

## Weekend Edition: 12 Things to Do in New York's Art World Before February 15

By Paul Laster • 02/11/16 5:10pm

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 13

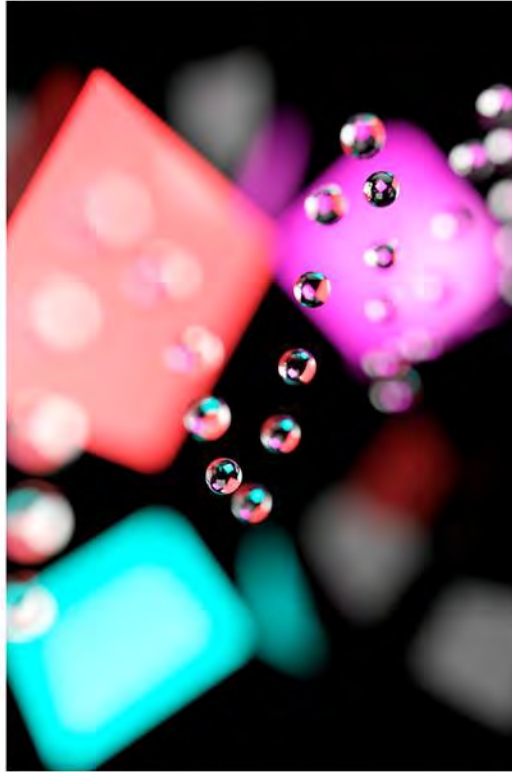


### Opening: "Keith Cottingham: Biology and Cosmology: Below the Visible" at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

A pioneer of digital art, Mr. Cottingham is known for his images of lifelike figures and forms. Over the past 20 years the artist has hyper-realistically rendered pictures of prepubescent boys, non-existent 19th century ethnographic studies and invented architectural spaces, as well as animations of physical forms in motion. In his new series of large-scale photographs, Mr. Cottingham visualizes crystals, spheres and other shapes from scientific realms. Mining the natural environments of biology and cosmology, the artist (with a little help from his digital tools) creates new worlds.

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 31 Mercer Street, New York, 6-8 p.m.

February 17, 2016



## KEITH COTTINGHAM AT RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

Image above: © Keith Cottingham, *Untitled*, 2015 / Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York  
 Biology & Cosmology: Below the Visible

Cottingham's subjects don't really exist. ...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, "Believing is Seeing." *Wired* 3, No. 10

For his fourth exhibition at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Keith Cottingham will exhibit fourteen large-scale photographic prints that touch on spatially complex imagery from the realms of biology and cosmology. Minimal compositions include spheres, crystals, and other seemingly recognizable shapes floating against black backgrounds, as well as intersecting forms which convey a prismatic sense of space. Hyper-realistic lighting activates the subjects, and bold colors, narrow depth of field, and time-lapse motion create emotional undertones. Suggestions of condensation and liquid represent form and spirit infusing out of emptiness. These futuristic renderings, operating outside human scale, ask the question: are we inside living cells or floating amongst the stars?

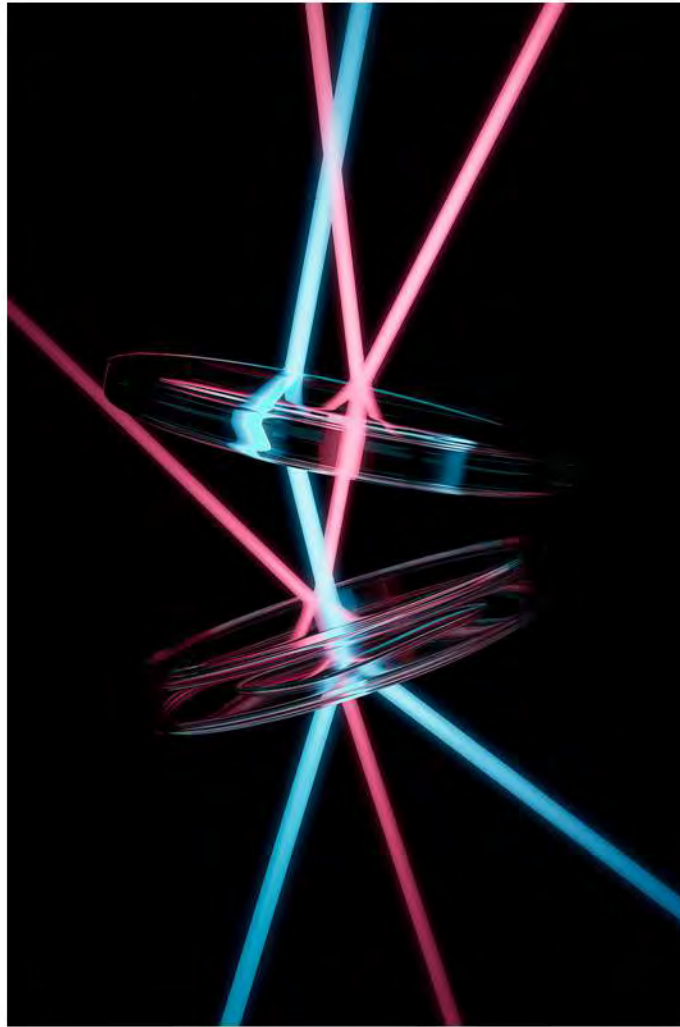


Image above: © Keith Cottingham, *Untitled*, 2015, Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

The exhibition charts a new direction for Cottingham, a seminal artist in the digital age, who previously challenged the authenticity of photography by simulating the material world to unsettling effect in three series: multiple images of a prepubescent boy in *Fictitious Portraits* (1992); a collection of nineteenth century ethnographic studies in *History Repurposed* (1999); architectural spaces in *Constructed Photographs* (2004); and animations of successive movement and interaction of diverse forms in *Growth* (2007). None of the subjects depicted exist.

With *Biology & Cosmology*, Cottingham finds freedom to create new symbolic worlds that go beyond real world limitations and operate outside human scale. The process, which he identifies as “constructive imaging,” begins with 3D models rendered and then printed as archival pigment prints. Instead of light photons revealing an outside world through a lens, these pure renderings go beyond photography to objectify 3D representations not tethered to real world referents. The 3D scenes, materials and lights are sculpted and designed, but how their physical properties interact with each other to create an image is based on real world physics. This divergent approach creates artful “visualizations,” blurring the distinction between imagination and reality.

