

White Columns

Rachel Handlin

strangers are friends I haven't met yet

November 8 – December 21, 2024

Opening Reception: Friday, November 8, 2024. 6–8pm.

White Columns is proud to present *strangers are friends I haven't met yet*, the first solo gallery exhibition by the Hawaii- and New York-based artist Rachel Handlin (b. 1995). Handlin, who has Down syndrome, graduated in 2024 from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn where she earned an MFA in Photography. Handlin's exhibition at White Columns aligns autobiographical works – including a series of life-size sculptural self-portraits – with her ongoing photographic documentary project in which she travels across the world to meet other individuals with Down syndrome who have also earned a college degree. In her artist's statement, which is prominently displayed, almost manifesto-like, within the exhibition itself, Handlin notes that to date only twenty-three adults with Down syndrome have earned a two or 4-year college degree: "... a community that didn't know it was a community." Handlin's revelatory and profoundly empathetic project is a form of both advocacy and activism engaged in raising visibility and expanding opportunities for people with Down syndrome. As Handlin writes in her artist's statement: "I want to open the door for kids with Down syndrome to get an education like me. Education helps you understand your world. Education opens doors. A lot of people don't think we are smart. They see us, but they don't see us. Some people won't talk to me. They ask my mother what my name is, how old I am. They don't ask me. They ignore me because I have Down syndrome. My mother gets mad. It makes me feel invisible."

Handlin's artist's statement - written on the occasion of the White Columns show - acts as a guide to the exhibition. It is a foundational text towards a deeper understanding of both her work and motivations, and is printed in full below:

strangers are friends I haven't met yet

Before they answered the doors they were strangers.

After they answered the doors they became friends.

Twenty-three adults in the world with Down syndrome have earned 2 or 4-year college degrees. I crafted an exhibition about them, traveling to take their portraits with my Graflex 4x5 field view camera, telling the story of a community that didn't know it was a community. Next to their portraits is their written "voice," connecting the viewer to the image.

I welded a steel sculpture, a door, for my poster. The door is an icon. My friend Luca gave me a piece of his scrap steel that looks like a viewfinder. It's my door handle. I use the viewfinder to open the door. The door symbolizes change—a stranger to a friend. I knocked on a lot of doors working on this project. I want to open the door for kids with Down syndrome to get an education like me. Education helps you understand your world. Education opens doors.

A lot of people don't think we are smart. They see us, but they don't see us. Some people won't talk to me. They ask my mother what my name is, how old I am. They don't ask me. They ignore me because I have Down syndrome. My mother gets mad. It makes me feel invisible. This inspired my sculpture invisible, a response to David Hammons' work in the Hudson River. The building is there, but it's not there—it's like a ghost. invisible is me and my mother. I'm wearing a crazy Andy Warhol wig. You can look through invisible—look through me.

One of my professors, John Monti, said he saw in his head a line drawing of me. I made a triptych of self-portrait sculptures out of solid steel square rods. We traced me with a thick black marker on brown paper to make patterns. I bent the steel with my hands using dye pins—I used my muscles. Then I welded the pieces together. These sculptures tell my story. I'm a photographer holding the shutter release for my field view camera, ready to take a photo. I'm doing pushups at CrossFit at home in Hawaii, on a yoga mat printed with negative-to-paper images of me taken with the 11x14 view camera at CalArts—negative images in negative space. I'm sitting with my legs crossed because it's comfortable for me, on a meditation platform I made out of white oak, walnut, and zebrawood.

A couple of years ago, I had to think about how to display my work in a smaller space. In one of my installations, I used a line of blue tape to build a 52-piece mosaic and bring the pieces together in a small area. In strangers are friends I haven't met yet, the cyanotypes are my "blue tape." In semiotics, it's an icon, creating a path that connects the community that didn't know it was a community. We walk the path to come to their houses. I knock on the doors to come in and meet new friends.

During Covid, a CalArts MFA student was curating an online film festival: the Feeler Gauge Festival. She invited me to create a short film inspired by a feeler gauge—it measures gaps. I made 15 grains of sand in Hawaii at home, using my mother’s iPhone. This film helps people understand that it’s hard to get an education if you have Down syndrome. Most students with Down syndrome are segregated. They don’t get an education like me. And I just finished my short film, invisible, inspired by my sculpture.

Art can make people think. Robert Frank’s work made me think. His photographs showed Black and White people on the bus, water fountains. The segregation was wrong. I just want to make people think. strangers are friends I haven’t met yet is social/political art, trying to make change. It’s important for babies with Down syndrome who haven’t been born yet. Segregation teaches that some people are not as good as others and don’t deserve opportunities—in school, at work, everywhere. That’s wrong. I want children with Down syndrome to get a good education like me. I want people with Down syndrome to be included in society.

My prior work has been about myself—my place in the world. Now I am gathering this community of new friends. With my portraits, I’m bringing people on a journey into my world, to meet my friends. I want them to get to know people they would probably never meet. Like Dawoud Bey, I am trying to start conversations—break down the “othering.” I want people who see strangers are friends I haven’t met yet to think about us. We are smart. Complicated. Interesting. All different.

Rachel Handlin
November 2024

Rachel Handlin (b. 1995, New York City) received her BFA in Photography and Media from CalArts, Valencia, CA, in 2020. She received her MFA in Photography from New York’s Pratt Institute in 2024. Her MFA Thesis exhibition, curated by Jody Graf, took place at Pratt’s Photography Gallery, Brooklyn, in April 2024. To follow Rachel on Instagram: @handlinrachel

White Columns would like to thank the New York-based artist Nick Relph for introducing us to Rachel and her work. We would also like to thank Rachel’s parents Laura and Jay Handlin for their invaluable assistance with this exhibition.

For more information about this exhibition, please contact info@whitecolumns.org
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