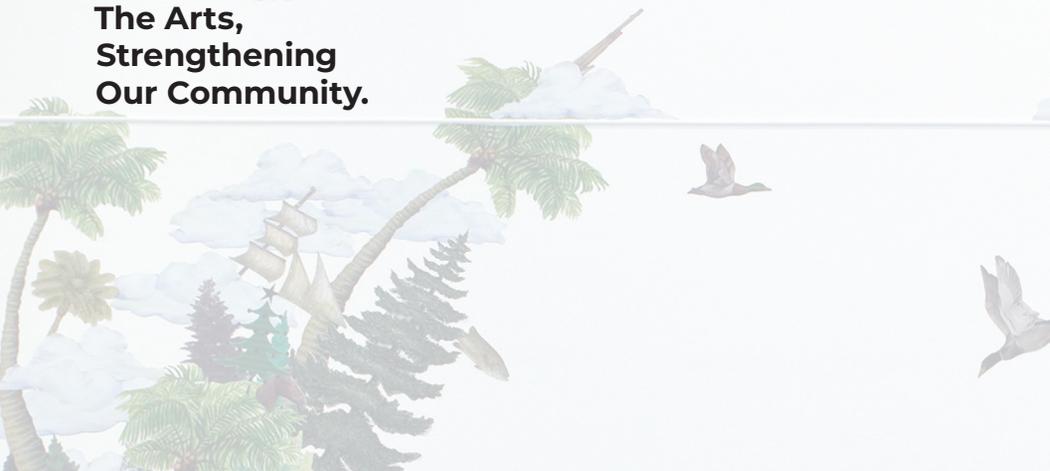


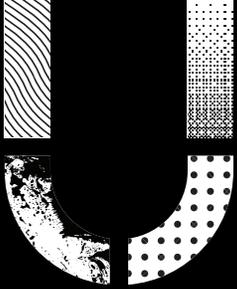
UNION

Supporting
The Arts,
Strengthening
Our Community.

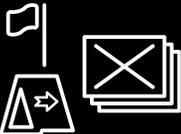


The Wanda D. Ewing Gallery

Open Tuesday–Saturday, 11 am to 6 pm



The Wanda D. Ewing Gallery is dedicated to the Omaha artist, educator, and supporter of The Union for Contemporary Art who passed away in 2013. Ewing encouraged dialogue around questions of who is allowed to make, see, and be seen in visual culture, and whether the arts look like the communities we live in, challenging her audiences to believe in the transformative power of art.



To view our exhibition schedule
and for more info on the program,
visit u-ca.org/exhibition.

The Union for Contemporary Art
2423 North 24th Street
Omaha, NE 68110

THE IPSEITY PROJECT

Zoë Charlton



Other Kinds of Introspection: *An Interview with Zoë Charlton*

In a new series of life-size drawings, the Baltimore-based artist Zoë Charlton uses the concept of the doppelgänger to examine issues of in/visibility in our current society. The doppelgänger has been interpreted somewhat differently over time, from the “spirit double” in ancient Egyptian belief, to a “double walker” in German literature, to a “twin stranger” in the current popular vernacular. Born with a twin brother, Charlton has long been interested in look-alikes and the idea of someone—or something—as a “stand in” for another person. A case in point, *The Ipseity Project* was inspired by an African female sculpture that Charlton acquired from an antique store four years ago and has since referred to as her “body double” or, more fondly, “Sib.” Attributed to the Bangwa people, the five-foot-tall sculpture is Charlton’s exact height and has other physical likenesses to the artist. In Charlton’s definition, “a doppelgänger can be historical or ancestral—someone who has similar histories of being culturally appropriated or who embodies you but isn’t exactly the same.” Installed at the center of *The Ipseity Project* exhibition, Sib represents questions that underlie Charlton’s new drawings: Where do we see our individual identities reflected in visual culture? How does that reflection (or the lack of it) shape our sense of self and sense of place in the world? How do the traditional figures in Western art history influence ideas about who belongs in art now?

COVER: Zoë Charlton
Wakulla, 2012
Collage and gouache on paper; 30 x 22 inches



Zoë Charlton
Les Demoiselles (The Great Outdoors), 2017
Graphite, gouache, acrylic paint, and collage on paper; 94 x 102 inches

Wanda D. Ewing tackled similar questions in her work and, as recipient of the second annual Wanda D. Ewing Commission, Charlton was drawn to Ewing's explorations of selfhood, or ipseity, and how we come to understand ourselves through images of people who share in our identities and experience. In previous works, Charlton, like Ewing, has examined the assertion of self within a culture where affirming Black women is considered a radical if not aggressive act.