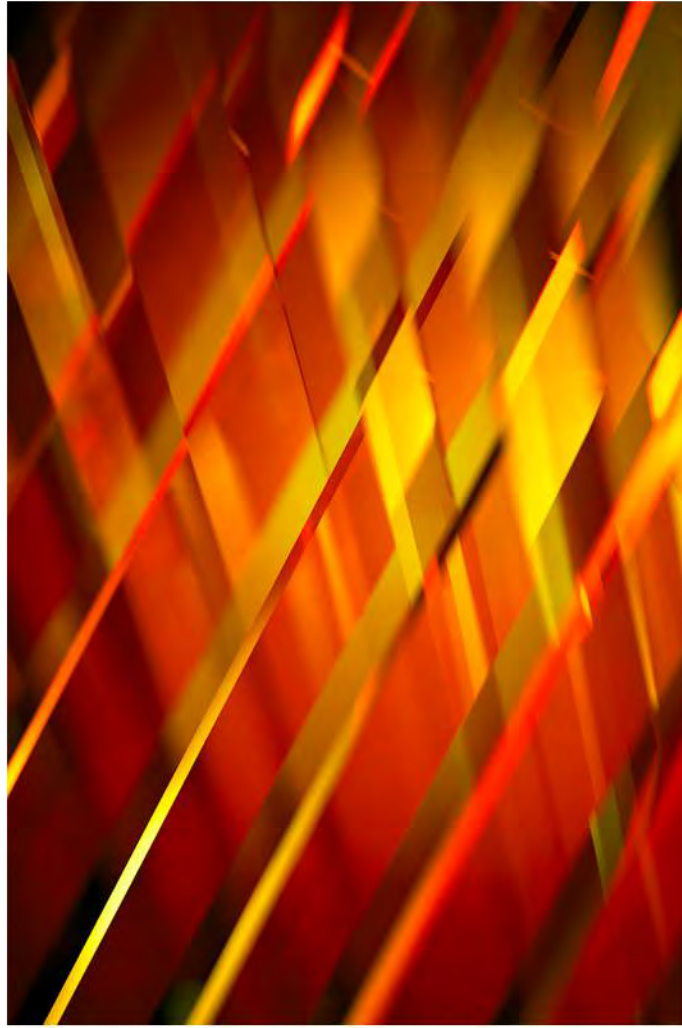


Image above: © Keith Cottingham, Untitled, 2015 / Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

As the lifeworld becomes more and more quantified, mystery is being further reduced and buried underneath the appearance of the rational. But there is more than meets the eye. What is circulating and permeating below the surface of the visible? What are the unseen creative forces breathing life into our unfolding existence? How will the new paradigm of matter and energy taking precedence over the 'soul' affect our understanding of ourselves? These colorful visualizations hope to re-enchant the viewer with the 'mysterious' by glimpsing the world that is just beyond our understanding. The deeper we look, the greater the new expanse becomes.

Cottingham's work has been reproduced and exhibited in major exhibitions, including the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Siemens AG, Munich, Germany; Fundación Telefónica, Madrid, Spain; Hayward Gallery, London, England; and Neue Galerie Graz, Austria.

## The world reimagined: Di Rosa opens 'Reconstructed World'

SASHA PAULSEN

A landscape in Jell-O, a car traveling in two directions, a fantasy cathedral created from weapons — these are all part of "Reconstructed World," which opened last weekend at Di Rosa.

Curated by Robert Wuilfe, the show brings together works from Bay Area artists such as Sandow Birk, Keith Cottingham, Kota Ezawa, Samara Halpern, Liz Hickok, Al Farrow, leonardogillesfleur (sic) Elyse Pignolet and Tracey Snelling for a visually stunning mix that is by turns humorous and playful, dark and astonishing.

"In an accelerated world that rarely allows for moments of reflection and interpretation, the deeper presence and meanings of every day life can become a blur," Wuilfe writes in an introduction to the program.

"It is a modernist cliché to speak of the omnipresence of images and the isolation of self, yet the problem of reaching through the veil of speed and stimulation persists," he notes, adding, "Many of us have a large chunk of the sum of human knowledge accessible via the smartphones in our pockets, yet unmediated moments of seeing in which we can look ahead and around us — are frustratingly elusive."

Wuilfe describes the "Reconstructed World" artists as ones who "address the elusiveness of the every day through tactics that bridge the gaps between imagination and perception."

This becomes, in the show, Tracy Snelling's amusing room-sized installations — everyone whose lived with a a teen-aged son will recognize this one — as well as leonardogillesfleur's entertaining representation of "Irreconcilable Differences" with his two-headed Fiat.

Cottingham's new-world digitally constructed images contrast with Halpern's nostalgic, miniature world Coney Island, recreated in three-dimensional film sets.

Birk and Pignolet have collaborated on a project that examines urban life as seen through peepholes in a museum wall, while Ezawa's complex project questions collective memory through the use of familiar images.

Wuilfe quotes Michel de Certeau, author of "The Practice of Everyday Life," who wrote, "Creativity is the act of reusing and recombining heterogenous materials." But who'd have thought of Jell-O? Hickok's Jell-O worlds, shown in video and photography, shimmer with life and imagination, and will also impress anyone who ever tried to make a Jello-O mold at Thanksgiving.

The star of this show, however, is Farrow's magnificent creations, one of which, "The Spine and Tooth of Santo Guerro," is on loan from the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. From guns and bullet casings, Farrow creates a synagogue, a mausoleum and a cathedral. These works, on their own, possess an intricate beauty, but their own silent commentary on our often-baffling world is immeasurable.



## **Between transparency and opacity – what the image gives [us] to think about**

The image does not look like we look at an object. It only sees the image. – Maurice Merleau-Ponty

What is an image? The proliferate multiplication of images in our contemporary world seems – this is its paradox – inversely proportional to our ability to say with certainty what they all correspond to. It seems to have been this way from the time of Saint Augustin: we are perpetually overexposed to images, we interact with them even, but if someone asked us to explain *what is an image*, we would be seriously hard pressed to provide a response. One could argue on two accounts that this is the wrong question. Wondering about what an *image* is would miss what the image tends to spread, to decline its plural forms, to scale itself down in becoming that which immediately avoids being "one". The other part, demanding *what is an image*, this inevitably amounts to asking its ontology, to question its *being*. Nothing seems ensured that it is the "being" of the image.

