

UNMASK: ISSUES WITH PERSONAL IDENTITY

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors College of  
Texas State University  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

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December 2015

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## **Abstract**

People are complex, multi-dimensional individuals, making each of us uniquely different. Unfortunately, others tend to identify us with just a few of these dimensions. We live in a fast-paced world that does not allow for recognition of the complex layers that are present within each of us. Technology and social media contribute to this hindrance. I am interested in portraying the array of layers that resides within us by using multiple views to represent each individual. Succumbing to an edited version of ourselves is limiting. I want for others, and myself, the chance to be seen as a rich and diverse human being. This series celebrates people's uniqueness. The grid represents the numerous roles, characteristics, and qualities that exist in each person. It removes the mask and displays the complexity within.

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## **Unmask: Issues With Personal Identity**

Individuals consist of many talents, experiences, and characteristics.

Unfortunately, the fast-paced society in which we live in does not allow for the acknowledgement of human complexity. Quick judgments and the categorization of people led to individuals becoming undervalued. I am interested in portraying the many facets of a person to celebrate the diversity within each of us. I want to reveal the many layers that create individuality. The photographs within *Unmask* celebrate people's rich complexity.

As we struggle to keep up with the fast-paced demands of today, it has become less common for us to take the time to appreciate how wonderfully complex individuals are. The rapid speeds of the Internet and social media have contributed to rushed conclusions and opinions. As technology and everyday demands increase, it is important that we remain aware of the many dimensions that people embody. This series is primarily concerned with representing these layers.

Throughout my education, I have struggled between identifying as an accountant or an artist. Constant comments from others suggested I was somehow less of an accountant or an artist because I chose to pursue two degrees. I was either an artist not serious about passing the Certified Public Accountant exam or an accountant with a hobby, but I was rarely identified as both an artist and an accountant. I became frustrated that people are being denied recognition of their multifaceted talents, skills, and abilities.

Many artists have called attention to issues surrounding the oppression of individuals, such as artist Hannah Höch (1889–1978). For this project, Dada Artist

Hannah Höch was my inspiration. Her work fearlessly confronted the inconsistencies between Germany's depiction of the "New Woman" and actuality. "New Woman" was the term used to describe the modern and seemingly independent female. Because Höch's art utilized collage, she was able to juxtapose text and images from mass culture. The technique resulted in powerful photomontages that boldly confronted the discrepancies between reality and mass culture's representation of women. Each fragment of the image takes on new meaning, depending upon the relationship with the surrounding fragments. Art historian Maud Lavin wrote, "the meaning of each fragment is contingent and incomplete, open to a variety of supplementary readings in juxtaposition with other fragments"<sup>1</sup> For *Unmask*, I want the images to portray a sense of power and fearlessness, similar to Höch's bold comparisons between imagery.

According to art historian Dawn Ades, Hannah Höch received the idea for photomontage after seeing a manipulated image in someone's home. The tenants had cut out a portrait and pasted the subject on top of a soldier's head in another photograph to make a personal memento.<sup>2</sup> The military keepsake inspired Höch to incorporate photomontage into her work. According to Lavin, the collage technique gives the artist the ability to "[deplete] one level of meaning, and then recontextualize and give new layers of meaning."<sup>3</sup> It is through the process that Höch was able to layer allegorical imagery to create art filled with messages concerning the liberation of women.

Höch's *The Beautiful Girl* (figure 1) is an example of her opposition to how mass media represented women. Lavin describes the mass culture during the Weimar Republic

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<sup>1</sup> Maud Lavin, *Cut With The Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1976), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Lavin, *Cut With The Kitchen Knife*, 24.

(1918-1933) as “a site for the expression of anxieties, desires, fears, and hopes.”<sup>4</sup> Today, social media takes on that role through the posting of personal statements and photos. Thus, Höch’s unusual pairing of images play on both the fears and hopes of those around her. I am interested in Höch’s process of isolating specific imagery and placing the images in a new context. The unnatural combination of subjects creates a witty critique of the transforming culture around her. The forced associations between objects, such as a light bulb, and the female figure directly confront issues of the “New Woman.”

