait - June 10
24 x 20 x 1 in
Wooden Board,
Image Transfers, Acrylic Medium



The Serial Portrait - June 7
24 x 20 x 1 in
Wooden Board,
Image Transfers, Acrylic Medium



The Serial Portrait - June 11
24 x 20 x 1 in
Wooden Board,
Image Transfers, Acrylic Medium

The Serial Portrait - July 3
48 x 36 x 2.5 in
Wooden Board,
Image Transfers, Acrylic Medium



The Serial Portrait - June 8
24 x 20 x 1 in
Wooden Board,
Image Transfers, Acrylic Medium



The Serial Portrait - July 29
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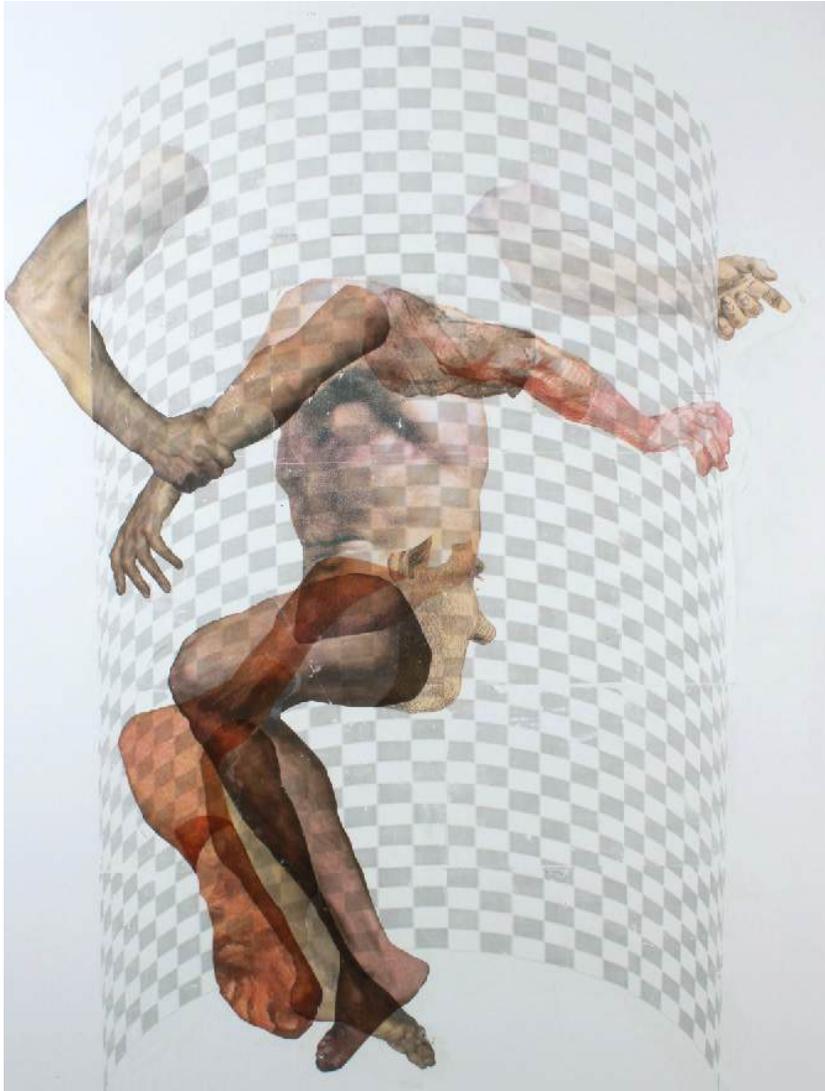


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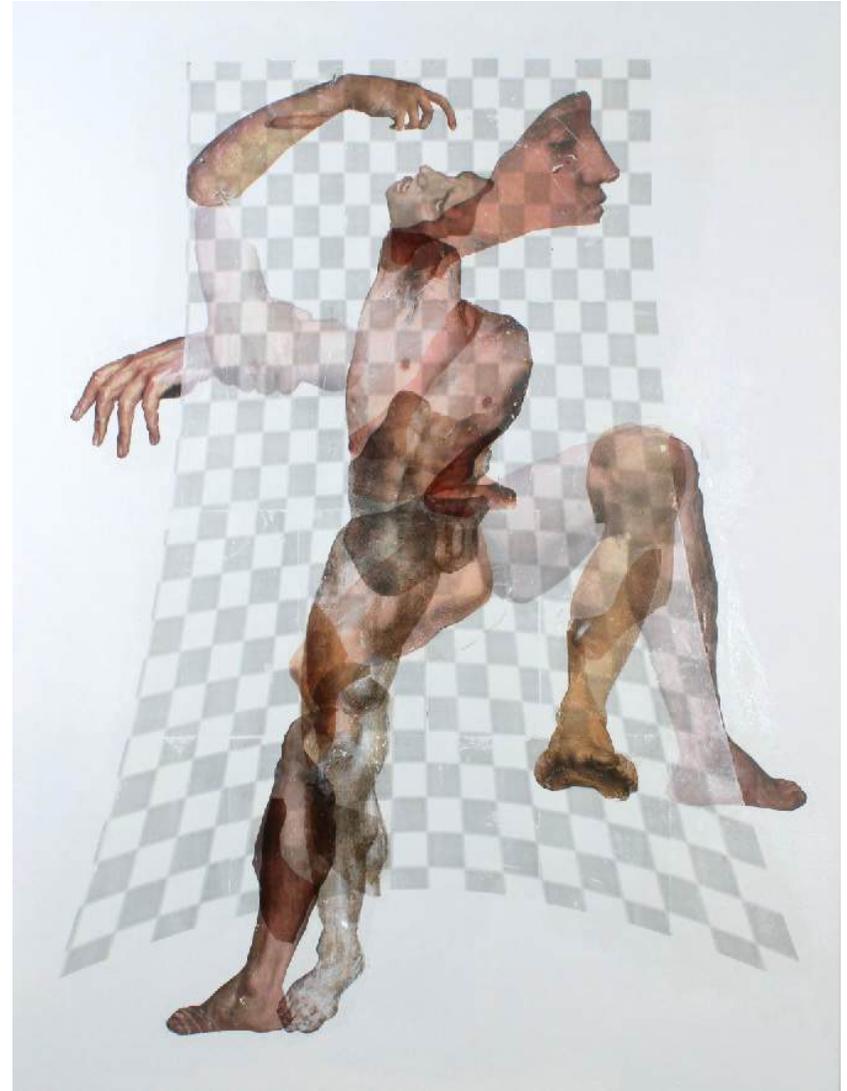


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