

EYEMAZING



Jesper Petersson

Somebody or Nobody?

Everything has two sides, including your face. A straight side and an oblique side. A broad and narrow. A nice side and an ugly side. Look in the mirror, what do you look like?

2008, a Swedish photographer was looking at a freshly taken image of a face, photographed from the front. He plays with the idea to make it perfectly symmetrical. But which side of the face is worth double? What is beautiful? It ends up with him making two pictures, one of the right side and one of the left facial side. The result is two completely different pictures of the same person. The photographer gazes at himself in the mirror and sees what he has always known, that his nose is a bit crooked. He then made two images of himself. Since 2008, he has photographed hundreds of faces. The photographer's name is Jesper Petersson.

"There are few, perhaps even no one, who is completely symmetrical in the body and face. Yet we strive for complete perfection. Who knows, in a hundred years from now we may no longer bear children, but order them as designed babies. As a photographer, I appreciate uniqueness. That is beauty. My own crooked nose makes me somebody. I am Jesper," he says.

So who is Jesper Petersson? Petersson, born in 1979 in Halmstad, a small town in Sweden, is an internationally known Swedish photographer. It all started back in 1989 when he got a camera as a gift. He studied photography and explored it intensely. His first photography project resulted in a photo book



called *Pals* in 1999. Since then, he has produced books, projects and participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions. Petersson is currently working with several of Sweden's most prestigious magazines, advertising agencies and other clients. His pictures are in great demand both in Sweden and other part of the world. His photography has found collectors in Sweden as well as other countries.

Somebody or Nobody? is Petersson's most recent project—a visual study of human symmetry or asymmetry. Originally a superficial beauty experiment, over time the project has become increasingly profound and challenging. By showing just the two symmetrical images and omitting the original image, Petersson questions if you really can achieve perfection. His conclusion is that the uneven makes us special.

As an addition to the opening of the *Somebody or Nobody?* exhibition in Stockholm, Petersson installed a photo station so visitors could photograph themselves. The lighting and the umbrella served as a natural barrier for some privacy. The camera was attached at eye level on top of a screen and visitors could see themselves and experiment freely. The final pictures were projected after a twenty-second delay on a wall above the DJ booth in the room where the guests mingled, and then they ended up on the Web.

After testing Petersson's photo booth during the opening night of the exhibition in Stockholm, I now know that I have a face with one narrow side and one broad side. But not which one of them I prefer. The two pictures are me and at the same time they are not me. And that is the thrill of the double por-



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traits—you have to imagine the “real person” behind or between them.

Since time immemorial, we have chosen to reproduce images of us that do not necessarily reflect reality. Some argue that nature seeks symmetry. Some argue uniformity is comfortable and resting for the eye. But when it comes to beauty, does it mean that a symmetrical face is more beautiful than a skewed one? For example the Egyptian queen Nefertiti is an iconic symbol of beauty. The face is completely symmetrical. No one can know for sure if she really looked like that. Nefertiti reflects the aesthetic ideals of her time and lets us interpret our own. It is no coincidence that the discovery of her was so widely reported because she represented our cultures definition of beauty.

Appearance is important when selecting a partner. According to studies we tend to prefer faces that are symmetrical over asymmetrical. It is believed that our reaction is based upon the hunt for a partner that can provide a good offspring. Asymmetry could be a sign of defective genes and signal illness and that we have been affected by stress from the surrounding environment during development. Symmetrical people would, if the assumption is correct, manage external forces. It is therefore outside the individual's power to do something about this. Neither hard work-outs or extreme diets can do something about the relations between the two facial halves.

But it's not enough to match the right half with the left half. The proportions of facial features must also be there. Researchers have developed mathematical

formulas to figure out how a face that we see as attractive looks. Many celebrities who are perceived as beautiful fit the template.

And there are more ideas about how to measure beauty. Wabi-sabi is a Japanese theory based on aesthetics that does not deal with asymmetry as an offset, but as a contrast between different parts of the face. Other terms are: echoism (the similarity of one or more facial features, particularly the eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth); harmonism (a similarity in facial proportion, usually involving the wing features and the distance between them); prima copulism (an attraction to another person based on them having similar features to someone with whom you form a strong interpersonal bond with at an early age, usually a mother or father).

A consolation for people with very skewed faces is the fact that after even only a small amount of alcohol we think faces are prettier and become less picky in our choice of partners. So it appears we like a certain amount of symmetry but not too much. A completely symmetrical face is simply not natural.

The exhibition *Somebody or Nobody?* is now touring galleries in Sweden and is currently displayed in Stockholm.

TEXT BY CAROLINE HEDLUND

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