Höch’s *The Beautiful Girl* criticizes modern views of technology and women. As Lavin wrote, *The Beautiful Girl* “is a portrait of a modern woman defined by signs of femininity, technology, media, and advertising ... [She] is part human, part machine, and part commodity.”<sup>5</sup> Höch created a photomontage that feels like an advertisement that mocks the relationship between modern woman, man, and machine. I admire her witty and confrontational approach. I am interested in how she is able to embed these messages through the strange relationship created between the imagery. Thus, I used collage in *Unmask* to introduce a new way of seeing the complexity within people.

My interest in her work has led me to incorporate collaging techniques within the series of photographs. The use of collage allows me to visually depict the concept of layers. I have chosen a gridded and linear system of collaging to emphasize the complexity of the subjects. Grids are often used to organize and present information, yet the grids in the images prohibit a clear view the individual. The grids ironically function to complicate the portrait, rather than organize it. The complexity of the grid requires time to decode. The grids break up the image so that we can acknowledge the individual

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<sup>4</sup> Lavin, *Cut With The Kitchen Knife*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Lavin, *Cut With The Kitchen Knife*, 43.

components. The subject is no longer hiding behind a solid masked expression. The individual dimensions of the grid can be analyzed, while the overall image becomes complex. It is the composite of individual components that make up the individual. Thus, the collaged information represents the individual.

In order to eliminate distractions, I made the portraits in a studio. The simplicity of the studio backdrop allows the individual to be the main focus. I wanted the subjects to feel respected and important. The process is also similar to how Höch isolates specific imagery before pasting it into her collage. I wanted to remove the individuals from potential interferences prior to working with the grids.

Because the work is focused on personal identity, the title is as important as the image. Words, titles, and names have the power to represent us just as imagery can. To address this sensitively, I asked each individual what words they would use to describe themselves. The resulting description becomes the title. The titles continue the layering effect and reinforce the complexity within each subject. I chose not to use their names because it would make the project about these twenty individuals, instead of the concept of individuality. Names are how we are accustomed to being identified. Thus, their names would function like the mask that I am working to remove. By titling the images using characteristics, qualities, and roles that describe the individual, the subjects are given the freedom to choose how they want to be represented.

Hannah Höch courageously confronted sensitive issues that surrounded her and has inspired me to do the same. Collaging allowed her to brazenly critique issues regarding the “New Woman.” Using collage, I collaged portraits of individuals with images of the same person. The result exposes the many dimensions of each person and

the grid depicts an alternate view of the subject. The multiple views within the image represent the numerous roles, characteristics, and qualities that reside in each of us. It is time that we re-recognize those around us to appreciate their individuality. The photographs provide the opportunity for individuals to be seen as diverse human beings. Thus, their complexity is no longer being masked.



Figure 1. Hannah Höch, *The Beautiful Girl*, 1919-1920, photomontage, 35x29cm, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