The photographic triptych of "Fictitious Portraits" by Keith Cottingham (1992) gives us successively a view of one, two, and then three adolescents situated in front of a black background and facing the camera. Shown at waist-height in a cold light, the still busts return to idealizing plastic, while their stares express an unimpassioned aristocratic. These faces with smooth hair and regular features, close to being androgynous, represent bodies whose growth is not finished, or better yet, broken. In its frozen perfection, the triptych evokes the portrait of Dorian Gray over which time has not been taken. All like a number of images in the series, the unity of the subject represents this diffraction in a worrisome polymorphism: connected between them by a disturbing "twin-ness", the almost- identical adolescents nevertheless differ imperceptibly, without ever providing distinct individuality. Undeniably, the "Fictitious Portraits" of Cottingham question. In disconnecting the identifying mechanism and in bewildering the automatic allocation, these images require that they be given time.

### **The Pensive Image**

Magnets for the glance, the photos of Cottingham can only, in their small pause, leave the pensive audience contemplating them. Impenetrable surfaces, they nevertheless aspire the movement of the eye and force it to find the origin of its disquiet. Through overexposure of the grain, the materiality of the image puts sand into the gears of the visual and creates its own time, that of the gaze. According to Roland Barthes, it is this precise moment that photography is subversive, "Not when it's frightening, repulsive or even stigmatizing, but when it is pensive".

In his analysis of the concluding lines of *Sarrazine* balzacienne ("And the Marquise remained pensive"), Barthes sees the beginnings of a precedent indecision that has been found, in turn by Jacques Rancière, to be reflected in the pensive attitude of the photographed teenage dreamers by Rineke Dijkstra. This "pensiveness", however, is again relative as long as the nameless state of mind the subject briefly represents that the pensiveness of the image becomes so confused with the pensiveness of the subject of the image. The "pensiveness" doesn't actually employ the act of subversion when it is no longer the subject, but just spreads and affects everything around it. In the space between the image and the gaze it creates, a thoughtful (pensive) atmosphere is formed, a pensive medium. Such a medium is a potential space, undetermined again in its singular updates, a medium of pensiveness preceding any thought and who, hence, "conceals the thinking non-thinking".

With strength, the photos of Cottingham recall that, far from remaining outside western thought, the image is always at the heart of thought in provoking its (thought's) exteriorization: an output itself. They are operational in a comprehensive project under the representation of schema or cliché, the image inevitably ruins while refocusing on that which exposes outside thought. The image runs outside itself and forces thought to expose that which cannot yet be thought and that which may be difficult to think about – That is to say that thought emerges itself in a sensitive pensiveness, of a sensitive “unthought” because of its exteriority.

The ambivalence of these images plays perhaps fully in this oscillation between the denunciation of the *limits* of the image and the “operationalizing” of its *borderline being*, with the ambiguity between what is given finitely (and therefore serve as a base representative which would otherwise be exempted under the gaze) and that which, in its finiteness, surpasses itself in permanence, never failing to recognize the limits of its own reason. Hence that strange paradox in the attitude of respect of the image: while recognizing that it can touch on that which is absent, making that which is present distant – which led Alberti to compare in *De pictura* the power of friendship – this is precisely to control and to board up its self-exceedence. In Antiquity, the critics of the image denounced titling its excesses, although it has returned: this pretention of being present, of presenting the same place that is represented to be the literal image a “precedent” of being.

### The Contending Image

The contender here is nothing more than a calculator. Instead of just remaining in its place and being only what it is, it is simulacrum, it is “as if” (it is the “*simul*” of Latin). At the difference of *lieutenant* who compensates for the absence of the original, the contender acts not only as the function of representation, but replaces the original itself in simulating its being. When we attempt to understand the new visual realities that we are encountering, it is worth recalling a tradition who, with its ambivalence regarding images, nevertheless produces a significant reflection to these images. Because describing the technological revolutions – for example the movement from film to digital – does not necessarily help us to understand what modifies the images in their effectiveness and fails too often to recognize the thought that the image has already defaulted. The words that we use without really taking care in our referral of these new visualities who themselves come from a tradition that did everything to keep image at a distance. These new visualities are called “*virtual*”, partly because their reality doesn't exist as a physical substance, and also because they contribute to a “*virtus*”, a powerful or effective actor on the spectator that Plato tried to describe. One still says that these new “visualities” consist of images of *synthesis*. But what does this mean? Once again, the Platonic distinction made between the copied images (the *eikones*) that, while representing, always remain disjointed from their representation, and the simulacrum images (les *eidola*) who straddle, encroach and merge with those images they are supposed to represent. In the first case, the *eikones* draw their representative authority from the representative they keep, its absence, its place, without calling to question the place; in the second, the *eidola*, not content to simulate their dependence on that which is represented, they replace it and make the distinction completely impossible. When such an illicit synthesis took place, impossible to distinguish the elements of which it was composed, we joined a chimerical anti-nature.

On such a background, the “*Fictitious Portraits*” of Cottingham can only recall these simulacra evoked by Plato: no real teenager served as a model for the photographer here, the immaculate bodies are in reality electronic chimeras, hybrid mosaics fabricated of shreds of digitized skin and hair, after hundreds of hours of work. Cottingham created these “hybrid” images, which no longer refer to any identifiable reality and consist of mere appearances. From a “*faculty figendi*” that does not reveal the soul, but devices themselves, these images are simulacra in that they present themselves *like* portraits, so they pretend to be something they have never been. The hybrid or chimeric character goes hand in hand with the

fundamental *hubris* image, an “excess” or better, a “pretension” to occupy a place that did not return. The debates about the image, ancient or new, are often debates around the place and time that is given to the images. As such, the thoughts of the image have rarely been thought about *from* the image (or *according to* the image, to speak with Merleau-Ponty), but rather consisted of an insertion of this disturbing objet in the sequence of already-established knowledge. Often, the protean character of the images and their strength raises effective reterritorialization strategies, to diffuse the conflicts around the “place” and amend the pretension. Paradoxically, the internal gap (in the image) between its appearance and what it does to appear – a gap that can be described, with Gottfried Boehm, of “iconic difference” – could serve as a pretext to the most ferocious iconoclasms , but also has an unconditional veritable iconophilia.

To emphasize that the appearing image is *still less* than what it gives to see, it emphasizes on its own irreducible autonomy and unsurpassable materiality; it emphasizes the fact that what we see in the image is always *more* than the physical object, giving it a legitimacy that comes from the outside and gives it meaning. So whether to deny the effectiveness of the images or on the contrary in defending their significant function, we are facing a search for *uniqueness* in images in order to store them well in the order of things or well in the order of the signifiers.





