

**Beyond Appearances: Julie Moos' *Friends and Enemies Series***

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**19<sup>th</sup> Annual Mint Museum Symposium**

Contemporary photographer Julie Moos' 1999 *Friends and Enemies* series takes as its subject matter seniors at Altamont School, a private school in Birmingham, Alabama. This series of large scale, uniformly sized photographs usually show two students seated next to one another in a non-descript, minimal setting and facing the camera. A typical example from the *Friends and Enemies* series is *Kristen and Abby* (Figure 1). The lack of any identifiable context in this (and other Moo's photographs) makes viewers focus on the sitters exclusively and the minute details of their clothes, postures, and facial expressions. The decision to define the sitters as either friends or enemies is one that is ultimately left to the viewer of the photograph. Though the image itself may provide certain clues and suggest various possibilities, but it is up to the viewer to pick up on and interpret these cues.

Judging others by sight alone leads to the creation and use of stereotypes. Even though we all know stereotypes are often more harmful than helpful, many scholars have argued that they are, in some respects, necessary to basic human functioning in the modern world. In short, most people living in the industrialized Western world, and particularly in urban and highly populated communities, use stereotypes to quickly make judgments and gather information about strangers. Psychologists support that, initial impressions and evaluations are used as the primary basis for guiding subsequent interaction, and accurate judgments help social perceivers, or the viewers, form satisfying relationships and avoid potentially harmful interactions.<sup>1</sup> Thus visual cues are particularly useful in the process of forming first impressions. This process is also central to the *Friends and Enemies Series* as it helps explain

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<sup>1</sup> Nalini Ambady and Heather Gray, "On Being Sad and Mistaken: Mood Effects on the Accuracy of Thin-Sliced Judgments"

how viewers are able to compare the sitters in Moos' photographs, and even how they can compare photographs one to the next within the larger series.

Indeed, the large scale of the photographs—each image is 48x68"— and the fact that they are taken with a 4x5 camera, and are therefore extremely detailed in nature, seems to deliberately invite visual inspection of the individuals pictured. Each photograph seems almost life size and this attracts the viewer, as does the fact that each individual is faced forward in a seated position, often making eye contact with the photographer and subsequently the viewer. All of the sitters in the series are confined to the same basic pose, which in turn leaves limited options for body language, as opposed to if they were allowed to choose their own stance.

From the outset it is important to note that the title suggests this series is about the stereotypes and assumptions that these students have formed over the years about each other. However, it is also the title that invites viewers to engage the images as a kind of guessing game. Therefore, in many ways this series is equally about the many assumptions, stereotypes and snap judgments that viewer's of the photograph are invited to make when assessing whether or not these young people are friends or enemies. The fact of the matter is we are never explicitly given the answer to this riddle. As such, the power of this series lies in its deliberate ambiguity. As Moos states, by pairing individuals under this title she "forces the viewer to get stuck between the two subjects and creates a fictional narrative between them."<sup>2</sup>

I argue that Moos' series aggravates viewers psychologically by making them question whether their stereotypes and assumptions about the students pictured are correct. I also

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<sup>2</sup> Amie Barrodale, "Odd Couple: Artist Julie Moos Makes her own Cliques"

argue that in the end, the point of this intriguing series is not reaching any definitive conclusion or the truth about whether these kids are friends or enemies, but rather, the real power of this series lies in its ability to make the viewer pay closer attention to the process by which we judge and form stereotypes about others.

Race and class play a large role in stereotype formation. These issues are seen continuously throughout the *Friends and Enemies* series, but I want to focus specifically on the issue of race in the next example. In *Drew and Monica* (Figure 2) there is tension between the two sitters, one light skinned the other dark skinned, that is especially seen through the girl's facial expression. It appears as though she has a look of fear on her face, which may in all fairness, not be due to, or directed towards the individual seated next to her. However, it seems that way to me when I look at this photograph. That is my assumption and perhaps my own stereotype. The young man also seems uncomfortable to me, suggesting that he also dislikes or fears who he is seated next to.