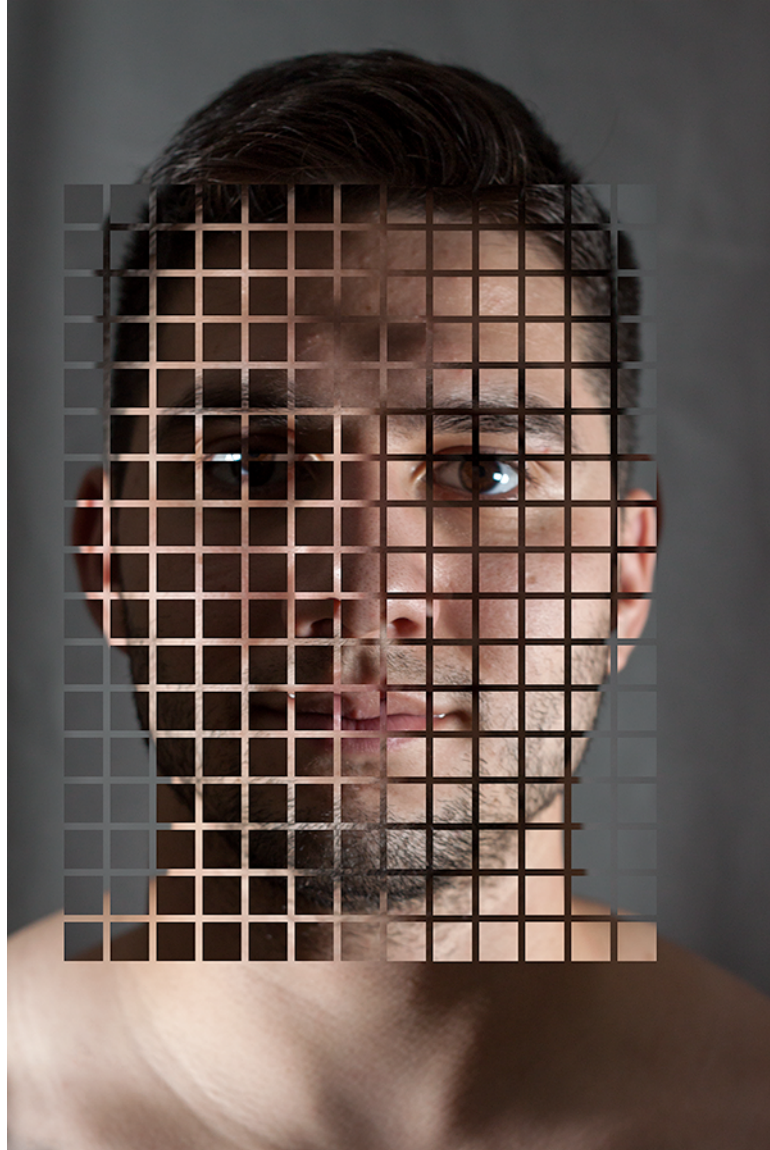


**Unmask**

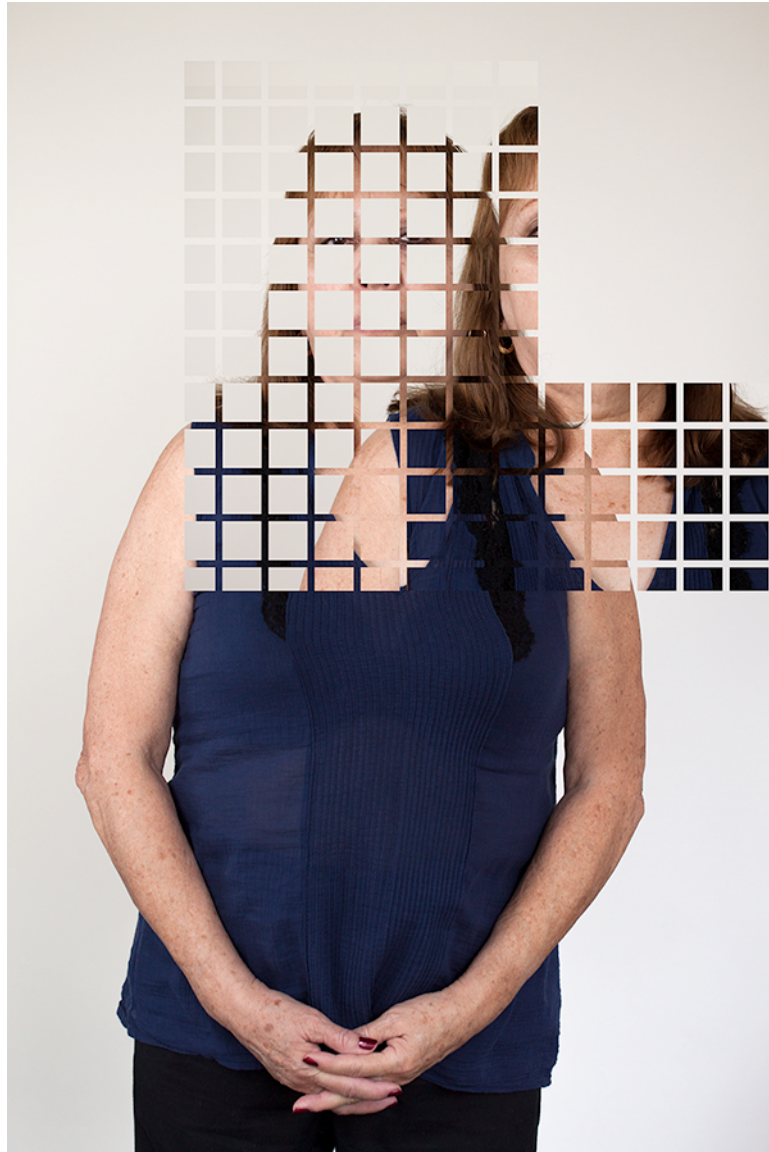