Keith Cottingham, *Sequence A (Frame No. 1770)* from *Growth*, 2007,  
C-print, 38 1/2" x 68". Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

## Keith Cottingham

**Ronald Feldman Fine Arts**

*Growth* was the title and also, at first glance, the theme of the short film at the center of this clever show by Keith Cottingham. At the outset of the film two wood beams occupy the foreground of a dark space. They jut out from the right, situated at a slight angle to each other; the viewer might imagine them to be roof struts, but they are clearly none too sturdy. Almost immediately they begin to sprout long spores like mushrooms. Then bugs start to flutter across the scene, making it appear as if nature's nocturnal secret life were being captured with time-lapse photography. Again, though, one has doubts: the wood seems slick, the light is oddly filtered, and the spores sway as if the whole scene were underwater. In fact, *Growth* is an entirely animated and deliberately ambiguous

invention, a work whose fiction is confirmed at the end when the beams break apart and fly off into the dark distance, like debris in space.

Cottingham has long been interested in creating plausible creations from invented scenes. In the past he has used small models to make photographs evoking architectural spaces. In this case, the accompanying photographs were simply stills from the film, and Cottingham seemed less invested in the marvel of fiction itself than in the gap between the small and slow and the big and fast: while the film appears to capture scenes of microscopic life, it goes on to suggest a world of vast, cosmic proportions. Maybe this theme is well worn, yet, composed as elegantly as it was here, the film delivered a reminder of human frailty.

—Morgan Falconer

**Keith Cottingham**  
Ronald Feldman Fine  
Arts, through Apr 17  
(see Soho).

It's hard not to compare Keith Cottingham with Thomas Demand, James Casebere and Craig Kalpakjian. All four photograph their own models of architectural spaces—or, in Kalpakjian's case, construct them digitally. The result is realistic-looking photos of fake spaces that ontologically undercut the authority of photography by showing how the medium, a supposed purveyor of truth, is complicit in a lie. But Cottingham has a wider range than the others; he also uses sculptural and digital materials to construct people and objects. This is a good thing, since his architectural works lack the subtle beauty and cohesion of Demand's and Casebere's, or the hipness of Kalpakjian's techno-conceptualism.

The first room in this show is filled with images of modernist architectural spaces and figures reminiscent of Soviet Social Realist sculpture. The second gallery, which includes work from the last five years, is more successful. Here, amid the eerie imagery, is a digitally rendered botanical speci-



**Keith Cottingham, *Botanicals (Leaves #1)*, 1999.**

men; it looks just like a photogram by William Henry Fox Talbot that's on view practically around the corner, at the Drawing Center.

Like Cottingham's picture, Talbot's photograms were executed without a camera (they were made by placing objects on chemically treated paper). Forging this connection between the two artists—it helps to have Talbot close at hand—places Cottingham in a good light. He might not be the best fake-architecture photographer out there, but his work is part of a tradition stretching back to the earliest days of photography: artists exploiting what is by nature a highly mutable and experimental medium.—*Martha Schwendener*



**Keith Cottingham**  
Ronald Feldman Fine  
Arts, through Apr 17  
(see Soho).

It's hard not to compare Keith Cottingham with Thomas Demand, James Casebere and Craig Kalpakjian. All four photograph their own models of architectural spaces—or, in Kalpakjian's case, construct them digitally. The result is realistic-looking photos of fake spaces that ontologically undercut the authority of photography by showing how the medium, a supposed purveyor of truth, is complicit in a lie. But Cottingham has a wider range than the others; he also uses sculptural and digital materials to construct people and objects. This is a good thing, since his architectural works lack the subtle beauty and cohesion of Demand's and Casebere's, or the hipness of Kalpakjian's techno-conceptualism.

The first room in this show is filled with images of modernist architectural spaces and figures reminiscent of Soviet Social Realist sculpture. The second gallery, which includes work from the last five years, is more successful. Here, amid the eerie imagery, is a digitally rendered botanical speci-



**Keith Cottingham, *Botanicals (Leaves #1)*, 1999.**

men; it looks just like a photogram by William Henry Fox Talbot that's on view practically around the corner, at the Drawing Center.

Like Cottingham's picture, Talbot's photograms were executed without a camera (they were made by placing objects on chemically treated paper). Forging this connection between the two artists—it helps to have Talbot close at hand—places Cottingham in a good light. He might not be the best fake-architecture photographer out there, but his work is part of a tradition stretching back to the earliest days of photography: artists exploiting what is by nature a highly mutable and experimental medium.—*Martha Schwendener*



---

**Keith Cottingham**  
**'Constructed Photographs'**

*Ronald Feldman Gallery*  
31 Mercer Street, SoHo  
Through April 17

Keith Cottingham's eerily Stepfordish photographs come across as a form of reverse archaeology. They reflect the digital present and future by showing some of the variety of pictures that can be made with very little intervention from three-dimensional reality.

On one hand, there are images that might almost be from the mid-19th century. These include two vaguely sinister, and forensic images of similar-looking girls as well as a misty landscape and a photograph-like silhouette of leaves that is actually a platinum/palladium print. On the other hand, there are weirdly familiar, nearly life-size grisaille images of one or two seated women; these suggest a generic realist style, somewhere between painting and photography, Soviet Social Realism and now.

The best works are serene, sometimes chapel-like architectural interiors that operate in the gap between Ezra Stoller's photographs of the old T.W.A. Terminal at Kennedy Airport and some of James Casebere's set-up photographs.

These are not especially likable or original images, but as a group they make the point that the entire history of photography can probably be reproduced on the computer. This connects Mr. Cottingham's work to that of James Welling (another member of Mr. Casebere's generation) in historical self-consciousness and thoroughness. Like it or not, one has the feeling that there is much more to come.

ROBERTA SMITH

Keith Cottingham: Constructed Photographs  
by Donald Goddard © 2004  
E-mail: [dq@newyorkartworld.com](mailto:dq@newyorkartworld.com)



*Untitled, 2004.*

Description: two figures. Constructed Photograph,  
digital chromogenic print,  
66 3/4" x 48" (framed). Ed. of 5.

Two women in one photograph, and one in another, look distressed, or in wonder. The first two hold each other anxiously, one seated with her left hand raised slightly above her lap, the other standing. The third woman, also seated, leans forward, expectantly, toward the left. They are all looking at something, not us, but something in the darkness that surrounds them. Light strikes them from the direction of what they appear to see.

