



FASHION & STYLE

Here I Am Taking My Own Picture

By **ALEX WILLIAMS** FEB. 19, 2006

MORGAN ADAMS, a recent college graduate, decided that her picture on her home page at MySpace.com had lingered a little too long, a full month. To snap a new one she called on the only photographer she thought she could trust: herself.

In her bedroom in Lubbock, Tex., Ms. Adams, 21, tried out a variety of poses -- coy, friendly, sultry, goofy -- in the kind of performance young people have engaged in privately for generations before a mirror. But Ms. Adams's mirror was a Web cam, and her journey of self-expression, documented in five digital self-portraits, was soon visible to the 56 million registered users of MySpace.

"Everyone's a little narcissistic," Ms. Adams said. "Being able to take pictures of yourself in privacy allows you to do it without inhibitions. Each person takes better pictures of themselves than anyone else can because they know their own bodies, they know their own minds."

The era of cheap, lightweight digital cameras -- in cellphones, in computers, in hip pockets, even on key chains -- has meant that people who did not consider themselves photography buffs as recently as five years ago are filling ever-larger hard drives with thousands of images from their lives.

And one particular kind of image has especially soared in popularity, particularly among the young: the self-portrait, which has become a kind of folk art for the digital age.

Framing themselves at arm's length, teenagers snap their own pictures and pass the cameras to friends at school or e-mail the images or upload them to the Internet. For a generation raised on a mantra of self-esteem, striking a heroic, sultry or brooding pose and sharing it with the world comes naturally.

"It's a huge phenomenon," said Matt Polazzo, the coordinator of student affairs at Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, referring to the compulsive habit of teenagers to snap everything in their lives, especially self-portraits. "Just yesterday I had a girl sitting on the couch in my office," he said. "She took out her cellphone and said, 'Here, I'm going to show you a picture of my best friend,' snapped a picture of herself and showed it to me, all in one fluid motion."

Art historians say that the popularity of the self-portrait is unprecedented in the century-long history of the snapshot. "I think it is probably a new genre of photography," said Guy Stricherz, the author of "Americans in Kodachrome, 1945-65" (Twin Palms, 2002), which includes snapshots culled from 500 American families. Mr. Stricherz said he reviewed more than 100,000 pictures over 17 years in compiling the book but found fewer than 100 self-portraits. These days you can find as many by clicking through a few home pages on MySpace, Friendster or similar social networking sites.

Jeff Gluck, a public relations executive, who lives in Woodcliff Lake, N.J., and his wife, Elizabeth, often find one of their two oldest daughters, ages 10 and 13, taking pictures of themselves with cellphone cameras. They do it in the



back seat of the car or on the sofa watching television. When not mugging for their own cameras, the girls experiment with the family camera. "Many times with our regular digital camera I'll go to download photos at the computer, and I'll find six pictures of one of the kids that they obviously took themselves," Mr. Gluck said.

To a certain extent new technology is driving the new self-portraiture. Cellphone cameras and other digital cameras are sold with wide-angle lenses that allow a picture taken at arm's length to remain in focus. Computers are essentially \$1,000 darkrooms that permit sophisticated manipulation of images.

But technology alone can't explain the trend. Even in previous generations when cameras were cheap, they were generally reserved for special occasions. "In 1960 a person just wouldn't take a Kodak Brownie picture of themselves," Mr. Stricherz said. "It would have been considered too self-aggrandizing."

Psychologists and others who study teenagers say the digital self-portraiture is an extension of behavior typical of the young, like trying on different identities, which earlier generations might have expressed through clothing and hairstyles. "Most of what I've been seeing is taking place in the bedroom," said Kathryn C. Montgomery, a professor of communication at American University, referring to teenage self-portraits. Dr. Montgomery studies the relation of teenagers to the digital media. "It's a locus of teen life where they are forming their identities, and now it's also a private studio where they can develop who they are.

"What better tool could they have than one that allows them to take pictures of themselves and manipulate them like never before?"

To Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a developmental psychologist, digital self-portraiture is a high-tech way of expressing an impulse among teenagers and young adults that psychologists call "the imaginary audience."

