



Top: Nadia Lee Cohen, *HELLO, My Name Is* (installation view) (2022). Image courtesy of the artist and Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua and Charles White.

Bottom: Nadia Lee Cohen, *Georgia May, North Hollywood, Los Angeles* (2020). Wall vinyl, 120 x 144 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua and Charles White.

diffuse manner. In a series of wall reliefs made with urethane, resin, and other materials, all titled (*Portrait Vain German* (2020–21), faces emerge from the works' bruised surfaces like death masks. A contemporary colloquialism teaches us that to "unmask" someone is to reveal the truth about a person. But the mask is also an avatar of the self that touches both what is within and what is without, an instrument that annuls the lines dividing the living and the dead, the visible and the obscene. Upson understood that in these capacities, the mask might act as an interloper in the borderlands, comprising the obscure landscape of one's own "yuck."

1. Paul McCarthy, "Interview with Kaari Upson," in *Kaari Upson: Good Thing You Are Not Alone*, ed. Margot Norton (New York: New Museum, 2017), 25.

2. McCarthy, 25.

## Nadia Lee Cohen at Jeffrey Deitch

May 22–August 13, 2022

For the duration of Nadia Lee Cohen's exhibition, *HELLO, My Name Is*, an elliptic, motorized dry cleaning rack and airport conveyor belt squeaked and clacked along at the center of the gallery. Fifteen bins rotated around the belt, each carrying an odd, unappealing collection of vintage items—cologne, motel keys, pantyliners, Sun-In, and a Ziploc bag containing two slices of bacon. Most importantly, each bin held a thrifted nametag, assigning each group of "belongings" to one of the 15 photographic portraits hung around the room. Jeff is a Nixon supporter;

Wanda has her period; nearly everyone smokes.

With the help of Hollywood-grade prosthetics and costuming, Cohen transformed into each of the 33 total characters in the portrait series (also titled *HELLO, My Name Is*). She collected the nametags that inspired the portraits at thrift stores and flea markets—pinned to each of the characters' chests, the nametags also identify their place of employment (among them Pizza Hut, Arby's, and Payless). These nametags, though, once belonged to real working-class people, who remain unknown to Cohen. She has appropriated and then reimaged their identities in painstaking, unflattering detail, spending time in a makeup chair to articulate details of their imagined physicality—their weight, wrinkles, blemishes, and perspiring skin. In making this work, Cohen inhabited the bodies of an imagined working class, creating high-production photos that masquerade as quick mall or yearbook portraits, the figures all posed on a wooden stool before the same fawn-colored backdrop.

These portraits are a far cry from those in Cohen's series *Women* (2016–21), on view in the second gallery, which mostly features recognizable, high-profile women from Cohen's circle (Cohen has both modeled for and photographed major commercial campaigns<sup>1</sup>). Among the famous faces are model Georgia May Jagger, of-the-moment actress Alexa Demie, and popstar Charli XCX. They are depicted with all the pageantry of Cohen's editorial campaigns—

Jagger's portrait in particular could have been lifted from Cohen's recent campaign for Kim Kardashian's shape-wear line, SKIMS. The subjects in *Women* are pictured mid-action on full, cinematic sets: glistening and partially nude, they often recline by the pool, professionally lit and accented by background extras. That is to say: they are built out, and their worlds are built out around them. The elevated photographic treatment of women with real-world status makes the divide between this group and Cohen's imagined working class in *HELLO, My Name Is* all the more glaring. Exhibited together, these bodies of work seem oblivious to class dynamics. They reinforce the cheap, easy tropes of visual hierarchy—and not because the artist was underscoring how photography, like society, is far less than democratized. In fact, there is little indication that Cohen intended for these works to comment on class at all.

Deeper in the galleries, a grid of videos featuring Cohen as 24 of the characters in the *HELLO, My Name Is* series purported to reveal "the intimate stories and truths behind each character."<sup>2</sup> But the display effectively blended them into a chorus. The short videos all played at once, the characters each miming speech while a separate, looping audio track rotated only a few seconds of their quippy dialogue at a time—"It's all upfront with me. Except there's just as much behind!" says Big Kat, patting her hips. The videos, like the images, became more about spectacle than "intimate truths," their interest hinging on the knowl-



edge or recognition of the fact that the characters are all Cohen.

