



# THE MASKED PROJECT

100 Portraits | Ashley Murphy



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# ARTIST STATEMENT

As a photographer, I have always been fascinated with the eyes. With more people covering their faces during the global pandemic of COVID-19, we are offered a unique opportunity to focus on the eyes and the individuality of each person.

This is not a series promoting whether or not these are safe coverings, or a series promoting going out in public. I traveled to homes, businesses, and public spaces, mostly near my home in Arkansas, to photograph each portrait with my 200mm lens. I texted on arrival and we met at a safe distance outside for a brief time.

Things I learned:

- The photographs are just part of this project. Talking, even briefly, with the subjects gave me insight to what others are thinking and doing during the pandemic, some of which I've shared in the accompanying text.
- People hunger for creativity and still yearn to express themselves during this time, even if it is just for a moment.
- Kids are still just kids. The weight of what is going on in the world is nothing compared to the innocence of genuine excitement from children seeing someone new after months of quarantine. The parents I've encountered have done an amazing job of teaching their children to maintain a safe distance while still laughing and having fun.
- While the virus's impact varies widely, the moments I looked through my lens and into the subjects' eyes made me feel as if we truly are all in this together, surviving uncertainty, enduring struggles, making adjustments to this "new normal," navigating fears, and embracing hope.

Many of my subjects have said this experience was exciting. A simple, quick photoshoot outside their home became something much more. It is a way to be a part of something bigger, a way to show the world who we are.

*The Masked Project* has been a creative outlet, a way to document this time, and a means not only to briefly interact with those who were ultimately distilled into these 100 images, but to really see them—to take time out of my day, pause, and see them. It has been an inspiring experience.

This is not about a virus.

This is about us.

Hair stylists like Ashley have been forced into unemployment as salons were ordered to shut down. It was clear that Ashley was taking the quarantine seriously. She remained at her apartment for approximately six weeks before venturing out. During that time, she turned to making art, and art sales helped keep her afloat while she struggled to obtain unemployment support.

ASHLEY  
SWAIN



For some, quarantine was not much of a change. As a landscape architect, Stacey continued to run his outdoor business. For this quick portrait, he took a break from planting in his garden. Just out of the frame are his dirt-covered hands. In the blurred background are pigs, rabbits, and his two children, running barefoot on their little farm oasis.

STACEY  
STAFFORD





Stokely was one of many children thrust into the quarantine chaos. With childcare unavailable, on this day he was hanging out at his dad's record shop. He always keeps his David Bowie and Andy Warhol dolls nearby. He was only beginning to grasp the new concept of distancing and clearly wanted to come closer to me for his usual fist-bumps.

STOKELY  
SHAEFFER



Crystal is a dynamically-talented creative, textile artist, and author who wears a mask she fashioned from leather, featuring her Mercer Textile Mercantile brand image. As the quarantine began, she was already staying at home, recovering from surgery. Weeks later, she feared reemerging in a mask.

Crystal said, “I didn’t want to cover my face and enter stores as a Black person. I didn’t want to face the real danger of being in places where I’ve been profiled and shopping in white neighborhoods for groceries where brows were raised behind masked faces.” More recently, protests against long-standing, systemic racial injustices and police brutality have led to difficult choices for many to attend or remain home amidst the COVID-19 risk. Crystal continued, “As a safety measure to protect myself and have a chance of seeing my nieces again, I worked on my resistance from home. My activism has included conversations, counsel to those in the streets, and poems penned for the movement. I have led marches and been in the streets, but at the moment, I am in a different place with my activism. Right now, I enjoy watching others organize and shine.”

Her activism honors the legacy of her father, the late attorney and civil rights activist Christopher C. Mercer, Jr. The third Black student to enroll at the University of Arkansas School of Law in Fayetteville, he passed the Arkansas Bar Examination with the highest score that year, and received his law license on May 17, 1954, the same day of the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. During the integration crisis at Little Rock Central High, he served as aide-de-camp to activist Daisy Bates and counselor to the Little Rock Nine, five of whom he drove to and from school during their first semester. For the Mercers, fighting for justice is generational.



