

MELISSA ANN PINNEY

IN THEIR OWN LIGHT



DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

July 5–August 4, 2023

IN THEIR OWN LIGHT

In Their Own Light is the result of Melissa Ann Pinney's five-year artist residency in Chicago Public Schools, which coincided with the historic merger of two segregated schools, escalating racial and gender inequalities, gun violence, and the challenges brought about by a global pandemic. The images in this exhibition depict an astonishing range of emerging identities amid friendships and school rituals. Pinney's portraits push back in complex ways against stereotypical, often negative images of these students to honor and celebrate the young people in our public schools.

MELISSA ANN PINNEY

The Chicago Public School students **Melissa Ann Pinney** encountered define themselves, having grown up as heirs to the Black Lives Matter movement, #MeToo and an insistence on gender fluidity. *In Their Own Light* is the result of her five-year artist residency at Bell Elementary School, the Ogden International Schools and Senn High School. When Pinney began this work at Bell School in 2018, she had no idea of what was to come—how the project would evolve and shift through an ongoing global pandemic, escalating racial and gender inequities and continuing gun violence. She has seen an astonishing range of emerging identities amid friendships and school rituals and gotten to know students over their high school years. Pinney's intention is for her photographs to push back in complex ways against stereotypical, often negative images of these students, to celebrate and honor the young people in our public schools.

Melissa Ann Pinney has exhibited nationally and internationally and has won numerous fellowships and awards. She has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, three Illinois Arts Council Fellowship Awards, and a National Endowment for the Arts Midwest Regional Fellowship. Pinney was selected for three large documentary projects that were exhibited, published, and archived in Chicago: *Changing Chicago* in 1987, *City 2000*, and *Artists of CPS Lives* in 2018, where she began her ongoing project in the Chicago Public Schools. Pinney's photographs are included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Art Institute of Chicago, the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, San Francisco MOMA, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, among many others. Pinney's monographs include *Regarding Emma: Photographs of American Women & Girls*, *Girl Ascending* and *TWO*, with Ann Patchett. Her upcoming book, *In Their Own Light: Photographs from Chicago Public Schools*, is scheduled for release in October, 2023.

Website: <http://www.melissaannpinney.com/>



William, Senn High School, 2023, edition 1/10 archival pigment print, 24" x 30"



Prom, Ogden International High School, 2022, edition 1/10 archival pigment print, 36" x 44"



Root for Each Other, Ogden-Jenner Middle School, 2019, edition 1/5 archival pigment print



Khov'ya & Coby, 2022, edition 1/5 archival pigment print, 36" x 44"



Arsone, Senn High School, 2021, edition 1/5 archival pigment print, 36" x 44"



Pep Rally, Senn High School, 2022, edition 1/10 archival pigment print, 24" x 30"



Girl Talk, Bell School, 2018, edition 1/10 archival pigment print, 24" x 30"



Vincente, *Senn High School*, 2022, edition 1/10 archival pigment print, 24" x 30"

INTERVIEW WITH MELISSA ANN PINNEY

Conducted by Rachel Manlubatan

Rachel Manlubatan: How do you first approach the subjects in your photos? Do the conversations you have with the students you photograph inform the aesthetics of each piece?

Melissa Ann Pinney: I first take in the entire setting itself, to see the quality of light, to see where the students are playing or congregating, then try to anticipate and follow the energy. The best pictures happen when I am open to notice what is ordinarily overlooked and don't intrude upon the spontaneous interactions of the students. Often students approach me and ask for pictures of themselves and their friends. I'm happy to make these pictures and send them to the students but they're not usually keepers for me. I'm looking for pictures I haven't made before.

The aesthetics of each piece are formed intuitively from that specific child or group, the light, their gestures, clothing and energy. Sometimes the student and I have spoken beforehand but not always. It's an improvisational approach and changes depending on the circumstances of the day and place.

RM: How did you deal with the hardships of stepping into several pre-existing communities? How do you think your art allowed both Ogden Elementary and Jenner Academy to merge more seamlessly, and what plans do you have to continue using photography as a way to help others?

MAP: Yes, it can be a challenge to assert oneself into a school community where one doesn't have a well-defined role such as teacher, staff or parent. I've found that demonstrating my commitment by showing up week after week and sharing the pictures I've made with the students opens a door to

joining the community.

I certainly wouldn't claim that my art allowed Jenner and Ogden Schools to merge more seamlessly. I would say that hanging over two hundred photographs in the school's hallways that honored and celebrated the students allowed them all to see themselves as the community they were becoming.

RM: Do you find that your aesthetic alters as current events continually change? What adjustments did you have to make to your artistic processes as you experienced the global pandemic and viewed societal inequities firsthand?

MAP: My aesthetic is continually informed a growing awareness of systemic racial and gendered inequities and a corresponding recognition of my own privilege as a white woman. These are deep and subtle changes, not things I could point to specifically in my pictures.

The pandemic shut down my work when the schools closed in March 2020 but that September, I returned to photograph cross-country practices and meets— anything that school related that happened in the open air. I didn't go back inside the schools until I was vaccinated.

RM: What do you hope audiences gain when they view your art? How do you ensure that your message gets across in your compositions, and how do you deal with outside opinions that challenge your own?

MAP: I hope my photographs show audiences the beauty and compassion of young people in Chicago's public schools, students who are often overlooked or not seen. I hope audiences will pay attention to the astonishing range of emerging identities amid friendships and

INTERVIEW CONTINUED

school rituals that have continued despite our current challenges. My hope is that all of the students I photographed feel truly seen.

I find the nature of art and art making to be intuitive, mysterious, and complex. The dynamic of each encounter between myself and those I photograph is unique and layered. Rather than any message, the kinds of things going through my head when I'm photographing are practical— where's the light, are her feet in the frame, is there a tree sprouting out of the subject's head? Every small decision about camera angle, gesture and expression changes the image. I discover the meaning only later when I have time to consider the picture.

I try to seriously consider and learn from opinions that challenge my own. It's not an instantaneous process!



THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community. The DEPS Artist Profile Series and graphic design is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Rachel Manlubatan. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at: colum.edu/deps

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Glass Curtain Gallery: 1104 S Wabash Ave, First Floor, Chicago, IL 60605

Gallery Hours: Monday–Friday 9 a.m.–5 p.m.