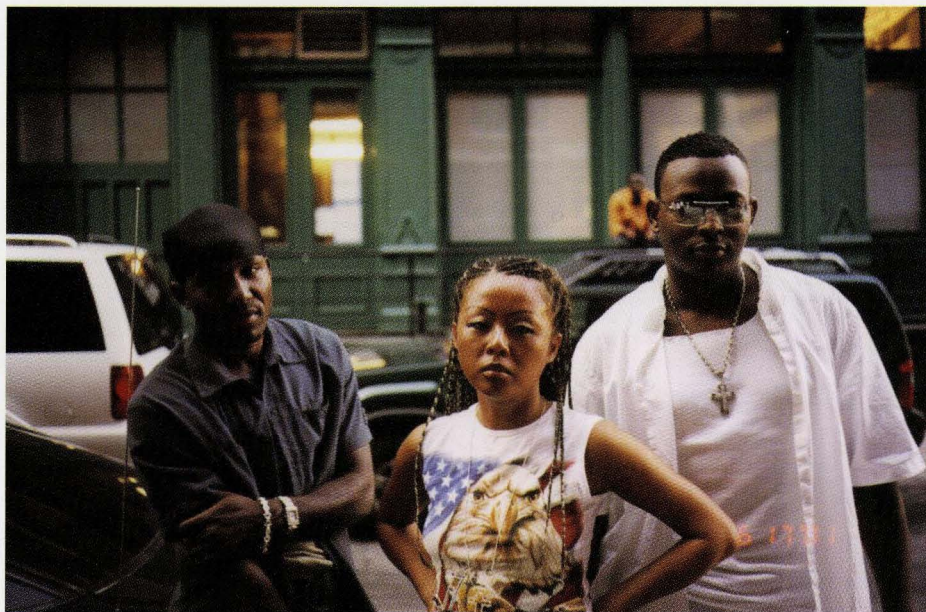


N i k k i S . L e e P R O J E C T S

2002 september 6 through october 16
clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tn



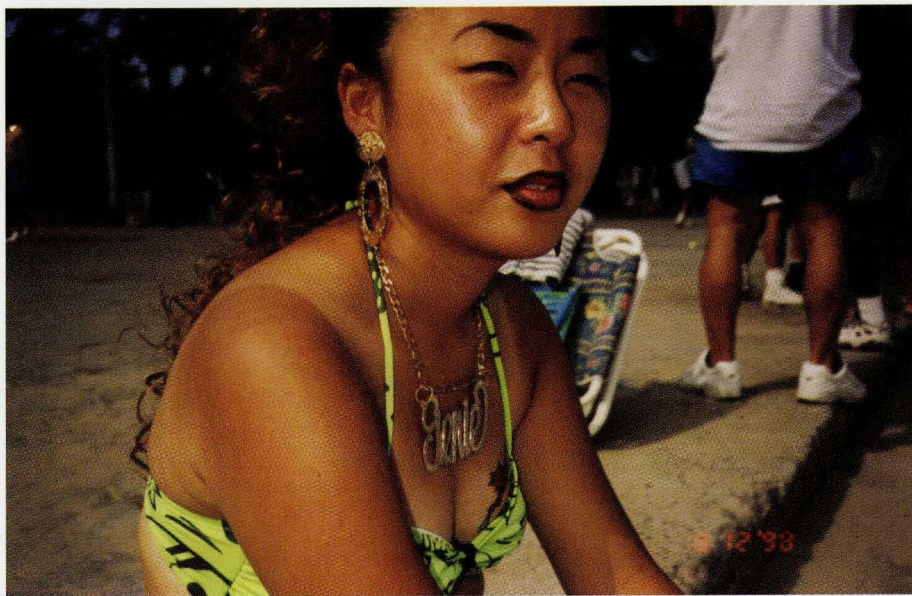
The Hip Hop Project (2), Fujiflex print, 30" x 40", 2001

Other people m



The Ohio Project (8), Fujiflex print, 28.25" x 21.5", 1999

ake me a certain



The Hispanic Project (25), Fujiflex print, 30" x 40", 1998

n-kind of person
—Nikki

PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS

At first glance, Nikki S. Lee's pictures have a sense of immediacy that would seem to guarantee their documentary authenticity. Her photographs of punks, tourists, young Japanese hipsters in the East Village, lesbians, Latinos, yuppies, retro-swing dancers, senior citizens, Ohio trailer park denizens, exotic dancers, skateboarders, Korean schoolgirls, and hip hoppers seem to offer direct insight into the lives of these segments of society.

