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It's Hardly Noticeable

Thesis by

John William Keedy

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
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It's Hardly Noticeable

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B.A. Studio Art / Psychology, Trinity University, 2007
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It's Hardly Noticeable attempts to make the abstract visually tangible and prompts a reconsideration of normalcy. Based both in academic research of psychology and personal experience with pathology, my photographs explore the world of a semi-autobiographical character who negotiates living with an unspecified mental illness and its impact on his thoughts and behaviors. As constructed tableaux, they exploit the relationship between fact and fiction, reality and perception, and truth and performance. The photographs question the legitimacy of applying the term 'normal' in a societal context by prompting a reconsideration of what, if anything, is normal, or at least what is perceived and labeled as such. Is it possible for a society to have a commonly held idea of what is normal, when few individuals in that society actually meets the criteria for normalcy?

It's Hardly Noticeable would not have been possible without the support and guidance of my thesis committee, fellow students, friends, and family. I would like to thank my committee: Dr. Therese Mulligan, Professor Susan Lakin, and Dr. Jessica Lieberman. Your time, energy, patience, and humor truly drove the project and me. To my classmates, thank you for your continued feedback and inspiration, and I wish each of you continued success. Finally, thank you to my family, without whom I would not have the confidence and courage that made this project possible.

It's Hardly Noticeable
John William Keedy





















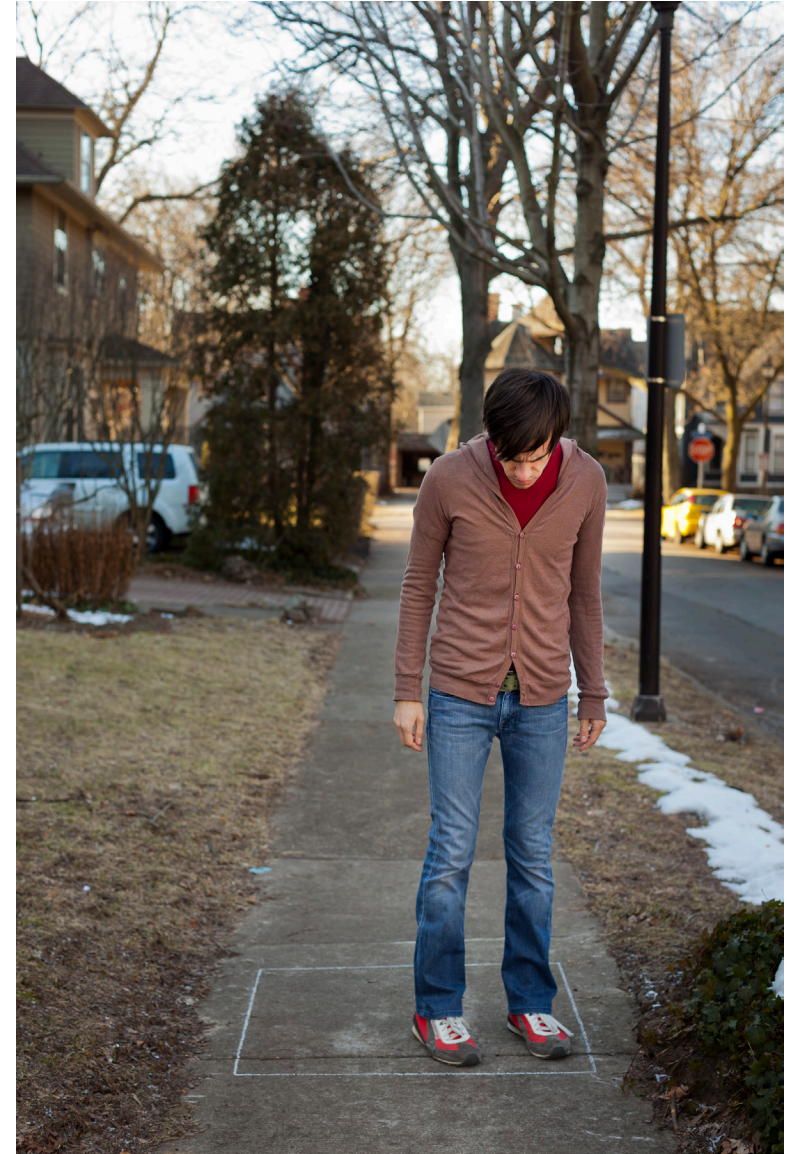




































My thesis, entitled *It's Hardly Noticeable*, explores the world of a character who negotiates living with an unspecified anxiety-based mental illness, and the impact of this illness on his thoughts and behaviors. Through constructed tableaux and metaphorical still lifes, the thesis reveals the relationship between reality and perception. Acting as a director, I create styled and stylized scenes that provide both reference to and distance from reality. My character negotiates situations constructed to highlight the impact and implications of his disorder, and by doing so raises questions concerning normalcy. My photographs question the application of the term 'normal' in a societal context by prompting a reconsideration of what, if anything, is normal, or at least what is perceived and labeled as such. Is it possible for a society to have a commonly held idea of what is normal, when few individuals in that society actually meet the criteria for normalcy?

In 2009, economist Bill Gross used the term the "New Normal" to define the American economic landscape of the very recent past. In ensuing years, this phrase resonated with the cultural zeitgeist and became an umbrella term for changes in societal practices. Its use to describe recent, or soon to be, societal changes is striking, identifying a shift in held notions of what is commonly viewed as acceptable, of what is normal. Many of the behaviors and thoughts depicted in the photographs are labeled as strange or abnormal, but they are not drastically uncommon. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in 2010, almost 21 million Americans suffered from some type of mood disorder; 22 million had a diagnosable personality disorder; and approximately 40 million people suffer from one or more anxiety disorders.

