

# Jamie Maxtone-Graham goes That Little Distance

By andofotherthings · July 21, 2014

*Do you feel perverse? Why the props? Why do you appear in the photos? Why are people naked? The photo series 'That Little Distance' raises many questions for viewers. Jamie answers the questions the subjects themselves posed.*

What follows are the comments by several people who sat with me in front of my camera for a photographic project I made in 2013 called *That Little Distance*. Following each comment, I asked the people to pose a question(s) related to either the series generally or their image specifically. To understand the basis of the work and the questions that follow, I recommend that people look at the whole series first on my site **That Little Distance**. The images are all long exposure portraits, 15-20 seconds each, all made in the same room and all illuminated by natural daylight passing through a large, north-facing window.



**Nguyễn Quí Đức:** I had an office close to Jamie's studio and had an idea of what he was doing with the natural light coming through his one window. I came to the studio (to be photographed); it was dark, and it felt eerie, musty, and yet, I felt calm. Perhaps it's the photographer's quiet manners. He didn't say much, and didn't direct me other than to ask me to turn and move an arm here and there. Jamie moved like a ghost in the room. I wasn't even aware of how he took

off his clothes and sat behind me. I wasn't afraid how I would look in the photo. I just wanted him to have a good sitting, a good photo in the end.

I have many questions for the series—about how you selected the room and were confident the light would work. I wanted to know how you came up with the idea of using such props and creating a setting that in the end were so appropriate, moody and exquisite. What was the process like — selecting subjects and positions, and the images after the series was done. I wanted to know how you talk to people about posing and choosing how to be in your photos. You seemed to have not asked me much. The reference to the old Dutch Masters' paintings is there, yet you've made something very different. I'd like you to comment on that. I also would like to know how you feel being in the photographs yourself. Did you think of how your subjects would react?

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *I wouldn't say I was overly confident the light in that room would work but I certainly had a sense it would, or could. I knew I had a good start with a large source of light (the window) and the direction it faced (north) would guarantee no direct sunlight would enter the*

space. The rest I knew I could take care of by diffusing the light itself with white fabric and shape it with large pieces of black cloth. You mention Dutch Masters – you know, it's the light. And it's the same light. Studio painters, and much later the early studio photographers, who painted still lifes or portraits worked in studios with north-facing windows. Since no direct sunlight entered, the shadows remained the same from morning until sunset. When you are working over the course of weeks or months, this is important. For me, this work was a kind of conversation with that work, with that light.

As for the props – I'll admit in the beginning, the scenes were much simpler than they became as I made more and more images. I began really playing around with the notion of what the chaotic or seemingly random arrangement of things could suggest by way of a location; an old attic, a forgotten studio – things along those lines. As for subjects, I was interested in a broad range of people and for very different reasons. Some people turned me down. Some people I knew well and others I literally just met. Interestingly, some of those images by people I didn't know at all were among the most imaginative – somehow. The poses were not always predetermined although I certainly had a sense of what I was interested in. But very often people bring their own best, and better, ideas and I always try to respond to that, to let people bring what they have to an image. It's usually always the better choice. Many of the best results came from a kind of improvisation that began with something specific and departed from that.

Being in the photographs myself was, right from the beginning, a very essential part of the work – to participate in the act, to enter the photographic space. It was an experiment in the beginning, I made some tests, but once I saw those, I knew this is what it had to be. I am pretty comfortable with nudity (both others' and my own) and I have certainly asked enough people to pose nude for my camera before this. It felt like participating in the image stripped literally of all concealing devices, to give that back to the process somehow, to offer just that much to the act and to the subjects themselves, to make that the premise of the work as a photographer – to offer instead of to ask – felt like the right place to begin. And I knew in offering that, that something would be given in return by those who agreed to this idea of sitting with me. Because each image took upwards of 20 seconds for each exposure, the usual framework of portrait making was upended. The time became a palpable element of the work – creating each one was a small performance of stillness as we each sat for that time before the open shutter. That repeated act of sitting quietly, together and alone in that room, it actually made it less about the image and far more about the long moments of stillness. I think everyone who made images with me felt that.



