

## Keith Cottingham

A traditional photographic portrait typically aims to disclose something of its subject's essence. Behind a two-dimensional likeness we sense an individual's character, developed over a lifetime of experience. If the subjects are not known or familiar to us, we project our own ideas based upon clues in facial expression, posture, mannerism and setting.

Though cloaked in photographic reality, Keith Cottingham's *Fictitious Portraits* in fact have no actual models. These are "beings" who have no basis beyond the two-dimensional, yet their very real appearance in photographs convinces us to believe they exist in the real world as we do. The young Californian's three *Fictitious Portraits* are composites of digitally scanned anatomical drawings and modeled clay faces, and photographic snippets of the hair, skin, eyes and features of individuals of different age, sex and ethnic origins, including the artist himself. Cottingham describes the creation of the portraits as a combination of painting and montage. He prefers comparatively "low-tech" computer programs like *Photoshop*, an electronically-manipulated paintbrush which allows the artist to combine discrete and overlapping elements.

*Fictitious Portrait*, 1993  
color coupler print  
45 1/2" x 38"

The series comprises a trio of large-scale color photographs of androgynous youths: a lone figure, a pair, and a trio of adolescent boys. They are so similar in appearance as to be barely discernable from one another. The youths are ideally beautiful, their naked skin virginal and unblemished, providing a seamless casing for the detritus from which they were constructed. Stiff poses and tight-lipped expressions reveal an absence of communion between the boys, and also recall the appearance of early photographic sitters who were required to stay motionless during long exposure times.

The jet black backgrounds which shroud the figures have no basis in reality, either. They evoke the paper or cloth backdrops of a photographer's studio or a blank electronic screen, reminders of the artificial mechanical processes from which the portraits were constructed. Cottingham makes no effort to disguise his artifice. The closer the viewer scrutinizes the fictive figures the more they begin to visually deconstruct, like painted figures which break down into areas of color and brushstroke. These figures, too, are products of the imagination, like the macabre fantasies of science fiction or horror stories. Their power rests in their uncanny ability to simultaneously mimic and contradict the veracity of photographic reality, attesting to how photographs can no longer be taken at "face" value.

