I am the Locus (#1-5)

Primary Maker
Adrian Piper

Date
1975

Medium
Oil crayon drawings on photographs

Dimensions
Sheet (Each): 8 × 10 in. (20.3 × 25.4 cm) Matted: 14 × 18 in. (35.6 × 45.7 cm)

Credit Line
Purchase, Gift of Carl Rungius, by exchange

Object number
2001.126a-e

Type
Photographs

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The series of five hand-worked photographs that comprise "I am the Locus" conveys Piper performing a consciousness of otherness on a walk through Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An American-born artist of mixed racial background, Piper has articulated questions about the politics of racial identity in many ways throughout her work as an artist and philosopher. In 1973, Piper created an alter ego, the Mythic Being, who became the basis of a pioneering series of performances and photo-based works. For this 1975 Mythic Being performance, she sported large sunglasses, an Afro wig and mustache—chosen to blend in with the mid-seventies urban environment, and dressed in men's clothing. This simple costume enabled her to appear inconspicuously as a black man to an unknowing public. In these photographs we can perceive the indifference of the crowd in Harvard Square to Piper's performance: people brush shoulders with her, or look in the opposite direction. Her subsequent intervention into the photographs with oil crayon and text helps to dramatize the scenes, and to express the tension between the artist's inner experience and the invisibility of her Mythic Being performance to its live audience. Drawing directly on the photographic prints prevents the images from being seen as straightforward documentation of a performative event. Instead, by the final sequential image, most of the other people and surroundings have been obliterated by drawing, which parallels the text's shift...
from philosophical meditation ("I am the locus...") to existential shove ("Get out of my way..."). Piper intended for these photographs to be made into posters; she did not initially intend for these preparatory images to be treated as works of art unto themselves.