

# **Stony Brook University**



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**Exploring Objecthood in Photography**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Allison Walters**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

in

**Studio Art**

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We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the  
Master of Fine Arts degree, hereby recommend  
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Abstract of the Thesis

**Exploring Objecthood in Photography**

by

**Allison Walters**

**Master of Fine Arts**

in

**Studio Art**

Stony Brook University

**2017**

This essay examines the nature of objecthood in photography. Through dissection of the notion of the real and the photographic process, I explore objects and the objectification of the human body.

## **Dedication Page**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Elizabeth and David Walters.

## Frontispiece



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## Section I - Objecthood in Photography

As everything we know and understand is some translation of one message or another, photography is especially deceiving. According to Roland Barthes, photography is a unique medium in that its denotative power is intense. Photographs<sup>1</sup> are indexical; in other words, referential to the real world. Here we are specifically discussing photographic images that reproduce the scene in front of the camera lens. A photographic image masquerades as a mirror of the real, but in actuality, a photograph is *a translation* of the real. In the experience of things, a phenomenological experience of the real world, the experience of image and object are combined, and their identity is presupposed to exist as one.<sup>2</sup> For example, when one looks at an object in space, visual stimuli is translated by the eye. Yet in looking at a photograph, it is translated twice; once by the camera from the object in space to the photographic media, and again by the brain from the photographic media to the eye. This double translation<sup>3</sup> displaces reality by an additional step, all while giving the appearance of presenting reality to the viewer directly.

This deceptive quality of photography is compelling. I am interested in the nature of truth, honesty, and the idea of the Platonic reality. However, these concepts are truly elusive. Through my work, I deal with these breakdowns, crossed wires, mixed signals, dropped messages, and other ways that humans misunderstand the world and misunderstand one another. I am interested in interpersonal communication, and the visual cues and systems we adopt and

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes. *Image, Music, Text*. "The Photographic Message." Ed. and trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Sontag Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

use to represent emotional conditions. My work is also informed by the absurdity of reality that is never understood, rather a constant deferment and simulation of a constructed reality.<sup>4</sup>

The constructed image of an object on a neutral background is inherently deceptive due to its dualism – its assertion that it represents a thing and its simultaneous denial of that actual thing. This dualism lies within all of photography but is most clearly deceiving in an image of an object that is removed from its context. When looking at a photograph of an object deprived of its context, the viewer is more likely to experience the illusion that she is seeing an unmediated object. Removing the context causes the photographic act to recede and allows the image to be read as the depicted subject matter. In my work, the subject-object relationship is conflated, intentionally separated, and utilized as a visual strategy.

My photographs are a constructed reality. Rather than taking from reality in a top-down sense, I prefer to build reality up from the ground. I start with a white space, a visual representation of nothingness. To this nothingness, I add a singular object. The intentional combination of the object with a white background is my own construction, and the photograph produced from this combination is my constructed reality. This is a set-up often found in product photography, forensic photography, archival photography, and technical photographs utilized for recording information such as images of research specimens. On an empty white background, the object is the sole identifier in each image. Thus, the image appears to be equivalent to the object itself. It illustrates a Platonic ideal form.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman. New York: Semiotext[e], 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, and C. D. C. Reeve. “Book VII.” *Republic*, Hackett Pub. Co., Indianapolis, 2004.

One could argue that white is not, in fact, nothingness, and this is true. Nothingness would be impossible to depict or even conceive of. The white background in my photographs is only a representation of nothingness. I work with white specifically in my two photographic series, “Objects No Longer of Importance to Me” and “Different People in the Same Pink Suit” because I want to achieve a reading of emptiness, nothingness, and sterility in my images.

Rather than present the viewers with the physical objects themselves, or with people in pink suits, I choose to present them with a photographic representation because I am interested in the idea of photography as a translation of reality, and the photographic object as a simulacrum of the real. According to Plato, humans will most likely never be able to understand the nature of reality, as each of us constructs her own reality through impulses received by her sense organs. Plato described this situation in his cave allegory: the humans in the cave were only able to see shadows playing on a wall by the light of a fire, but they were unable to see the things that caused the shadows, nor the light of the sun. For Plato, this was a metaphor for sensory input to the brain. Plato believed that humans could only understand truth or reality through rational thought, not through physical experience.<sup>6</sup> The already-filtered conception of reality is often mistaken for reality itself. It is this filtered reality that photography attempts to grasp. It captures visual stimuli in a way similar to that of the human eye; filtered from everything else out there. When one looks at a photograph, she sees a reproduction of visual stimuli; not even the stimuli from the original object. One must remember that all visual stimuli are translated in order to be registered by the brain.

