

ARTFORUM

Niklas Taleb

Cell Project Space

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Niklas Taleb, *The Personal Life*, 2021, ink-jet print, tissue wrapping paper, glass, tape, 16 × 21 1/2".

Niklas Taleb's one-person show "Solo Yolo" featured photographic works of various sizes, mostly richly colored pigment prints along with a few digital C-prints, all housed in frames made by the artist himself. As is typical of the German artist's work, the content of the photographs is ostensibly mundane. The images are nevertheless arresting, not because they transcend the quotidian nature of their subjects, but because the compositions seem to illuminate those subjects from within.

In *Simon*, 2023, a white man whose face is half obscured by a gray New York City baseball cap eyes a debit card, which he has apparently just drawn from a cross-body bag. *The Personal Life*, 2021, displays several photographs of various sizes as a domestic still life: Tucked into and propped just below a gilt picture frame are, inter alia, a naturally lit picture of a bunch of elementary-school-aged kids in the forest, a shot of a woman's expressionless passport photo, and the image of a sleeping baby. Taleb is a young father, and his work often features signs of early childhood. *Untitled*, 2023, is a triptych whose images of progressively increasing size portray the window of a darkened room at various stages of illumination by a star-projector night-light. Another work, also *Untitled*, 2023, is an oblique-angled carpet-level photo with a Hello Kitty bucket in the foreground and unicorn stickers and shadows of bed slats on the wall in the background. Perhaps the most intimate work on display, also *Untitled*, 2023, is a close-up of adult hands filing down a baby's delicate fingernails.

These works are best accounted for in terms of what Theodor W. Adorno called "the transformation of communicative into mimetic language," with mimesis here referring to modes of relating to the world that aren't premised on conceptual identification. Outside of a fine-art context, photography as a medium is more often than not discursively communicative. This is evident in its most ubiquitous contemporary manifestation, social media, as influencers convey their status and others post snapshots of private moments, aimed at an audience of friends and family. Taleb's work is, prima facie, largely indistinguishable from more enigmatic examples of the latter, with a crucial difference: We dwell on candid pictures in a social-media feed only fleetingly, scrolling past once we've recognized who's in them or where they were taken. Blown up and isolated in the gallery, similar-seeming images command intuitive attention in a manner that would not be enriched by knowledge of their context.

This is not to say that Taleb's personal relationship to the works' content is irrelevant, but rather that the nondiscursive elements of this connection are all that matters. What is important here is not paraphrasable significance, but affective elements of perception that would usually be factored out of cognition. This focus is emphasized by the few works in the show that have been obviously manipulated: *Alex*, 2023, superimposes the image of a man reclining on a couch with his hands behind his head over an image of the same man on the same couch with his hand contemplatively on his chin, while *Playgroup*, 2023, horizontally splits in two a photo of four twentysomethings whose attention is captured by a point out of frame and switches these two halves around. The reasons for these choices cannot be translated into language, and yet they never appear arbitrary, but rather inextricable from their subjects' particularity.