Do You See Me?

In the last several years I’ve looked at this photograph hundreds of times, always in front of a crowd of people. It’s one of the opening images in the slide lecture I’ve given to audiences of all kinds: K-12 students, college groups, nonprofits, corporations, Rotarians, Unitarians, and police officers. I am a photographic artist, but I did not take this photo. I am in the middle of the second row, with the buttoned-up paisley shirt.

My presentation usually starts with me telling about growing up in Duluth, being the only Asian kid in my school, and explaining how that experience informed my artistic perspective. When this picture is shown I ask the audience: “Do you see me? Raise your hand if you think I stick out.” Reactions vary widely.

Fifth graders with no filters will often gleefully point out how different I look. Many middle schoolers will anxiously look around the room to see how others react first. Adults can be even more tentative and awkward than middle schoolers. Some claim to see no difference. Others answer diplomatically, “You stand out because you’ve got the fanciest shirt.” Often it’s the non-white people in the room who shoot up their hands with certainty.

Each group I work with is different, however, and even broad generalities should not be made. I am an artist, after all, not a social scientist. My question, I understand, is a loaded one. For most of my adolescence I was oblivious to how I appeared to others. In fact, it wasn’t until after college that I started to think seriously about my cultural identity. Through all of my schooling I had assumed I was like everyone else. After all, I am a born-and-bred Minnesotan.

But you don’t grow up with a mirror in front of your face. The people around me became my mirror. More important—and more profound—popular culture became my mirror. It took me a long time to understand just how distorted that mirror is.

Who, indeed, determines who sticks out? Do you decide? Do the people around you decide? How much does society shape the idea of who belongs? Looking at this photograph makes me realize that the thousands of photographs I’ve taken as an artist are my way of answering that question: “Do you see me?”

—Wing Young Huie

WING YOUNG HUIE’s current project, Chinese-ness (forthcoming from MNHS Press), explores his identity from a “what if” perspective by photographing Chinese men whose lives he could have had if circumstances had been different (if, say, his family had never left for Duluth and Wing had lived in China his whole life). After photographing these men, Wing asks to put on their clothes and gives them the camera to photograph him.
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