**Chu Hà Thanh:** The 15 second ritual, slowly the objects, the bodies and the light get sucked and processed in the camera. The body, skin and nakedness are intimate and beautiful, revealing and richly textured, not shocking at all. There is something unclear between light and dark in this silent still. It is a very subtle and playful image. I stare at it and I think it is so erotic, even perverse and disturbing.

The two young girls in high school uniforms and their shirts opened loosely like the way guys have theirs open, and the very subtle image of the naked middle-aged man in the shadow, almost invisible to eyes impatiently flipping through the image. It's like, a really uneasy twisted wet dream.

So, do you feel perverse, do you feel immoral?

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *I suppose if I was unaware of the loaded nature of two school girls in uniforms sitting together with their shirts open, I might be rightly accused of some sort of perversion or immorality; or maybe just plain ignorance. I will wholly acknowledge the fertile sexual nature of the image and my interest in creating something that directly participates in that space without it being seen as perverse or immoral. I think as adults we can and should feel like a healthy dialog about sex, sexual issues, age, maleness, femaleness is appropriate and I think as creative people that it can and should enter the public discourse. I have looked at a lot of work by Balthus (who made many, many provocative images of young girls) and of the photographs of Japanese photographer **Hisaji Hara** (who made work after Balthus), and I was interested in exploring some of that ethos in my own work and this series seemed to present that opportunity.*

*For better or worse, I have to admit to the attraction of making sexually charged images, though not for that very express purpose. It's a very difficult balance – to get into the essence of the idea of the image – to generate the charge, participate in it while remaining true to the intention, to the meaning of the work without being consumed by the moment – to take that charge and inject it into the image. That takes a kind of restraint while it also requires a healthy lust for what is real and what is human. But I think it requires a distance too, an objectivity. I don't think I could step comfortably into the kind of work (Chinese photographer) **Ren Hang** or **Sandy Kim** make, for example, but I admire what they do. But their seeming boundary-less aesthetic also has some built in limits (for me). I suppose I wanted this work to feel more personal than work I've made to date and if the nature of who I am as a sexual being comes through, that's fine.*



**Adriana Dominique:** What really intrigued me about the sitting was the set-up of the room, those muted colours, that stillness, that unearthly light. It was unlike any other place I had seen. I remember sitting, lying down, stretching, contorting; uncomfortable. I was very aware of myself, the shape my body was forming. I also remember concentrating to keep my body still and to keep any involuntary movements at bay. And tearing up as my open eyes grew excruciatingly dry.

You said your nudity in this series was a way of overcoming reticence in your work. Did it have the desired effect? Are there other ways you think you might approach reticence in the future?

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *I think the idea of pushing oneself creatively can take on many, many forms; the decision to appear nude in the work was only partly about addressing something personally. The nudity could not exist in any project simply for its own sake but it was right for this work. The more important idea for me is simply appearing in the work; breaking the fourth wall. The nudity is secondary – though also essential. So, on the one hand while the nudity of the photographer in the image is an important element, I think conceptually the presence of the photographer in the work is the more important discussion. I guess this would lead to the question ‘then why be nude?’*

*Initially, the idea was that I would be the only person nude in the whole series but this evolved as I began making the work and so people I posed with also began to appear partially or entirely nude. You and I met the very day we made this image together and I suppose if I had felt braver, I might have asked you if you would consent to also appear nude. But I’m not sure if we could have made this image better because of it. There is something so exquisite about the way you lay yourself across that table – a pose you found by yourself – that I’m not sure if your nudity would have improved on the image. It may not have detracted, but I cannot assert it would make it better.*

*In the creation of this series I was partially interested in some kind of conversation with art, with art history, so I enter the work in the guise of the classical male nude. It’s a role. And so I came to realize, a performance. The poses in each image, while somewhat considered ahead of making the actual image, are also quite spontaneous and often are a reflection of the other person in the photograph, a mirroring. This was an unexpected development in the work. It wasn’t used continually, but I tried it when it seemed like an appropriate approach in a given situation with a particular person.*

*I can’t predict how to deal with reticence in future work but I know I require a greater sense of courage in myself. I often find myself not asking questions I later wish I had, of not pushing myself hard enough, of being too polite. This is not an easy element to overcome. But I actually find that creatively, with a camera, I can get to know things about people, about myself – and share very*