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, and C. D. C. Reeve. “Book VII.” *Republic*, Hackett Pub. Co., Indianapolis, 2004.

## **Section II - Objects No Longer of Importance to Me**

In my first series, “Objects No Longer of Importance to Me,” I present the viewer with a series of images depicting objects. The objects are at once visible, decontextualized, as well as removed from any environmental space. Each object is memorialized through the careful presentation, printing, and framing of its image. Each object initially becomes the symbol of the thing that it stands for. For example, at first, the viewer sees a roll of toilet paper, an action figure turned backwards, a telephone receiver. These items become platonic ideals of the things they depict. However, upon further examining the photographs, the viewer begins to notice slight signs of wear, of life, in the details of the objects. After the viewer notices the imperfections in the objects, the perfection of the ideal falls away, and the viewer is left with a simulacrum of what the ideal had been. This realization is inherently disappointing, bringing the viewer back to reality.

The relationship among the objects appears at first to be arbitrary, but through seriality, the repetition of the same type of image, the viewer begins to construct a narrative of how they might relate. The viewer becomes aware that the artist has selected these items specifically. Furthermore, the viewer realizes that these photographs and objects have been carefully treated and reproduced for viewing. Here, the title of the series, “Objects No Longer of Importance to Me,” comes into play. Why are these objects no longer of importance? How could they possibly be, if they are displayed and reproduced so attentively and lovingly? These are questions I wish to raise. The title is clearly tongue-in-cheek, asking us to query the significance and intention behind the selected objects.

By nature, the photographic representation of a thing makes it important to the photographer. A photograph represents a specific point in space-time. Each photograph is taken

of a specific thing in space at an exact point in time. Barthes' notion of significance and the real in photography is based on an idea he termed 'ça a été', or the 'has-been-there-ness' of the photographic capture, in direct relation to the real, or the photographed event.<sup>7</sup> The exactness of a decision to make a photograph renders its location in space-time a significant one. In this way, all photographs have importance. Therefore, the act of photographing these objects renders them significant. In the process the objects become memorialized. The interplay between importance and unimportance here is ambiguous and playful.

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<sup>7</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. "That-Has-Been" New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. (76-77)

### Section III - Different People in the Same Pink Suit

In the series titled “Different People in the Same Pink Suit,” I present the viewer with another situation. This time, the difference does not lie in the inherent nature of different objects, but rather in the slight variations of the human body depicted. Each photograph presents a decontextualized figure in space. Each figure is a distinct person wearing a pink zentai suit. Zentai suits are typically adorned by sports fans or in fetish. The anonymity of the zentai suits is sometimes found to be sexually exciting. In “Different People...” each figure becomes fetishized in a corporeal and objectifying sense.

My use of the color pink could be interpreted as a feminist statement, but my intention, while still political, was rather to reference the highly commodified “millennial pink.” This is the pink of many contemporary advertisements to young people, the pink of capitalism today.<sup>8</sup> This pink suit represents a commodifying and consumerizing of the human body. Wearing the pink zentai suit, the individuating physical features of these people fall away, and the viewer is left with a reduction of the human body to the shape of its flesh and stance.

Through decontextualization, covering, and masking, the identity of each individual is removed, and each character becomes an avatar. In Hinduism, an avatar is the embodiment of a god in human form. On the internet and in computer games, an avatar is an online identity or representation of a person. The pink suit persona represents a commodification and fetishization of the human body, of a futuristic, cyborgian, post-internet human being. This being represents the hive mind of an uncritical internet society comprised of homogenous, faceless entities.

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<sup>8</sup> Schwartzberg, Lauren. “Why Millennial Pink Refuses to Go Away.” *Nymag.com*, New York Media, 19 Mar. 2017, [nymag.com/thecut/2017/03/why-millennial-pink-refuses-to-go-away.html](http://nymag.com/thecut/2017/03/why-millennial-pink-refuses-to-go-away.html). Accessed 24 Apr. 2017.

