2. William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, eds. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed January 17, 2022, https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/venus-and-adonis/the-poem/#Ven-1159.

3. Madhavi Menon, *The woman's part: desire and sexuality*, *The Week*, November 8, 2015. https://www.theweek.in/columns/guest-columns/desire-and-sexuality.html.

Sam Richardson at Human Resources

October 9–24, 2021

Sam Richardson's recent exhibition of photographs at Human Resources, *(What I've Realized About Coping and Coalescing)*, was largely framed as a pandemic-era body of work, but about half of the pictures were made prior to 2020. Based on research into the Catholic patron Saint Wilgefortis—who was ostensibly crucified by her father after she prayed to be made "repulsive" to prevent her impending nuptials (and God answered her prayer in the form of a beard)[1]—these earlier images explore notions of gender, grief, and representation. The works draw a parallel between Richardson and the decommissioned Saint: a self-portrait that shows the artist's soft, patchy stubble of a beard is hung beneath a photograph of a heavily bearded, gold-lustered Wilgefortis statue. Their gazes inverted, Richardson and the Saint appear almost to look at one another across time, the distance between them compressed.

Given that lockdown drove so many to turn inward, it's surprising to see that the photographs Richardson made in 2020 and thereafter are more externally oriented, comprising mostly intimate, solitary portraits of friends (in bed, in nature). The new pictures move Richardson's project to a more holistic place. In turning the camera outward and in making pictures in community with others, a body of work already with so much to say about historic grief, generational trauma, and representation (how we remember, how we are remembered) allows itself to be transformed in the face of a wide-reaching and collective, yet intensely personal crisis. Grief is no longer imagined as isolated to the individual body, but unbounded, a world built up around it.

Across the gallery's walls, close-cropped images of the body, various portraits, and details of lived spaces are wholly integrated; two more classical self-portraits book-end the show, the rest of the pictures contained between them. Hung in a line, the images break off occasionally into clustered arrangements. Together, the photographs and one video work on view layer and trace various instances of grief, with broader references to gun and state violence, bodily traumas (some of them medical—surgical scars, a still-wrapped Covid swab), and the ongoing trauma of the erasure of queer experience. Richardson's medical-sexual motifs unite the disparate images: a blood-stained index finger; a half nude self-portrait on a hospital exam table; a steel vintage chastity belt; a soft leather harness coiled, sans-body, on a bed; a shiny purple dildo drying in the shower.

Even when a literal figure is absent, bodily grief and trauma are palpable, images of pleasure mixing with them to prevent a straightforward, melancholic read. The photographs without bodies seem to always suggest their presence, in both the macro and micro: in one image, the blue beam of a surveillance helicopter pours over Glassell Park; another depicts an empty bed, host only to a pile of sagging, crumpled bedsheets. Though there is friction amongst the imagery (in competing references to pleasure and pain, in the layering of historic and private trauma)—the movement between polar scenes at times extreme—it isn't jarring. Instead, it feels like a reflection of what it is actually like to live now, in this moment and its attendant traumas.

The single, self-reflexive video work that accompanies the images, *Untitled, May 2020*, offers important context, and also structurally echoes the photographs, utilizing visuals, voiceover, and on-screen text to bleed and collapse private and widespread generational traumas. The story and legacy of Wilgefortis unfold as the film cuts—sometimes rather abruptly—between disparate scenes: from the pandemic and racial justice protests to the artist's father, who points himself out in a news photograph from the Kent State massacre.[2] Later, a pelvic exam is accompanied by the unmistakable crank and wretch of the speculum; an erotic scene, in which an unseen figure massages and slaps the artist's breasts, takes an almost medical tone on its reappearance, as Richardson guides them to feel a hard lump beneath the tissue.

Erin F. O'Leary

Sam Richardson, *Harness* (from *Cluster*, 2018–2020). Archival inkjet print. Image courtesy of the artist and Human Resources.

