



# Jackie Nickerson

## Reflecting on a World of Global, Industrialized Production and Consumption

Jackie Nickerson began photographing Zimbabwean farm workers in 1996 as a way to change the perception that those who work in African agriculture are disempowered, unmodern people. The resulting series, *Farm*, focused on the unique and beautiful clothing the workers made for themselves, and by doing so, highlighted the worker's identity, individuality, and ultimately their modernism. This was published by Jonathan Cape in September 2002. (German edition, 'Leben Mit Der Erde', published by Frederking and Thaler, 2002; French edition, 'Une Autre Afrique', published by Flammarion, 2002.

For her most recent series, *Field Test*, published by Kerber Verlag, October 2020, Nickerson questions the life-style choices of the people of this world and reflects a contemporary reality in which the autonomous human subject is a compromised, problematic entity. Nickerson's photo sculptures dismantle and reconstruct, protect and destroy the individual human being. *Field Test* is a further elaboration on Nickerson's long-term interest in how people inhabit, experience, and impact the world around them, and how their circumstances shape and define their lives.

In the series *Terrain*, Nickerson turned her attention to the roles in which workers play in the production and commodification of agricultural goods. *Terrain* focuses on the synergy between cultivation, workers, and the environment, employing a reduced artistic language to draw attention to important debates around crop specialization, subsistence farming and food security.

Nickerson is an American-born British artist who lives and works between London and rural Ireland. Her work is held in many important private and public collections and has been exhibited in venues which include the Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Museum of Modern Art, Salzburg; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels; National Portrait Gallery, London; Mudam Musee d'Art Moderne, Luxembourg; Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas; Sunderland Museum, UK; Harn Museum, Gainesville; Vatican Museums, Rome; Benaki Museum, Athens Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin.

She is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.

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All images © Jackie Nickerson, from the series *Field Test*, published by Kerber Verlag in 2020. Courtesy of the artist and the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

*“My process of creating photo sculptures is informed by exploring the relationship that we have with our natural environment. I think about content and which elements I want to use. The idea always starts with the components of the materials themselves. What is the intrinsic nature of it? What is it used for? How is it constructed? How does the nature and function of it relate to the people that use it? Then it is a process of seeing how it can be applied to a person and how that construction changes how we see both the material and the person underneath. So in effect, a new identity is made.” - Jackie Nickerson 2020*

Writing in the mid-1930s about what sparks a poem, Elizabeth Bishop suggested that one factor is “the feeling that the contemporary language is not equivalent to the contemporary fact; there is something out of proportion between them, and what is being said in words is not at all what is being said in ‘things.’” The photographs we see in Jackie Nickerson’s *Field Test*, and the perplexing entities they often feature, emerge from just such a sense of disproportion, or perhaps disjuncture. Except that in this case, for words read images. The artist is spurred to devise a visual language equivalent to a set of facts that eludes conventional representational strategies. There is a materiality to her images, an integral sculptural component, just as Thomas Demand’s photographs feature an apparently familiar reality that is actually, in each case,

a three-dimensional paper construction. Nickerson’s images too, convey a reality that is in the process of reconstruction.

Collectively, it is clear that her photographs occupy and reflect a world of global, industrialized production and consumption. They respond to the fact that technology is reshaping the world and the people who inhabit it, in subtle and less subtle ways. Mention the impact of technology, and images of automation, of slick robotic production lines, and algorithmic marketing tools come to mind. But of course, technology is disruptive across the board, favouring the rich at one extreme and engendering the gig economy, drawing in armies of menial workers, who struggle to survive, at the other. Hi-tech merges with and generates lo-tech, co-opting humans at every turn.

There are, mostly, single individuals in the photographs, which could be described as portraits of a kind. But we can never quite pin down the identity of the subjects who, to put it mildly, remain elusive. Perhaps they are not even subjects in the sense we usually think of subjects. Sometimes it is almost as if they are metamorphosing, and have been caught at a stage of transformation, as they are remade by the workings of the world around them, scrambling to adapt with whatever is to hand. In their indeterminacy, their fraught illegibility, they are icons of anxiety, shielded and isolated.



