

# [Silvia Beatriz Abisaab Uses Portraits and Conversation to Uncover Personal Stories](#)

*Sam Stevens speaks with Silvia Beatriz Abisaab about intimately connecting and collaborating with her subjects through photography and conversation, and more recently, sharing the untold stories of individuals existing and surviving on the fringe.*

Silvia Beatriz Abisaab explores the appearance and experience of race through interviews, photography, video, and performance. One of Abisaab's recent bodies of work is loosely organized under the title of *Cultural Exchange* but is part of an ongoing practice of documentary-based works. Two years ago, the artist began to document the spaces of contemporary artists and art students around Kansas City, Missouri, where she received her BFA at the Kansas City Art Institute in 2016. She takes full portraits of each artist framed by their studios, depicting the beauty and the toil of art making as well as one's relationship to personal space. Abisaab shoots frank photographs of her subjects and in a way participates in a personal exploration of a community to which she belongs.

Likewise, the *Cultural Exchange* series presents images, as well as voices, of friends, acquaintances, and strangers who have some connection to the artist—each voice describes experiences of racial discrimination and feelings of alienation. With her camera, Abisaab captures vivid encounters, street scenes, and lively shops along with dignified images of the people she is interviewing. This project serves as a platform to represent the voices of marginalized individuals and challenge the viewer's perception of race and ethnicity, grappling with the paradoxes around physical appearance and representation. Her photographic process is a tool for confronting stereotypes, playing with the perceptions of and definitions around identity, and expanding the relationships between people across cultures.



Julio C. Mortera Rodriguez by Silvia Beatriz Abisaab. Image courtesy of the artists

**SAM STEVENS:** Silvia, in your past work you interview people directly and document their spaces, using photography and audio recording. In these multi-disciplinary pieces, you orchestrate an experience rather than crafting a specific image. How did you move from the process of photographing to the process of interviewing? And who do you consider your audience to be?

**SILVIA BEATRIZ ABISAAB:** I find it interesting when you state that I orchestrate an experience rather than craft a specific image. From my standpoint, I feel that I am doing both simultaneously. I personally feel that the experience that I am having with the individual allows an idea to be crafted that will then be captured. That is ultimately what my practice is doing at the moment.

My practice consists of engaging in conversations with individuals to learn about them and encompass that moment and/or experience using photography, video, and sound. Specifically speaking about the artist's studio portraits, it is very important to do more than capture. I interact with each participant in a deeper way because I find that the more I learn about their studio practice, thoughts on life, and/or political to cultural perspectives, then the more attentive I was in making sure I can represent them respectfully. However, I definitely feel that by speaking with them, it allows for our time spent together to be great and valuable. That mindset allows me to create an interesting transition from photographing to dialogue.

Now as for my audience, I would love for the whole world to be my audience, however that usually doesn't happen. Yet, I am starting to see that those who are interested in simply gaining more perspective and insight in the arts while learning more about someone else is my kind of audience.



Collaboration with Brandon Kintzer by Silvia Beatriz Abisaab. Image courtesy of the artists

**SS: Last year you worked with a fellow KCAI alum, sculptor and architect Brandon Kintzer to create a series of abstract images. These works showed arrangements of bodies, shapes, color and line in an indefinite space. What is the connection between the work you were doing with Brandon and your documentary work? In a different way the documentary work is also an exploration of appearances and bodies.**

SBA: The work that Brandon and I collaborated on came from an interest in bodies engaging with sculpture and space, and utilizing aesthetically minimal elements to see how the body and those elements can infuse with one another to create another sculptural form and perspective. Though it was a great experience, I can't seem to find a current connection to the work that I am doing now. However, I could say that I am more thoughtful on how I connect with and capture the individual. Not to say, that the people I worked with on this project with Brandon weren't thoughtfully captured, because they definitely were. However, I must be more thoughtful with the subjects I work with now because I am in their space, an intimate space that has depth and meaning to them, from personal to creative experiences.

**SS: Your photographs toe the line between conceptual and direct. Could you speak about this relationship in your work? How do you choose your subjects?**

SBA: My work is more direct because I aim towards a personal and informative narrative. Being

direct allows the participant to understand my motives. I want to learn and hear about their creative explorations, thoughts, and opinions—any information and experience that I can utilize and translate through digital media applications and/or through conversations with others. I connect with either close friends, classmates, or anyone in the art community who I find interesting based on the current studio work or simply because I am interested in connecting with them. Facebook and Instagram are great tools in following what my peers are doing and it helps me seek and ask if they are interested in getting their portrait taken and potentially having a conversation. The reason for this direct act is that the chosen subjects, whoever they may be, are people that should be celebrated because of how amazing they are at what they do. My fascination with my subjects can lead to new opportunities for them, from being showcased on a different platform to being contacted by another person to find commonality with them.



Beky by Silvia Beatriz Abisaab. Image courtesy of the artists

**SS: When building a body of work that deals with the tension and reciprocity(exchange) between individuals and communities, where do you fit as an artist and what is your**

**relationship with your subjects? Does a distance exist and remain, or does closeness with a community develop throughout your process? What is the importance of collaboration for you?**

I think of my role as a “socially engaged artist”, interacting and engaging with a lot of different individuals and communities through listening and sharing respectfully. When you show the individual participating in the artist’s work as not just a subject, but a person with value, that makes the work and relationship stronger. Even without the “artist” title, it is important to understand that if a person who is seeking to build, grow, or gain a relationship with any individual they must be considerate. I’m not seeking to gain profit out of anyone that I work with since it is not my focus. Instead what I try to convey is that there exists many people that are extremely talented and worthwhile. If you encounter someone with unique viewpoints, reach out and connect with them. Furthermore, you should be really thoughtful since you won’t only have a great experience, but also gain new knowledge from someone who you may not share a common background with and yet, channel the same interest or learn something you never knew about. It is that moment where I gather a sense of who they are and more perspective from them that allows us both to work simultaneously to capture their image. While there are times that can be distant, is not something I intend to happen and we just continue our daily doings. However, I continue to brainstorming potential ideas that could lead into another collaboration.

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