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Artist Gillian Wearing's best shot

'This is me as my brother. The body suit weighed a ton. I couldn't breathe'

Interview by **Leo Benedictus**
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'It took three or four months to prepare' ... A self-portrait of Gillian Wearing as her brother (detail). Photograph: Gillian Wearing

There's an art to making things look real. This is a self-portrait of me as my brother, getting ready to go out to a club. It's a recreation of a snapshot that my mum took of him in about 1990. I'm wearing a silicone body suit, a mask and a wig.

There's a lot of detail in there – the stained tracksuit bottoms, the clothes on the bed, the glass of beer on the side. I am quite a perfectionist, so it took three or four months in 2003 to prepare. Even the pants had to be perfect.

I used a better camera than my mum had, but because she still had the original, I could study the way the flash fell away from the ceiling. Luckily, it's the same house, and it hadn't been refurbished, so I didn't have to recreate that. Wearing the body suit, however, was difficult. My brother is not that much taller than me but he is a lot broader, and the suit weighed a ton. It was sculpted in that fixed position, so I couldn't move. The mouth of the mask was closed, so I was breathing through the nostrils. I remember thinking I could only last about 10 minutes, even though I had to make it look like a natural hair-brushing session.

I got a photographer friend to take the pictures, while I directed him by mumbling or writing things down. Once you take silicone off, it stretches; I probably wouldn't have been able to reshoot without having another cast made. Trying to recreate a snap that originally took a few seconds required about 13 rolls of film and five or six hours.

My brother didn't make any comment before I made the picture, but when he saw it he

really liked it. And his friends thought it was quite cool.

Curriculum vitae

Born: Birmingham, 1963.

Studied: Art at Goldsmiths; self-taught in photography.

Inspirations: Diane Arbus and August Sander.

High point: "My breakthrough works, Signs That Say, when I approached people and they wrote thoughts down on a piece of paper."

Low point: "I had to have my Diane Arbus mask made twice because it didn't work out the first time."

Pet hate: "Stylised black-and-white photographs. When people think of quality, they always think of that."

Dream subject: "I would like to time-travel a few decades back and take the kind of snapshots that weren't taken then, because people were more formal."

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