

Preface



This book offers one of the most fundamental of all human sentiments – “I love you” – handwritten by 40 individuals in languages from around the world. Juxtaposing traditional scripts with bright, contemporary colors, the compilation conveys both newness and timelessness, cultural specificity and universal feeling. It thus represents the latest and most explicit phase of an ongoing cultural investigation by the performance artist and photographer Pierre Sernet.

Born and raised in France, resident in New York since 1973, this widely traveled entrepreneur has recently returned to his own first love and vocation, visual-arts practice. In 2002, he began to exhibit several complementary groups of large-scale, color images probing the nature of personal connections across nationalities, generations, ethnicities and historical eras.

“One”

The pictures in the tellingly titled series “One” show selected guests, drawn from a broad variety of backgrounds, sharing a bowl of tea with the kimono-clad artist. Sernet, a longtime student of the formal Japanese tea ceremony at the Urasenke School in New York, has been trained to perform the ritual in a traditional setting, where every accoutrement (flower, vase, hanging scroll, ladle, etc.) and every gesture (bowing, whisking, proffering the bowl, etc.) is freighted with prescribed meaning.

For the "One" shots, however, he has replaced the conventional teahouse with a portable cube of the same size outlined in collapsible wood and metal tubing. Carrying this "conceptual space" to seemingly unlikely sites around the world – a favela in Rio, Times Square in New York, the Thar desert in India, a Pachinko parlor in Osaka – the artist creates in each locale a mini-refuge, allowing him to engage in private contemplation and in friendly encounters with curious strangers.

Each person invited to participate in the venerable Japanese rite is free, in effect, to fill Sernet's empty cube with his or her own mental reactions and constructs. The peacefulness that invariably ensues strongly suggests that, under the right circumstances, even apparently incompatible worlds and philosophies can be productively brought together. When hospitality is properly exercised, the higher values of humankind, unknowingly shared, emerge through an artful civility.

"Face"

The extreme close-ups in Sernet's "Face" series depict the visages of statues from numerous cultures and historical periods. Each image, cropped to accentuate the male figure's eyes, is divested of secondary social trappings and ornamentation. Each focuses instead on the "windows of the soul" and those basic physiological elements of facial structure that transcend racial or ethnic characteristics. Adult brow, nose, lips, and eyes are seen to compose a nearly constant mathematical relationship across space and time.

The result is a kind of composite portrait of Man, a record of the surprising uniformity of our representations of our innermost selves. Why, we are induced to ask, is there such similarity in the gaze of these icons – ranging from Assyrian lords to George Washington, from Greek champions to Eastern sages – that widely diverse groups have chosen to create and preserve? Are we not seeing our true communality embodied in stone?

The look that these statue heads, in turn, direct toward us can trigger a critical self-examination. Are we worthy of their company? Do we express our most essential being as well as they? Their regard is unfaltering, a salutary but relentless reminder of our common lot. To live, no matter how blithely, in the present is also to submit to the scrutiny of our fellows and the past.



Love

The challenge to be our best is probably nowhere more urgently felt than in the emotion that the world's many languages label "love". Part spontaneous outburst, part verbal contract, the statement "I love you" is at once utterly simple and immensely consequential. It can designate a notion as naïve as the puppy love between schoolmates or as philosophically complex as the core doctrine of ethics or the foundation of a major religion. By implying ultimate esteem for another, it simultaneously demands the very most of ourselves-no matter whether it is addressed to an erotic partner, a spouse, a friend, a family member, a pet, or even a stranger.

The linguistic, graphic, and chromatic variety in the volume at hand is a metaphor for the myriad elaborations of one universal and unchanging psychological fact. Human beings need to deeply connect. For Sernet, the essential truth about "I love you" is this: people around the world may say it differently based on their cultural diversity, but they are profoundly alike in their sharing of that elemental feeling. Nothing else they profess can bring them more completely together.

Richard Vine

