

# The 7 Photographers Proving That the Self-Portrait Is 2018's Most Exciting Genre

by  
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Right now, the self-portrait is in a state of rapid evolution. Just look at, for example, MoMA's exhibition of New Photography, which just opened in New York. In 2016, the survey was chock-full of post-internet art, so it was only natural that the 2018 edition, "Being," which prompted 17 artists under 45 to explore "notions of personhood and identity," would be all about selfies. At the same time, though, photography's new talents have been busy giving the centuries-old field a facelift—and these are not casual iPhone snapshots. Instead, the conceptual and formal thinking behind their selfies are all about identity—and, it turns out, selfies are perhaps one of the only real ways to communicate identities many complexities, which of course include race, gender, sexual orientation, and politics. It would be inadequate to simply characterize these photographers as, say, "black" or "gay" artists: Whether in portraying themselves or making some broader societal commentary, the likes of Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Kawita Vatanajyankur, and Fumiko Imano produce works that get far below the surface level of their subjects. Get to really know some of those redefining the genre, from Fumiko Imano, a 43-year-old who just shot (and starred in) her first fashion campaign, to David Uzochukwu, a 19-year-old world traveler, here.



Omar Victor Diop, *The W/African Railway Strike 19*, from the series *Liberty*.  
1/7

## [Omar Victor Diop](#)

Born and based in Dakar, Senegal, the 37-year-old self-taught photographer Omar Victor Diop was in Spain for an artist residency when he had the idea to do a series on the unsung heroes of black history, titled *Diaspora*. After studying black subjects in classical baroque painting, Diop got to work and quickly realized the series had developed another layer: though he's long focused on modern Africa in his pictures, he ended up feeling such a connection with the historical figures that posing as them felt like "invoking souls that needed a voice to speak"—particularly about how issues of race and justice stand today. Concluding that "times change, but the struggle of oppressed people remains the same," Diop, who started out in finance but is now represented by Magnin-A gallery in Paris, moved on to grouping together black protest throughout history in *Liberty*, a series he finished in 2017 and which he again starred in, often as multiple figures in the same frame. Simultaneously, though, *Liberty* is also Diop beginning to open up his practice to other subjects, too, but easing into it slowly—starting with adopting a female alter ego.



*Genevieve Gagnard, Hidden Fences. Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian*  
2/7

## Genevieve Gagnard

Remember how a nonexistent film, *Hidden Fences*, ended up being brought up again and again during last year's award season? The mashing of two completely different films, *Fences* and *Hidden Figures*, which both happened to have predominantly black casts, is exactly the type of seemingly harmless mixup that the 36-year-old photographer Genevieve Gagnard has devoted her practice to by calling attention to just how "telling [they are of ] America's subconscious prejudices." As a mixed-race woman, those types of "unspoken divides" have long been unavoidable for Gagnard, who uses her self portraits—like the ones at the center of her upcoming show, which is of course titled "Hidden Fences"—to meditate on race and beauty through a variety of persona. (In doing so, she's also gotten the art world's attention in the process; she was the standout name at Prospect, New Orleans' sprawling triennial, last year.) It's a testament to just how deep Gagnard can delve into the complexities of identity, though, that the effectiveness of her portraits can often be found in their backdrops: she always takes care to create painstakingly detailed domestic sets for each of her characters.



*Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Darkroom Mirror, 2017. Courtesy the artist, Yancey Richardson Gallery, team (gallery, inc.), and Document*  
3/7

## Paul Mpagi Sepuya

Paul Mpagi Sepuya, who's 35 and based out of Los Angeles, doesn't just capture homoeroticism through his camera—he also makes it impossible to be unaware that he's doing so, by offering peeks at his lens and his photo studio in between the fragments of bodies, which might otherwise have been simply sexualized. Sepuya, whose work can currently be found in both MoMA's biennial and the New Museum's triennial, may appear in many of his photos, but for him, they're not about his identity: "I'm interested in using my body, alongside the black and brown velvet, as a material for revealing information that is otherwise obliterated by whiteness," he said. "It's about asserting force, interchanging my body, my hand, and the camera lens."



