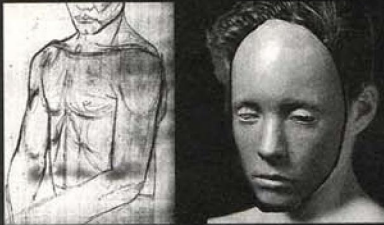


BELIEVING

Their soulful appearance may convince us that they live and breathe, fear and forget, just as we do, but Keith Cottingham's subjects don't really exist. His *Fictitious Portraits* depict beings that have never lived beyond two dimensions. The San Francisco-based artist's series of eerily identical adolescent boys are assembled from scanned anatomical drawings, modeled clay faces, and photographic samples of hair, skin, eyes, and other features taken from numerous individuals – including the artist – of different ages, sexes, and ethnic origins.



Cottingham describes the portraits as a combination of painting and montage, fused together slowly and meticulously with low-tech programs such as Photoshop. Their jet-black backgrounds, which shroud any traces of the figures' world, evoke the backdrops of a conventional photographer's studio, where real characters and personae have been captured since the dawn of photography.

But Cottingham makes only a limited effort to disguise his artifice. The closer the fictive figures are scrutinized, the more they begin to deconstruct, much as paintings break down into welters of colored brush strokes. It's this ambiguity – each image's uncanny tendency to both mimic and contradict photographic reality – that tells us no photo should be taken at face value. – *Ron Platt*

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