



K8 Hardy
Position Series #13
 2009
 Courtesy of the artist

NEW ARTIST

K8 HARDY

BY AMANI OLU

K8 Hardy's "Position Series" includes 19 images of the artist portraying herself performing as various social and cultural archetypes. These works offer a strong dose of absurdity. Most of Hardy's portraits are straight photographs, with the exception of the few that tinker with alternative process, collage, and photogrammed objects. Her process is unpretentious and left primarily to chance. To prepare for each portrait, she randomly selects an assortment of clothes and props before finding a location. With preconceived notions left at bay, she allows her methodology to sail uninhibited in a sea of unpredictability; it is, in fact, spontaneity, combined with her sensibility, that constructs these images.

These are not self-portraits. An apt read would be to understand them as commentaries on the social and physical representation of contemporary values, human behavior, and the culture that melds the two. A wonderful example is *Position Series #22*, in which Hardy portrays a penurious, haphazardly dressed woman "caught" while browsing the men's section of a store. This image drips with the aesthetic colloquialism one would expect to find in *US Weekly's* "Stars Are Just Like Us," or in a Facebook photo album titled "Mom at the Mall." Characteristic of a soon-to-be forgotten snapshot, its conceptual function symbolizes a collective gaze of the masses on itself. This gaze complicates the relationship between artist, subject, and viewer, and asks, "Who is the person taking the photograph, and what does he or she see? Who is the person photographed, and what does she represent?" These questions add currency to the project's conceptual

premise: The "Position Series" is not simply about physicality, as the title might suggest; it is, instead, concerned with how the human gaze unconsciously categorizes people into convenient positions.

These images lend themselves to a discussion of the role of photography in postwar art. Hardy is a performance artist whose positions depict condensed, less calculated Happenings, akin to Allan Kaprow's Happenings from the late 1950s. Kaprow required the viewer to attend a Happening in order to experience its singular, ephemeral nature. In Hardy's series, the experience of the Happening is created via proxy: the photograph. Her pictures can be understood as recorded Happenings. The ideas Hardy puts forth are impossible to produce without the photographic medium; yet she echoes the convictions of Conceptualists such as Dennis Oppenheim, who declared that "the photograph was necessary only as a residue for communication," by claiming, "I don't care about photography." (She has, however, admitted that her work questions photographic truth.) "The final product," she continues, "doesn't have to be perfect, and I don't even shoot an entire roll of film, maybe three to five images." This series is about "figuring out what you can do with what you have." Hardy toes the party line of the artist who "uses" photography, thereby historically denying the medium equal footing in her own project, as well as in postwar artmaking.

What is most refreshing about the "Position Series" is how it explores the many complicated arguments of gender and feminist

identity politics. Each image or "position" affirms that biological determination among certain groups does not lead to concrete social roles or functions, that gender is a social construct, and that complete homogeneity does not exist, even in social groups united by a shared perspective. In *Position Series #11*, for example, Hardy emulates a lesbian wearing oversized men's clothing and a baseball cap. That the woman's physical disposition is overly masculine is evinced by the slouch of her shoulders, the gesture of her hands, and her stance. There is no single category with which to define this woman, even in gendered social groups. Identity is the sum of uncontrollable situations, conscious decisions, and unforeseen experiences. Moreover, one's identity today may be completely different tomorrow. Hardy makes clear the level of complexity in defining gender and identity.

The "Position Series" examines critical issues in art and life, but does so in a style that challenges the viewer to think about why these images need to exist, and about his or her role in their existence. Hardy does not provoke reactionary criticism or jeopardize her sincerity by overcompensating; she purposely avoids injecting anger and bitterness into her work, instead favoring displays of gaiety and playfulness. This does not detract from the work's efficacy, but, rather, is what makes it most compelling. By leaving aside shock value and political heavy-handedness, Hardy liberates the viewer from the pressure to stand with or against her, thereby, ironically, allowing him or her to not take a position.



K8 Hardy
Position Series #22
2009
Courtesy of the artist