But, of course, they do not see (they are specifically without pupils) and they are not women, nor can they therefore be anxious. Neither are they sculptures of women that have been photographed, though their modeled surfaces and heightened awareness suggest a connection with the classical tradition in sculpture. So why do we (or rather, I) identify with them so immediately, emotionally and intellectually? After all, though they were constructed and

contextualized on a computer, a means that has only recently been available, they are no more fictitious than any other figures in works of art. The Greeks and Romans devised ideal proportions for human and other bodies, and Leonardo da Vinci was even more calculating. However affected we are by these and, for instance, the more emotionally wrought figures of Bernini in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we can also embalm them, and dismiss them, as the products of defunct mythologies in other times.



*Untitled*, 2004.

Description: interior columns.

Constructed Photograph,

digital chromogenic print,

62 1/4" x 48" (framed). Ed. of 5.

The figures are not witnesses of Agamemnon's murder, nor of the Nativity, nor of Nora's defection in *A Doll's House*--but they are in that manner. In a way, Cottingham's other pictures are diversions, of an extremely powerful kind. Each one is a resounding architectural space, the space into which the gaze of the figures might be directed, the obverse of the inverse. From our own experience, three of the four most closely resemble a church, an auditorium, and a conference room. The fourth space is puzzling, in that it seems to have no particular association, with its two windows at floor level and its domelike interior of ascending, bellowing forms. Each of the spaces has a focal point, an altar or a door, a screen, a stage, or the two windows cited above. We are in places like others we have been in many times in our lives, where we are expected to have something revealed to us that will direct us and define what we should be, or perhaps would like to be, doing, thinking, feeling, seeing.





*Untitled, 2004.*

Description: front view.  
Constructed Photograph,  
digital chromogenic print,  
66 3/4" x 48" (framed). Ed. of 5.

What Cottingham encounters is the elegant inevitability of human, and more particularly, artistic presumption. Works of art are made to achieve some higher sense of reality, whether in religious, philosophical, or aesthetic terms, just as roads and bridges are made for the purpose of going somewhere else. The auditorium or the church may be confining, impossible to move about it, but ultimately to be there is somehow thrilling, just to wait for everything to be explained.

Nothing does appear on the screen, at the altar, on the stage. The perspective of seats, desks, columns, and overhead louvers in the red, yellow, and blue auditorium space ends in a perfectly black rectangle. The elliptically arched church space ends in a tiny square altar in one work and a tiny square door in another. In each picture, light is modulated with extraordinary "naturalism" to articulate the structure defining the space. Light comes in through windows, in some cases, and from other more hidden places, but that is all we can surmise about what might be outside the structure that has been made, seemingly, to reveal what is outside. We don't really know what might be outside, any more than we would know, despite elaborate systems of ideological and pictorial clues, sitting in Chartres Cathedral or watching a play by Ibsen.

The exhibition remains through April 17, 2004, at Ronald  
Feldman Fine Arts, 31 Mercer Street, New York, NY 10013. Tel.  
212 226 3232. Fax 212 941 1536. [www.feldmangallery.com](http://www.feldmangallery.com).

E-mail Inquiries to Author:  
**Donald Goddard** — [dg@newyorkartworld.com](mailto:dg@newyorkartworld.com)

[NY Art  
World](#)

[Magazine](#)

[Reviews](#)

[Back to Top](#)

Art Review — [NewYorkArtWorld.com](http://NewYorkArtWorld.com)

All artwork is copyright of the respective owner or artist.

All other material © Copyright 2004 New York Art World ®. All Rights Reserved.

Questions? Comments? [info@newyorkartworld.com](mailto:info@newyorkartworld.com)

[NYAW.COM](http://NYAW.COM)

---

## Keith Cottingham

Ronald Feldman Gallery  
31 Mercer Street  
SoHo  
Through March 27

The various appropriation artists of the 1980's, who were said to make rather than take photographs, confirmed that photographs can lie. In the 90's it is being proved that photographs can say just about anything you want, thanks to digitalization. As a result most people now approach any photograph hanging in an art gallery with suspicion, combing the surface for telltale clues to truth or fiction.

Keith Cottingham's first New York show invites such combing. In one room images brim with the gray grainy light of 19th-century vintage photographs. Themes of the period — colonialism, slavery, scientific and geographical exploration — are evoked. Images include a quasi-Assyrian sculpture of a lion, a black woman in profile, a Chinese junk drifting along a placid river and a close-up of a sprig of leaves.

In the other room are three large color portraits of one, two and three bare-chested teen-age boys shown against black. In addition to looking almost like clones of one another, they have a slightly android artificiality to their handsome faces and thick brown hair.

Nearly nothing is real in either series. The junk, for example, is a three-dimensional model with details digitally added; its background was lifted from various 19th-century photographs and fused into one landscape, also on the computer. The Stepford Boys, whose artificiality is more available and disturbing, began with a life-size head sculptured by the artist, which was then scanned into the computer for further work.

To make sure the viewer doesn't miss a trick, the exhibition includes a statement by the artist detailing his nearly invisible technique. This has the effect of reducing the show to an extremely familiar formula: the co-dependent image and text of Conceptual Art. It all becomes more interesting to think about than to look at.

ROBERTA SMITH



# Keith Cottingham

By Christine Roch

For the past five years, Keith Cottingham has dedicated himself to one project, the digitally constructed photographic images entitled *Fictitious Self-Portraits*. Literally both fiction and portraiture, these works represent the artist and yet, as digital creations, do not reflect the likeness of any one living being but are rather amalgamations of individuals and computer enhancements. Products of cutting edge technology, these collages are nonetheless the resolution of traditional methods: writing, drawing, sculpture, and still photography. Combining and altering the resultant images from these processes, Cottingham creates an idealized vision of youth that questions perceptions of time, desire, and our sense of being. These works may directly represent the multiple personas of the artist's "self," but indirectly they address the modern American relationship between soul and body, self and society, real and imagined. This series of work challenges our notions of authenticity and demands, "Is who we see what really exists?" – CLR

Left: *Triplets*, from the series *Fictitious Self-Portraits*, 1993  
(cat. no. 18)

Right top: *Single*, from the series *Fictitious Self-Portraits*, 1993  
(cat. no. 14)

Right bottom: *Twins*, from the series *Fictitious Self-Portraits*, 1993  
(cat. no. 15)







