

Future Artifacts Gaze Back in Erica Deeman's 'Familiar Stranger'

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The Do List



Erica Deeman, Detail of 'Untitled 02 (Self Portrait),' 2020; Cassius Obsidian clay, unique in a series. *(Courtesy the artist and Anthony Meier Fine Arts; photo by Christopher Grunder)*

This time last year, I'd just published an annual, obligatory "10 Art Shows to See this Fall"-type story, previewing the exhibitions and events to look forward to in the months ahead. Early September is the start of the visual art year, a prime slot for an artist and an exciting moment for the people who love to look at their work. It's time to flit from opening to opening, celebrating new shows and reconnecting with old friends.

As with so many things, that won't be the case in 2020. Our museums are still closed indefinitely. Smaller capacity venues now schedule visits by appointment or shift their exhibitions to online viewing rooms. When we do see art these days, we are alone: half holding our breaths as we try to limit our time indoors or else hunched over computers, clicking through digital images. Which is a shame, because some of these shows deserve the buzz and enthusiasm that comes from in-person, communal art experiences.

In a coronavirus-free 2020, San Francisco artist [Erica Deeman](#) would have had a packed,

conversation-filled opening on Aug. 25, but instead, *Familiar Stranger*, her show at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, is simply open. In the stately mansion at 1969 California Street, Deeman's clay works read like specimens, their irregular edges contained within the deep profile of rectangular white frames. Upon closer inspection, the obsidian-black sculptures reveal Deeman's own face looking out. *Familiar Stranger* is 15 self-portraits, each uniquely shaped by Deeman's hands.



Installation view of 'Familiar Stranger' at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco, 2020. (Courtesy the artist and Anthony Meier Fine Arts; photo by Christopher Grunder)

The space between Deeman's flesh-and-blood self and the wobbly, organic lumps of clay lining the gallery walls is filled by both technology and manual labor, a push and pull reminiscent of the past six months: intense physicality paired with digital remove.

The body of work (pun always intended) began during a residency at the Headlands, and draws from Deeman's experience photographing objects in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture for the *New York Times Magazine's* [1619 Project](#). In an interview with Essence Harden that accompanies the exhibition materials, Deeman talks about her relationship to these objects linked to slavery, some of

them so fragile they could only spend a limited amount of time under lights. Among the images she captured for the *Times*: iron shackles sized for children; a 19th-century tool for cutting sugar cane; and a daguerreotype of an enslaved woman.

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The assignment left her thinking of permanence. “As a culture, I ask, what will we leave to be remembered by?” Deeman says to Harden. The sculptures in *Familiar Stranger* come at the question of creating lasting signifiers of Deeman’s presence in two ways—by becoming solid, and by multiplying. Using 3D printing, she translated black-and-white photographic self-portraits into molds, pressing Cassius Obsidian clay into them. (Look closely and the layer lines of the 3D prints are visible in the details of Deeman’s faces, along with mineral flecks of light in the dark clay.) Peeling the clay out of the molds distorts and fragments her face. In one, we get just her nose and eyes.



Erica Deeman, 'Untitled 12 (Self Portrait),' 2020; Cassius Obsidian clay, unique in a series (Courtesy the artist and Anthony Meier Fine Arts; photo by Christopher Grunder)

The repetition of subject matter, material and presentation (the show is hung with military precision) reinforces the variations in Deeman's expressions and manner of self-presentation. This multitude of selves is an idea she also found in Stuart Hall's autobiography (the show's namesake), *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*.

Deeman likens her formal similarities to Hall's writings on a shared cultural identity within the Black diaspora; the irregularities then become representations of individual experience.

Under smoke-filled skies, during the loneliness of solo viewing, *Familiar Stranger* attains its stated goal of achieving "artifact" status—as all activities now feel like something done in another time, at a remove from the world we once knew. Aiding in this somber interpretation is the Benjamin Moore "Wet Clay" color of the gallery's walls (the paint name almost too perfect), a hue chosen for its Headlands-like ambiance: damp, mossy and a little utilitarian.

Moving around the perimeters of the gallery, gazing into Deeman's smooshed clay faces, I thought of the Shroud of Turin. I thought about the hollows left by those who perished at Pompeii. Both are inverses, like Deeman's molds, that have been used over centuries to extrapolate different forms of knowledge. These antecedents to Deeman's work also hold space for mystery, just as the accretion of Deeman's self-portraits will never fully capture or accurately represent the artist. We have little control over how the future will interpret this time. We can only be, as Deeman is, incredibly purposeful about the things we leave to be remembered by.



'Familiar Stranger' is on view at Anthony Meier Fine Arts (1969 California Street, San Francisco) through Oct. 2.