The fundamental tensions of photography animate the work of Talia Chetrit. In our age of image excess, Chetrit uses her camera to probe the relationship between photographer and subject, investigating themes of agency, authorship, intimacy, and the passage of time. Her practice incorporates diverse formats and genres, including portraiture, self-portraiture, still life, editorial, and street photography. Many of her images are mined from her personal archive, dating to her adolescence in 1990s Washington, DC. Family, partners, and friends reappear throughout her work, as do glimpses of photographic equipment, such as tripods, flash cords, and the camera itself.

Avoiding a singular mode of image-making, Chetrit's varied and occasionally charged works are united by her exacting eye for composition. Whether a staged studio portrait or a candid street shot, there is always an evident, and sometimes exaggerated, attention to framing and cropping. She shoots all her works on film, uses no post-production, and embraces graininess. The selection and arrangement of photographs for display are treated as an artistic act almost on par with taking them with a camera.

Chetrit is her own most frequent subject, photographed in various stages of dress. One body of work featured images of the artist wearing see-through plastic clothing, while in the Bottomless series, she wears a sweater and nothing else. Her likeness is usually reflected in mirrors that reveal the camera and other studio trappings; her genitals are often exposed and sometimes the focal point. Measured, formalist, and undeniably beautiful, these self-portraits draw on and reauthor a tradition of female nudes in photography, mixing an informal intimacy with a clinical, matter-of-fact presentation of her body that confounds the viewer. Chetrit has also photographed herself with her partner, Denis, including one series showing the pair having sex in her studio, clothes around their ankles, and another series of large-scale, ecstatic-looking images of the couple having sex outdoors in a lush meadow, a visible remote-control cable tethering the artist to her camera and allowing her to control the shutter release. Although legibly erotic, these images, too, are ambivalent; for some viewers, they are straightforward and relatable, perhaps even commonplace, while they may provoke strong responses from others.

“Talia celebrates the fact that we’re all implicated in the intersubjective processes that produce images, inviting us to continuously refresh our looking. Even when these images are insufficient, she’s saying, they are repositories of information that evince the very underpinnings of our psychology.”

—Sahra Motalebi
BODY PARTS (DETAIL), 2022. SILVER GELATIN PRINT.
Chetrit is interested in the social dynamics of viewership. She explores how the presence of a camera affects the behavior of her subjects, perhaps exposing latent conditions or creating new ones, and in turn how the experience of viewing her works can activate unconscious impulses or preconceptions.

“The constructed situations and performances are controlled and staged for the camera, but so much of what then transpires can be seen as metaphorical and echoes current human experience,” she has said. “Conversations about overexposure and privacy arise; we are complicit in the permission to look, to analyze sexuality, and to project our personal and cultural biases onto an image. With the pace in which the world of images is changing, it is important to critically unpack and analyze how things are evolving and what the evolution means.”

In more recent images, Denis begins to appear with another subject—the couple’s young son, Roman. Semi-nude or costumed in designer women’s clothing, Denis stands in front of Chetrit’s camera regularly, bottle-feeding his son in one image, or striking fashion model-like poses while Roman plays seemingly unaware on the floor beside him. The photographs feel at once familiar and unexpected, upending the traditionally gendered roles of artist and muse with elements of camp and charged playfulness. Roman also appeared in utero in self-portraits the artist made during her pregnancy. Since giving birth, she has photographed Roman in the arms of models, in the studios of friends, and in ambiguous setups where he’s accompanied by shoes, accessories, domestic objects, other children, or the family cat.

Bodies sometimes seem like objects in Chetrit’s work, and sometimes this dynamic is inverted. Clothes and other domestic things are a frequent subject in isolation as well, photographed in still life-like compositions that, in the absence of human figures, have an uncanny or animistic quality. She also photographs her body parts touching or close to objects, usually hard things like chains and vases, which sometimes leave a physical index in her soft flesh. Many of these images recall early twentieth-century modernist and surrealist photography, a realm in which male artists often photographed objects and women’s bodies as coequal subjects of formal exploration. Chetrit reauthors this relationship, both overdetermining and subverting it.

About ten years ago, Chetrit began incorporating photographs from her personal archive into her exhibitions, including pictures she took as a teenager of herself, her family, and her group of friends. Some of these works look like typical family photos or teenage snapshots, while others are more precocious and performative, capturing young female subjects wearing makeup, acting out narrative scenarios, or seducing the camera. Chetrit is interested in reanimating these images that were not originally taken as art—and that she could not take now if she wanted to—by cropping, printing, and recontextualizing them in the present. Her parents feature in many of these photographs, often alongside their daughter, and reappear in her recent
work in studio portraits, looking like Hollywood actors. This mixing and collapsing of temporalities offer little by way of nostalgia, instead asking us to think about the way all photographs are performative, even the unstaged ones we consider proxies for real memories.

This complex web of genres and personal relationships shows us both too much and not enough. There is a reticence to Chetrit and her works. Far from a retreat from intention or meaning, this is at least in part a deliberate strategy to displace the act of interpretation to her viewers. Chetrit wants to activate our subconscious impulses and make us face our assumptions and preconceptions, reacting to her images and finding significance in and between them on our own. Her work encourages us to reflect on the role of photography in our lives and its relationships to self-image and memory, as well as its unique capacity to bridge the public and the private spheres. Why should seeing a photograph of a vulva or a penis in a gallery make us uncomfortable, when we all have bodies and see them naked every day? The acknowledged presence of the camera changes something, and so does a shared viewing experience, where we sense our reactions might be observed. These ideas and reactions, and what they might reveal about human psychology, are interesting to the artist.
MOM AND DAO, 2023. SILVER GELATIN PRINT.
Although Chetrit appears throughout her work, we don’t learn a lot about her from looking at it. This elusiveness is no doubt fueled by the fact that, more than any other medium, photography forces us to think about the relationship between fact and fiction. Chetrit revels in and exploits this ambiguity. Photographs present themselves as scientific evidence, yet their connection with reality is tenuous and unknowable. The only fact that we know for sure when looking at her photographs is that a camera was there to make each one, and that if people are shown, they probably interacted with each other or with her behind the camera.

