

Christina Balch: Selfies and seeing ourselves -- one artist's look in the mirror

When I wake up in the morning, I grab my smartphone, open the camera app, and snap a quick photo of myself. I've been doing this almost every day for over two years, and I now have over 700 photos of myself when I wake up. This is ongoing art project that I call "Awake." This project arose from a common perception that we look bad and even ugly when we wake up in the morning—puffy face, bloodshot eyes, bed head. First thing in the morning is generally not when we want our photo taken. Waking up though is a rare time of day when I can take a photo of myself without having any preconceive notions about what I want that photo to look like. I don't attempt to stage the photo either. Being half asleep allows me to take a truer self-portrait because I'm not conscious enough to make any judgments or decisions about the photo as I'm taking it.

I was inspired by feminist performance artists in the 1970s who used their own faces and bodies repeatedly in their artwork to investigate self-image and self-perception of women. I believe we can similarly use today's technology to challenge the norm—and especially challenge unrealistic physical expectations of beauty. Usually when taking a self-portrait, sometimes known as a selfie, people want to present themselves in a certain way, and they only post their best photos to social media sites. With the "Awake" project though, I strive to capture what I actually look like at a certain point in time, not what I want to look like. And I post each and every photo to my Instagram page.

Sometimes at that odd time of day, I get a photo that captures a hidden part of me. This photo captures a vulnerability that I normally wouldn't want photographed. Over the last two and half years that I have been doing this project, I've seen myself in hundreds of candid photos, many of them unflattering, and some of them funny, and as a result I'm more comfortable with my face as it is and as it changes and ages, too.

The "Awake" project has empowered me to show my face to the world without judgement of myself. Social change can start with seemingly mundane actions like sharing a selfie. Thank you.