Now, we have no way of knowing for sure if they truly dislike each other, nor do we know that they fear each other, and, of course there is ultimately no way to conclude as a fact that they are enemies because of racial difference. However, with such little information provided by the image itself, the viewer of the photograph, in this case myself, is tempted to making my own snap judgment by concluding that racial difference is the likely cause of the tension between the two. I wonder, though if my analysis does not tell me more about myself than about the sitters in the photograph. I am confronted with my own process of stereotyping based on the sparse visual information I was given. And this makes me want to be more

analytical and fair and aware about when I do this all the time in my everyday life. I may not be able to stop the use of stereotypes completely, but this series is teaching me to at least be aware of the fact that I am employing stereotypes and that I am not necessarily finding the facts and speaking the truth.

Before having pairs of students sit together for their portrait, Moos played the role of the social experimenter and researcher by investigating each senior's relationships with his or her classmates. Specifically she did this by collecting and viewing various yearbooks and talking to guidance counselors about the student's interaction with each other, and by having conversations with the students themselves about their peers. However, we the viewers are never given access to the details of Moos' research. We only see the photograph and the title of each photograph, which only gives the name of the individuals seated. Without the benefit of her research, viewers can only guess based on appearances. As I just demonstrated by narrating my own thought processes when viewing the photograph *Drew and Monica*. It is surprising how these large scale detailed photographs reveal so little about the people they picture. Moos knows the answers but she withholds them and that is precisely what makes these photographs so powerful.

Although the act of researching and taking these photographs was a long process for Moos, it is the viewer's relationship to the finished product that is the real experiment. Moos' photographs expose how spectators make their own assumptions when they view the pairs. As such, the photographs ultimately invite the viewers to question their thought processes and how correct initial assumptions can be if they are indeed based on stereotypes. One such

viewer, Meredith Mulhearn, reported on her thought process after viewing Moos' photograph of *Bleeker and Wisely* (Figure 3) stating:

I found myself making assumptions about the depicted individuals without once second-guessing my thought process. As a viewer, I was left only with visual cues upon which to base my decisions. I struggled to uncover clues in the subject's vague expressions, style of clothing and other superficial characteristics. Based upon these visual cues I created my own interpretation of the existing relationships. In essence, however, my theories were based solely on stereotypical surface evidence, which made my conclusions completely unfounded.<sup>3</sup>

The unknown history behind the two individuals photographed is intriguing to the viewer because of the inability to know an actual answer. The setting offers no cues as to how or why Moos paired the two together. We are given such little information that we begin to fabricate how the pairs feel towards each other. The viewer is forced to make largely blind judgment. Moos could have chosen these students neither as friends or enemies, but as mere acquaintances. We only assume that they are friends or enemies because of the title for the series.

Moos forces us to closely inspect each photo to see how the slight variations of posture in each pair can create an impact. *Thomas and Hugh* (Figure 4) show two young men facing forward and sitting. The boy on the right side has his head tilted away from his fellow student. This slight difference in posture may lead to the assumption that he is not comfortable sitting next to his peer. You can also see this same posture when viewing *Colin and Chris* (Figure 5). The young man on the left side is also leaning away from his peer. However, both of the students are wearing black, which can indicate a similarity between the two. This similarity can cause the viewer to assume that the pairs are friends, but further investigation can indicate

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<sup>3</sup> Meredith Mulhearn, "Julie Moos' 'Bleeker and Wisely'"

otherwise. The student on the right is stiff, with a very stern expression on his face. The student on the left also looks unhappy about his pair. Although these are assumptions, we pick up on these visual cues in order to figure out the situation of the photograph, but ultimately we will never know if we have read the cues correctly, once again, the indeterminacy of the photographs are central to their meaning.

