



# *The Puzzle of the Self:*

## Cornelia Hediger's Doppelgängers

by Adam Harrison Levy

**In Cornelia Hediger’s *Doppelgänger* series, her female subjects are elongated, fragmented or distorted, and the rooms that these figures inhabit have a dream-like, almost fairytale quality to them. There is an overall mood of emotional provocation, tinged by fragility and doubt, which is counterbalanced by the formal rigor and control of the artist. The most successful of these images manage to play with and explore these tensions. As a result, these photographs can be read as a visual narrative, an intimate quest to solve the unsolvable puzzle of the self.**

Hediger’s work consists of a grid of six distinct photographs assembled into one overall image. At first glance there is an enticing, almost nostalgic aura to them—the cumulative effect of the old-fashioned dresses and black Mary-Jane shoes, the grandmotherly stockings, the quaint antique dolls, and the delicate porcelain teacups. The rooms that her characters inhabit seem eerily empty, out of time, like abandoned institutional wards or domestic interiors that remain untouched by the glowing screens, molded plastics and hard shiny surfaces of 21st Century life.

But if you look more closely at these images, they are tinged by elements which are darker and more forbidding: hints of conflict and violence, psychic loss and wounding, sexual explorations, and deep psychological ambivalence. What could otherwise be precious or cloying is toughened up by a vision that is attracted to probing perilous emotional terrain.

All this is suggested by the title of the series—*Doppelgänger*. “It’s a German word,” Hediger explains in her soft, Swiss-inflected English, “that means double-walker. It’s a ghostly image of a person who is also an omen for bad luck and death.” She pauses for a moment, considers the thought, and then smiles slyly. “If you see yourself as a *doppelgänger*, you know it’s bad news!”

Hediger is an artist willing to confront bad news; she explores intensely personal feelings and then offers them back to us in structured images that seek to embody these emotions. The process and techniques by which she is able to do this are not something that she discovered immediately. It is the

culmination of years of persistent work, an extended trial and error investigation, both aesthetically and technically.

The origins of the *Doppelgänger* series lie in her previous body of work, *The Future is Canceled*. In those images, shot on medium-format color film, a female character is often seen in the presence of a doll (dummy), its limp feet, legs and torso a haunting symbol of lost possibilities. “I had this doll (dummy) that was lifeless,” she explains, “and I realized that I wanted interaction, I wanted it to stand up. And I just had to figure out how to do it.”

She started the *Doppelgänger* series by photographing herself in ways wherein she could embody two characters in dialogue with each other. She shot in 35mm negative color film for two years. “I would shoot in sections and then make two contact sheets, cut one up, and put the little frames of the contact sheets together.” It was a highly laborious and costly process that involved renting a color darkroom, processing the original images, physically arranging the images, scanning them in and then retouching. The entire process took weeks.

She was working primarily in found spaces, which she would set dress by adding objects and props. As her alter-ego of the *doppelgänger* took on more individuality, and as Hediger grew more confident in her technical abilities to create the images she imagined in her mind, her repertoire of accessories and clothing began to grow.

A typical shoot could now last up to eight hours, much of that time spent meticulously lighting. Working with studio lights and umbrellas, never strobes, she seeks to achieve depth and complexity. “Sometimes the spaces are so small that I have to move everything around. And because I’m often playing two or sometimes three people (characters), I have to change clothes. And then I have to get behind the camera and do the focusing and then get back into character. I have hundreds of little labels all over the place, so I know where to move the tripod and where to go.”

For each six-paneled image, Hediger shoots an average of 126 separate images. About 10 each for the bottom row and feet, and an increasing number as she moves up the image, with the majority of the shots being reserved for the faces. The most difficult part is capturing the nuance of how each character looks and relates to the other.

Previous Page

*Doppelgänger* 03.16.07,  
Cornelia Hediger

Right

*Doppelgänger* 02.23.08,  
Cornelia Hediger

Three years ago she switched from film to 35mm digital format as a way to cut costs and time. But she didn't change the process of how she shoots and assembles the overall images. She never looks at what she is shooting while she is doing it, and she never digitally manipulates the image. "I shoot RAW files and then download them after the shoot."

In 2008, she took another developmental step forward by taking more control over the spaces in which she shoots. Working primarily in her own apartment, she color matched the wall with the costumes and props in a way that more fully expressed her vision for the characters and their interactions. Her aim, as always, was to evoke a mood that is emblematic of an emotional truth.

Hediger sketches her images before actually shooting them, like a film director storyboarding a narrative. But her preparations are becoming even more involved. For these later sessions, she is the set designer, prop master, actress and cinematographer all rolled into one. This gives her more exacting control, but she remains amazed by how much is still left to chance in the assembly of the final image. This is a paradox she enjoys. "I control every single shot, but once you put them together you lose control."

Hediger's ambitions are growing as she gains technical proficiency. Recently she has imposed more rigorous standards on herself, and she is now re-shooting about a third of her images. "I'm looking for moods. I have the structure down. Now I want more. How does it feel? How does the image come across?" There is more at stake for her now, both technically and artistically; she's anything but complacent. She seems anxious to push her process along, to take another step forward. "I don't want to be just pleasant. Because I get bored. My work has to be more than just visually pleasing"

*All images are copyright Cornelia Hediger. The images are courtesy of the artist and Klompching Gallery.*



*New York photographer Cornelia Hediger was born in Zurich, Switzerland and educated at Rutgers University. Her works are exhibited internationally, and she is among the Photo District News' 30 New & Emerging Artists to Watch, 2009.*

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#### Product Resources

Cameras: Contax RX, Canon 50D; Lenses: Carl Zeiss 50mm; Film: 100T; Lights: Lowel Tota

PORTFOLIO:



*Doppelgänger 01.16.07, Cornelia Hediger*



*Doppelgänger* 12.31.06, Cornelia Hediger

PORTFOLIO:



*Doppelgänger 04.07.07, Cornelia Hediger*