These subjects are also being commodified through the act of being photographed. Photography itself is a method of distribution and endless multiples. Billions of photographs exist on the internet today, all available for consumption, regurgitation, and evaluation. In Nathaniel Cunningham's "Face Value: An Essay on the Politics of Photography," he posits that the current economy is one that capitalizes not on human labor, but rather on quantifiable actions by human beings, or "biocapital." He writes, "Mortgage agreements, 'like' buttons, viewer ratings, social networks, student loans, and medical diagnoses all share the same feature: the capacity to generate a raw number that can become an object for speculation."<sup>9</sup> In this way, the serial image imitates the quantifiability of human behavior and its driving force in the current economy. As Walter Benjamin points out in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," photography is often used towards political ends, and it is often applied toward propaganda.<sup>10</sup> In this series, each person becomes a commodity. The size of each photograph depicts each individual at the size of a child's toy or Barbie doll. By making the figures doll size, I attempt to reference the reproducibility and compact ownability of each figure. In this sense, the body is a commodity, one in a series of endless variations or multiples. Whether we look at "vacation Barbie" or "doctor Barbie," Barbie is always the same character, simply wearing a different suit or mask. Barbie is the same person in different suits. By putting different people into the same suit or mask, I attempt to achieve a similar level of multiplicity.

The standardized blank backdrop for each image in this series, the repetition of the pink suit reduces subject identity to a basic form, a shape in color. This formal and visual strategy

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<sup>9</sup> Cunningham, Nathaniel. *Face Value: an Essay on the Politics of Photography*. New York, NY, Workinggroup, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Lexington, KY, Prism Key Press, 2010.

transforms the subjects into a type, where they become very much the same. This mirrors the homogenizing capacity of consumer culture in the millennial era. Millennials are the generation of those born between 1982 and 2004. This generation's population is the largest so far in human history. This specific generation is known for its familiarity with digital media and technology. During the millennial era, technology and digital media have also adapted to its constituents. With these, the economy has also shifted to accommodate these valuable consumers. Marketing and aesthetics have also taken a pointed turn towards the millennial generation, the generation that is savvy, technological, and highly involved in consuming and producing images.

The 2016 Pantone color of the year was a special blend between a cool blue called "Serenity" and a soft pink called "Rose Quartz." The Pantone website states:

As consumers seek mindfulness and well-being as an antidote to modern day stresses, welcoming colors that psychologically fulfill our yearning for reassurance and security are becoming more prominent. Joined together, Rose Quartz and Serenity demonstrate an inherent balance between a warmer embracing rose tone and the cooler tranquil blue, reflecting connection and wellness as well as a soothing sense of order and peace. The prevalent combination of Rose Quartz and Serenity also challenges traditional perceptions of color association.

In many parts of the world we are experiencing a gender blur as it relates to fashion, which has in turn impacted color trends throughout all other areas of design. This more unilateral approach to color is coinciding with societal movements toward gender equality and fluidity, the consumer's increased comfort with using color as a form of expression, a generation that has less concern about being typecast or judged and an open exchange of digital information that has opened our eyes to different approaches to color usage.<sup>11</sup>

I work with the pink color for its relationship to "wellness," "welcoming," and "peace." This pink represents the wellness and fluidity focused mindset of the millennial generation, and especially millennial consumers.

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<sup>11</sup> Pantone. "INTRODUCING ROSE QUARTZ & SERENITY." *Pantone Color of the Year 2016 - Rose Quartz and Serenity*, [www.pantone.com/color-of-the-year-2016](http://www.pantone.com/color-of-the-year-2016). Accessed 24 Apr. 2017.



#### Section IV - Objecthood Elsewhere in Photography

I find it relevant to reference the work of Taryn Simon, as I similarly photograph series of objects, or object-like people, in a decontextualized blank space. Simon does this in several projects, such as “Black Square” and “Contraband.” In “Black Square,” Simon presents photographs of objects in black space. This black space is the same size as suprematist Kazimir Malevich’s 1915 work of the same title. In this sense, every object, document, or person Simon places within the black space has a relationship to Malevich’s “Black Square.” In “Contraband,” Simon presents photographs of objects that have been confiscated by U.S. customs at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York. The items are taken from individuals entering the U.S. from abroad. The objects are photographed on a light neutral background.

