Filmmaking and video production are probably the only mediums that require more gear to produce a final project than photography. The tools and techniques of the photographic process influence how practitioners explore new ideas just as much as new ideas and academic theories unveil the ever-expanding understanding of photography and its uses. There has always been a certain amount of sweat equity involved with the making of photographs that many practitioners wear like a badge of honor. The hardships endured by photographers like Carlton Watkins—in his portable horse drawn darkroom filled with glass plate negatives, roaming the virgin west and inhaling mercury fumes in pursuit of the perfect picture—resonate with those photographers who have mastered complex printing techniques or reveled in the small success of correctly threading a roll of 35mm film onto a stainless steel reel in total darkness. Even Polaroid film and Andy Warhol's proclamation that "Photography is easy, you just press the button and a picture comes out" wouldn't stop photographers from inventing or exploring increasingly complex strategies in order to make a picture. Gear and gadgets are an integral part of contemporary photographic practices from Gregory Crewson's elaborate cinematic productions to the legions of street photographers fly fishing for pictures down Fifth Avenue with their multi-pocketed vests and cumbersome camera bags. For some photographers gear and gadgets are a passion, for others they are a nuisance, but for everyone involved in the medium the tools must be negotiated by interest or indifference one way or another.

Even artists who choose to borrow photographs from other sources must still negotiate some aspects of the technology of the medium. Zoë Sheehan Saldaña begins her process of picture making with the simple practice of downloading pictures from the Internet, but by the time she has produced a finished work of art she has expended nearly as much labor as Carlton Watkins on his best day. The pictures that Sheehan Saldaña pulls off the Internet are portraits that look like they might have come from a high school yearbook. Sheehan Saldaña removes random bits of information from these already low resolution pictures and then passes the remaining information from her computer to a sewing machine that stitches the image onto canvas. This is a time consuming process that she must interrupt often to change the color of the thread for every shift in tone and texture she wants to achieve in the final picture. The final cross-stitched circular pictures are presented in circular Formica and plywood frames. Working every day during her month long residency at Light Work from June 15 – July 15, 2001 she was able to complete the sewing of six new pieces. The process of transforming the portraits from low-resolution Internet pictures to coarse cross-stitched images on canvas doesn't prevent us from recognizing the images, and almost being able to read them as if they were familiar faces from our past. Sheehan Saldaña has done nearly everything she could to obscure the information in the pictures but these efforts cannot overpower the ability of photography to represent and reveal identity with the familiarity that can be both anonymous and specific.

After completing each picture Sheehan Saldaña arranges groups of them to suggest a common relationship. In the group of pictures reproduced here it is not hard to imagine they are all part of the same high school freshman class. The classic school portrait framing where each sitter smiles softly while gazing slightly off center of the camera's lens is as familiar as our own reflection in the mirror. We instantly understand the circumstances under which the portraits were made and usually have a good laugh when we look back at our own portrait made under the same circumstances. Except for a few short years where our parents sent these portraits to friends and relatives it seems that they function best as comparisons on how far we have come and how much we have changed.

These powerful emotions and memories run through Sheehan Saldaña portraits, and her complex and creative efforts to obscure the specific identity of the people in her pictures clarifies the difficult and universal struggle to gain insight into who we are and how we will be remembered.

Jeffrey Hoone, 2002

Zoë Sheehan Saldaña lives in New York City and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program from June 15 to July 15, 2001.