

Parts and Scenes is Nikki S. Lee's first exhibition of the Parts (2002-2004) series in the United States in nearly a decade. The show also presents Scenes (2014), a series of short videos that VSF is proud to debut. Parts and Scenes both feature the artist in tableaux of her own design; her visage is the constant that nonetheless changes in the contexts of the various photographs and videos. Parts and Scenes have much in common with Projects (1997-2001). The images in that earlier series garnered Lee considerable attention by detailing the different cultural groups—skateboarders in California, school girls in Korea, and lesbians in Oregon, among others—that she seamlessly integrated. In Projects, Lee was as interested in picturing the people she encountered as picturing a version of herself among them. The works in Parts and Scenes continue the artist's exploration of selves in relation to others.

For Parts, Lee concerns herself with how individual women relate to men, avoiding archetypal female characters as explored by Cindy Sherman in her Untitled Film Stills. The works focus on the female figure, while her male companion is invariably cut out of the composition. Indeed, Lee purposely crops out the woman's counterpart: that the man is excised from the photograph is made clear by the band of white photographic paper that borders only three of the images' four sides. What remains, what the artist guides the viewer to see, is the woman and her expression, her clothing and how she carries herself, and what her body language communicates about her mood. Lee invites viewers to divine—using dress, context, and location—the protagonists' intersectional senses of self.

Scenes, particularly in the context of revisiting Parts, is exceptionally prescient in the era of #MeToo. The videos depict different couples, composed of Lee with anonymous men, making out in various settings—a karaoke bar and a motel room among them. Lee frames the action with her photographer's eye, rather than that of, say, the pornographer or the motion-picture director. Instead, she encourages viewers to feel the space she pictures. The videos convey disparate feelings, even as they document the awkwardness that attends physical communion. Sofa suggests a mutual, if tentative, enthusiasm by showing a man and woman kissing, while Shower communicates lusty passion by capturing a couple in tight quarters, necking as water falls over them. Curtain and Motel reveal dominant partners, as the male protagonist in the former clutches his lover's neck with his hand while the man in the latter averts his would-be seducer's lips by turning away. With Scenes, Lee successfully builds on Parts and Projects, dwelling on intimacy, power, and how selves are made.

– Dr. Cherise Smith

Dr. Cherise Smith is Chair of African and African Diaspora Studies, associate professor of AADS and Art History, and the Founding Executive Director of the Art Galleries at Black Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of *Enacting Others: The Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Duke, 2011) and *Michael Ray Charles: A Retrospective* (Texas, 2019).

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