Right page: Shark, 2019  
Following spread, left page: Chimera I, 2019  
Following spread, right page: Chimera II, 2019









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Visibility is invariably scrambled or thwarted. Intervening layers, veils, screens, sheets, frames, boxes, distort or displace pictorial convention. Any hint of distinctive personality, for example, or of coherent identity, is wrapped, buffered, packaged, concealed, suppressed. The figures are both startlingly visible and yet, in many respects, invisible. Everyone, we know, has a distinct personality. Clothing and many other aspects of appearance can express personality and fix identity in terms of gender, age, social status, cultural affiliations, and role – one’s role often being signalled by a uniform, formal or casual.

In Nickerson’s images, however, a mass of accoutrements and devices shield and neutralize standard signifiers of gender, race, personality, and more. The materials draped, bound, taped, and knotted, serving as improvised barriers and coverings, are generic, anonymous, and ubiquitous. They are mostly plastic in one form or another.

If these are modes of disguise, they are not necessarily elective. Often the gear worn appears protective, against what it is not clear: risk of infection, of contamination? There is certainly an urgent, improvisatory quality, an underlying air of crisis, to the way materials are brusquely enlisted and patched together.

Protection, in the form of a barrier, works both ways. Protect the wearer or protect what the wearer is in contact with. Equally, visibility can be a strength or a weakness; see and not be seen. One might be visible, say, for reasons of surveillance, monitoring, and management. Beyond that, for those doing the monitoring, it can be better that you are forgotten if, for example, you are on the labour rather than the customer side of the economic equation. No one wants to know too much about you. Nickerson addressed exactly this state of affairs, the world of remote, invisible labour, serving distant, on-demand markets, in her project and book *Terrain*.

Operating at a level far deeper than overt surveillance, a battery of communications, entertainment, and commercial technologies means that digital invisibility is much more difficult to achieve and is even aggressively discouraged. It takes a lot of energy and ingenuity to become and remain digitally invisible. People do attempt it. One must discard a great deal of technology, and crucial aspects of the data that validate your official, bureaucratic identity. There are people who have set about devising DIY clothing and coverings that deflect surveillance devices, aiming for a kind of digital camouflage.

While it is just over a century since the first mass-produced plastic, Bakelite, was created, plastics have quickly become virtually infinite in form and function. From small, hard utilitarian objects to vast, flexible sheets, plastics are universal and dispensable, but stubbornly durable. Magically protean, they collectively, largely invisibly, make up a kind of polymer grid that enfolds and may well choke the planet. The presence of waste plastics extends from the incalculable dispersion of micro-beads to vast cluttered expanses of fragmentary debris, floating islands, and archipelagos. But we remain enslaved to the sheer versatility of plastics; they have become indispensable.

There is another kind of grid, one formed by digital technologies, that permeates and, it is no exaggeration to say, shapes our lives. In this boundless Technopolis, citizens are increasingly defined by their role as consumers, flattered with the illusion of

choice and themselves traded as exploitable commodities by data harvesters. The cultural theorist Fredric Jameson characterized rampant commodification - when areas of life previously within the sphere of the personal are monetized - as symptomatic of late capitalism. When seduced by the technologies of communication, individuals become hapless marketers, consumers who are themselves traded.

How is it that the enhanced connectivity enabled by digital technologies might serve to push people apart? The technology that seemed to promise so much in its early days has, in the hands of monopolistic tech giants, delivered something else again. Devices funnel and reinforce preferences and opinion, muffling debate, encouraging self-absorption and divisiveness, diminishing critical thought, while yet maintaining the illusions of agency and community. To be sure, the consumer might enjoy some material advantages, but within unsuspected and distorting constraints.

These *Field Test* images arrive, and they are slightly disturbing, as though they reach us from an uneasy future that is already forming around us: this is where we are headed. We may not quite recognize this future becoming present, but a lot about it is curiously familiar and relatable. It is as though these images speak a language we are already learning to follow, even though we are not, as yet, fluent speakers.

Jackie Nickerson's new series *Field Test* is on view at the Jack Shainman Gallery, NYC (25th February - 3 April 2021).









Previous spread, left page: Virus II, 2019  
Previous spread, right page: Suit I, 2019  
Left page: Seed Tray, 2019  
Above, top left: Blue, 2019  
Above, bottom left: Pink Head, 2019  
Above, top right: Blue-Green, 2019  
Above, bottom right: Cloud, 2019