The exhibition title, *It's Hardly Noticeable*, began as a tongue in cheek name for a single image. This image fittingly became a point of departure for the succeeding works in the series. Originally, it served as a mantra for the pictured character, providing reassurance—albeit empty reassurance—concerning his ability to hide his behaviors. As the thesis title, encompassing a series of twenty-one images, the phrase retains its original meaning,

but also expands to reference both the series' theme and use of performance, as well as the hidden presence of thoughts and behaviors that run counter to social norms.

Thus, as the signature thesis image, *It's Hardly Noticeable I* (p. 1), embodies the major themes of the series as a whole, displaying a number of formal and aesthetic motifs running throughout my images. The photograph establishes my use of repetition, both of form and of action, and sets a precedent for images steeped in accumulation and ritual. This can be seen in the handmade marks repeated on the wooden fence. Their repetition and consuming patterns constitute an obsessive behavior by a now absent character.

As pictured, the fence reveals the marks left behind. Simultaneously, the fence is a backdrop for the character's recent performance. Though the character attempts to conceal his obsessive acts from surrounding neighbors, the audience's gaze allows an observation of the character's world. Though not physically depicted, the character's presence is described through his actions. In succeeding images, his presence is made visible as he takes center stage.

It's Hardly Noticeable II (p. 2) allows the audience to see a direct continuation of the obsessive mark making, but this image shifts the theme of the series in two important ways: 1) The photograph brings the series into the domestic space; and, 2) It visibly reveals the character, introducing the use of self-portraiture and establishing a very direct and multi-faceted connection of my performative role as photographer—the maker of this series—and, importantly as the character himself. In my thesis, I have come to terms with my own issues of mental disorder, namely Social Anxiety Disorder. This state of being has always defined my sense of normalcy, although this contrasts greatly with societal norms.

Questions of what constitutes normalcy, explorations of performance and the use of self as a pictured character are themes I formulated in my first year of graduate study. I have spent the last year refining my understanding of these themes, recognizing why I am drawn to make these images, and deepening how I give photographic representation to the themes' inherent ideas. An overview of my thesis series demonstrates my approach. I have established three categories of representation: portraits of the self as a performative character, constructed tableaus, and still lifes with metaphorical implications. These three groups take up the series' themes but from a variety of aesthetic perspectives.