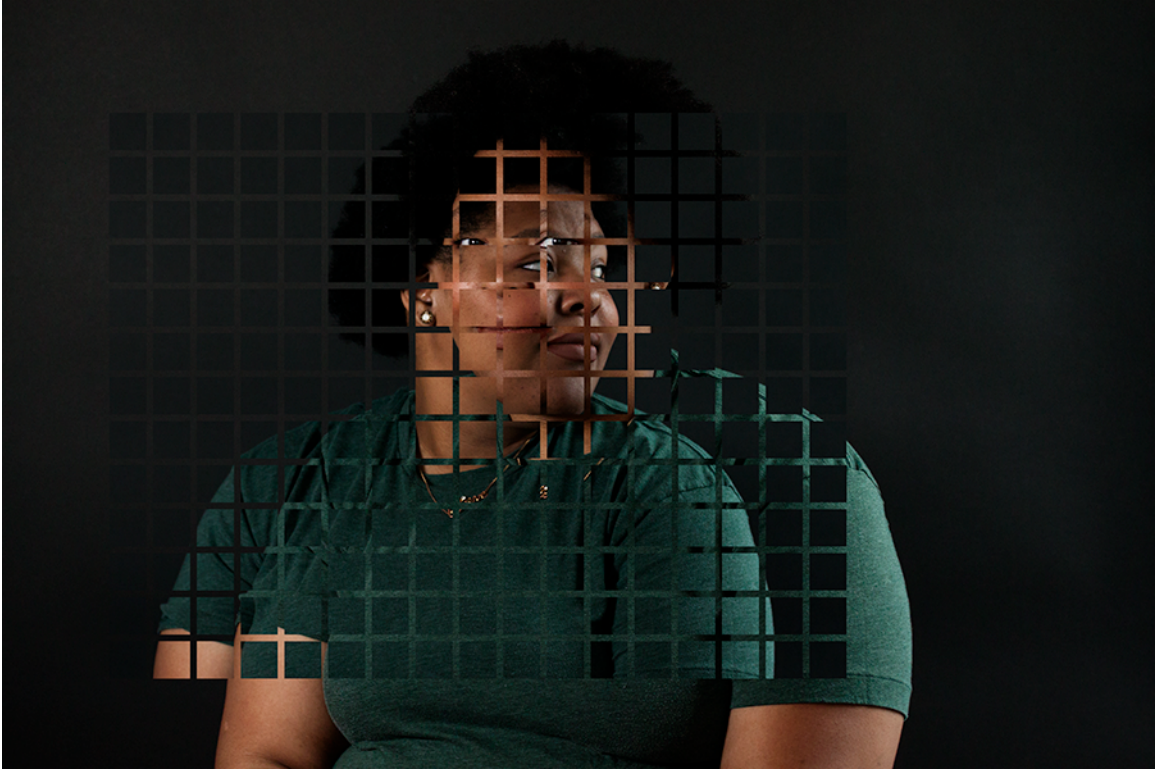


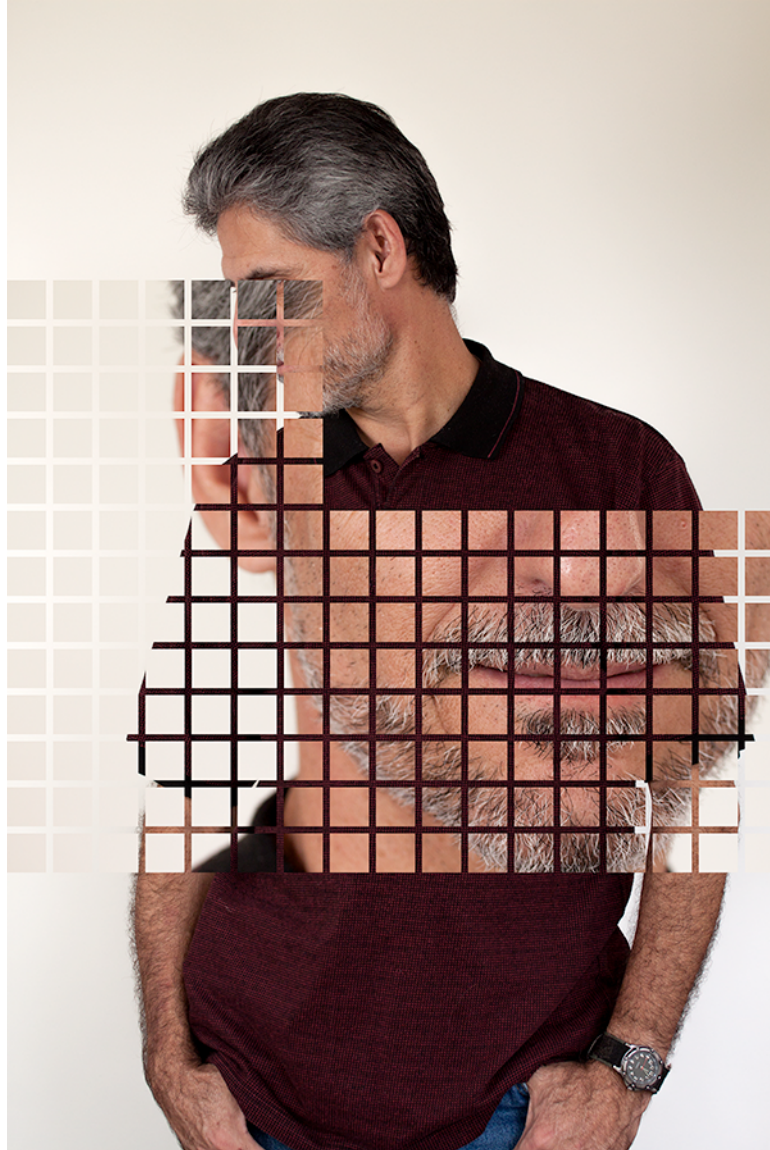




