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COLLECTOR DAILY

Ken Ohara, Extreme Portraits 1970-1999 @Miyako Yoshinaga

By [Loring Knoblauch](#) / In [Galleries](#) / April 5, 2017

JTF (just the facts): A total of 26 black and white photographic works, framed in black and matted, and hung against white walls in the main gallery space, the smaller second room, and the back office area. All of the works are gelatin silver prints, made in 1970/1998 or 1998/1999. The prints are sized 24×20 or roughly 16×13; no edition information was available.

The show also includes 1 multi-panel photographic work, 1 folded album, and a selection of photobooks. The multi-panel work comprised of 81 gelatin silver print panels, made in 1970/1993. It is sized roughly 94×77. The folded album has two postage stamp sized gelatin silver prints for each day of the year. It was made in 1971-1972. A special edition of *with* is also a folded album, including 123 RC prints. It was made in 1998.

A small catalog of the show has been published by the gallery. (Installation shots below.)



Comments/Context: Whether we attribute the conceptual invention of the photographic typology to Bernd and Hilla Becher in the mid 1960s or simply credit them with adding painstaking structure and objective rigor to an earlier idea, it's clear that the sub-genre counts them among its critical inventors. As they applied their strict vision to the vanishing industrial architecture in Germany and elsewhere, they deliberately pared away surrounding context to get to the essence of elemental form, and in the process, they identified (and documented for posterity) patterns and repetitions in the water towers, factories, and mining infrastructure that had heretofore been overlooked.

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While the intentional standardization of the typology has, in the past 50 years since the Bechers got started, been widely utilized by many of their original students and countless photographers around the globe, its application to the human form has been less common. Of course, for this specific subject matter, we can go back before the Bechers to standardized government images of all kinds (identification cards, passports, criminal mug shots etc.), and many might point to Thomas Ruff's deadpan color portraits from the mid-1980s or Tomoko Sawada's more recent iterative explorations of identity as highpoints in contemporary typological portraiture. But the art historical arc of this conceptual approach to the human form really needs to include the Japanese photographer Ken Ohara and his 1970 series *ONE* as one of the landmark bodies of work in the genre. This show unearths Ohara's images and gives them the spotlight once again, connecting us back to the 1974 *New Japanese Photography* show at MoMA and reminding us of his rightful early place in the overall timeline.

ONE is an unusual project in that it reduces the human face down to a closely cropped arrangement of unsmiling eyes, nose, and mouth, without any other surrounding hair or clothing to give us personality clues. Ohara made hundreds of these portraits in New York during the single year of 1970, and ultimately published them in an innovative full bleed photobook that included page after page of faces – it was so thick and bulky that some likened it to a Manhattan telephone book.

The fascinating thing is that the darkness of the prints served to equalize the faces, in many cases making it hard to accurately identify either race or gender. Ohara's process of portraiture actively removed the usual human definers and categories, the tiny nuances of bodily form (the thickness of eyebrows, the presence of freckles, the fullness of lips, the brightness of eyes) becoming the most prominent features inside his strict headshot framework. A set of larger prints made in 1998 further highlighted these physical details and gave the individual prints more heft on the wall.

Seeing these images decades later, they still have an engaging intensity, the paring down of faces to their elemental component parts still a radical and unexpected way to look at humanity. An extra large 9×9 grid of prints coming together to form one wall-covering face (entitled *Grain 115*) reinforces the bold, confrontational nature of these portraits – the sitters stare right at the viewer with unflinching directness, and when the shots are enlarged to such massive scale, their presence is even more dominating.

A second portraiture project by Ohara from nearly thirty years later provides a smart foil for the images from *ONE*. In *with* (from 1999), Ohara took hour long portraits of various friends and family, and even though many tried their best to stay still during the extended exposures, each face dissolves into blur from the subtle movement during the shot. The effect is something like watery erasure, the details of the surroundings remaining crisp while the critical facial features and expressions of the subjects are removed. The sitters seem to slip into the fabric of time, their presence documented but their identities and personalities elusive. So the two projects provide a kind of back and forth balance – in *ONE*, Ohara explored the limits of what a simple face can tell us, and in *with*, he did the conceptual opposite, making portraits that show us everything but the identifiers of faces.

“Extreme portraiture” (as evoked in the show's title) seems like an appropriate moniker for Ohara's consistent underlying rigor. These are projects that exemplify a thoughtful conceptual deconstruction and rebuilding of photographic portraiture. In both, Ohara seems to be testing the edges of what is possible, searching for the behavior of the medium found at its limits, both philosophically and technically. In systematically experimenting with what a portrait does and does not communicate, he has forced us to extrapolate those questions to ourselves, probing the very nature of what constitutes identity.

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Collector's POV: The works in this show are priced as follows. The 24×20 prints from *ONE* are \$5000 each, while the 16×13 prints from *with* are \$3500 each. The large grid is \$48000, while the folded album is \$50000

and the special edition photobook of *with* is \$40000. Ohara's work has had little consistent secondary market history in the past few years, with only a handful of lots changing hands. For those lots that have sold, prices have ranged between roughly \$500 and \$5000, but given so few transactions, gallery retail likely remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.