Moos also capitalizes on the idea that in high school looks and appearances are especially important. High school is a turning point for students, where they find themselves transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood. At this stage in life a student's outward appearance may define their personality as they attempt to discover who they are. It is these stereotypes that Moos addresses in her work and wants the viewers to realize as they observe the photograph. Moos gained her inspiration for this series from the 1999 Columbine shooting in Colorado, in which two students killed twelve of their own classmates and one teacher before committing suicide.<sup>4</sup> The two student shot fellow classmates they did not necessarily know, but that they had judged based on their own stereotypes. Stereotypes are prevalent in high school and psychologists suggest students depend on them in order to discover their own personality. As the extreme and tragic case of Columbine demonstrates, that kind of defining one's self in opposition to others can result in violence, and even the death of one's perceived and largely self-manufactured enemies.

Having enemies assists in the discovery of finding one's own identity. Most people throughout their lifetime (and especially during high-school) have at least one enemy that they consistently run into. Although these run-ins produce frustration and even rage, both of the

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<sup>4</sup> Larry Rinder, "Julie Moos"

individuals are, ironically, undeniably connected and dependent upon each other. Perhaps it is better to have an enemy than nobody at all because it gives us a way to define the parameters of our personality. However, when pushed to extremes, we all have seen the incredible harm and violence and objectification that stereotyping can lead to. Moos took the Columbine tragedy into consideration when photographing these students because of the potentially harmful and even deadly interpersonal relationships that are formed during high school based on stereotypical assumptions. Perhaps by becoming more aware of when and why we employ stereotypes, we can reduce violence against strangers and those who we do not immediately understand and perceive as different and therefore as a threat to our identity.

Carla Hansal, a contemporary art curator for the Mint Museum, explains “Moos had to exert heavy pressure on a student who skipped the session when he discovered he was to be photographed with someone whom he didn’t like.”<sup>5</sup> Although the sitter arrived the next day and was photographed with the other individual, Moos also captured *Michael* (Figure 6) who graciously posed alone after his fellow sitter left. This is an important moment in the series. A student seated alone is unique to the rest of the photographs, which makes a powerful statement. With the rest of the sitters next to someone we are able to compare and contrast their demeanor to each other, with *Michael* alone we only have him to look at. He makes a powerful presence sitting alone, which reflects integrity, but also a sense of loneliness. This photograph reflects that *Michael* is comfortable with who he is, even if others are not. People viewing the photograph who have left high school behind must admire this rare display of courage at a time when the young adult’s identity is so fragile and in constant flux. Because he

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<sup>5</sup> Carla Hansal, Vantage Point 1: “Julie Moos: Friends and Enemies”



is able to sit alone as opposed to the other students in the series, we face him on his own terms, he defines himself.

Moos talks about her own experience stating, "Once you graduate high school, you realize that the kids who are super cool really aren't that cool, they all look the same. They've just convinced all the weaker people that they are cool. It made me wish I could go back and see things differently."<sup>6</sup>

Moos' Friends and Enemies series plays on the idea of stereotypes and how spectators cognitive thought process reacts to an unknown story behind a photograph. Each of Julie Moos' photographs in this series creates a thought process that leads the viewer to think about why they decided to fabricate the significance of the photograph in whatever manner they did. This is exactly what Moos is trying to accomplish in her work. The viewer's aggravation of not knowing whether or not their judgment is correct leads to continuous thinking about first impressions and assumptions. The inability to have an answer leaves the viewer's guessing. This makes stereotypes apparent and allows the spectators to question if their initial assumption is correct.

Ultimately Moos' portrayal of high school students, allows the viewer to see that stereotypes do not only affect individuals in transitional phases in their life, but also others who have established themselves as adults. She wants viewers to realize that we all use stereotypes towards others even though many of us have long left adolescence and the turbulent high school years behind us. In the end, perhaps Moos' contribution is that her photographs teach

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<sup>6</sup> Amie Barrodale, "Odd Couples: Artist Julie Moos Makes her own Cliques"

us to think twice when we stereotype others and to be more open minded when we meet a new individual.

