

THE LOOK 2020

Intimacy in Isolation

It can be unsettling to be seen. Now I have to see myself.

Photographs by Texas Isaiah Text by Akwaeke Emezi

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Turay Turay and Cat Jones, in a sunbeam. Texas Isaiah for The New York Times

I have been alone for months.

My reflection shows a body I'm still unfamiliar with — a shaved head, keloids slashing across my chest, a soft belly with a pale spill of hypopigmentation next to my navel.



Cat Jones and Turay Turay, intertwined. Texas Isaiah for The New York Times

It's been two years since I slept with anyone, a stranger in London whose name I've forgotten. I don't want to be touched right now. It feels too invasive, hands on my skin, a hungry mouth.

In the echo of isolation, I'm writing letters to my friends, confessing how I'm not sure I've ever been attracted to anyone — not anyone real, not when the *idea* of them is what I want to be close to, what I want to touch. When you make a person unreal, are they still alive?



Kendra Norwood and Rei Essex-Simmons, in an embrace. Texas Isaiah for The New York Times



Texas Isaiah for The New York Times



Johnathan Gary and Trey Crooks, in repose. Texas Isaiah for The New York Times

Before the pandemic, I left a lover who used to fantasize about my corpse. It suited me back then, back when I wanted to be dead, a weight of heavy flesh gone cold, but still loved by someone who would take the time to arrange my limbs, angle my jaw, my stone of a head. I wish I could say I wanted him alive, but the closest thing to truth is that I wanted him animated, but not real.



Tyler Shaun Evains and Juju, in the hedges. Texas Isaiah for The New York Times

I wonder how far the distance is between making a person an object and making an object a person, the way station where someone can be both real and unreal at the same time. The other day, I researched male sex dolls, with their still eyes and soft mouths, their cold and plausible skin. I don't want to keep a corpse in my house, but I'd take a one-night stand with something that was sculpted to pass as an inanimate human. It makes little difference in the end, whether that body is flesh or silicone. Either way, I'd be alone.



Cat Jones and Turay Turay, in conversation. Texas Isaiah for The New York Times



Texas Isaiah for The New York Times



Joi Purvy and Jaz Joyner, in a squeeze. Texas Isaiah for The New York Times

If I lie naked in a bed with someone else, touching their body and seeing only the fantasy of them that I've created, are they even there? What if it's just me and my imagination, something I created on the scaffold of their flesh? What if I've just turned them into a proxy of myself?

Maybe they're doing the same thing to me, making me a mirror. Maybe that's the unspoken contract: to be blank spaces for each other, holding the maps of desire that are projected on our skins, fingers lacing electric as they press against spines and shoulder blades. I often imagine the aesthetic of our bodies in proximity — this dark warm skin, thick black hair, white teeth breaking apart in pleasure.

Maybe we are alone together and that is a tender choice, to avert our gaze, to allow each other some privacy in the midst of such terrible intimacy. It can be unsettling to be seen. Maybe we are two dead things tangled up like chains, maybe we resurrect when we are apart.



V. Rene Miranda and Sir Lex Kennedy, out of shadow. Texas Isaiah for The New York Times

The other night, I was hallucinating wind chimes in my pulse, my blood singing to me from inside my head, pushing along, and I thought: How much closer could anyone get to me? My heartbeat was surging through my lower lip, pressed smudged and sleepy against the moss green linen of my bedsheet, and I was so deliciously alone, soft and untouched. Another pulse would have spoiled it.

I have never spent this much time with myself; to become my own favorite companion is a new and strange thing for me. I was always looking for someone else, and now I'm terrified of finding them. Perhaps they don't exist outside of my imagination; I've never met a lover who could make all their own stories come true.



Ellene V. Miles and Kirea Smith, in each other's presence. Texas Isaiah for The New York Times



Texas Isaiah for The New York Times

I gave up on having a self and accepted that I've been unreal this whole time, a story even when I'm alone.

After all, the worlds I make are better than the world we have. In my realities, we are transcendent and never cruel. There's no violence, only swaths of tenderness. We touch each other as if we were lost and then brought back to life; we face fear like we're already dead.

I see unknown lovers in my dreams, they dance with their bodies close to mine and kiss me on airplanes cutting through a night sky. Maybe after the isolation ends, one of them will make themselves real enough to find me, and the idea of them will be the same as the flesh, which means they are like me, strong enough to live as a story and have it stay true. I would, I think, like to be touched then.



Kendra Norwood and Rei Essex-Simmons, in communion. Texas Isaiah for The New York Times

Texas Isaiah is a visual narrator based in Los Angeles, Oakland, Calif., and New York. Akwaeke Emezi is the author of the novels “The Death of Vivek Oji” and “Freshwater.”

The Look is a column that examines identity through a visual-first lens. This year, the column is focused on the relationship between American culture and politics in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election, produced by Eve Lyons and Tanner Curtis.

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