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Photographing Ikea, Some Assembly Required

By Rena Silverman Mar. 30, 2016 [Comment](#)

This week Lens is featuring photographers from around the world who have been chosen to attend the fourth annual New York portfolio review.

Even if you show up at Ikea with a plan — whether it's to find matching side tables or a better bathroom rug — it's only a matter of minutes before the aisles suck you in. As you pass under the waffled lights, past the modular shelves, the same chair in four colors, the patterned throws and checkered pillowcases, it's easy to lose yourself to the hypnotic, repetition of products everywhere. While some view the experience as overwhelming, others see it as practical or mundane. But Margeaux Walter sees it as a work of art.

In her series “Sign Language,” she re-enacts the performance of consumers as they lose their identities to surrounding Ikea products. These consumers, whom she portrays in her own staged photographs, blend into the patterns of rugs, furniture or flooring, all of which she purchases from the store.

“I chose Ikea because it is a huge furnishing company that most people are familiar with,” she said. “The furniture is recognizable across many countries, races, classes of people, and it is a representation of consumer culture.”

The project started as a thesis to her M.F.A. program at Hunter College, from which she graduated in 2014. After making a three-minute video — a horror spoof using Ikea furniture with a heart pillow as the main character — she was inspired to create a rough sketch of a gray, brown, tan and black patterned rug. She placed a figure with a laptop on a gray couch across

from another figure in a chair near a table. On the table was a pitcher of orange juice and a black notebook. The tan socks of one figure, the gray shoes of the other and the black notebook on the table all blended into the patterned rug. That sketch was the basis for “Cocoon,” which she shot later, using herself as the two models.

“My initial concept was to create an image where the characters would completely blend into the domestic space furnished by Ikea, giving more of an identity to the furniture than the figures,” Ms. Walter said.

She builds all of the sets in her studio herself and mounts her digitally backed Hasselblad on a long tripod so that she can use the camera to photograph directly overhead. She usually takes pictures in sections and tiles the results together to get maximum resolution.

“The printed images are very large, up to 6 by 9 feet, allowing the viewer to see various levels of abstraction and details as they move towards the image,” she said.

“Static” shows two women — both played by Ms. Walter — in black-and-white striped outfits standing on a rug of the same pattern. A purse, also striped, blends into the bottom right of the rug. Loose objects surround the rug on what appears to be a wooden floor.

Her work echoes the performance art and conceptual photography of the 1980s and early 1990s, a time when such artists as Cindy Sherman, Glenn Ligon and Catherine Opie composed images that represented political issues of race, sexual identity or gender. The difference between her work and that of these artists, Ms. Walter said, is that while many performance and conceptual artists reinvent characters and individual personalities, she is striving for the opposite. “My characters are more stand-ins for generic people,” she said. “I’m never replicating them as personalities.”

Ms. Walter is not the first artist to use Ikea to sort out her ideas. In his 2007 video “**Stealing Beauty**,” the Israeli artist Guy Ben-Ner installed himself, his wife and children in Ikea showrooms all over the world and filmed himself and his family in semi-scripted dramas until staff members intervened.

But unlike Mr. Ben-Ner’s work, Ms. Walter’s performance mimics the style of her images, which require exhaustive measures to set up each photo. This is reflected by the patterns that run through the narrative of her final prints.

“‘Sign Language’ is more about being anonymous and disappearing,” she said. “I don’t really

feel that human when I'm performing. I have to line up everything exactly with the patterns. It's a very robotic feeling, which is how the images look."

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In Bloom.

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Credit

Margeaux Walter

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