The self-as-character images establish the importance of the performative nature of the work, while at the same time, allow me the opportunity to explore to what degree these are images of a character, and to what degree these are images of me and my own anxieties. The constructed tableaus are conscious installations, providing a glimpse into the world of this character, his behaviors and surroundings. His actions, his rituals are fully revealed, but the motivation for performing these rituals is not so readily apparent. In this sense, these images reference the confusion and lack of understanding often felt by those who exhibit behaviors similar to those of the character. These images are presented very much from the perspective of an outsider, but as someone who also catches an insider's intimate glimpse of the character's mental state. The still lifes invert this perspective. Rather than depict the character's external world, they reveal his internal world. Some are visual representations of a mindset, a belief, or a compulsion, while others act as symbols of general or specific anxieties. Some photographs can even be viewed as the beginnings of behaviors or rituals that have yet to manifest themselves outside of the character's psyche. The three types of representations employ different perspectives to allow for an investigation with greater depth. However, all three approaches provide insight into living with mental disorders, like anxiety and compulsive behaviors, the conditions of normalcy, and the range of normal functioning.

In his essay *The Problem of Anxiety*, Freud describes anxiety as essentially objectless. It is something felt or something linked with an expectation, but it is endowed with the characteristic of indefiniteness. It is this indefiniteness that forms one of the main subjects of the thesis series: transforming anxiety into a tangible, physical presence, into something that can be photographed. As artistic and aesthetic reference, I have looked to Symbolists, who worked during the same period as the rise of psychology as a social science discipline in the late nineteenth century.

Symbolist artists, like Max Klinger, composed images that attempted to understand depression, fear, and anxiety. Klinger's collection of ten etchings, entitled *Paraphrases about the Finding of a Glove*, tells the story of a protagonist facing a variety of psychological states or crises. It uses visual symbols to give meaning to the abstract ideas of psychology the work addresses. Like Klinger, Austrian artist Alfred Kubin employed and manipulated symbols and imagery to create new forms representative of what he called the freshly analyzed psyche.

Similarly, my photographs reference and draw from altered, at times, unstable mental states. They employ banal, recognizable objects in a way that subverts these objects' intended function, allowing them to take on a darker, perhaps even sinister role. In *It's Hardly Noticeable XX* (p. 6), thumb tacks, like Klinger's glove, are removed from their expected use, and become a means to imply an aspect of my character's mental state. The tacks on the doorbells embody the character's psyche by showing aggression towards others, even punishing their attempts to interact with him. While the warm light emanating from the doorbells suggests a welcoming presence, the tacks serve only to turn away any visitors. The desire for personal interaction is subverted into an aggressive, even tortured, fear of others. In addition to Symbolists, my work also has a strong connection to Surrealism. The movement's interest in the subconscious, as well

as its negative view of conformity to social norms, resonate deeply in my photographs. Many of my images depict the creation of a fearsome object by altering the function of common, domestic items or locales. In *Gift* from 1958, the Surrealist artist Man Ray took a simple domestic object and changed its function with the addition of tacks. The tacks, which grab and hold, contrast with the iron, designed to smoothly slide, causing both to be rendered useless.

It's Hardly Noticeable XXXI (p. 8) comments on the often thin line between comfort and fear, revealing a constructed space that has been, for better or worse, altered by my character. Acting almost as candles, the lights cast a warm, inviting glow that, along with the pillows and plush blanket, welcome the viewer into the space. But in spite of the number of lights, pockets of the space fall into darkness, creating a tension that subsumes the interior into something ominous. The image can conjure feelings of safety, but viewed within the framework of psychopathology and mental disorders, the lights can also be seen to reference boils or pustules. Thus, the interior's environment is transformed into a formidable space of discomfort and unease.

When the character is not visible in the images, viewers are encouraged to mentally fill in his absence through the traces of his actions. In this way, the work exploits the often-muddled relationship between fact and fiction, truth and performance by serving as transcribed documents of an orchestrated action. The viewer can apprehend the character's, or my, presence, through the marks he leaves, whether they are tick marks on a fence or packages on a doorstep, and, by extension, in way in which each image is constructed and shot.

Many of the photographs provide aesthetic reference to performance and theater, using corners and walls to create backdrops, in front of which the performances of the character, ritualistic in nature, are enacted. Like an actor in a play, the character performs his prescribed role in full view of an audience.