Much as in my photography, Simon’s photographs become collections of objects. It is through the standardized uniformity of the presentation of the objects in the series and through their decontextualization that they become a collection. On “Contraband,” Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist writes:

Simon’s images and lists [...] open up a [...] space of the surreptitious, the forgotten, the bizarre and the banal, exposed to the cold light of the camera, and all set against an unchanging grey backdrop, the colour of administration and neutrality. The very uniformity of the photographs’ formats, what Simon calls their ‘painful repetition’, echoes the repetition of the objects. It is a production-line aesthetic that conceals the intense concentration of labour expended by both Simon and her assistants in the production of the artwork, and the immense concentration of labour contained in the objects themselves.<sup>12</sup>

This “production-line aesthetic,” as Obrist calls it, does not only hide the labor of taking photographs, but it also hides any hint of place. The objects have to speak for themselves without having any context. The labor of creating meaning falls on the objects themselves.

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<sup>12</sup> Obrist, Hans-Ulrich. *Taryn Simon: Contraband*. Gottingen, Steidl, 2010.

Though Taryn Simon's work is deeply political, both of us study anthropology through our photography. In "Contraband," Simon examines the nature of goods that are blacklisted by American society as a whole.

## Section V - Conclusion

In “Objects No Longer of Importance to Me.” I examine a personal history of intimate objects. The arranged objects are not obviously related. The viewer must make her own deductions regarding their relationship. In “Different People in the Same Pink Suit,” I look not to objects for information about humans, but rather to the human body itself. As the body is at once presented and removed by the pink suit, there remains something for the viewer to uncover. The viewer is free to judge and critique the people inside the suit.

In “Objects No Longer of Importance to Me,” I question the emotional significance that an image is capable of conjuring, by representing various banal items. I use the “everyday” nature of the items to relate to the observer. I am asking the viewer to form an emotional response and position towards the images, therefore, the project acts as an exploration of what it means to be human and to have feelings. The objects could be important to “Me,” or they could not be. Most likely the viewer will have no immediate attachment to these random objects, but through analogy and in relation to her own life, she might be able to conjure some nostalgia. “Objects...” deals with loss. The viewer’s inability to access or understand the actual items parallels the artist’s inability to declare the objects important, or to settle her own feelings about the objects.

“Different People in the Same Pink Suit” explores the human body and the reduction of a human person to her body shape. The repetition of this concept over multiple bodies homogenizes them. The bodies become objects, all very much the same. Differences between the bodies are only noticeable in details such as size, shape, and stance. This homogenizing is violent and political. The individuals photographed have been silenced. They are featureless, genderless, mouthless, faceless, skinless. The commodification of the body, the eradication of differences, of

physical features, of gender expression, of racial expression should make the viewer feel something. It speaks to the gendered, sexualized, and homogenized commodification of the body we see daily in advertising and media. The loss of identity, of self expression, of gender, of autonomy evident in youth culture as a result of the contemporary political and economic climates frames this work.

Furthermore, the ambiguous gender mapping in “Different People in the Same Pink Suit” is an extension of its political subversion. The subjects of my photographs have no clear gender expression, although physical features traditionally identifying gender may be somewhat visible through the pink suits. Perhaps this causes the viewer to bring into question their own preconceived definitions of body and gender. The viewer is left guessing what is behind the suit, what physical features may be present. This undressing of the subject is a sexual act. The bodies are fetishized and sexualized in an aggressive way. This aggression upon the depicted figures represents general social aggression upon unusual or ambiguously gendered bodies.

All of my photographs are framed in white, again the lack of color signifying sterility. The whiteness is also an extension of the white paper of the prints. Additionally, the frames reify the thingness of my prints. They are objects. For my “Objects No Longer of Importance to Me,” this is especially true, as the objectness is doubled. The objects photographed are objects, and the prints of the photographs are also objects. In “Different People in the Same Pink Suit,” the frames reinforce the objecthood of the doll-like people. As photography is objectifying by nature, this sense is increased through the use of frames.

Overall, my work is about objectification, ambiguity, identity, and loss. I am interested in mixed signals, confused communication, and the human need for understanding. Photography is a deceptive medium, and it amplifies the objectification and objecthood of objects presented as

photographs. I want the viewer to create her own story regarding the objects presented, and also to think about their absence. A photograph is a mark in space and time. Since time passes and matter is constantly in motion, all photography documents a frozen moment in relationship to unstoppable change. I want the viewer to share in this sense of lost time with me.