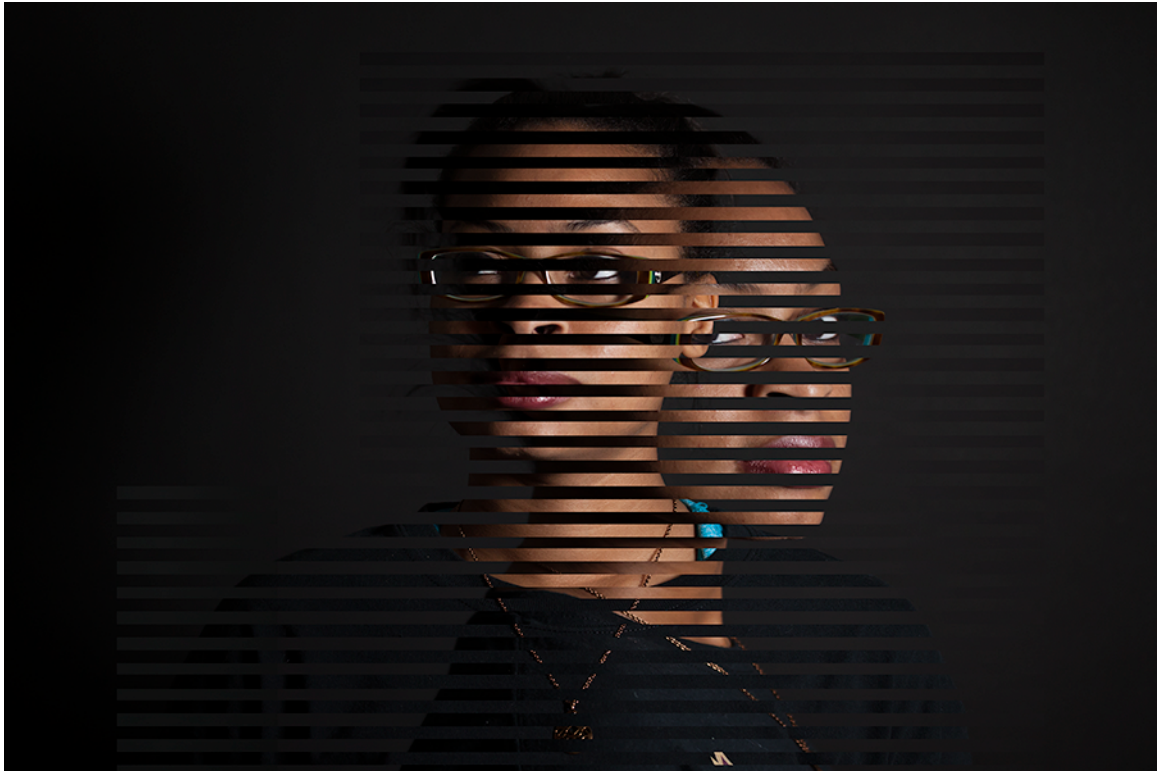


