The family photograph is a marker of myths. It captures a fraction of a second of activity and fuels narratives for generations. The photographs that comprise Tammy Rae Carland’s 1998 series On Becoming are black-and-white staged portraits that merge the family snapshot with aspects of photographic history. They appear to be relatives of the figures in August Sander’s sprawling People of the Twentieth Century, Dorothea Lange’s hardscrabble subjects, and Diane Arbus’s impassive outsiders.

While Carland is keenly aware of the medium’s history, her pictures come from a deeply personal place. In On Becoming, for numerous reasons, the artist styled herself and posed as both of her parents. One factor is that she has few photographic records of her childhood. “My family’s personal archive of snapshots can fit into a letter-sized envelope, with room to spare,” Carland wrote of this work in 2013. Fires, moves, and instability contributed to their loss.

Another, more poignant reason is the deceptive nature of images. Her parents were not who they appear to be in those few remaining pictures. Carland barely knew her construction-worker father, a hypermasculine man who was gay, closeted, and an alcoholic. Carland’s mother was Cuban, Native American, and French, but she spent her life “passing” as white. “I have been forever infatuated with the well-tailored truths and messy tall tales of my parents, their childhoods, their lives.”

These self-portraits, taken with a Lubitel toy camera, present the rigid, idealized identity templates for the midcentury white working class. Carland treats the photograph as a construct—the polar opposite of a Cartier-Bresson decisive moment. She created each setup and had someone else hit the shutter. In Untitled (On Becoming: Billy + Katie 1964 #6), mom, in curlers, stands in front of the clothesline, hung with the denin and starched whites of the parental vocations. In Untitled (On Becoming: Billy + Katie 1964 #4), dad sits alone at a bar in chinos and windbreaker, a dark beer in his hand. He lifts his glass to the camera with an impassive glower.

Carland uses these images to imagine what her parents were like before she was born: “I have been in love with the untold stories and untaken photographs and with the absolute freedom I found in being able to invent myself, based on my parents’ social disappearance and their constant state of self-invention and becoming.” By “becoming” her parents in these pictures, she makes us keenly aware that every family snapshot is built from, and enters into, a cycle of history.

These are identities that have a tragic, melodramatic ring to them—and all the more so for Carland’s family having lived in Section 8 housing in Portland, Maine, the kind of easily romanticized squalor that has long been photographers’ catnip. Carland’s early interactions with the medium came when students at the local college would photograph in her neighborhood, attempting to capture Lange’s gritty style. When Carland applied to that same college, she found an image in the school catalog taken of her by a former photography student, making the problematic fictions of the medium palpable. “I never entered my home and neighborhood with my camera,” she recalls. “I avoided photographing anything that had to do with the realness of my life.”

Carland, well known for her role as an artist-activist in the queer community, founded the legendary Mr. Lady record label in 1996, after attending the theory-intensive MFA program at the University of California, Irvine, and the Whitney Independent Study Program. Layered with meaning, the images in On Becoming were staged in 1998, deep in the era of identity politics, in the age of queer theory. Posing as both her mother and father, Carland attempts to understand the complexity of her lineage.

“From my father I learned how to perform, and more significantly how never to fully become,” Carland writes. “I learned how to pass from my mother, and more importantly how never to fully disappear. I have been forever infatuated with the well-tailored truths and messy tall tales of my parents, their childhoods, their lives.”

Glen Helfand is a writer and curator based in Oakland and associate professor of California College of the Arts.
Untitled (On Becoming: Billy + Katie 1964 #7), 1998

Untitled (On Becoming: Billy + Katie 1964 #3), 1998
Untitled (On Becoming: Billy + Katie 1964 #6), 1998

Untitled (On Becoming: Billy + Katie 1964 #4), 1998

All photographs courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.