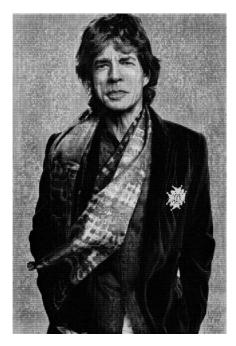March 2013

Alex G. Cao
Contessa
Cleveland

Alex G. Cao, *MICKJAGGER vs KEITHRICHARDS, AFTER VADUKUL*, 2011, Chromogenic Print with Dibond Plexiglass.

New York-based Chinese photographer Alex G. Cao's newest body of work is a cool, emotionally distant meditation on fame and beauty. For the 16 pieces in "The Image Within," Cao used computer technology to produce poster-size images of pop-culture icons composed of tiny, identical, black-and-white photographs. Organized in a grid and adjusted to reflect values of light and dark, the smaller cells that make up each composition seem to be somehow related to the images they cumulatively produce.

Viewed from a distance, *STEVEJOBS vs NEILARMSTRONG, AFTER WATSON* (2011), a portrait of the late technology tycoon Steve Jobs, appeared to be a simple photograph. Viewed up close, however, it dissolved into a sea of small photographs of the astronaut Neil Armstrong. An image of Botticelli's Venus, which consists of thousands of Michelangelo's *David*, offers a wry commentary on Renaissance ideals of beauty and gender.

To avoid monotony and to reward close looking, Cao occasionally interrupts the repetitive images in his tiny grids with surprising variations. Although their seemingly coded meanings may not be readily legible, the artist's fundamental intention seems to be to keep the viewer guessing – and thinking. *FLAG vs JFK* (2011), for example, is an image of the American flag made from portraits of John F. Kennedy, in an ostensible ode to American patriotism. But the composition also includes a single image of the U.S. Capitol dome, and a sole photograph of the late senator Ted Kennedy, perhaps suggesting that J.F.K.'s political ambitions differed from those of his brothers.

Cao has said that he was inspired to create his photographic appropriations after he saw ancient Roman mosaics in Pompeii. Instead of channeling the poetic power of those tile works, however, his mechanical compositions most closely resemble pixilated images on a computer screen, and they express the ways digital technology can be deployed in both project and obscure identity.

– Steven Litt