## 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.

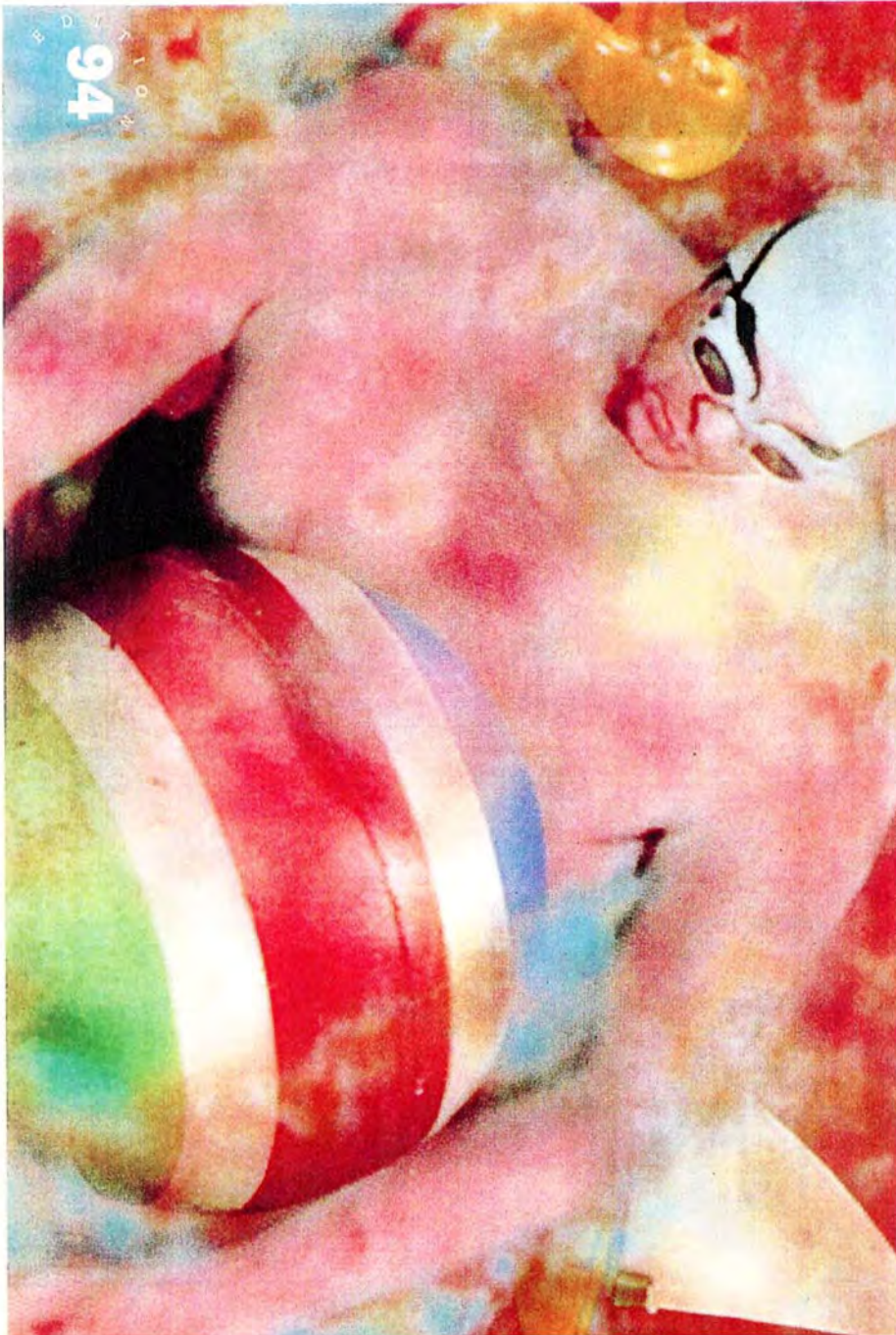


Cottingham describes the portraits as a combination of painting and montage, fused together slowly and meticulously with low-tech programs such as Photoshop. Their jet-black backgrounds, which shroud any traces of the figures' world, evoke the backdrops of a conventional photographer's studio, where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

Ron Platt (rplatt@mit.edu) is assistant curator at the MIT List Visual Arts Center.





HANNES LEOPOLDSEDER

PRIX  
94  
ARS  
ELECTRONICA

# PRIX ARS ELECTRONICA 94

HANNES LEOPOLDSEDER

INTERNATIONALES KOMPENDIUM DER COMPUTERKÜNSTE  
INTERNATIONAL COMPENDIUM OF THE COMPUTER ARTS



## KEITH COTTINGHAM

Keith Cottingham (USA), geb. 1965, lebt und arbeitet als Künstler in San Francisco. Ausbildung an der San Francisco State University, u. a. bei Lynn Hershman (Photographie und Video), an der Suite 3D des Center for Computer Arts, San Francisco, und am San Luis Obispo Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, Kalifornien. Zahlreiche Einzel- und Gruppenausstellungen in den USA und in Europa.



Keith Cottingham (USA), born 1965, lives and works as an artist in San Francisco. He studied at San Francisco State University, including special study with Lynn Hershman (Photography and Video), and at the Center for Computer Arts, San Francisco, and at the San Luis Obispo Polytechnic in San Luis Obispo, California. Numerous solo and group exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe.

■ «Keith Cottinghams Arbeit ‚Fictitious Portraits‘ nagt an zwei der grundsätzlichen Mythen des Modernismus: an der ‚wissenschaftlichen Objektivität der Photographie‘ und an der ‚kreativen Echtheit der Subjektivität‘. Sein photographisches Triptychon führt vor Augen, daß beide Vorstellungen nur gesellschaftliche Konstrukte sind.

Erst die Computertechnik macht Cottinghams Forschungstätigkeit technisch möglich. Durch die Methoden elektronischer Bilderstellung hat er seine Photographien buchstäblich von jener Kette befreit, die sie an die ‚Wieder-Gabe‘ einer räumlich-zeitlichen Konstellation durch lichtempfindliches Material – kurz das, was die Modernität als ‚Wirklichkeit‘ bezeichnet – bindet. Cottingham hat die Nabelschnur zur Moderne durchtrennt und ist in den imaginären, virtuellen Raum jenseits des ‚Wirklichen‘ eingetreten.

Doch das Aufregendste an ‚Fictitious Portraits‘, das, was sie von der billigen Illusion der Massenware abhebt, in der der Effekt zum verführerischen Eskapismus wird, ist die Tatsache, daß sich diese Virtualität auf die ebenso schillernden wie erschreckenden Geheimnisse der ‚modernen‘ Gesellschaft bezieht.

