

Our Differences Unite Us
by Clinton Yates, journalist

Challenging the norm of the school portrait is difficult because it carries with it a deep history. Why not take a look at your own school picture first? Does it accurately reflect what you were feeling that day, that year, or really, ever? Does it give you any insight into whom you were at that moment?

This is the question artist Justine Graham set out to answer in a project re-envisioning the school portrait. Putting each of 460 sitters in front of the camera with four different backgrounds and “assignments”, and putting them together in a book, she has attempted to reframe our idea of what the school photo actually represents. Her previous work has studied classification and presentation, exercises that force viewers to challenge preconceived notions about how we fundamentally view others and ourselves. Testing the visual and cognitive assumptions that we often don't realize affect our daily interactions is her way of bringing people together and fostering harmony.

As part of this exercise, I looked back at my senior year yearbook, which I designed jointly with my friend and classmate Chloe Oliver. In the fall of 1999, we felt it was important to establish our identities on the project in an unforgettable way. So, we put a barcode on the back with our initials, so no one could forget. Since we were in charge of the yearbook, we could represent ourselves in a way we wished, but in most yearbooks, the sitters have no opportunity to do that.

Graham's view pays homage to this. "The book is an end to a process that seeks to build community, both in revisiting what it looks like and how it showcases itself, but also in engaging in a visual arts project as a collective experience. The surprise of having sat four times to four sets of instructions, and having the camera flash without knowing what it will look like, is also part of the process," Justine said.

And that process was an experience that many of the students who participated will never forget. The project was a year in conception and organization, with photographs taken over two days. Executing, cataloguing and curating four photos of each of 460 sitters involved 23 11th and 12th graders and their teachers, and for many it has been an indelible experience.

"It was the most professional thing I've ever been a part of," one student told me. Others remarked on how talking with people and giving them instructions beyond the typical sit and smile proved to be a trying endeavor. "It's amazing how difficult it is for some people to close their eyes and smile at the same time," another student recalled of the experience. Think about it. Now try it, yourself. Told you.

Over the course of the four chapters of this book you'll take a journey into the world of identity, reflection and imagery. In this book, the portraits appear in conjunction with each other in unexpected ways – siblings are placed next to each other, teachers show up amongst their students, and in one chapter the color of your shirt becomes the sorting mechanism.

The Chapters

The first chapter immediately shifts the paradigm of the typical portrait. The subjects are in front of a warm, inviting yellow background that quickly establishes a happy tone. Furthermore, instead of the standard first name, last name after each row, Justine uses first names only across the entire school community (6th through 12th plus staff). Alphabetically, the presentation invites you to experience a shared bond, through something as basic as how we address each other every day.

In the second chapter, Justine finds a new way to sort her subjects. By choosing a specific background color for each nationality, students are framed in front of their allocated color(s). My classmate and current WIS Design Technology teacher Natalie Marchant was particularly glad to be a part of the project for this reason. "I get my own color. I'm the only one from Mauritius!" she explained. For those with multiple nationalities, all their colors are represented.

For the third chapter, subjects were placed in front of a white background. The absence of imposed color creates a focus on the face. And because the sitters have their eyes closed and the traditional fixed gaze isn't the main focus, it's interesting to note where one's eyes eventually wander. Photos are organized here not by name, but by day and month of birth. Common dates of birth are an intriguing way to think about how the human race chooses to organize itself and what its timeline looks like.

Lastly, the fourth chapter uses a black background. To please the inner child in all of us, Justine chose to give the sitters the chance to make a comical face. This classification is fascinating because you see the range of what many of us have been socialized to believe is the definition of "funny", expressed in a myriad of faces. The serendipitous element of the color of the clothes worn that day becomes the organizing framework.

Not to be forgotten in this equation is the institution where the project took place. Although Washington International School hasn't broken tradition for decades when it comes to school photos, it is a diverse place in many senses of the word. As a student who attended from Kindergarten through graduation, I never knew who was going to be sitting next to me in class – someone from a country halfway around the globe, a bilingual American, or a student holding three passports.

Using a sample size of humans with such a diverse array of upbringings, both culturally and socio-economically, made for the perfect canvas with which to work. That Justine is an alumna herself speaks to the trust inherent in allowing such a large, personal project to effectively take over the School for a few days, and that shows in the work. This was not a stranger asking for a photo on the street.

As you flip through the next 125 pages, consider where your family comes from in the world. And try to analyze why certain images and representations mean what they do to you. Then consider how you might feel about yourself and others when you realize that those presumptions could be incorrect. This book is as much a visual learning experience as it is something fascinating to look at.

While working on this project, one phrase I've become familiar with kept coming back to me. This year, France's national soccer team debuted a jersey with an inscription on the inside that described the difficult identity politics the team has faced for decades, due to the effects of colonization and emigration.

"Nos differences nous unissent." Our differences unite us.

Indeed.

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