On view at Elizabeth Houston Gallery from April 28 to July 9, Nobody Knows promises to “tell all the truth but tell it slant.” Representing queer history by intentionally obfuscating it, Robyn Day’s paradoxical archive plays with the materiality of photographic substrates, deeply wedding process to the significations of its portraits.

With no officially sanctioned narratives of its own, LGBTQ histories are carefully pieced together through acts of rediscovery, reassembling, and reinterpretation, often from the annals of legal or medical proceedings that speak with a pathological cast. Day transforms that fundamental method of piecemeal recovery into an artistic process, using materials and their physical “memory” as metaphors for the “love that dare not speak its name” throughout history. Layering, scraping, scratching, and crinkling photographs, and transforming their surfaces with ink, charcoal, pigments, or even boiling water and ice, Day reworks images as they develop and after, moving seamlessly between analog and digital alterations. The cumulative effects of this slow process of development are a kind of theater of inscrutability. It is no longer possible to discern how each photograph was made, nor how many times or by what means transfigured.

In this way, Nobody Knows mimics the ambiguities of queer history through a performance of process. Masquerading as an unearthed archive, Day’s series of portraits, ironically, faithfully and freely represents queer identity on its own terms. With the act of inventing an archive parallel- ing queer performativity, Nobody Knows renders the presence of its subjects—long denied or hidden from view in historical records—through an intentional evasion of strict documentation. Instead, the experimentation of material processes surpasses the aesthetic of salvaged evidence of the past, and becomes a chrysalis for identity. Just as their photographic substrates are reassembled and transformed, layered and reworked, so too are the people within the portraits, who carve space for themselves and their communities in times and places that are not always welcoming, asserting their personhood with grace and poise.

Day’s artistic process reflects the artist’s subject matter, with a performance of the archive—one that creates rather than tracks the “truth”—echoing the performative of gender expression for the camera. Combining found images with contemporary portraits, Day makes each anachronistic in its own way, removing Polaroid emulsion from its casing or rephotographing prints underwater. The sum of these acts of conceptual experimentation is a body of political portraiture that needles at heteronormative and gender-normative assumptions.

With compositional layering a metaphor for identity, Nobody Knows becomes a paradox of representation, one that freely represents the beauty and presence of each person pictured through its experimental approach to conveying the failed representation of queer lives throughout history.

Robyn Day graduated with an MFA from Columbia College Chicago in 2017, receiving the Graduate Merit Award. Day currently lives and works in Chicago, IL. Solo and group exhibitions include Elizabeth Houston Gallery, New York, NY, Cornell Henry Art, San Diego, CA, Plummer Park Great Hall, West Hollywood, CA, ILHAM Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Berlin Blue Art, Berlin, Germany, The Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC, Toshima Center Square, Tokyo, JP, Panopticon Gallery, Boston, MA, Nappe Arsenale Nord, Venice, IT, Arc Gallery, San Francisco, CA, Schneider Art Gallery, Chicago, IL, Hannah Bacol Busch Gallery, Houston, TX and Samson Projects, Boston, MA. Robyn has received press coverage in Vogue Italia, the South Bend Tribune, the Northwest Indiana Times, Dig The Dunes, The Advocate and The Charlotte Observer. A 2016 Stuart Abelson Graduate Research Fellow, Day was also an Athens Photo Festival Finalist and Julia Margaret Cameron Award Finalist in 2015 and an Anne Louise Barrett Fellowship recipient in 2014.