I draw more than merely aesthetics from the theatre. I'm inspired by playwright Samuel Beckett's use of absurdist narrative and obfuscated character motivation in plays like *Endgame*. In this play, Hamm, a blind man confined to a wheelchair, struggles to reconcile his desire to be alone and his fear of loneliness. Hamm vacillates between belittling and exiling the few people left in his world, while desperately begging them to return, while always attempting to imbue order into his world through small, ultimately meaningless rituals and behaviors.

Much like Beckett's character Hamm, my protagonist attempts to assert control over himself and his surroundings, and though he is dedicated to his ritualistic actions, in a larger sense these actions are ineffective. They do not constitute a change for the better, instead, they show the character as powerless to come to terms with his mental disorder and anxieties. Similarly, the world in which *Endgame* takes place mirrors the world I have created in the series, *It's Hardly Noticeable*. Both environments are stripped of extraneous people, and while Beckett imbues his world with a state of in-betweenness, of nothingness, through props and staging, this nothingness, as Freud described anxiety, becomes a primary subject of my work. My character is constantly working to adapt, to fix his environment. It may be to correct something gone astray due to his illness, or it may be to create an environment in which his illness is easier to manage, or even in which his illness can thrive. Occasionally, he is forcing his environment to better suit his needs. While the actions serve a very specific and very important function for the character, they are, in the end, a futile remedy to these problems and circumstances.

Sociologist Dr. Erving Goffman's 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* directly related the projection and maintenance of an impression of normalcy in daily human interaction with theatrical performance. Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor identifies seven elements of theater that parallel every day human interaction,

including belief in the importance of playing a role, the realization of what aspects the actor wishes to convey, a need to maintain the performance despite possible interruptions, and the concealment of certain information from the audience. Using Goffman's paradigm, the character becomes an actor performing for the viewer.

I create a first impression that the character—and, by extension, the image—can be easily accessed, but further investigation reveals a deeper complexity. When the viewer moves beyond a first descriptive reading, the deeper, more difficult issues and questions raised by the work reveal themselves and readjust the audience's initial interpretation. In this way, my work plays with issues of surface impressions and then judgment. This simultaneous yet conflicting perspective of the character recalls the concept of a double-consciousness as described by the writer W. E. B. DuBois—the practice of seeing oneself through both one's eyes and the eyes of another. He wrote:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness. (DuBois 8, 2007)

Admittedly, this adaptation of DuBois's concept differs significantly from his original intent, highlighting race relations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here I am using DuBois's concept to address the idea of alterity, differences, and other-ness. The feeling of difference provokes a performance in order to convey normalcy. In her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Judith Butler argues that gender, a key component of identity, is constructed through the repetition of acts, through the repeated performance of actions that by way of accumulation form one's identity. With this in mind, then, the repeated performance in the attempt to convey normalcy, could result

in the development of a second identity, one separate from, and perhaps even in conflict with, one's true self—the development of a double consciousness. Like this idea of conflicting identities, the photographs lead the viewers to assume a perspective of the character that is contradicted by details within each image, creating a dual view of the character and his actions.

In his series *Understanding Joshua*, photographer Charlie White creates a character that is easily identified by the viewer as quite different from those around him, physically and otherwise, yet his differences seem to go unnoticed by those in the frame, again creating a bifurcated perception of a single figure. White's work also fits within the larger practice of tableau photography, with his use of constructed narrative and strict manipulation of props, staging and light.

Artists like Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Charlie White construct often elaborate sets and orchestrate a moment or a situation to be photographed. These types of work use cinema, figurative painting, the novel, and classical allegories as reference points to create maximum meaning, and present tableaux that are a blending of fact and fiction. While some, like White, draw attention to the constructed nature of their images, others are more subtle.

Thomas Demand photographs constructed scenes, but in a way as to mimic something found. The disconnect between fact and fiction is further obfuscated as, for example, in Demand's work *Office*, which portrays a recreation of the former Stasi headquarters in East Berlin after being ransacked by demonstrators in July 1990. Viewers look for narrative despite the inherent signs the scene isn't real, but constructed. My work looks to blend the approaches of artists like Demand with that of photographers like White.