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Figure 1

Julie Moos, *Kristen and Abby*, 1999



Figure 2

Julie Moos, *Drew and Monica*, 1999



Figure 3

Julie Moos, *Bleeker and Wisely*, 1999

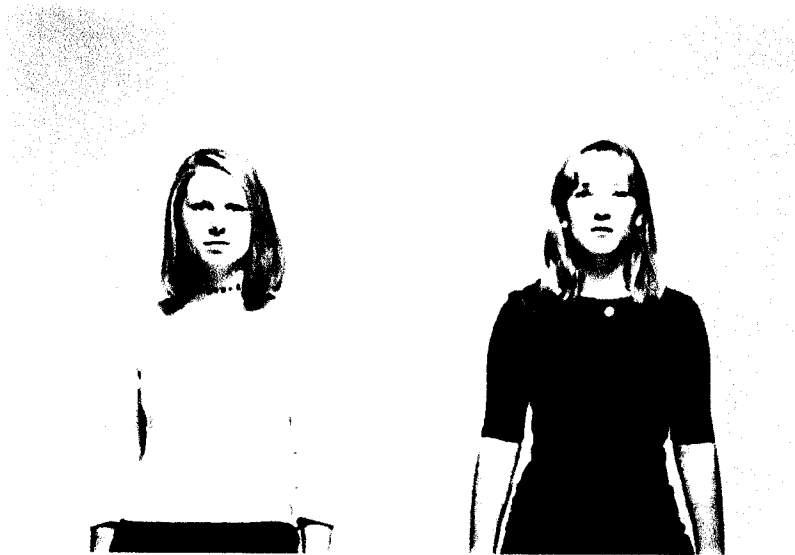


Figure 4

Julie Moos, *Thomas and Hugh*, 1999



Figure 5

Julie Moos, *Colin and Chris*, 1999

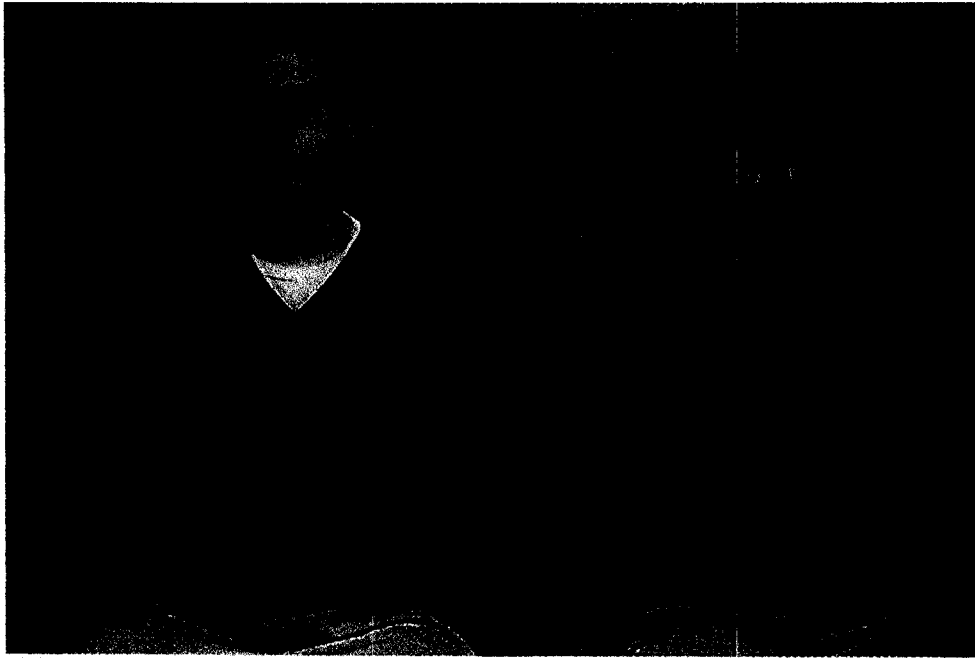


Figure 6

Julie Moos, *Michael*, 1999