*personal things with others – that in any other situation would simply not exist or might be considered inappropriate. For example, I invited an acquaintance to pose with me for this series and I explained that I would also be in the photograph without any clothes on and she kindly explained to me that this was the last thing she would be interested in doing. I can understand that. The camera cannot justify every behavior.*



**Nguyễn Quốc Thành:** Just right before Jamie wanted to shoot me for this series, a friend of mine reminded me about Francis Bacon who revolutionized painting people, painting them “inside out”, showing the shapes of the muscles of human body under the skin. So when I sat there for Jamie, I tried to follow the great painter, in a way that I tried to “strengthen” my muscles as much as possible, in a desperate hope that it would affect the result. Actually I also wanted to do the

opposite of what many sitters do, not to relax in front of the camera.

I don't really understand why Jamie tried to be in the pictures, naked, hiding in shadows but showing himself at the same time. Since the photographer is always ‘present’ by taking the photograph – since the camera cannot make pictures by itself – why did you feel you had to be in the image in order to make this presence literal?

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *While it was an important element for me to be in the images, it was also important to be found only in the shadows of each image. Furthermore, in a number of the images – and yours is one of them – I am something like a mirror of the subject, reflecting the posture or pose of that person. Actually, Thành, this image of us was the first one I experimented with this idea in.*

*I liked the way it worked and I did it on others as well. The presence in the shadow had the effect of being ‘there’, being present, but also not fully there or not equally there. It was also interesting because I was not aware of the tension in your body until you told me about it afterwards; I was only evaluating your facial expression which you made so serene and so calm. But in looking at your image afterwards I saw the tension in your fists and I really liked the contrast between your body and your face. It's not obvious and I like that it causes some disquiet in your persona and then also between the way you are in the light and the way I am in the shadow. I am always appreciative of the chances people take in work.*



**Nguyễn Huy An:** When I entered the studio, I did not expect it to be that small. I looked at the photos and had a feeling that it'd be spacious. The lights and things in the room were so beautiful; and I loved the vintage atmosphere and the dark corner of the studio. It's like an old painting with surreal details, which suits me perfectly. On my way into the room, I wanted to be a character in the photo. I even wanted to have some more photos taken.

I don't have many questions on this art series; I don't know what to ask. At first, I had some doubts whether the settings factor and the slow speed of the photo affected the natural sense of the portraits; however, when I looked at them, I could still see it. Even though it is not something new, this is a complete and beautiful art work. The contrast between the character in the light, and Jamie as the main character silently in the dark is very lively. I wonder: before taking the photo, did he worry about people overacting, and about the photo being overly fashionable?

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *I think beauty in art can work in a number of different ways. Beauty can and perhaps has certainly become cliché and function in a way that undermines the work; 'attractiveness' replacing meaning or a clever eye substituted for depth or concept. I think because we are so assaulted by beauty in every possible way through commerce and advertising, it's become a kind of shorthand language that we simply consume as thoughtlessly as a plastic bag. But I think Beauty is also a tool and can be a means to connect to an idea. I was interested in creating a certain kind of image with a certain quality of light and a palette of colors that was muted, soft and fully of deep shadow and I was interested in (hopeful for) the potential for Beauty to come from that combination of elements as a means to connect to an idea or ideas about history, art, photography and my relationship with these things. It is a way in, a door. I think getting someone to stop in front of an image because they find Beauty, getting them to linger and pause to find other things, this is not a bad device. Beauty is a language; it is both the word and the definition of the word. That's a complicated thing and the definition is certainly different for everyone who looks at or listens to or feels something beautiful.*

*Many people in this series, including you and your performance group (Appendix), are artists or poets or creative in some way. You all have this relationship with B/beauty – struggle with it, massage it, ignore it, reject it. It is always a part of work either by inclusion or exclusion, by embrace or by assault. But somehow, in our own ways and with each work, we find some place to exist with, or next to, the beauty that is appropriate for that work.*

*I wasn't worried about people performing in the images at all. I have made enough work with other people now and I know what I am looking for in terms of facial expression. I mean, look, the images are not natural – there is, as you noted, a surreal element to them. So the best thing for me in creating this believable fiction, is that the people in the images are accepting of or simply ignoring the*