The themes of my images—compulsive behaviors, mental illness, psychological instability, even anguish—can be difficult to view, but by presenting it with a rich and familiar aesthetic, I hope to attract viewers before they realize the full meaning of the images. This is the case with my still lifes. I use the aesthetic style of advertising to give a hyper-real personification to the abstract ideas of psychology. Archetypes of commercial photography—intentional staging of props, saturated colors, rich and dramatic lighting, and depiction of details—while seen throughout my series, is overtly present in the still lifes.

Removed from an inhabited space, but retaining hints of the domestic, the still lifes function as conceptual footnotes to the narratives found in the other images. Drawing upon a large tradition of still life imagery, they offer clues and representations of the character's emotional and mental state. If the self-portraits and constructed domestic spaces are staged performances, then the still lifes are soliloquies, a dramatic device in which my character talks to himself, relating his anxieties and disorder, and sharing them with the audience.

The tradition of still lifes, with its emphasis on metaphor and symbol, fit well with the concepts of my series and the ways in which I address them. In *It's Hardly Noticeable XXXII* (p. 10), milk quickly pours out of the holes in the glass and spills over the sides of the small table. Though the glass is fairly full, the leaks imply it is a temporary fullness, necessitating either constant refilling or an acceptance of emptiness. With a nod to Sisyphus and a tongue in cheek reference to spilled milk, the image embodies the character's fragile mental stability, which requires consistent work and investment.

Continuing my directorial approach to the work, I utilize the studio still life to deepen the exploration of the series. While the self-portraits and domestic installations assert the need to control behaviors and circumstances through ritual and repetition, the still lifes suggest control through total oversight of props, staging and light.

As representations of some aspect of the character's mentality, the props need to reflect him and his personality. The subjects of the images are not in a specific space, as in the installation images, but rather reside within the constructs of the character's mind. The studio then becomes a space of internalized beliefs of one's own identity or sense of self, as well as the opinions of others. In the still lifes, the character's environment is filtered and altered as it manifests within his psyche, leaving stripped down, simplified symbols of the domestic in the form of wallpaper, or small tables, or the way in which the light is cast in the background. Further, I chose familiar items that have specific, known functions, and alter or change their meaning and intended use, revealing hints and clues as to the mental state of the character, and the manner in which his disorder impacts his sense of self. While the mental illness of the character is never directly specified, the symptoms are at their core derived from the ways in which some mental illnesses manifest themselves.

When constructing images, I pull from psychological case studies and writings by those experiencing these symptoms firsthand. My research, including the requirements for diagnoses, and in fact the diagnoses themselves, are not always constant, but across time have been subjected to great change. New studies often contradict basic principles once assumed true, only to be countered by still newer studies. This can be seen with each new edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, released by the American Psychiatric Association, in which disorders are re-categorized, re-labeled, created and removed. For example, as recently as forty years ago, Dr. Albert Scheflen's *Body Language and Social Order* was regarded by some as truth backed by science, showing images of social interaction with descriptions that read:

When a male appears he may be expected to play certain male roles in an interaction. But he can signal that others must change these expectations

by swish behavior. He can sway his pelvis, flutter his eyelids, and present his hand in the manner depicted. (Scheflen 65, 1972)

It wasn't until 1973 that homosexuality was removed as a mental disorder from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, when Dr. Robert Spitzer pushed for its removal, arguing homosexuality as a normal variant of human sexuality. The prospect of a behavior which at once point was believed to be abnormal, even unhealthy, being re-classified as normal fascinates me, and further weakens the claim that any behavior can be labeled as normal.

I don't believe there is such a thing as true normalcy. At its core, my thesis work comes from this belief, from my own personal experiences with mental disorder. The pictured character is me and I am him. This perspective provides me distance from which I can more clearly and safely examine my own self-identity, replete with compulsions anxieties. I am the self and the other. Like most, if not all people, I possess a double consciousness and project a double consciousness onto others. As I continue to search for my own ideas of what normalcy means, I return to the question: Is it possible for a society to have a commonly held idea of what is normal, when few individuals in that society actually meet the criteria for normalcy?

