TEN THOUSAND FACES

A MULTITUDE OF SELF-PORTRAITS OFFER AN UNCANNY GLIMPSE OF LIFE’S PROGRESS. —Matt Huston

WE’RE NEVER MORE aware of time’s passage than when it literally stares us in the face. Our skin wrinkles and droops, our hair thins and grays, our expressions shift and slacken. We know these changes are bound to occur, yet comparing an old snapshot of oneself to a current one can cause a person to wonder: What happened?

Photographers around the world are addressing that question directly and vividly. Over long periods of time, they take photos of themselves once a day, capturing their personal metamorphoses in minute detail. Perhaps the best known project is that of Noah Kalina, who started taking daily self-portraits in 2000. In 2006, he published the photos in a fast-paced YouTube video called “Noah Takes a Photo of Himself Every Day for 6 Years.” That video and its follow-up, at 12-and-a-half years, capture a wide-eyed, fresh-faced college kid morphing into a somber-looking, thickly bearded man.

Together, the videos have been viewed more than 30 million times. Kalina was not, however, the first to indulge this deceptively simple idea. Karl Baden, a 62-year-old professor of fine arts at Boston College, began taking daily self-portraits nearly 28 years ago. He carries out his project with the type of controls typically applied to science experiments. By keeping all the elements constant—black-and-white film, a solid white background, and himself

THE SEASONS OF LIFE

Seasons have the power to shape our feelings, attributes, and behavior, even before we’re born. Every time of year, it seems, brings its own formative influences. —S. Lynn Edmonds

WINTER-born babies have mothers who are, on average, younger, less educated, and less likely to be wed, finds one study. This may help account for seasonal differences in child development. Wealthier women, researchers suggest, may tend to try for non-winter births.
shaven, unsmiling, and shirtless—the pictures focus sharply on the changes in his visage. Many of his 10,000-plus images have been posted on his blog and stitched together in a two-minute video. Over weeks, months, and years, the accumulation of new grooves and textures on Baden’s face is striking to behold.

Breaking a life into measured fragments appeals to a basic curiosity about the way people change, inviting viewers to ponder the march of time at their own speed. It’s not surprising that the age of digital photography and social media has spawned many similar endeavors.

Different subjects encourage viewers to draw different meanings. In 16 years of daily self-portraits by digital artist Jonathan Keller Keller, changing hairstyles, clothing, and expressions tell the story of a young man exploring new ways of presenting himself. In the photos a young British woman named Rebecca Brown took of herself over six-and-a-half years, starting at age 14, viewers see not only her transition into womanhood but also evidence of her battle with the compulsive hair-pulling disorder trichotillomania. Other photographers have turned the lens on their children: Munish Bansal chronicled his daughter’s dramatic growth from a newborn into a young adult. There’s even an iPhone app, Everyday, for once-a-day photographers.

Repeatedly taking pictures of yourself was once a novel concept. “Now it’s totally normal and acceptable,” says Kalina, a 34-year-old photographer whose portfolio includes work for Disney and General Electric. But neither he nor Baden take their photos in the spirit of the booming culture of selfies. “I don’t even necessarily see myself,” Kalina says. “There’s a sort of detachment.”

For Baden, the project took on an added dimension as he underwent chemotherapy for prostate cancer in 2001. In the photos from that period, his dark hair recedes, then blooms back after his treatment. The changes underscore his mortality, which hovers as a theme of the entire series. “One of the drivers for making art,” he says, “is to try to extend your life beyond your physical, corporeal life on the planet.”

The photos also serve as a window into the lives of others. He has shown his images in exhibitions and used them in class projects, and likes to find out how an image from a particular date resonates with others’ experiences of that time. “It’s less for me and more about how people’s lives intersect,” Baden says. “It’s kind of like punching life’s clock.”