Indem ‚Fictitious Portraits‘ geschickt die darstellende Photographie nachahmt, zeigt sich jedoch, daß der Begriff ‚Realismus‘ sich als erstaunlich dehnbar erweist und daß Photographen, genauso wie Maler, Regeln und Schemata entwickeln, um ihre visuellen Zeichen zu hinterlassen. Photographien garantieren genauso wenig Realität, wie die Malerei es tut. Wie es

■ «Keith Cottingham's work 'Fictitious Portraits' gnaws away at two of the foundational myths of Modernism: the scientific objectivity of the photograph, and the creative authenticity of subjectivity. His photographic triptych demonstrates that both notions are merely social constructions.

Computer technology makes Cottingham's exploration technically possible. Through the techniques of electronic imaging he has literally loosened his photographs from their tether to a light-sensitive material's re-production of a spatio-temporal constellation – to what Modernity has labeled 'reality'. Cottingham has cut the umbilical cord to the Modern and has entered into the imagined, virtual space which lies beyond the 'real'.

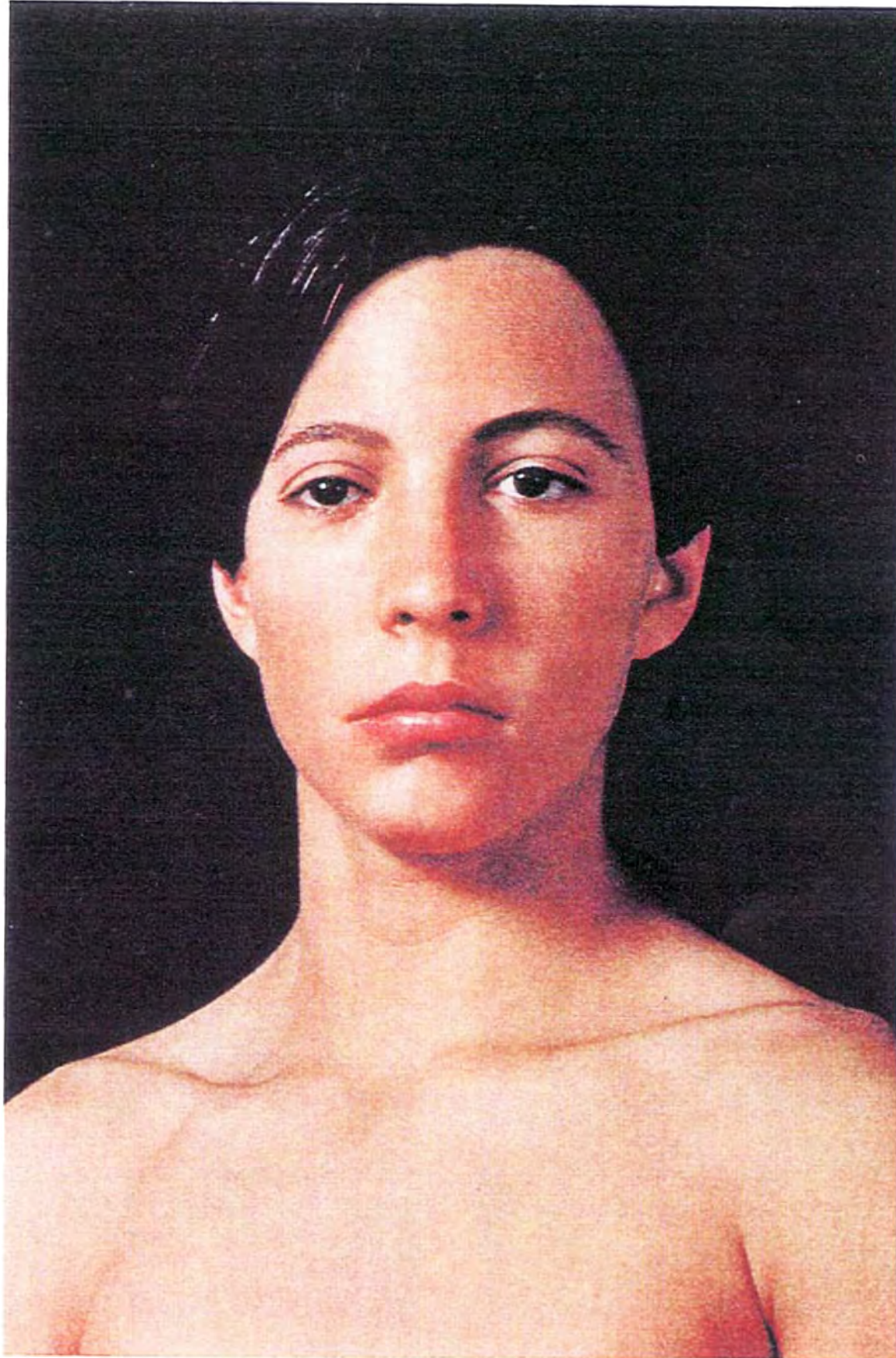
Yet, what is most exciting about 'Fictitious Portraits', what sets it apart from manufactured make-believe where effect serves as seductive escapism, is that this virtuality is folded back upon the mysteries – both glamorous and terrifying – of 'Modern' society.

Yet, by mimicking representational photography so craftily, 'Fictitious Portraits' demonstrates that as a label 'realism' is remarkably elastic, and that just like painters, photographers invent rules and schemata for laying down visual signs. Photographs no more guarantee reality than paintings do. In the words of E.H. Gombrich, photography as well as painting is 'something akin to visual hallucination'.

We find, then, that Cottingham's concern is not with 'realism', but with what he calls



KEITH COTTINGHAM



Auszeichnung  
Fictitious Portraits, 1992  
HW: Macintosh II  
SW: Adobe Photoshop



## KEITH COTTINGHAM

E. H. Gombrich sagte: Photographie, ebenso wie die Malerei, sei ‚etwas, das einer visuellen Halluzination verwandt‘ sei.

Wir sehen also, daß Cottinghams Anliegen nicht ‚Realismus‘, sondern, wie er es nennt, ‚konstruierter Realismus‘ ist. ‚Der Realismus in meiner Arbeit dient als enthüllender Spiegel für uns selbst und unsere Erfindungen, die ebenso charmant wie ekelerregend sind. Die Technik dient einfach der Projektion der imaginären Realität.‘

Mit der elektronischen Reproduktion zapft Cottingham das, was er sich vorstellt, an und überschreibt damit die Wirklichkeit. Die Illusion photographischer Authentizität erlaubt es ihm, ansonsten eigenständige, ja sogar konkurrierende Konstellationen miteinander zu kombinieren. Doch das Kunstwerk wird nicht zur Collage eines Bildes, sondern zur Collage der Wirklichkeit. Die Fähigkeit, die Essenz der Wirklichkeit heraufzubeschwören und sich deren Inhalt vorzustellen, ist das, was Cottinghams Arbeiten ihre beunruhigende Kraft verleiht.