*condition they are in. It is their/our environment we are seen in and are part of. Whether I am working in the streets making portraits or in this studio, the process of getting people to simply relax into themselves and their environment is the same exercise for me. The differences arise with each person and the approach I need to take towards getting to that state of performative non-performance, of being and not doing. I sat in on acting classes in Los Angeles for many years and I observed a lot of processes. I use them and I also just enjoy relating personally to people in these conditions towards finding that state of being I am looking to capture.*



**Amelia Nanni:** Well...the first thing I remember is that it was more difficult than I could expect to stay still without moving for 20 seconds. And the other thing, and this is maybe because I shoot pictures too, is that I understand how difficult it can be to give the right expression to the photographer. I was surprised to discover that it was difficult for me to control my own expression; for example I was thinking to give one particular expression but after seeing the photograph, I

discovered someone else. One other thing; I really love this meeting and how we so naturally made this picture! It was an excellent memory of a human and artistic meeting. I didn't know you but I just trusted you completely, like we've known one another a long time.

When you are yourself in the picture, do you come as a person, as a character, or as a photographer? What do you mean your presence? How did this idea come to you, what was the first interrogation? why nude? and the different object in the picture it is just graphic or they have some symbolic meaning?

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *I came into the photographs as all three – as myself, then also as someone in the role of a person in the photograph and finally as the photographer. It was a delicate challenge to juggle these roles – the photographer was looking for specific elements and making sure the technical and aesthetic issues were being addressed. But he also had to be sure the character of both himself and you, the sitter, were working to support the idea. And then the objective self, me, who is there in the room with you – it was important to be able to participate in that way too, to feel the atmosphere and the mood that you helped create by being there with me. You understood the idea very quickly and were so agreeable – I knew right away we would make a good photograph. And it didn't take long before we had made several very interesting ones. And then it was complete.*

*The first interrogation was with time – historic time and literal time; through this series I wanted to have a conversation with a period of time and the art of that time. Neoclassical art came into prominence in Europe right as photography was being developed. Early photographers fell into the spirit of the neoclassical movement (which is itself a conversation with an earlier period of Greek history and art) and – to oversimplify it – embraced the aesthetic of painters. So I felt both grounded in that, connected but also a kind of freedom to say something about the time and the place where I am, where we are, today. I feel certain that people looking at this work will feel something about that, either through the light or the muted color palette or through the mood. But it is also confused with people who are very much of this time. Also, in the years I have been photographing here in Vietnam, this is the first series where I have felt the naturalness and appropriateness of including Western subjects.*

*The nudity was partly a natural extension of the neoclassical dialog. It's also to do with the presence of nature within the confines of this enclosed room. The same is true with the objects and the furniture*

*in the room. In the beginning, the scenes were more simply conceived, but as I made more images, I began experimenting with more complicated arrangements, exploring some possibilities. I also included fruit, flowers and other perishable, organic items. And I reused these again and again. They would appear ripe and fresh in one image and slowly, over time as I reused them, they would fade, rot and die. I don't arrange the images chronologically according to the lifespan of these objects, but the fact that they have a life and perish on camera is part of the work and part of the intent, the meaning, of it.*



**Nha Thuyen:**

coming into a darkening space  
even the naked eyes couldn't reveal my own ineffable  
dizziness  
all i could be at the moment of being closer or more  
distant  
just the faded shadow of an endless memory of what-  
haven't -ever -happened  
i am holding the broken words in my hand, watching

them leaving each other

till

the unnameable sadness and love nurtured in the familiar strangeness of my body have disappeared  
in the void

where

no one would be excluded

i was there and i am not here

the faint moon was shot

what were you looking for?

what can I save and what can save me at the moment? what things make me saved? i think of my self of the now, i think of some beautiful moments of love, friendship and magical connections that can save some fragments of my life. i save all of those fragile moments to be saved – here and there and somewhere and nowhere in time and space, no time no space.