Abbey spends most of her days behind the camera doing social media for numerous restaurants. We met outside one of those restaurants as she was brainstorming and helping reinvent the primary way restaurants do business during the shutdown by transitioning to curbside services and other offerings. She also helped boost social media presence in order to keep customers informed about these new services.

“I lost some clients due to having to close and some cut their services in half to save on cost. I gained a new client who shifted their business to start making masks in order to keep people employed,” she shared. Abbey’s income was dramatically impacted as was that of her partner, who also owns a restaurant.

ABB  
BEY  
ROL  
FFE



I first photographed eighteen-year-old “Quinn” a couple of years ago. I was saddened to learn early in the quarantine that she had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Approximately two months after her recovery, we met for this photograph.

“I felt like I was going to die,” she told me. In March of 2020, she was diagnosed with the virus after her father, an American Airlines pilot, was also diagnosed.

“I could hear her trying to breathe through the walls of the house,” her mother, who has an autoimmune disorder and was forced to stay away from her daughter, recalled. She compared the sound to the “death rattle,” describing the labored breathing that sometimes precedes death. After many days of severe abdominal pain, high fever, and difficulty breathing, Quinn began her road to recovery. She and her father were two of the lucky ones who were able to fight off the virus.

QUINCY  
EUBANKS





# DEIDRE VIGIL CORDOVA

For some, the stress of not being able to work and the lack of income has been balanced by the joys of spending time with their partners. For Deidre, quarantine hit the pause button on an otherwise fast-paced daily life. However, the joy of pause was pierced by fears for her son who works in an assisted living facility 30 miles away. After this photograph, I was able to sit in her yard for a little while and talk. It was my first “hangout” with someone, even though we remained ten feet apart.



Pivoting has become a buzz word for many businesses. For Phil, owner of Rock Town Distillery, the “pivot” came through transitioning the distillery to assist in combating the shortage of sanitizers and cleansers. Initially, he offered the free service of filling sanitizer bottles for people as they came into the retail area of his business. Then, he began bottling the sanitizer and also offering large pails of sanitizing solution for commercial use.

PHIL  
BRANDON



Many retail businesses not ordered to shut down have still been majorly affected. I met Jenanne at her upscale men's clothing store and photographed her as she stood in the doorway. The mask she chose was a head wrap typically only worn by males in Arab culture. She wore it with the strength and resolve that both she and her business would survive this.

“Traditionally, the Kufiya headdress is a Palestinian national symbol and worn by men,” Jenanne said. “As a female menswear designer, I often blur the gender lines with garments I create and break many fashion ‘rules’ because I believe expression of self is vital, especially in highly oppressive societies. Find your voice, even if it's without words.”

JENANNE  
FILAT



With the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) at many hospitals, some doctors and nurses were left to locate their own. Robert purchased online the personal mask and safety gear that he needed to continue working as an emergency room doctor. For him, safety is of great importance so that he does not bring the virus home to his wife and daughter.

Robert shared, “I have watched a viral pandemic unfold from the frontlines in my role as an emergency room physician. At first, I was proud of my fellow Arkansans. We were social distancing, wearing masks, and staying home. We were a *community*. But as the weeks wore on I saw a shift in attitudes, both toward the virus and myself. My name graces the signature line on multiple death certificates that list COVID-19 as the cause, yet I have been called a liar, a crisis actor, an agent of the liberal left, and George Soros. And those are the nicer monikers. And now, with the virus growing exponentially in my patient population, I watch my neighbors again, not with pride, but with shame and frustration. I do not revel in the suffering I see, no matter how self-inflicted. I feel the sorrow of loss at what might have been and discomfited at the reality that we have brought upon ourselves.”