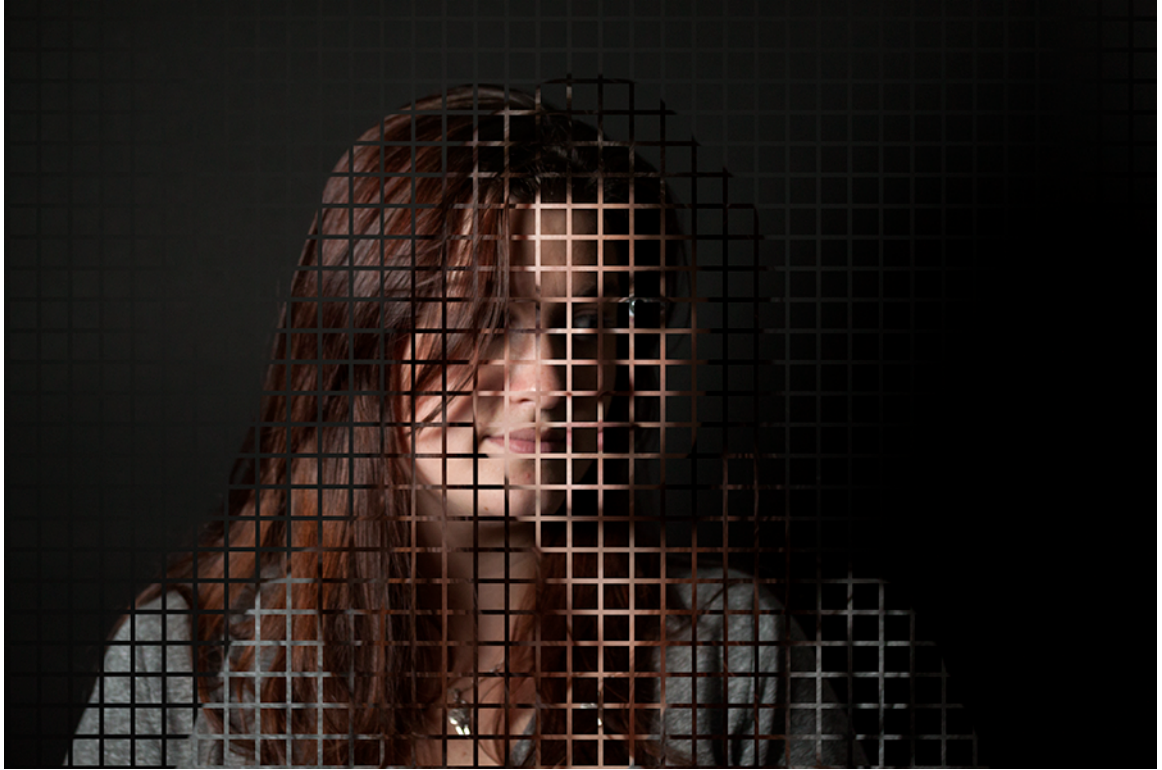








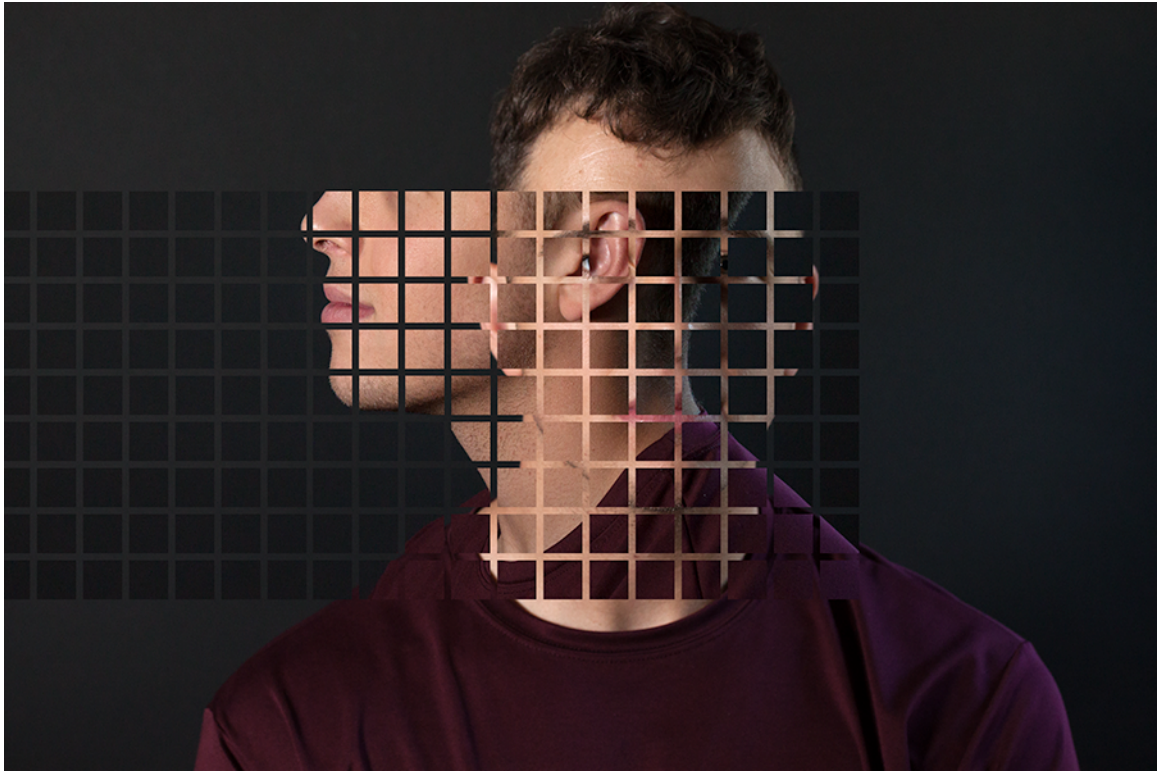