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *In making this work, I was looking for something I hadn't seen before – either in work by others or by myself. As I get deeper into producing my own work – which is to say photography that I conceive of and produce out of my own interest in making it – I think it is paramount to be loyal to an instinct, an impulse, an interior voice which only one person can hear and follow. I have worked commercially in film and photography and made work for others and I have never, ever really been able to make the kind of work I want to make for a client; one or the other of us is always disappointed. More than any other previous series I have made, I was looking for something that was really quite interior. The fact that this is the first series I have produced in an indoor space is a condition not lost on me. In numerous previous series, I used artificial (interior) lighting outside in a public space. For this work, I took the natural (exterior) daylight and used it as the sole source of illumination in an interior space.*

*Increasingly, I want to make work that, while personal, also tries to connect to, to converse with something I have learned or felt about art or the history of art. So when you ask 'what was I looking for', maybe I can tell you I am looking for my place in that history. Maybe it is arrogant to think that I might even have a place. But in this obscure corner of SE Asia, in this tough little city we live in with the people around me who challenge me and inspire me, who depress me, with my own life and being*

as a man, a father, a husband – I know I can try to go deeper into myself and attempt, at least, a dialog.

To address something towards the second part of this question – about saving, salvation: you know, a large part of this series for me is about mortality. I am in my mid-fifties and in that weirdly conscious place where I am closer, certainly, to my death than to my birth. So perhaps one reason I chose to portray myself in shadow is some reflection of that relationship I have both to my own existence and to the existence of others. Even the title – *That Little Distance* – is a reference both to the space between us all and to the time we have remaining. It is actually part of a quote from something I heard John Cage say – he spoke of ‘that little distance before the end’. It really struck me, the way he put that – it is so simple. And he was not a young man when he said it.

Nothing can be saved. That is the truth of it. The images I make save nothing; I am not saved by them nor is anyone else. In truth, one person I felt very close to who posed with me in this series died just 7 months after we made the photograph. I didn’t know at the time, and perhaps he only suspected, that he was sick and going to die – maybe he didn’t. The making or the not making of the photograph would change nothing. He is gone and someday I will be too, as we all will be. So what is the point? Why? Einstein said, “The question ‘Why’ in the human sphere is easy to answer: to create satisfaction for ourselves and for other people. In the extra-human sphere the question has no meaning.” But my friend and I, as with many others I made images with – including yourself, Nha Thuyen – became somewhat slightly closer or came to some greater understanding of one another through the making of these images together. I think we did. I am satisfied we did. And that is a kind of magic that I always hope for in making work beyond the actual magic of a really satisfying photograph.



**Nguyễn Hoàng Nam:** That day, I came in the room with my girlfriend to be a part of your series. We didn't hesitate to take off our clothes after a few first shots. Everything happened naturally, it seemed like your existence, your camera and the two of us tenderly merged with the space around us then vanished. I felt peaceful and I know we all shared that feeling. It's the peaceful feeling of being silent and painting beauty with silence. You will never see anything twice in your

life, everything will change the next time we sit together, even if we sat in the same room and the same angle of light came through the north windows, I know.

I like considering your series as an example of existentialism. Let's imagine you hang two photos side by side, one with people and one without, what do you think you will see? I've heard that sometimes you can only feel the existence of something by feeling its absence.

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *I think you raise a very interesting point here; that of existentialism. One can argue that images are perhaps proof of existence. We were together in that room on that day in that way as individuals – each of us with our own distinct impression of the event and time. But as you point out, there was a shared (social) experience and it is perhaps at that point that existentialism ends. Each of us individually gave meaning to the moment and the experience but after that I think we have to conclude the existential moment is over. An image without people can definitely bear elements of existence – the physical presence of people is not, I believe, a requirement for proof of this.*

*We were, once. We continue, though differently. We will be gone, definitely. The existential debate is too complicated and too full of disagreement to be definitively argued by me. But one thing I found important quite early in this series was the space around the people, the emptiness of it, the void around the people, the absence. I worked in this small room for nearly six months and I never felt like I ran out of possibility for what to see or how to see it. If I could imagine it, I could realize it – make it exist. Sartre speaks of 'encountering oneself' and I would say this was a fundamental element of the work seen here – encountering myself in the literal process of encountering others. Kierkegaard said, 'the subjective thinker has only one setting -existence... The setting is inwardness in existing as a human being.' So existentialism is neither an external expression nor a physical proof, as argued by these two. Maybe the room itself was a metaphor for this inward existence.*



**Thomas Blecha:** Funnily, the image looks kind of cold to me, though the process of shooting it in the studio was rather hot – it was in the end of summer in Hanoi. Before the shoot I was a bit worried, I guess, about being in the room together with my boy and a naked photographer – that either he or I would feel uncomfortable, though usually nudity does not bother me much. But during the shoot I was busy to find a right position, looking steady somewhere away and concentrating on breathing lightly, so I forgot about the nudity. And looking at the picture, it is not about the nakedness of the photographer who stays in the back, in the dark. It is about the portrait subjects.

