

Anton Kern Gallery

Anne Collier *Portraits*

May 6 – June 21, 2025

"What do we see when we look at Anne Collier's photographs? Borrowing from psychoanalytic feminist literary theory, today I see a kind of female jouissance: a pleasure and pain that is at once erotic, mystical, and political. A feminine libidinal drive repressed by the symbolic order. The inner life of photographs." (Polly Staple, 2025.)

Anton Kern Gallery is pleased to present *Portraits* Anne Collier's seventh solo exhibition at the gallery. Early in her career Collier described her practice as a form of "deflected self-portraiture," wherein the objects that she documented – including her now celebrated works incorporating images of record sleeves, magazine covers, book pages, etc. – embraced the idea that they might be avatars or surrogates for the artist herself. The current exhibition will include key works from this era, including *Studio Floor (Marilyn, Norman Mailer)* and *Untitled (This Charming Man)*, both 2009. Yet throughout her practice Collier has periodically returned to the genre of portraiture itself: creating images - depictions and representations - of other individuals, including friends and artists in her immediate circle. For her latest exhibition at Anton Kern, Collier presents works made between 2003 and 2025, structured around two important series: her rarely seen *Aura* Polaroid portraits produced in Oakland, CA, between 2003 and 2004, and her ongoing series *Developing* – close-up photographic 'portraits' of people's eyes suspended in darkroom developing trays - which was initiated in 2009.



Anne Collier, *Aura (Anne Collier)*, 2003, Color polaroid, 4 1/4 x 3 3/8 inches (10.8 x 8.6 cm)

Collier's *Aura* portraits were created during the artist's time living in Oakland, California. They were made in a downtown Oakland psychic store using a modified Polaroid camera that its creators claimed could both capture and visualize the sitter's energy field or aura. Each of the aura portraits is accompanied by a computer-generated printout, 'analyzing' the resulting hyper-saturated chromatic images. Over the course of two years Collier took local friends as well as artists visiting the Bay Area to the psychic store to sit for an aura portrait. Eventually, she made more than forty such portraits, including those of artists John Baldessari, Mike Kelley, Frances Stark, Cerith Wyn Evans, Vincent Fecteau and the writers Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian, among others. Given the absence of scientific evidence to rationalize or legitimize the promise of aura photography, Collier's images operate instead within photography's long-established entanglements with questions of veracity and belief: ideas that have been inherent to the medium since the emergence of, say, late 19th century 'spirit' photography to Susan Hiller's and Mike Kelley's more recent investigations into photographic manifestations of psychic phenomena. Writing about her own uncertain relationship with auras, in a text that accompanies Collier's exhibition, Alissa Bennett suggests: *"I thought it was a nice idea that the catastrophic jumble in my brain might have transmuted into a golden cloud that hovered around my person, but it seemed too new age-y to buy into, like a fantasy from another time."*

In her ongoing *Developing* series, which began in 2009 with a now iconic self-portrait work - *Developing Tray #2 (Gray)* – Collier continues to explore her interest in the formal languages and technical apparatus of the analog photographic process. Staged in the studio, and shot with Collier's typical forensic precision, each of the *Developing* works depict an enlarged image of an individual's left eye (with the studio lighting clearly evident, and reflected in their irises and pupils,) which is then produced as a 8" x 10" black and white photographic print, which in turn is suspended - and 'framed' - in a darkroom developing tray, with the sitter's tear duct in alignment with the

tray's pouring lip. In this series Collier encourages multiple readings and interpretations around the word 'developing,' considering how it relates to the literal analog photographic process, to the ongoing evolution of her own practice, as well as to how the notion of development relates to ideas of aging, and to personal, emotional and psychological growth. As with her earlier *Aura* portraits the subjects of the *Developing* series are drawn from the artist's circle of friends and peers – including the dancer and choreographer Vinson Fraley, the chef Dalad Kambhu, and the artist Klara Liden, among others – and when seen together both series propose or suggest not so much “deflected self-portraiture,” but rather something more collaborative or collegial even, something akin to a form of social portraiture.