In ‚Fictitious Portraits‘ kann Cottingham dank der Möglichkeit zur elektronischen Reproduktion den Mythos der Photographie gebrauchen und mißbrauchen, kann den privilegierten Anspruch auf das Wirkliche, auf das, was er ‚die wichtigste Erfindung der modernen Zeiten – das Subjekt‘ – nennt, kritisch hinterfragen. Das ‚Selbst‘, der moderne Begriff des Menschseins, ist das, was Cottinghams photographisches Triptychon in Frage stellt.

Cottingham stellt sich Körper vor, indem er sie nicht als Wesen abbildet, sondern sich selbst mit anderen vermischt, indem er Gestalten aus Ton, aus anatomischen Zeichnungen, aus zahllosen Photographien von verschiedenen Rassen, Geschlechtern und Altersgruppen formt. Diese scheinbar normalen photographischen Portraits stellen die menschliche Wirklichkeit als Konstrukt in den Vordergrund, als das Produkt bedeutungsvoller Aktivitäten, die auf den Körper anspielen. Wie Cottingham poetisch sein Bild beschreibt: ‚Da ist diese leblose äußere Schale, mit ihrer Schuld, und hinterfragt zornig

‚constructed realism‘: *‘The realism in my work serves as a revealing mirror into ourselves and into our inventions, both charming and nauseating. Technique simply serves to project the imaginary reality.’*

*Through electronic reproduction Cottingham draws on what is imagined and writes it upon the real. The illusion of photographic authenticity, then, allows him to combine otherwise discrete and even competing contexts. Yet, the artwork becomes not a collage of an image, but a collage of reality. This ability to construct the essence of the real and imagine its content is what gives Cottingham’s work its unsettling power.*

*In ‘Fictitious Portraits’, electronic re-production allows Cottingham to use and abuse photography’s myth, its privileged claim to the real; to critique what he calls ‘the most important invention of modern times – the subject.’ The self, the Modern notion of personhood, is what is being called into question by Cottingham’s photographic triptych.*

*By hybridizing himself with others, by creating characters out of clay, anatomical drawings and numerous photographs of different races, genders, and ages, instead of re-presenting subjects, Cottingham imagines bodies. These seemingly formal photographic portraits foreground human reality as construction, as the product of signifying activities which play upon the body. As Cottingham poetically describes the image: ‘There’s the lifeless, external shell with its guilt, angrily questioning the viewer’s responsibility, leaving body, blank eyes. Breath. Older, hard, intense – younger, innocent, relaxed. Unaware. Flux of warning, guilt, worried questioning. In the blink of an eye, the movement between life and stagnation.’ Through the construction of bodies, made possible by electronic reproduction, Cottingham shows that selves, like ‘Fictitious Portraits’, are mental collages made from numerous images from the past, future, and the imagined. By creating a portrait as multiple personas, the ‘self’ is exposed not as a solidified being, but as the product of social and interior interaction.*

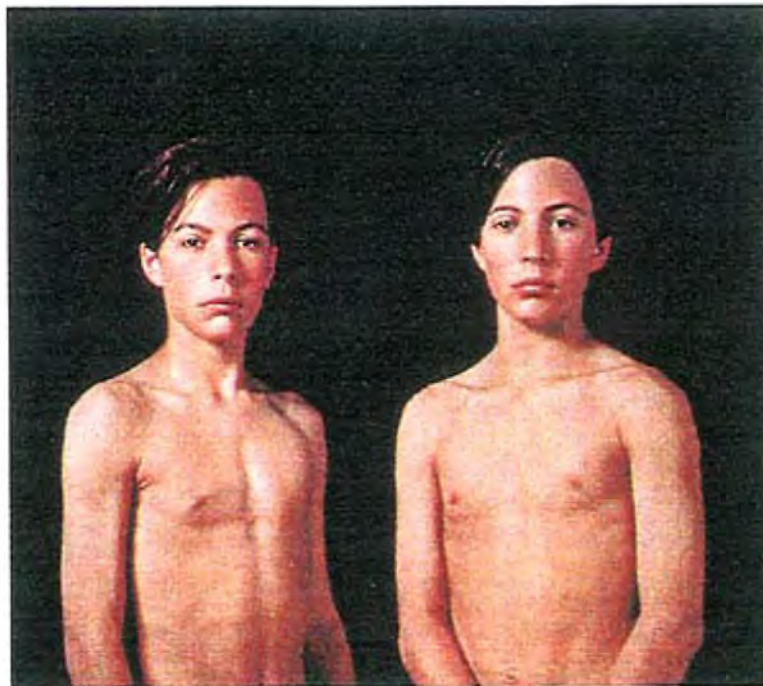


## KEITH COTTINGHAM

die Verantwortlichkeit des Betrachters, den Körper verlassend, leere Augen, Atem. Älter, hart, ernst – jünger, unschuldig, entspannt. Unwissend. Flux der Wärme, Schuld, besorgt fragend. Einen Augenblick lang, die Bewegung zwischen Leben und Stillstand.

Mit seinem Zusammenstellen von Körpern, das erst durch elektronische Reproduktion möglich wird, zeigt Cottingham auf, daß unser aller ‚Selbst‘, genauso wie ‚Fictitious Portraits‘, nichts anderes ist als eine geistige Collage aus zahlreichen Bildern der Vergangenheit, der Zukunft und der Phantasie. Indem er ein Portrait aus mehreren Persönlichkeiten zusammensetzt, wird das ‚Selbst‘ als ein nichteinheitliches Wesen, als Produkt von gesellschaftlicher und innerer Wechselwirkung entlarvt. Cottingham veranschaulicht, daß eine Auseinandersetzung damit die Anpassung des ‚Ich‘ und des ‚Du‘ an ein Idealbild beinhaltet und sich der Betrachter durch diese Art von Bildern selbst findet.» (Greg Grieve/Keith Cottingham)

*Cottingham shows that discourse involves the 'match' of the signifiers 'I' and 'you' to ideal representation, and that it is through those representations that the subject finds itself.» (Greg Grieve/Keith Cottingham)*



**Auszeichnung**  
**Fictitious Portraits, 1992**  
**HW: Macintosh II**  
**SW: Adobe Photoshop**



## 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.

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.

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