With *The Ipseity Project*, Charlton pushes these ideas further, exploring what happens when her body is the point of departure for a body of work that invites participation by people with similar physical characteristics, but from a range of backgrounds and cities. What bearing does affinity with another's physical form have on our capacity for empathy? How does the culture of a place affect who is seen and who is not? Where, exactly, does the artist draw the line between self and subject?



Typical of Charlton's process, she began *The Ipseity Project* by publishing a call for models in regional newspapers, on social media platforms, and spreading the word through friends and colleagues. She solicited people living in Omaha, Baltimore, and San Antonio, cities that she has visited or lived in this year. Her call emphasized a desire for sitters from a diverse cross-section of communities: female/male/gender-fluid/non-gender conforming, people of color and non-people of color; various ethnicities and races, abilities, and ages. In the drawings, "the sitter, or subject, becomes a catalyst for imagining, becoming, or understanding another person's perspective," says Charlton. "At its core, this project is about empathy and finding reflections of oneself in others, while blurring the boundaries and expectations of the self-portrait." In the following interview, the artist discusses the process of building relationships with her sitters, how she sources images, and the challenges she encountered with this project.

"At its core, this project is about empathy and finding reflections of oneself in others, while blurring the boundaries and expectations of the self-portrait."

Nicole J. Caruth: Let's start by talking about Wanda Ewing. I was struck by the coincidence you discovered upon being invited to create new work for the Wanda D. Ewing Commission. Not only were you familiar with Ewing's Bougie series, you were using images from the series in your lectures even though you couldn't identify the artist. What drew you to Ewing's work? What purpose did her work serve in your lectures?

Zoë Charlton: I remember seeing the Bougie series in exhibitions around 2008 and thinking "Who made these wild magazine covers?" I was excited about this satire around Black feminine identity. I also remember seeing images from Wanda Ewing's series Video Grrlzzz. Some of the conversations about sexualized depictions of Black women's bodies made by Black women artists still centered on Kara Walker. Wanda Ewing's approach criticized media, pop culture, and was very relatable because of its referents. Those images continue to be powerful. I included them in my lectures as a way to round out the conversation about representations of Black women by Black women and to show what Ewing's version offers.

“... the sitter is important only in that they perhaps allow empathy; viewers imagine that this person could actually exist and it makes the story believable.”

NC: When we began talking about this project, you mentioned that although you've drawn many people in your career, until now you had only drawn two self-portraits, one in childhood and another in adulthood, both of which were made under “periods of duress.” Why did you decide to explore your own body now?

ZC: Yeah, I don't have any traditional self-portraits, and I should say that the two I mentioned were class assignments. I've never liked making self-portraits, though I have often modeled for my own figure drawings. Wanda Ewing frequently made work about her body and this was about visibility and empowerment or self-critical gestures or other kinds of introspection. These ideas are important in my work, too. *The Ipseity Project* drawings are about how I/we are reflected in and by others, or even how we are similar to others, especially when it comes to visibility, experiences with tokenism, and difference. In this project, I decided to represent people who may occupy the same amount of physical space as I do but are read differently.

NC: What was your process for getting to know your sitters, or, as you also call them, collaborators?

ZC: I have a process for meeting people, introducing them to projects, and working with them. I typically start by placing ads on Craigslist or some other online platform. Or, if I see someone who seems interesting for a series, I will introduce myself. The potential sitter and I talk about the project, their relationship to it, and if all goes well, they come to the studio to pose for a series of photographs or to see my past work. It's kind of like dating. We are definitely building a relationship and trust.



Zoë Charlton
Restive Under This Treatment, 2018
Graphite, acrylic paint, and collage on paper; 74 x 120 inches

I don't consider my drawings to be portraits. I work figuratively, mostly from direct observation, and the work is narrative. That the drawings look like the sitter is important only in that they perhaps allow empathy; viewers imagine that this person could actually exist and it makes the story believable. Because I work mostly from life and take my own reference photos there are always people in my studio. My practice relies on other people's involvement. I tend to work with people for extended amounts of time or build a series around them. I may end up working with someone for an entire month or a year, or in the case of one person, off and on for fourteen years!

NC: Tell us about your imaging process, specifically your use of stickers in the wall collages.

ZC: I source much of my imagery from what already exists. I use stickers, which generally have a decorative function, to narrate in my drawings. I scan the stickers, enlarge them using digital software, and then print them out onto drawing paper, photo paper, and vinyl. The playfulness of the stickers becomes more surprising and absurd with a shift in scale. Stickers function as visual shorthand. The way an image is generated brings content—both in the form of the images and its style. For instance, I collage trees using multiple styles of stickers—photographic, illustrative, painterly, etc. This conflation of styles alters how these images are read. Neither the images nor the styles in which they are made are value-free.