**Section VI - Images**



Allison M Walters, Objects No Longer of Importance to Me #1, 2017, 40 x 50cm



Allison M Walters, Objects No Longer of Importance to Me #2, 2017, 40 x 50cm

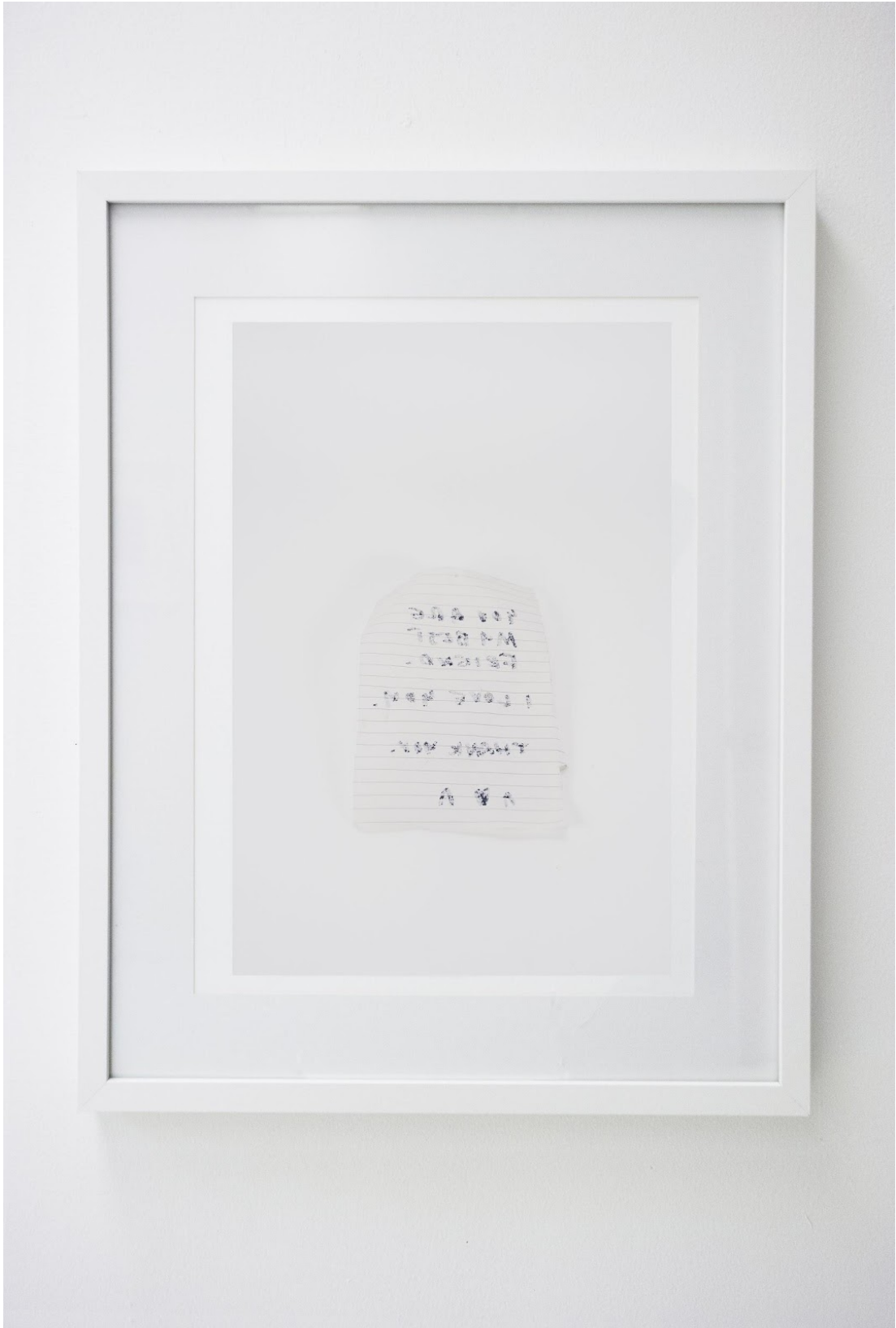


Allison M Walters, Objects No Longer of Importance to Me #3, 2017, 40 x 50cm





Allison M Walters, Objects No Longer of Importance to Me #4, 2017, 40 x 50cm



Allison M Walters, Objects No Longer of Importance to Me #5, 2017, 40 x 50cm



Allison M Walters, Different People in the Same Pink Suit #1, 2017, 40 x 50cm



Allison M Walters, Different People in the Same Pink Suit #2, 2017, 40 x 50cm



Allison M Walters, Different People in the Same Pink Suit #3, 2017, 40 x 50cm



Allison M Walters, Different People in the Same Pink Suit #4, 2017, 40 x 50cm



Allison M Walters, Different People in the Same Pink Suit #5, 2017, 40 x 50cm