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Alimah Kamil

Help her find her friends

Suggest friends for her



Befriending the characters of Facebook

Text by Tony Martins / Artwork by Mónica Márquez



Facebook is a polarizing thing. Some people are scared to death of the personal invasion and exposure that it can necessitate; more exhibitionistic folks who are keen to externalize their lives do so on Facebook with an abandon that can morph into obsession or addiction.

Although I could quit any time I wanted to, I'm on Facebook almost every day for social interaction and for promotion of *Guerilla* magazine. I currently have 702 Facebook friends. But for me and others, Facebook is more than a passing fancy. Now populated with almost 500 million souls, Facebook is a powerful and efficient way to meet people, network, and share ideas. All kinds of individuals and groups are wise to this. Heck, the Queen of England is now on the bloody thing.

Yet communication is only part of the appeal. On a personal level, Facebook and similar social media let us construct a kind of theatre wherein we build a character or identity (a "profile" in Facebook terminology) that projects a limited and strategically edited view of ourselves.

In this sense, Facebook is a voyeuristic/exhibitionistic toy for the affluent of the world. It lets us escape reality by creating a new one in which we amass hundreds or thousands of "friends" and commodify an idealized version of ourselves. We eat on Facebook and we are eaten.

This and other social media conundrums and contradictions are explored in *The Lives of Others*, a series of digital and mixed media works by Mónica Márquez that was shown at Orange Art Gallery in October and November.

The works in the series blend digitally enhanced photographs of strangers taken by Márquez during extensive global travels with fabricated elements from the more common screen interfaces from Facebook.

"The strangers, for whom I created a total new identity, became characters of Facebook," explains Márquez, who is a Colombian-Canadian painter, photographer, and digital artist based in the Ottawa region since 2001. She joined Facebook last year to communicate with her family but quickly found that this particular online world contained abundant fodder for psychological and sociological exploration.

"On social networks there is self-marketing, which includes our search for the perfect promotional image that obliges us to conceal our own reality, our real image," Márquez points out.

The artist creates names and fragments of personal details in the works that offer a glimpse of a Facebook identity, but the photographs contradict that reality with a level of intimacy and reflection that would rarely if ever appear in a personal Facebook profile.

"I try to show the other face of the characters on Facebook: their inner lives, their moments of 'real reality,' what they really are outside this network, the faces that we do not see; the excluded ones, in short, what has been left out," says Márquez.

Márquez also became interested in the language used in Facebook, where, as the artist notes, "people tend to respond in banal ways to questions and applications such as: What's on your mind? What are you planning? Help her find her friends."

In my observation, the prevailing Facebook mode of conversation is lighthearted, witty, sometimes acerbic, and

Previous page

Alimah Kamil, 2010, Digital print face-mounted on plexiglass, 52 × 79

Facing page

Ted Rowntree, 2010, Digital print, ink and acrylic on paper, 52 × 79

Hu Jintao, 2010, Digital print face-mounted on plexiglass, 52 × 79

facebook



What are you planning?



facebook

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Hu Jintao

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Info

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What's on your mind?

Share

View Photos of Me (1)



Send Flowers for Any Occasion!

You have received 0 flowers

Send Flowers



♥ You have a myheart request



Ling Tam sent a request using iHeart:
Ling gave you a heart!

Accept Heart

Send a Heart back!

Ignore



sometimes benignly critical of Facebook itself. In other words it's quite similar to cocktail chatter among chums.

As illustration, here's a segment of a Facebook exchange I was part of this November:

Peter Simpson thinks that allowing other people to add you to groups without your permission is the single stupidest thing Facebook has done to date.

Wednesday at 9:42am · Comment · Like

Justin Wonnacott then there is the group of people who like to stick their leg out from under the sheet to keep cool in the summer - wanna join?

Wednesday at 12:48pm · LikeUnlike

Tony Martins This is an outrage! Let's start a protest Facebook group and add EVERYONE!

Wednesday at 2:11pm · LikeUnlike

Tony Fohse you can opt out. and, while you're opting out unfriend the scumbag who took liberties with who you might choose to associate with.

Yesterday at 9:43am · Like

It's all a little bemusing, for sure, but because of the whimsical and selective nature of most content, Márquez feels that Facebook can present a troublesome illusion that glosses over the harshness of social reality for many people in the world.

"By publishing only carefully selected photographs taken during short moments of joy and fleeting glory, and by increasing one's collection of 'friends,' it is possible to construct a totally new identity quite removed from one's everyday nature," Márquez notes.

"A social network is transformed into a world of perfection, even happiness, and to the devil with the anxiety, loneliness, and fear that are so prevalent in our societies."

This critique might lead to a question: Is mighty Facebook bringing about anything that approaches powerful social change or is it mere frivolous escapism?

Márquez points out that although the network is a truly global phenomenon (Indonesia and Turkey are the third and fourth biggest markets, she reports), a lack of openness and inclusiveness conflicts with the Facebook mantra that "anyone can join."

"On the one hand, due to diverse political, cultural, religious, gender or socioeconomic reasons, many people do not have access to Facebook or even Internet," says Márquez. "On the other hand, Facebook does not seem to foster relations among people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. On the contrary, it promotes finding new friends through existing ones, so the circles remain closed."

A Facebook friend of mine (whom I've never met in person and know very little about) recently announced that she'd done some "spring cleaning" by jettisoning some Facebook friends. When I wasn't among the jettisoned, I asked her what prompted the move and this was her reply:

"I'm really just getting tired of facebook, to be frank. The amount of crap that people (including myself) post here is absolutely exhausting. A person you barely speak to can comment on your/a status (without a clue as to why that person had posted it in the first place), and become a self-righteous, blowhard, picking apart every little thing."

So some bad shit can go down on Facebook. But to what degree do we construct new realities or identities in this virtual world? Curious to field test this central idea from in *The Lives of Others*, I posed a question in my Facebook profile status: "How different is the Facebook you from the real you." I received these responses:

By publishing only carefully selected photographs taken during short moments of joy and fleeting glory, and by increasing one's collection of 'friends,' it is possible to construct a totally new identity quite removed from one's everyday nature

lol~ im always me~ no matter where i am~~ :)
12 hours ago · LikeUnlike

Not at all. Pretty much me. Except I'm not as public in person.
11 hours ago · LikeUnlike

It depends,... but its pretty much all me!!!! BTW: Great stair dancing with you and the girls on Saturday night!!!! So fun!!!xo
11 hours ago · LikeUnlike

two different faces of the same book.
about an hour ago · Like

I lie through my teeth on fb.
10 hours ago · LikeUnlike

Facing page

Aniel Baker, 2010, Digital print face-mounted on plexiglass, 52 × 79

Ling Tam, 2010, Digital print face-mounted on plexiglass, 52 × 79