

# CLOSETS:

Reimagining Identities While Embracing Memories

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# CLOSETS:

## Reimagining Identities While Embracing Memories

The "closet" in the American-English vernacular has long been a metaphor used to describe the psychological parts of ourselves that are kept most private, or hidden, from public view. As an expression, it points to the zone of our secrets, or the site of our deepest vulnerabilities. The work shown in *Closets: Reimagining Identities While Embracing Memories* explores these innermost aspects of ourselves, symbolized through closet spaces, and how we perform our identities based on how we desire to imagine ourselves to the world.

The artwork in the show includes images from residential closets, garments found in collections, clothing that evokes personal and cultural identity — as well as closets and cabinets that store photographs and tools. By investigating the closet as a site where beauty, memory and labor are enacted, this exhibition celebrates the closet as a space of empowerment for individuals authoring their own identities against/in opposition to social or cultural convention.

The closet transcends its utility as a storage unit, and becomes a container for the emotional, physical, economic, intellectual and spiritual markers of our lives. The space, which is typically closed from public view, is a site for critical engagement with ideas related to beauty, self-fashioning, public expectation and personal subversion within larger context of personal and social memory.

The artists in this exhibition place a keen emphasis on the texture, design and composition of the closet. In addition to highlighting what one wears, the artists are exploring how it is worn, and the systems we employ to organize our tools and garments and give them meaning. They are capturing the interiority of the closet as well as the nuanced objects that populate our most intimate spaces.

The closet as a site of memory is as much political as it is personal. The artists in this exhibition seek to examine this duality in the places where most people would not look. In so doing, they reveal through the poetics of visibility how the mundane action of what we choose to wear, and the items we hold on to become extensions of ourselves in the world.

**Kalia Brooks Nelson, PhD**  
Co-Curator

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Each time we stand before our closet to pick out our clothes, we make a series of choices about how we want to appear before the world. This is just as true for people who claim not to care about clothes as it is for self-proclaimed fashionistas. It's because we recognize that the way we adorn ourselves communicates something about who we are and where we come from. And everyone has experienced the discomfort of showing up some-where dressed like they didn't get the memo. We can think of our clothes, then, as a powerful social skin.

—**Tanisha Ford**, *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion*

What is the closet? It is the ultimate interior, the place where interiority starts. It is a dark space at the heart of the home. It is not a place where you live, but where you store the clothes in which you appear. It contains the building blocks for your social construction, such as your clothes. The closet also contains the disused pieces of your past. It is a place to hide, to create worlds for yourself out of the past and for the future in a secure environment. If the hearth is the heart of the home, where the family gathers to affirm itself as a unit in the glow of the fire, the closet contains both the secret recesses of the soul and the masks that you wear.

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—**Aaron Betsky**, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same Space Desire*

The exhibition, **Closets: Reimagining Identities while Embracing Memories**, brings together a diverse group of artists and writers reflecting on intimate spaces where identities are explored and objects reimagined in and outside of closets. I, along with the artists and writers, **Hilton Als**, **Ken Ard**, **Jessica Atkins**, **Anthony Barboza**, **Elizabeth M. Claffey**, **Dario Calmese**, **Patricia Cronin**, **Jennifer Ling Datchuk**, **Adama Delphine Fawundu**, **Lauri Freedman**, **Janna Ireland**, **Emma Kaufman**, **Qiana Mestrich**, **Matthew Morrocco**, **Maaza Mengiste**, **Lorie Novak**, **Karl Peterson**, **Linda Foard Roberts**, **Bayeté Ross-Smith**, **Margaret Stratton**, **Sophia Tsanos**, **Adrian White**, **Wendel A. White**, all have found ways to consider objects of memory and the impact of the dressed and undressed body in contemporary art.

Drawing on both my own work and images by other artists, writers, and photographers, this exhibition examines how art influences fashion, style and identity by re-framing narratives about personhood. The artists and writers here explore notions of reinvention to imagine alternative experiences about identity formation. For the past four years, I have explored narratives about order and disorder; closets; the self; and desire, and I am excited about new ideas about privacy and spectatorship when considering this theme. The closet was a fascinating theme for me to consider while organizing this exhibition, because metaphorically it signals interiority, contemplation, secrets, and sometimes order. The closet is a quiet space that allows me to reflect on dress and storytelling. The images in the exhibition range from portraiture to abstraction considering often the consumer/wearer and user. Some consider the portrait of individuals who use clothes to project an identity while other images and objects serve to perform and preserve memories.

The private space of the closet is open to interpretation, allowing the viewer to engage and invent. Other images include documentation of residential closets and work rooms, archival cabinets, garments found or left because of migration, as well as closets and drawers that store albums, photographs and tools.

**Patricia Cronin's Shrine For Girls** (2015), an Official Solo Collateral show of the 56th Venice Biennale, was selected by then Commissioner Okwui Enwezor, reflected on the global plight of exploited young women and girls. The large scale photographs in this exhibition documented the installation inside the 16th-century Church of San Gallo where she “gathered hundreds of girls’ clothes from around the world to represent three horrific events in Ireland, India and Nigeria, and arranged them on three stone altars to act as relics of these young gender martyrs to create a shrine in their honor.”

**Deborah Willis, PhD**  
Co-Curator



*SHRINE FOR GIRLS (CHIBOK)*, 2015-18, PIGMENT RESIN COATED PHOTOGRAPH, FACE MOUNTED WITH OP3 PLEXIGLASS WITH WOOD BRACE MOUNT, 26.25" X 39.50", EDITION OF 10

### **PATRICIA CRONIN**

Patricia Cronin is an interdisciplinary conceptual artist whose work examines issues of gender, sexuality and social justice. Cronin's work has been exhibited widely in the U.S. and internationally, including *Shrine For Girls* at the 56th Venice Biennale that then traveled to The FLAG Art Foundation, New York and the LAB Gallery, Dublin, Ireland. Other solo exhibitions were presented at the Capitoline Museum's Centrale Montemartini Museum, Rome, Italy; Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans, LA; Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY; and the Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, FL. Cronin is the recipient of numerous awards including: the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award, Anonymous Was A Woman Award, and Civitella Ranieri Fellowship. Her work is in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Art and Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, both in Washington, DC; and Kelvingrove Art Galleries and Museum, Glasgow, Scotland, among others. She is professor of Art at Brooklyn College, CUNY.

**Shrine For Girls (2015)**, an Official Solo Collateral show of the 56th Venice Biennale selected by Commissioner Okwui Enwezor, reflected on the global plight of exploited young women and girls. Inside the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Church of San Gallo, I gathered hundreds of girls' clothes from around the world to represent three horrific events in Ireland, India and Nigeria, and arranged them on three stone altars to act as relics of these young gender martyrs to create a shrine in their honor. I focused on gender-based violence: Boko Haram kidnapping 276 school girls in Chibok, Nigeria; the gang rape and lynching of two teenage cousins in Uttar Pradesh, India, and the incarceration of countless girls in forced labor institutions known as Magdalene Laundries in Ireland and other European countries. By commemorating their spirits, this installation is a meditation on the incalculable loss of unrealized potential at the hands of unfathomable cruelty, and will hopefully awaken our obligation to combat gender inequality worldwide and restore some of the dignity these women and girls were denied in life.