Memorably, upbeat—nearly joyous—footage from a dance club mixes with and fades into another nightscape, as surveillance helicopters buzz and circle the city. By blending personal footage with news media coverage related to Kent State, the pandemic, and protests, Richardson allows their private and public narratives to conflict, complicate, and build around one another as they unfold in fragments. In its refusal of any single, linear narrative or lens through which to understand these events, *May 2020* reinforces the integrity of their multiplicitous, ongoing lives.

Likewise, the inclusion of portraiture in the show expands the initial Wilgefortis-focused work, bringing the experiences of others into a line of inquiry that initially centered the self. Though made in 2019, the black-and-white portrait *Sydney (in Cathy's yard)* is the most compelling demonstration of how portraiture builds out Richardson's project. In the image, one of the figure's bespectacled eyes is concealed by the reflection of a photo umbrella and camera on tripod—an effective visual component that also does important conceptual legwork. While in a self-portrait, an overt reference to the production of the image would read as a self-reflexive gesture of authority—the maker of the image unmistakable—here, in a portrait, the move feels more like a collaborative visual gesture. (This ethos extends to the titling of the works, where photographic subjects and assistants are always identified by name.) Especially alongside the fragmented images of statues of Wilgefortis, whose story and image have been transfigured over time, these pictures seem to approach larger questions of representation and how we are remembered photographically. Together with the portraits (most of them made intra-Covid) and their investigations into the pain of others, Richardson's self-portraits read differently. Here, they function as gestures of shared vulnerability; as attempts to not only excavate and display private instances of physical or emotional exposure, but to negotiate and destabilize the stakes of photographing another by also subjecting themselves to the camera's eye.

Photography is a legitimate tool through which to understand and/or conceptualize one's experience, and its use in this capacity can, and often does, result in affective images. But Richardson's project, somehow cracked open by the limitations of lockdown and unburdened from its narrow conceptual framework, avoids the romance and melodrama that so often defines this kind of work. Though it straddles the pandemic's onset, the conceptual shift in Richardson's body of work cannot be solely explained by lockdown-induced limitations on what kind of pictures could safely be made. Instead, the very impetus for the work was changed. Though the wide-reaching, headline-making tragedies of Wilgefortis, Kent State, and Covid-19 find connectivity as they intersect through Richardson, it is when the camera turns to others that notions of grief and crisis become more intimately accessible. In the company of the other portraits and pictures, Richardson's self-portraits act not solely as personal inquiries, but as reminders that photographs are only impactful in so far as the camera is a subjective machine. While the show could have benefitted from a tighter edit (certain of the street images lack a strong sense of perspective, while some of the photographs of the body felt flat in comparison to their more visceral counterparts), it is also better for the friction amongst the photographs. The ways that the artist has moved the work forward in the face of massive, disruptive, and traumatic change, taking in new data and responding to it, make the friction feel like a part of the work's resonance. It was a relief, especially in this moment, to see a gallery exhibition that felt like an artist still reconciling; the work not unresolved, but agile.

1. The Vatican removed St. Wilgefortis from the official holiday calendar in 1969, and statues and shrines of her likeness were subsequently destroyed or relegated to storage. Incidentally, the revocation of her sainthood was due both to "ugliness" and to her resemblance to art historical renderings of Jesus, another bearded figure on a cross. (The popular narrative is that Wilgefortis' story was created in error, as an explanation for a depiction of Christ in a full-length tunic, instead of in the loincloth normally depicted at the time.) As Richardson explains in the show didactics, Wilgefortis' story, and its afterlife, have come to "represent an erasure of recorded and historical violence against… women, queer, non-binary, and transgender people."

2. Not unlike the story of Wilgefortis, the Kent State massacre, which saw its 50th anniversary in May of 2020, is another tragic legacy that was long covered up, misrepresented, and distorted publicly (to political ends, particularly). Vince Guerrieri, "How 13 Seconds Changed Kent State University Forever," *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 1, 2020, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/fifty-years-ago-kent-state-massacre-changed-university-forever-180974787/.