Zoë Charlton
Companion, Constant, 2015
Graphite, acrylic paint, and collage on paper and wall; 25 x 22 feet

NC: You recently sent me an article by the editors of DIRT in which they discuss “fraught empathy” and problematic attempts by artists to represent marginalized communities. What aspects of this article resonated with you in relationship to *The Ipseity Project*? In developing this body of work have you grappled with questions about your own gaze?

ZC: *The Ipseity Project* held real challenges for me, from connecting with people from the Omaha communities I wanted to draw, to being an outsider attempting to make work that reflected the demographic of Omaha, to my assumptions about others’ visibility. This series required me to consider what was most important in this project—concept, size requirement, regional specificity—as well as my agenda and what purpose it served. The DIRT article questions artist motivations and modes of representation, which I also had to address in *The Ipseity Project*. I’m looking at my motivations and impulses as an artist, my ability to be compassionate as a person relating to others, and my politic as a Black woman who is allied with, separated from, or privileged in ways that individuals in communities different from mine might not be.

“... it’s not always safe to be seen.”

NC: How is *The Ipseity Project* alike or unlike your previous bodies of work?

ZC: I look for people whose physical appearance helps tell a story. I usually have a particular kind of person in mind for each series. For example, when I made the *Paladins & Tourists* series during a residency in Fort Collins, Colorado, I placed an ad in a local paper looking for male models with “runner’s bodies.” In my ads, I always disclose my identity—“African American female artist”—and that typically influences who responds. However, the people who answered that ad were all white men. I hadn’t fully taken into account the demographic in Fort Collins and the people who responded to the ad shifted my plans for the drawings. *The Ipseity Project* is not that different in this regard: I used the same process for soliciting participants, though, in order to make drawings based on my own body, I requested people in my height and weight range. I wanted representation from diverse groups, but the parameters proved prohibitive. After running the ad for two months, I had received zero responses. After I removed the weight requirement, I started getting responses and there was a lot of variation among participants.

In *The Ipseity Project*, I represent people on the margins of society or people who have differences that maybe aren’t visible on the surface. I want to be seen and I tend to think that everyone wants to be seen. Visibility can be an act of defiance and agency, particularly for individuals whose identities are impacted by stereotypical portrayals in media and throughout history. What I recognize is that it’s not always safe to be seen.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Zoë Charlton (b. 1973, Tallahassee, Florida) received her MFA degree from the University of Texas at Austin and her BFA from Florida State University in painting and drawing. Charlton's work has been included in national and international group exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, TX; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; The Studio Museum of Harlem, New York, NY; The Delaware Contemporary, Wilmington, DE; Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland; Haas & Fischer Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland; Clementine Gallery, New York, NY; and Wendy Cooper Gallery, Chicago, IL. She has participated in residencies at Artpace, McColl Center for Art + Innovation, Skowhegan School of Painting, and The Creative Alliance. Charlton is the co-founder of 'sindikit, an artist project space in Baltimore, and sits on the Maryland State Arts Council. She is an Associate Professor at American University in Washington, D.C.

WANDA D. EWING COMMISSION

Charlton is the recipient of the second annual Wanda D. Ewing Commission, which supports the production and presentation of new work by a woman artist of the African diaspora. Wanda Denise Ewing (1970–2013), the Omaha artist for whom The Union's gallery and commission are named, was influenced by folk-art aesthetics, craft traditions, and the limited depictions of Black women in Western art history and popular culture. Through her art, she celebrated Black bodies and explored the complex interplay of race, gender, and sexuality. The commission was established to carry forth Ewing's legacy and to create a vital cultural opportunity for Greater Omaha, where narratives of Black female experience are too often absent from the arts discourse.

Recipients of the commission are invited to develop a companion educational program or project. In conjunction with *The Ipseity Project*, youth ages 13–18 in The Union's New Voices and Art Club programs will have a special opportunity to work with Zoë Charlton as she leads a drawing activity. Youth will use portraiture to highlight their features and celebrate their individuality; following the drawing activity, associate director of performing arts, Denise Chapman, will lead exercises to put the drawings in motion, exploring how portraiture helps us understand the body in space and how visual art can support character development. Charlton will also lead a private figure drawing class for The Union's teaching artists and other art educators, discussing posing and drawing the human figure in her practice.

The Ipseity Project is organized by Nicole J. Caruth, an independent curator and the artistic director at The Union for Contemporary Art.



Special thank you to Film Streams for their help in advertising *The Ipseity Project* call for models!