In her text written to accompany this exhibition Alissa Bennett concludes:

“It’s interesting to think about the difference between looking with the eye and looking with the camera. The camera seems to me like it’s a simple tool, like a can opener or a pair of scissors, a device that pries the lid off something so that we can see inside of it. I think Anne knows that, which is why she uses it to isolate the brief moments when feelings like love or loneliness or longing rush up from inside of us and flood our surfaces, things that are too fast or too fugitive for us to register in the maelstrom of everyday life. Maybe if we had apertures instead of pupils, we could quiet things down and see what she sees ...”

Anne Collier (b. 1970, Los Angeles) lives and works in New York. She received a Bachelor in Fine Arts from California Institute of the Arts, Valencia in 1993 and a Masters in Fine Arts from The University of California, Los Angeles in 2001. During 2014-2015, Anne Collier's first major institutional exhibition travelled across institutions in North America including MCA Chicago, Chicago (2014), CCS Bard, Annandale-on-Hudson (2014), Aspen Art Museum, Aspen (2015), and The Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2015). Selected solo exhibitions include: 'Anne Collier,' ICA Miami, Miami (2023); 'Eye', Lismore Castle Arts, Lismore (2023); 'Anne Collier: Photographic', Sprengel Museum, Hannover (2018) and touring to Fotomuseum, Winterthur (2019); FRAC Normandie Rouen (2018); and 'Anne Collier: Women with Cameras (Self Portrait)', Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis (2017). Collier's work is held in numerous public collections, including: Tate, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; MoMA, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; SF MoMA, San Francisco; LACMA, Los Angeles; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Mumok, Vienna; Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, among others.

“You’re saffron today”

Alissa Bennett on Anne Collier’s *Portraits* at Anton Kern Gallery, May 2025

There used to be a man who would come to see me at a gallery I worked at a long time ago who delighted in claiming that he could read auras. “You’re *saffron* today,” he would say, scrutinizing the air around my head with narrowed eyes. “You should be writing right now; the words are just *pouring* out of you.” I thought it was a nice idea that the catastrophic jumble in my brain might have transmuted into a golden cloud that hovered around my person, but it seemed too improbable and new age-y to buy into, like a fantasy from another time. “Oh, wow,” I would respond to this would-be mystic, quietly casting aspersions at him for the sin of trying to encourage me, “I guess I better get to work then.” I didn’t bother to tell him that writing hasn’t ever poured out of me and that it probably never will; I have to wrench it out of myself like splinters, word by word.

I don’t know why I had such a hard time believing that this man could see something that I couldn’t, but he seemed fairly confident in his abilities, which I admit gave him a spooky kind of gravitas that I respected. I thought maybe he’d practiced meditating at one of those retreats in the Catskills where you’re not allowed to talk for two weeks, the kind of place where you eat rice with a wooden spoon and go to bed at 7pm; it takes a lot of discipline to slip across the astral plane. I’ve only recently started to admit that every time I close my eyes and try to find nothingness, all I can imagine is a raccoon, its eyes bright with mania as it runs around in circles on a deck.

I wonder what it feels like to focus until you can read the heat that accumulates around a body, what it means to be able to concentrate until you can see a person’s badness or their kindness or their cruelty broadcast in technicolor. Maybe some people are easier to project upon than others, which I guess is part of the magic that defines who among us becomes a celebrity; fame is meted out to those we immediately feel we already know, the people who seem familiar enough to bear the burden of our devotion. Recently the writer Devan Diaz told me she thought that there was something about the way that light reflected off of Marilyn Monroe’s hair and skin that made her look perpetually spotlighted, as though she was walking around in the glare of a supernatural klieg light that never turned off. I think that when our subconscious minds register this kind of aura, it probably makes an image feel more human to us, as though we feel we are able to see the subject in the same way the man in the gallery saw me all those years ago. I don’t know if it’s a mistake or not, but I do know that this kind of intimacy is mostly a hologram, it’s a fantasy we like to indulge in so that we can continue to pretend that there is no violence in the act of our looking.

It’s interesting to think about the difference between looking with the eye and looking with the camera. The camera seems to me like it’s a simple tool, like a can opener or a pair of scissors, a device that pries the lid off of something so that we can see inside of it. I think Anne knows that, which is why she uses it to isolate the brief moments when feelings like love or loneliness or longing rush up from inside of us and flood our surfaces, things that are too fast or too fugitive for us to register in the maelstrom of everyday life. Maybe if we had apertures instead of pupils, we could quiet things down and see what she sees. Maybe I could myself finally find that flash of saffron before it vanished into the ether.

- Alissa Bennett