"This is the idea that adolescents think people are more interested in them than they actually are, that people are always looking at them and taking note of what they are doing, even if it is just walking across the school cafeteria," said Dr. Arnett, who is a Fulbright scholar at the University of Copenhagen.

To Dr. Arnett, the role-playing evident in many self-portraits found online is "a form of pretend: the adolescent version of children dressing up." Others speculate that today's young people are different from earlier generations because they are more comfortable with public self-exposure.

"When I was a kid I didn't want my picture taken," said Jim Taylor, a trend consultant at the Harrison Group in Waterbury, Conn. "But these kids are fabulous self-marketers."

He added: "They see celebrities expressing their self-worth and want to join the party. This is a free forum to do so."

"Self-branding is a big deal for kids, and self-produced entertainment is a big deal," Mr. Taylor said. In their pictures, ordinary young women metamorphose into glamour queens or pinup girls, thanks to a few well-rehearsed come-hither poses and mood lighting reminiscent of an old Hollywood studio portrait. Average boys turn themselves into brooding antiheroes by gazing intently into their camera lens in a darkened room, face half buried in shadow.

"There's always a theatrical quality to their shots," Mr. Taylor said. "Kids love melancholy and sadness. There is lots of obvious symbolism about whether they see themselves as an actress, a model, a Christ figure or a Hamlet."



Young people have become so candid in sharing their intimate images online that some parents and lawmakers are concerned. This month the attorney general of Connecticut, Richard Blumenthal, promised an investigation into MySpace, spurred by complaints of parents that minors could have access to sexual images on the site or could post suggestive pictures that could make them vulnerable to sexual predators. Members have included pictures of themselves in scanty attire or suggestive poses. For many, MySpace functions as a dating site.

But the operators of the Web site, which is owned by the News Corporation, the media conglomerate controlled by Rupert Murdoch, insist that a third of the work force is devoted to policing the site for inappropriate material. Offending members can be banned from the network, and MySpace says it will contact law enforcement officials in serious cases.

Not everyone who compulsively snaps self-portraits sees it as a journey of self-discovery. Tim Zebal, 23, an audio engineer in San Francisco, posted on MySpace an arresting shot of himself taken at a dramatic angle, wearing a billowing shirt and framed in a baroque gold mirror. "I had a new camera phone and snapped a picture in the mirror of a bar restroom," Mr. Zebal explained in an e-mail message. "I thought it looked cool. That's it."

Amber Davidson, 19, a freshman at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minn., refreshes her self-portrait on MySpace every couple of weeks and puts a lot of thought into it.

"There's been a big increase in creativity over the past couple of years," she said, referring to the self-portraits on the site. "A lot of people get inspired by what they see in other people's pictures."

HER MySpace home page contains five self-portraits created by pointing the camera toward herself, arm outstretched. She composed each shot so that the arm holding the camera is invisible. In one, Ms. Davidson wears a black-and-white spaghetti-strap dress and peers up winsomely at a camera over her head. It took about 15 tries to get it right, she said. "I don't want people to think I'm sitting there taking all these pictures of myself, even though I kind of am."

Since endless experimentation with digital photography costs little or nothing (you just delete the duds), many young camera owners like Ms. Davidson have practiced their art to the point where they have stumbled across sophisticated portraiture techniques of lighting, composition and camera angle that were once the province of professionals.

Take that shot with the camera held high above the head, so common on MySpace that some members refer to it as "the helicopter shot." It is a fairly sophisticated technique.

"Shooting from higher up stretches the neck muscles, and there is no double chin," said Ken White, the chairman of the fine-art photography department at the Rochester Institute of Technology, adding that it also accentuates the jaw line. "It is a glamorizing view."

In the era of the blog, when many deem the most trivial and personal information fit for public consumption, the self-reference of the new portraiture feels natural. "In a funny way I don't see this as photography anymore," said Fred Ritchin, an associate professor in the photography and imaging department at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. "It's communication. It's all an extension of cellphones, texting and e-mailing."

Many users consider digital self-portraits whimsical and ultimately disposable.



"People want pictures of a new hairstyle, outfit or makeup, and they want to show it to their friends," Tom Anderson, the president of MySpace, said in an e-mail message. But, he added, "I suppose all folk art comes from necessity of some sort."