Which distance do you mean referring to the title? Some friend told me he finds especially our picture kind of “anti racist” – because what he sees is a white tall guy sitting and leaning on the standing, tall Asian boy. What do you think about that? How would you describe the look of your sitters – do they look serious or sad or strong to you?

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *In this image, I am hardly noticeable since the way I lay behind the bench, the light barely touched my body.*

*The distance in the title touches upon any number of ideas which I like the viewer to think about more than I care to explicitly explain. But it certainly may refer to physical distance, emotional distance or the distance as measured by time – between people in the image or those viewing it. Whichever measure feels the most important for each person, it's that little distance I'm interested in. I mentioned previously that the title came to me after hearing the artist John Cage speak about distance as he referenced the time he had left to live.*

*I find the image of you and Tuan really strong in the way you are somewhat physically subservient to him – you hold him, you lean against his bare chest, you seem to be lovers in the photo but he also seems to barely notice you. There is an implied authority in that attitude even if it might be a fiction since we/I created this pose for the purpose of the image – but it was based on something. So yes, in that you – the white male – seem to be in a position of diminished authority to this Asian male, there could be found an alternative power relation in that. What do I think about that? – that it's really great your friend felt that and brought it to your attention. I also think it reflects some truth as well. You and I – we are visitors in this place. Even if the locale is not explicit in the images, you and I are both outsiders and subservient to the dominant cultural idea of place and I'm glad that seems present in this image.*

*This is also really the first time I have made work that included people who weren't Vietnamese (there have been other attempted series but this is the first complete one), so this is quite a relevant point regarding my own practice and perhaps reflects an attitude of my own ideas of race and power. It's a*

*complicated issue, particularly as it relates to photography and media, and deserves broad, open and honest discussion.*

*What I try for, relative to people's expressions and your question about 'serious, sad or strong', is the total relaxation of the face. I don't want people 'indicating' anything – not an emotion, not a feeling – just to be there as simply as possible. That is what I want to see – a complete lack of projected expression. When the viewer can fill in that space, that distance, with what they bring to the experience of looking at an image – it's in this moment that something interesting.*



**Nhung Walsh:** Because this was somewhat a self-portrait, it was like entering someone else's dream; weird but fascinating at the same time. It definitely created a surreal feel to it and I was glad that the dream situation actually happened, in daylight, literally. You kept yourself in the background most of the time, so while shooting, in the back of my head I was wondering: "what is he doing?" At the time of shooting, I associated the performative ghostly and

strange (and naked) figure in the picture with a landscape instead of a person; that there was nobody there but me. I'd like to think that the haunting landscape itself is a living creature and I am with it, and maybe I am it. Because the creature was naked, I think many people will think about intimacy or some kind of provocative sexual desire. But I was not scared and did not feel intimate in a sexual sense. Instead, I felt calm, safe, and comfortable.

What is the most important element for you in this set – the light, the people, or your image? You asked your subjects for permission to shoot them ideally naked or half naked. Were you disappointed when your subjects refused to shoot naked or half naked? I guess it's more difficult in Vietnam when nude is still a taboo issue. How did you anticipate this?

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *Of course I am setting out to make something photographically exceptional and because the images are composed of people in light, they must each function in some kind of insane balance for me to find the kind of image I can be satisfied with. I can only shape the light. So the excitement for me is to see what can come from the person I am working with. Sometimes that takes time and sometimes it comes easily. When it doesn't come at all (as happens occasionally), it is my failure and not the other person's. That is a case of me not being persistent enough or clear enough in my direction. But in general, all things must be in some form of support of the other things – the light, the expression of the subject and the overall compositional elements. You also raise this very important point of the self-portrait.*