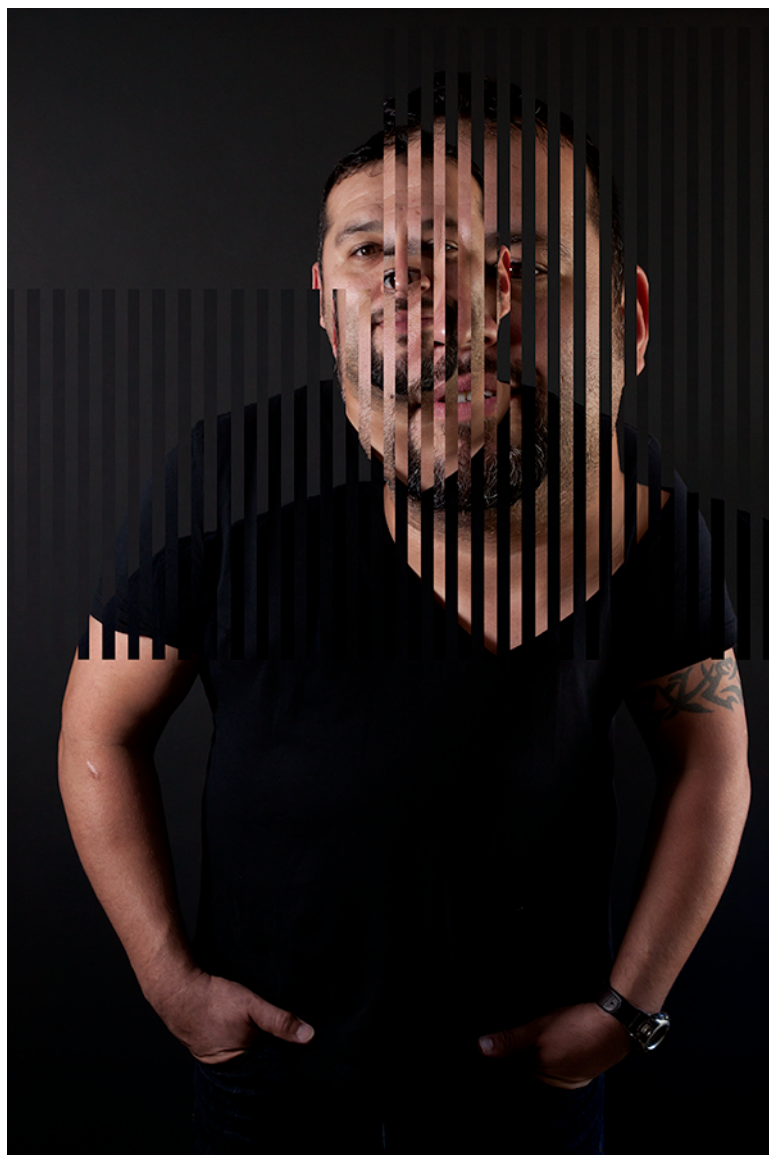


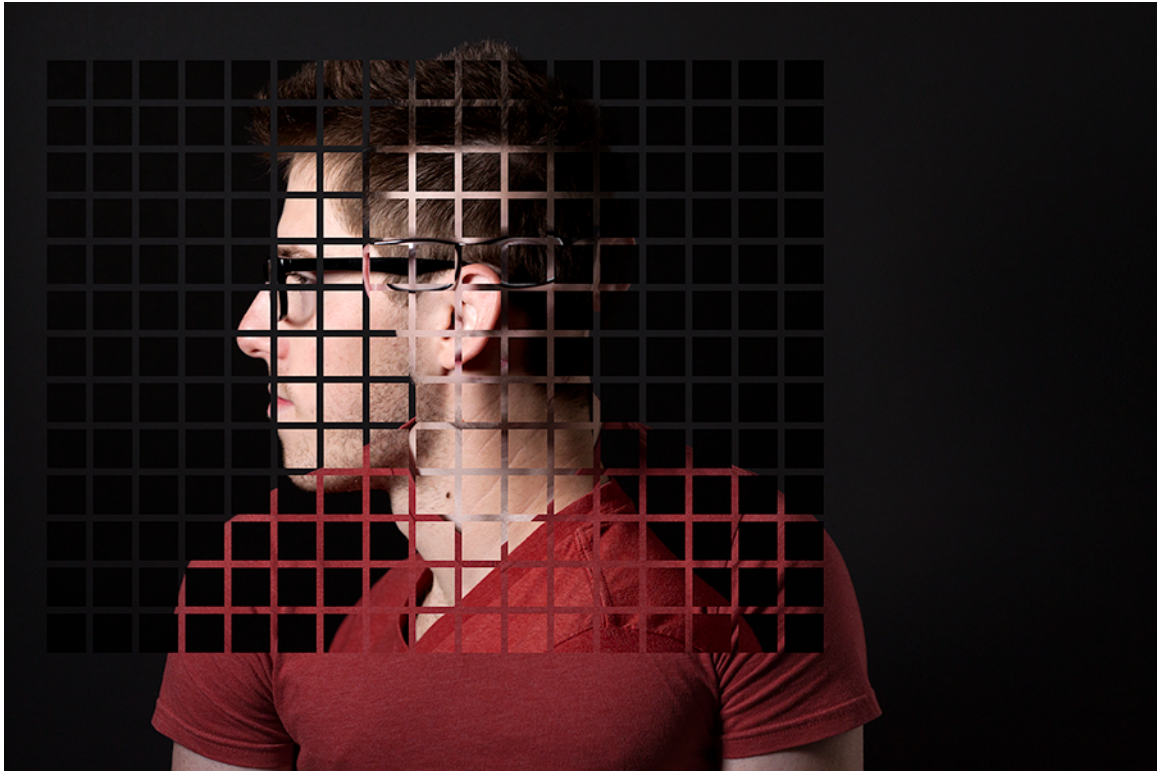
















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