

# (Mis)perceptions

Deborah Wing-Sproul  
wants us to question  
everything

01



**above** *Anonymous Biography* is an ongoing photo project that addresses our assumptions about people and cultures based on appearance and context. "I'm interested in framing what a person sees in order to invite questions about what it is we think we know or understand," says Deborah.



“Don’t presume you know who I am based on the cues I’m giving you.”

In her latest work, *Anonymous Biography*, Deborah Wing-Sproul tackles the subject of judgment and perception. The series of large-format photographs, which was recently exhibited at Kittery’s Buoy Gallery, shows the artist from behind, her curvaceous body clad in long skirts and dresses, draped awkwardly over a footstool, her face hidden, her straight blond hair skimming the floor as it hangs loosely from her lowered head.

“We think we know so much just based on appearances,” she says, “but in these photos you don’t really know if I’m male or female. You might say, ‘Well, that’s a woman’s hips and buttocks.’ But maybe I’ve got padding there. Maybe I’m wearing a wig. Yes, you can safely say that I’m white. But am I young? Am I old? Am I depressed? Am I full of lust?”

In contrast to the persona depicted in *Anonymous Biography*, Deborah, 62, is slight of build with close-cropped gray hair, dresses in loose, simply styled neutrals, and has an unassuming, androgynous look. “I’ve been presumed to be a privileged white woman, a cancer survivor, a Buddhist nun, and a Nazi,” she says from her Portland studio, “all because of my hair.”

“There’s so much judgment in our culture, and it’s really ugly. It’s something people need to be reminded of.”

Deborah’s workspace is tiny—a table is hinged to the wall to allow her to move around—and packed with thrift-store finds: ottomans and poufs, afghans and blankets used in *Anonymous Biography*.

“This is primarily a photo studio for me,” says Deborah, “and it’s a challenge. But I enjoy limitations.”

Limitations lie at the heart of Deborah’s multidisciplinary oeuvre, which utilizes her body as a canvas to navigate the territory between the individual and the cultural. Initially trained as a dancer, she moved from Upstate New York to study with choreographer Merce Cunningham in New York City. After a decade of serious practice, however, she began to pursue other artistic disciplines. “I loved technique and class, but I wasn’t sure it was what I was supposed to be doing anymore,” she says. She started designing costumes for other choreographers and took classes at the School of Visual Arts, where she was especially drawn to printmaking and video.

In 1995, Deborah traveled to India to research and film block printmaking and indigo production. “I came back with some nice footage,” she says, “but I didn’t do anything with it for years.” When she finally looked at it again, she realized that the film was less about indigo and more about movement, “feeling a person’s pain when they’re doing something all day long.”

Over the following decade, Deborah made several videos and short films studying repetitive motion and worked as an assistant to sculptor Martin Puryear in the Hudson Valley. She also continued printmaking, returning to school at SUNY New Paltz in 2004 for an MFA when she was 47.

While on a trip to the Maine coast that same year, the ever-curious Deborah became fascinated by an unusually large kelp bloom. “I wanted to find out whether what I was seeing was normal,” she says. She dove into research, studying seaweed as a vehicle for examining our own cultural parameters. “Seaweed doesn’t observe human established boundaries, and that is its strength, its freedom.” She soon moved to Maine, commuting to New Paltz for her final semester.

What began as an MFA thesis project grew into something far larger. Currently in its second decade, *Tidal Culture* has so far taken Deborah to Newfoundland, Ice-

land, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Outer Hebrides, with each site documented through photographs, objects formed from seaweed, and one-hour videos of the artist facing the ocean. “I’ve chosen a spot as the epicenter of the North Atlantic,” says Deborah, who plans to circumnavigate the world’s oceans for the project. “I find a location, aim my body towards that epicenter, and sit for an hour. I question what I think, what I can see, what I understand, what I don’t understand.”

Like *Anonymous Biography*, *Tidal Culture* examines human perception and judgment. “In *Anonymous Biography*, I’m asking you not to presume that you know who I am,” says Wing-Sproul. “In *Tidal Culture*, I’m opening to the world and not presuming that I know what it is. I’m trying to create a self-consciousness with these works. Your self-consciousness, my self-consciousness. That’s what is required to grow.”

While in Greenland in 2009, Deborah found herself confronting a dramatically different set of limitations. On the second day of her trip, while scouting a location site with her assistant, she lost her footing and fell down the slope of a fjord, breaking several ribs and severely injuring her leg. “The ground slipped out

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from under me,” she says. “I was in the hospital for four nights.” She recalls lying there, thinking, “What can I do if I can’t

work? What if I can’t move? What are the possibilities?”

Less than 24 hours after being released from the hospital, she resumed her journey. “I had one full day before heading to Iceland for my next video,” she says. “We were able to get a last-minute boat ride to the site and were left at shore’s edge. We had to hike and carry equipment. We only had time for one take before meeting back up with the boat. I sat still on a rock, surrounded by ice and water; I felt like I was slipping. It was the most painful hour of my life.”

From that accident emerged another project, *Durational Devices*, a series of physically demanding performance pieces that utilize her background in both dance and printmaking. In each of the work’s five sections, a different drawing tool is used with a unique wheeled aluminum platform that constrains movement and vision and can be propelled only by the

artist’s toes. The resulting print is a record of her performance.

“It’s about a kind of imprisonment of the body, about not having a certain degree of control,” says Deborah. “I can let go of that control for a period of time and become something else, share someone else’s experience. But the difference between true suffering and a performance is that I know it’s going to end.”

Deborah has a deeply personal reason for wanting to share this type of physical suffering. “My sister had early-onset schizophrenia,” she says. “She was never in control of her body. She would wander the cornfields at night, put her hand through a glass window, speak in tongues. She needed 24-hour supervision.

“I’m acutely aware of how people perceive other people, and particularly those who are close to us,” she adds, “and

viscerally feel their pain. I felt my sister’s pain, her wanting not to be sick.” She pauses for a moment, eyes moistening. “Even though she died in ’94, I feel like I’m still protecting her from people’s judgment.”

By shining a light on the misperceptions that often separate us, Deborah hopes to appeal to the empathy that lies within us. “My wish is to connect,” she says. “That’s why it’s important for me to use my body. I have a body, you have a body. If you see somebody in pain, you feel something. If you see somebody about to fall, you try to catch them. So if you see my body in a situation, you, in your own body, try to understand it or feel it. And if we haven’t compartmentalized our mind to death and are still in touch with our gut, then we’re in touch with our humanity.”

below In *Tidal Culture*, as in many of her works, Deborah keeps her face hidden from view. “It’s not that I’m removing myself,” she says, “but I’m trying to create something that’s mappable for most people. So I’m flattening myself to a surface, and then the viewer is flattening themselves onto me.”







*above* In *Durational Devices I–V*, Deborah uses her body as a vehicle to reflect different states of being—young, old, limited, or ill; lonely or depressed; contained, controlled, or marginalized—and how we confront resistance with and through the body.

## FEATURED WORKS

- 01** *Anonymous Biography: Over, 6*, 2015, giclée on Somerset, 45" x 30"
- 02** *Tidal Culture Part III: Latitude 00.000N / Longitude 00.000W* (Greenland), 2009, video still (single channel video, 1 hour)
- 03** *Durational Devices: I*, June 29, 2018, graphite on painted concrete 40' drawing on 44' white path; two-hour performance at the Marble Block building, Biddeford, Maine