*You know, in the beginning I was not interested in photographing others nude at all, partially or otherwise. I thought it would be more interesting if I were the only one nude in the image. I changed my thinking about this though. Some people volunteered to be nude. Some I even asked not to undress. Some I agreed to let do so. Some, like yourself, I asked be partially undressed and they declined. Some I asked and they agreed. This is not something I need to push for. The important thing for me is the absolute comfort and relaxed nature of the people in the image. Nothing good can come out of an unwilling sitter. I think your impression of Vietnamese people being uncomfortable with (their own) nudity is not completely correct; some of my most willing nudes were Vietnamese. I was turned down equally by non-Vietnamese as well – I think that all people generally have body issues of one sort or another; some form of shame about their own nude image – I include myself. This is not a Western or Eastern conceit. It is not easy to reveal oneself to others in this way and difficult enough to confront oneself. Some people I have photographed nude for the first time*

*really welcomed the opportunity to be challenged in this way, to risk nudity and being documented. And I think without exception, those who did find something beautiful in themselves.*



**Hà Lan Anh:** When Jamie invited my daughter Mila and me to participate in his project, I felt both the resistance and desire to say yes. Resistance because I was not sure how my daughter would see it later, how the project would be curated and represented.

But being in the room and doing the portrait with Jamie and Mila that day felt like being in a Tarkovsky movie, or in a magical realist book where everyone is somehow connected, but there is no linear chronicle of time, and the photo of one person is retold in someone else. Both the objects the people were very quiet, minimal in our colors, mirror and reflections, draperies of cloth, even our breath was so light that it felt like we could even hear spirits moving in between. The studio space was ghostly but it felt safe, like a theatrical space guarded for us to play this image sculpturing game. But it was a difficult game of self-control and irrational behaviors, spontaneity and constraints. In several frames, my body placed itself in order with no thought at all, while in others I found my pose but had to adjust because my daughter moved. I did not pay attention to what Jamie was doing and did not even know where he was until I saw the final photo. And where Jamie is in all the portraits is probably one of the aspects I like most about this series.

I never saw him nude (before this). When I saw the portrait, I was impressed by how symmetrical he is, in contrast to the many asymmetrical models. Sometimes he mirrored people like a buffoon, sometimes he was in the background quietly like a prop, sometimes it was a perfect balance and sometimes it was not.

How does it feel for you to be the only and always naked white man in the series? And how does that sense of identity influence the spontaneity when you create the image with other people, including the Vietnamese women, disabled, gays, etc? I guess I'm curious to know if the white male identity is a privilege or a burden for you in your collaborative creative process and how do you feel with that?

**Jamie Maxtone-Graham:** *I am quite aware of my whiteness living in this very non-white place. I am reminded daily of my otherness – and that is a very complicated existence, made more so by the use of the camera and the power of that instrument to dictate the message.*

*It is one reason I have worked nearly exclusively in portraiture for the past several years; although I still dictate the message, I also offer collaboration or, more importantly, the right to say 'no'. I think this is a quite important distinction in the nature of work made by someone from the developed world working in the developing world. I won't pretend it's a perfect system, but the relationship between subject and author is a flatter, slightly more equal one.*

*One aspect of appearing nude in these images is also to give to the other person sharing the frame everything that is me – to literally strip bare, conceal nothing, offer everything as a gesture towards*

*that relationship of power, a kind of vulnerability. So yes, you are a woman, as well as a woman of another race and I have even made a nude portrait of you previous to this. But to me, there was no difference in my thinking in making the previous portrait where I was dressed and you were not and making this one where I was nude and you only partially. The real interest for me was in finding the perfect pitch of the work. Even allowing Mila the freedom to be herself in the moment of the image – her blurred presence was the exact right note for the work, an improvisation I couldn't possibly have conceived of but that I try always to be open to as well. So whether the image was with a gay couple, a disabled Vietnamese woman, another white male, a mixed race couple, a mother and infant daughter – I was determined to represent myself equally to and before all of you. I don't pretend to have an exact or perfect response to this issue except to deal with it directly and openly. Working this way requires a sense of trust.*



*It's interesting because when I look at these images I hardly notice difference – not between gender or sexual preference or race or ability – although, perhaps in one way, the series might be exactly about that. I looked for different kinds of people and couples and ages of people to sit with me so perhaps it is more about that than I am ready to admit. I know I was interested in a broadly inclusive palette of people. Actually, I wish I had been able to photograph more old people, particularly older women; to be honest, that is something I feel is missing. I really love the image of Trần Dương Tường who posed nude for me – he was 81 when we made that photograph. He is amazing.*