“I photograph myself and my family in part because they’re available to me, but they become a way for me to talk about other things,” she says. “I don’t think of my work as being about my family or myself. There isn’t much disclosed—my life still feels private even if I am literally showing my privates in my work.”

This presentation at the Wadsworth marks the artist’s first solo museum exhibition in the United States. Chetrit has created a sequence of fifteen photographs, including recent works and reactivated archival images. Portraits featuring many of her most frequent subjects, including Denis, Roman, her parents, and herself, are intermixed with still life-like, quasi-surrealistic photographs of shoes and clothes, yielding unexpected juxtapositions and connections. A black-and-white photo from the late...
SELF-PORTRAIT (COREY TIPPIN MAKE-UP #1). 2017. INKJET PRINT.
'90s of Chetrit’s teenage friend biting a chain is paired with an image of Chetrit’s clitoris, shot through a chain link, in an extreme close-up that renders it slightly abstract. One image, taken by Denis, shows Chetrit with Roman in a hospital bed immediately after she gave birth.

Chetrit rarely offers direct explanations for what she photographs or why, instead leaving clues for the viewer that sometimes conflict or confuse. Despite her reluctance to ascribe narrative, her works are full of recognizable, relatable, and sometimes alluring content, which creates an absorbing tension for viewers. She works with traditional genres of photography but renders them slightly unfamiliar, peeling them apart and showing them to be porous and unstable. She makes us reckon with each work as a constructed image, inviting us to imagine and project. Mixing seemingly incongruous formats in her carefully considered exhibition arrangement, Chetrit produces unexpected points of convergence and contrast between images that, viewed in isolation, would read differently. She emphasizes the relationship between arrangement and meaning making, helping us realize that the significance of any photograph is contingent, inextricable from its context. We viewers are very much implicated in this dynamic, which Chetrit has described as triangulation.

This interpretive slipperiness is at the crux of Chetrit’s work, and she embraces the discomfort it sometimes causes viewers accustomed to reading images at face value. By encouraging us to sit with and reflect on this discomfort, Chetrit offers a profound model for critical engagement with not only her own photographs, but all the images with which our contemporary world is overflowing. “If you ask her what it is exactly she is photographing, or why she chose a particular edit, she is likely to answer you with another question: a set up,” writes Sahra Motalebi, the artist’s friend and frequent interlocutor. “It shouldn’t come as any surprise, then, that in looking at this work, we find our own assumptions mirrored back at us, ourselves fully implicated.”

Jared Quinton
Emily Hall Tremaine Associate Curator of Contemporary Art

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Talia Chetrit's solo exhibitions include Dickering, Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles (2021); Joke, kaufmann repetto, New York (2020); Amateur, MAXXI, Rome (2018); Showcaller, Cologne (2018); Poser, Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf (2017); AIMIA | AGO Photography Prize, Toronto (2016); and I’m Selecting, Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf (2015). Chetrit's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; SculptureCenter, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami. Her work is held in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art; the Jewish Museum, New York; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Chetrit received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2004 and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2008. She is represented by kaufmann repetto, New York and Milan; Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Body Parts (Detail), 2022
Silver gelatin print
49 x 32.8 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Boob Top, 2023
Silver gelatin print
35 x 22.6 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Breaker (Chain), 1997/2023
Silver gelatin print
35 x 23.6 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Buckle (Pam Hogg), 2023
Inkjet print
60 x 43 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Chain Clit, 2023
Inkjet print
50 x 35 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Future Goals, 2022
Silver gelatin print
49 x 32.8 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Hard to Title, 2019
Inkjet print
36 x 24 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Jean Shoe, 2021
Inkjet print
50 x 34.5 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Mini Shoes #1, 2023
Silver gelatin print
35 x 23.3 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Mom and Dad, 2023
Silver gelatin print
59 x 39.3 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Roman (in Jordan Wolfson’s studio), 2021
Inkjet print
50 x 33 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Roman on Denis, 2022
Silver gelatin print
33.3 x 50 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

Self-portrait (Corey Tippin make-up #1), 2017
Inkjet print
14 x 10 in.
Edition 4 of 4, with 2 AP

Self-portrait (Downward), 2019
Silver gelatin print
35 x 23.5 in.
Edition 4 of 4, with 2 AP

Shoe / Trash, 2022
Inkjet print
50 x 33.5 in.
Edition 1 of 4, with 2 AP

All works courtesy of the artist, kaufmann repetto, Sies + Höke, and Hannah Hoffman.
Born 1982 in Washington, DC
Lives and works in New York

ARTIST TALK
Talia Chetrit in conversation with Nuar Alsadir
Thursday, October 5, 5pm gallery viewing;
6pm conversation

SCREENING
Barbara DeGenevieve’s Desperado (2004–06)
Run of exhibition, Contemporary Gallery

CURATOR TALK
with Jared Quinton
Friday, December 15; 1pm

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