After some looking we notice that Lee herself is a recurring character in every image. Sometimes she is at work, where she gyrates in leopard print lingerie, or checks her ass and adjusts her thong in the backstage mirror of a Connecticut stag club. But more often Lee is just hanging out. In one photo, we see Lee with magenta hair, studded leather, and a pierced lip, sulking in a doorway with a young man sporting a Mohawk and standard issue camouflage, tartan, and safety pins. In another picture, Lee cops a B-Girl attitude, as she stands with arms akimbo between two African American men on a public street. No, these are not really self-portraits. Now we get it. Like Cindy Sherman in her "Film Stills," Lee is playing a role.

Unlike most photography, which documents a split-second exposure, Lee's images are fragments of an experience that unfolds over an extended

period of time. For each of her projects, Lee immersed herself in the life of a subculture for a period of weeks. To play each part she altered her appearance subtly or dramatically: repeated trips to the tanning bed for the Hip Hop and Hispanic Projects in New York, bleaching her hair to live in a trailer park in rural Ohio, letting her hair form into natty dreadlocks to hang with skaters in San Francisco, shedding pounds for the Exotic Dancers Project, or wearing elaborate costumes and makeup for the Seniors Project. Lee's work reminds us that all identities are roles. One's place in a community and even one's sense of self is always understood in relation to others. As Lee explains, "other people make me a certain kind of person."

Lee melds two distinct photographic modes. Moving from group to group, she is kind of an anthropologist with a camera. This is a practice with a long history. In their early twentieth century photo-exposés, Progressive reformers like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine trained their lenses on the huddling masses of New York's immigrant ghettos. Indeed, since its inception, documentary photography's power lay in isolating and freezing visual information, thereby reifying notions of normalcy and aberration, native and alien.

Lee's work is equally rooted in the photographs we take at parties and on holidays and to remember

family and friends. Although Lee is a trained photographer (she holds degrees from the Fashion Institute of Technology and New York University and has worked for fashion photographer David La Chappelle), the pictures themselves are taken by a friend or passer by with a point-and-shoot camera. Like our own snapshots, Lee's photographs commemorate exemplary rather than extraordinary moments. And while they are artless technically (the camera's electronic date stamp is sometimes visible; at times the subject is washed out by a garish electronic flash), they show honest effort in framing and emphasis, just like our own photographs.

Lee's work brings these two traditions—call them the ethnographic and the personal—together, emphasizing the role that photography plays in making our world intelligible and the ways we use photography to identify ourselves, our families and friends, who we are and how we want to be seen.

The eagle and American flag on Lee's t-shirt in the Hip Hop Project may be a clue to what's going on here. Curiously, Lee hasn't labeled this the "Black" project or the "African American" project, and Lee is racially ambiguous with bronze skin and cornrow hair. Together—which is how Lee prefers her work to be seen—the photographs tell a story about assimilating and adapting, but also carving out a subcultural niche and remaking a place and

community that stands apart from the mainstream. As Lee blends into her new surroundings, she becomes our guide to the sea of visual cues that mark the myriad communities that make up the American city in the twenty-first century.

As Barry Schwabsky writes in *Artforum*, Lee "has an immigrant's keen eye for the quotidian rituals of social identification." Indeed, learning to navigate one's way through a perplexing forest of signs is indeed an important skill for anyone who finds him or herself in a new place where all the rules and expectations are different. In the Hispanic Project, for example, Lee's oversize jewelry, rose tattoo, waxed eyebrows, dark lip liner, permed and highlighted hair, and sunburned and slouched shoulders all mimic the style of her working class teenage Latino girlfriends. These are small details, but important ones.

Lee first came to the United States in 1994. Born Lee Seung-Hee in a small town in Korea in 1970, "Nikki" is an "American" name, like the names chosen by many young Koreans who come to America to study. Choosing an American name may be preferable to endless mispronunciations by teachers and classmates. It is also an act of self-invention in a new country and shows a deft understanding of the importance of image in American culture.

— Bill Anthes