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A mug shot is a portrait that no one chooses to have taken. Its intent is not to flatter or illuminate but to record and identify, in full face and in profile,



a person under arrest. Like a butterfly pinned to cotton, the accused becomes a specimen. Yet if mug shots are concerned only with cold, hard facts, the circumstances under which they were made can't help but inflect them with all sorts of untoward and bottled-up emotions.

Many of the more than two hundred subjects of "Least Wanted: A Century of American Mugshots," which opens this week at the Steven Kasher gallery, look deliberately blank and affectless—the model for much contemporary portraiture, from Andy Warhol to Thomas Ruff. But others are defiant, dazed, amused, bored, furious, frightened, contemptuous, devastated, or beaten (some literally). And it should come as no surprise that, though there are plenty of creeps here, a lot of these men and women exude a noir glamour that Jean Genet identified instinctively: "I recognize in thieves, traitors and murderers, in the ruthless and the cunning, a deep beauty—a sunken beauty."

—Vince Aletti