*Kawita Vatanajyankur, Carrier 2 (Fish), HD Video Still, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Nova Contemporary*

4/7

## Kawita Vatanajyankur

Kawita Vatanajyankur is technically a video artist; the image above is a still from one of her works in her series *Splashed*, which focuses on the exploitation of labor in Thailand's fishing industry. Appropriating the vibrant, cheerful colors of the industry's advertisements to instead portray the cruel exploitation of its workers, it's typical of the type of work the artist, who was showcased at last year's Venice Biennale and landed a solo booth at this year's Spring/Break, has made ever since she moved from Melbourne, where she grew up, to Bangkok, to live with her family. Since then, Vatanajyankur has explored the changes in customs and cultures through meditative performances captured in video clips. While she tests the limits of her body and mind to ignore social standards and examine what's important to her, the artist has also recently seen her work become much bigger than herself, expanding to also tackle society, labor, and exploitation. "I use my body as a medium to express strength, endurance, power, powerlessness, violence, and insecurities within today's world of materialism and consumption," she said.



*Fumiko Imano, from the series We Oui. Courtesy of the artist*  
5/7

## Fumiko Imano

Fumiko Imano also went through some cultural shift in her childhood: She grew up in Rio and studied photography and fashion in London before heading back to her hometown, Hitachi, in Japan, at which point she said she "felt like an alien in [her] own country." Though Imano has been taking self-portraits since she was 18, primarily as a form of therapy, it's only now, at age 43, that they've been attracting mainstream attention. Earlier this year, Jonathan Anderson tapped her to not only shoot but also star in Loewe's spring 2018 campaign, alongside the model Saskia de Brauw. In fact, Imano actually turns up twice: Part of the reason that her self-portraiture has proven so therapeutic is that, after a happy accident which she now considers "magical," Imano discovered that using a pair of scissors to physically cut and paste her images to make it appear as though she has a twin sister has made her feel less lonely—and continued to over the years, in an ongoing series she calls *We Oui*.



*David Uzochukwu, Immortal, 2015. Courtesy of the artist*  
6/7

## David Uzochukwu

He may be just 19 years old, but David Uzochukwu has been taking self-portraits since he was 13 in what he now calls "the obvious solution" to making work early on, as no one else had to be involved. (Uzochukwu, who's from Austria and seems to have been on the move ever since, has never exactly been in one place long enough to have a longterm collaborator anyway: he grew in Luxembourg and Brussels, and is now about to make the move from

Vienna to Berlin.) Like Imano, he's now come to consider self portraiture—which, for him, focuses on vulnerability—as a form of therapy: "I discover new facets of myself every time I make one—live through emotions I didn't know I had bottled up inside me," he said. The photo above, for example, is a celebration of regeneration, as well as a story of black resilience. In between making series like one that examined how racism has shaped him, turning him into an "emotional wreck" last year, Uzochukwu has also kept up a steady roster of mainstream clients ranging from Disney to Dior—all before turning 20.



*Michael Bailey-Gates, Behind Glass, from the series Horse in the Rough, 2017.*

7/7

## Michael Bailey-Gates

Since Michael Bailey-Gates moved from Rhode Island to New York and signed to Ford, the 24-year-old has done his fair share of modeling for others. It's when he poses for himself, though, that the 24-year-old produces the arresting images that made him the recipient of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation Award in 2015 (and one of our most promising photographers to follow). He's in fact been taking portraits of himself since he was a kid, shooting and working with those around him long before Kembra Pfahler introduced him to the idea of Availabilism, the performance art movement he now works under. Also key to his work is infusing his beliefs about gender and thinking outside of binaries; for him, "photography is no longer about communicating," he said, but instead "about intention."

<https://www.wmagazine.com/gallery/7-self-portrait-photographers-to-follow>