

NUMARK GALLERY

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On Exhibit

MUSEUMS ■ ART SPACES ■ GALLERIES

Nikki S. Lee: New Guises, New Gazes

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IN NIKKI S. LEE'S latest series of photographic self-portraits, called "Parts," the chameleon-like artist-performer is often depicted in the guise of a traveler. In several of these pictures, on view at Numark Gallery along with examples from Lee's earlier "Projects" series, she appears against backdrops that suggest, to varying degrees, unfamiliarity. Here she sits at an outdoor cafe, pointing off-camera at some unseen attraction; there she waits in an airport, distractedly tugging at an eyelash. In others, she positions herself in front of a cathedral, a scenic mountain overlook, a pier from which her boat is about to depart—or dock.

Lee is, in a sense, the consummate tourist, and not just because of her apparent fondness for this mise-en-scene of the wanderer. In both "Parts" and "Projects," the work has always been about identity and belonging, as well as *not* belonging.

In Lee's earlier work—represented at Numark by shots taken between 1997 and 2002 from "The Tourist Project," "The Hip Hop Project," "The Yuppie Project," "The Skateboarders Project" and "The Punk Project"—the artist, through changes in dress, makeup and demeanor, has disguised herself as a member of a social group to which she does not belong. In one image, the Korean-born, New York-based artist appears as an Asian sightseer at the Statue of Liberty. In another, she sits at an expensive restaurant, where she poses with a man (to all appearances, a would-be fiancé) at a table cluttered with the remains of dessert and a jewelry box from Tiffany's.

Unlike, say, Cindy Sherman, the artist to whom her work is most often compared, Lee doesn't stage her scenes. Over the course of weeks or months, she spends time with a given social group—in addition to those mentioned above, the artist has infiltrated lesbian, senior citizen and Latino circles—gaining



PHOTOS FROM NUMARK GALLERY

Nikki S. Lee dresses the part for her self-portraits, including "Part (28)," above, and "Part (10)," at left. Her photographs are on exhibit at Numark Gallery.



a kind of acceptance, and ultimately documenting her performance in snapshotlike photographs taken by

a friend or another member of the group. She does not dissemble, however, always telling her tempo-

In Lee's various "Projects," it is the artist who stands out. Ironically, although she makes every effort to blend in, Lee is always immediately identifiable. By passing herself off as someone else, she is, in a sense, revealed to be more fully herself. In "Parts," the absence of a partner, toward whom Lee's gaze is often directed, calls into question not only the identity of the excised man, but of the woman who remains in the frame.

In other words, the deliberate omission of one half of a couple casts an inevitable shadow across the half that remains. In that shadow, there is an implicit drama that goes beyond the street theater of her "Projects." In those earlier pictures, what the viewer felt was a kind of brinksmanship: Will she be accepted or rejected? And is she embracing or making fun of otherness? In "Parts," it would appear that Lee herself, or the persona she has stepped into, is the one who is doing the rejecting, of an "other" who remains a mystery.

Lee's art has previously underscored the degree to which barriers of class, race, age, sexual orientation, geography, taste and other social markers are—and are not—permeable. Now her gaze has shifted from the cultural to the personal. Despite Nikki S. Lee's protestations that her main area of interest is Nikki S. Lee, there has always been a universal resonance about her work. With this latest twist, what the artist seems to be saying is not just that we will be judged by the clothes that we wear, but by the people we hang out with (or hang out to dry).

Which is, when it comes right down to it, what my mother always told me.

NIKKI S. LEE: PARTS AND PROJECTS

Through July 24 at Numark Gallery, 625-27 E St. NW (Metro: Gallery Place-Chinatown), 202-628-3810. www.numarkgallery.com. Open Tuesday-Saturday 11 to 6. Free. Public programs associated with the exhibition include:
■ Wednesday from 6:30 to 8 — Gallery reception with the artist.
■ Thursday at 7 — Artist talk. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW (Metro: L'Enfant Plaza).

rary comrades that she is an artist.

In "Parts," most of which dates from 2003 (with two images from 2002), Lee ups the ante a bit. Here, in addition to posing in various forms of "drag"—everything from the bra, panties and cigarette of a downtown hipster to the demure white suit of a Junior Leaguer—Lee positions herself in front of the camera with a solitary male figure, who in each case has been somewhat clumsily cropped out of the frame. To highlight the sense of something (or, rather, someone) missing, the photos have white borders on only three sides, as if the subject had gone though her photo album with a pair of scissors. But who is the subject?