The press release boasts that “in sharp contrast to the Facetune, filters, and Photoshop self-portraits of social media, Cohen adds lines and double-chins and love handles to her subjects[,] coloring in the pain and loss and heartbreak of their lives.”<sup>3</sup> Big Kat and Jeff have swollen, fleshy fingers and fake double-chins; Jackie has a pronounced prosthetic nose and high, penciled brows; Brenda and Teena’s skin is painted with blemishes. This body of work was made in 2021, the same year that Cohen and her father appeared in all Gucci on the cover of the luxury fashion magazine *Numéro Berlin*,<sup>4</sup> underscoring the fact that Cohen is punching down, involving herself in revealing the (imagined) vulnerabilities of others while not implicating herself in any capacity, disavowing a critical position in the process.<sup>5</sup>

This is where Cohen’s approach to the character self-portrait fails to achieve what artists like Gillian Wearing, Nikki S. Lee, Genevieve Gaignard, Tommy Kha, and earlier, Claude Cahun, have done in this genre. These photographers have used their bodies to investigate and express intimate and urgent ideas (or cultural assumptions) about their identities as they relate to gender, family, diaspora, and race. In her 2003 series *Album*, Wearing employed fabrication experts to create silicone masks used to reconstruct old family photos, becoming not only her family members but also becoming herself again

as a toddler and teen. In *Projects* (1998–2001), Lee literally embedded and lived amongst various subcultural groups, transforming her appearance, dress, and mannerisms in an attempt to assimilate—but the images are also about her own identity as a South Korean woman living in the U.S., about never quite fitting in. By contrast, Cohen creates caricatures, mostly because she lacks a real stake in the matter.

Cohen has insisted that her photographic world “doesn’t reside in the same world that we live in,” and is “a much freer place to live.”<sup>6</sup> But both of the bodies of work on view seem to replicate the stark inequities of our own world: Cohen populates her imagined world by co-opting the identities of real people who have undoubtedly experienced the struggles of exploitative capitalism and systemic classism, racism, and sexism. As the show came to a close in August, the gallery shared a goofy, eight-minute video about the exhibition, co-written by Cohen, on Instagram.<sup>7</sup> An actor in costume as Cohen’s “Jeff,” narrates the satirical gallery tour. The post made the working class into a punchline, describing Jeff as “one of Arby’s four part-time managers.”<sup>8</sup> Neither the PR video nor the work itself aims its critique at the systems of power and inequity that govern our lives (or the role that photography can play in reinforcing them)—and, as a result, both are ultimately more painful than satirical. For Cohen to occupy a body malleable and unmarked enough that it can serve as a “blank slate” is a privilege

of mobility that necessitates certain structural advantages (beauty, wealth, whiteness, et al.). Unfortunately, she exercises that power to imagine a world that merely replicates the deep inequities of our own—a project only possible in the absence of empathy and regard for the profound stakes of photographic representation.

1. Cohen, undoubtedly, has a strong editorial eye, but her images are also derivative, perhaps most of the photographs of Larry Sultan and Philip-Lorca diCorcia—*Richie, Brooklyn, New York* (2020) is a dead ringer for diCorcia’s *Marilyn; 28 Years Old; Las Vegas, Nevada*; \$30 (1990–92).

2. *HELLO, My Name Is*, press release, Jeffrey Deitch, 2022, <https://deitch.com/los-angeles/exhibitions/nadia-lee-cohen-hello-my-name-is>.

3. *HELLO, My Name Is*.

4. NUMÉRO & NUMÉRO HOMME BERLIN (@numeroberlin), “NUMÉRO BERLIN / THE „ALTER“ ISSUE — / GET YOUR COPY! / Models @nadialeelee with her dad,” December 10, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXUEjxqsWb2/>.

5. To be sure, Cohen does appear as herself in the show—just once across the two groups of photographs on view. In *Nadia, North Hollywood, Los Angeles* (2020), included in *Women*, she is glamorously made up, sporting big hair and small red panties.

6. Jyni Ong, “Nadia Lee Cohen on how she became Nadia Lee Cohen,” March 8, 2019, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/nadia-lee-cohen-photography-international-womens-day-080319>.

7. Jeffrey Deitch (@jeffreydeitchgallery), “NEW! Explore Nadia Lee Cohen’s ‘Hello, My Name is’ exhibition via @nowness with host Jeff,” Instagram, August 17, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChXf6CfF7bR/>.

8. “Culture Catcher,” August 17, 2022, produced by Fabien Colas and Malcolm Duncan, video, 8:09, <https://www.nowness.com/story/culture-catcher>.