THE POLITICS OF PORTRAITUDE

Jessica Silverman Gallery
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Kenneth Bergfeld
Cécile B. Evans
Matthew Angelo Harrison
Jamian Juliano-Villani
Josh Kline
Lynn Hershman Leeson
In his influential account on portraiture, Richard Brilliant writes of the historically shifting dynamics between subject, artist and beholder, flagging the contingencies of identity that stem from such relationships. A panel painted by Botticelli, a decaying monument of Stalin, a presidential campaign photograph – the striking range of media surveyed underscores the capaciousness of portraiture as a representational instrument “especially sensitive to changes in the perceived nature of the individual in Western society.”1 For a viewer casually flipping through the pages of an art history textbook or strolling the corridors of a grand museum, this thesis might be reduced to a narrative of storied individuals: kings and philosophers, high-minded men of higher rank, officials of Church and State. The narrative tells us that portraits are technologies of power and visibility is tantamount to social and institutional affirmation. To be painted, sculpted or photographed – to be rendered widely visible beyond the actualities of dumb flesh — is to gain traction within a public sphere.

Representation is power; portraiture lifts the individual to commanding heights. It’s an exhausted story in the history of art. In the age of social media, the idea has been rebooted as a kind of folk wisdom, a populist fetish. You might know nothing of Rembrandt’s tenebrous self-reflections in oil or care even less about paintings of dead generals, but the average millennial lives and breathes the value of image capital. Moreover, the sovereign reign of Selfie culture and Instagram announces the existential mantra of our times: I snap therefore I am. Raphael famously rendered Pope Julius II in alternately ceremonial and personal terms, launching a series of debates on the apostolic image and the visual technics of faith.2 These days portraiture might translate to a new kind of religion as it ushers in a very different type of iconoclasm. The excessive picturing of self and other is the media’s daily bread. Kim Kardashian, “breaks the Internet.”

Portraiture, in other words, may well be the common coin of our daily existence, our placeholder in a relentlessly mediated world. But this acknowledgment hardly relieves us of analyzing its “changes in the perceived nature of the individual.”3 In fact, it’s the naturalization of portrait modes within contemporary media – and the translation of its historic conventions into diverse platforms – that compels us to question the terms of its authority and to chart an equally crucial narrative in which such representations are linked to a sense of an individual’s domination as much as her power.

This is the expansive terrain traveled by the artists in “The Politics of Portraiture,” for whom the complex relationship between portraiture, power and likeness is far from a given. On the last count, portraiture’s representational mandate, when not picturing statesmen or landed gentry, has been historically pegged to identity, coalition building and self-actualization. For any number of marginalized peoples and communities, to be invisible was to be disenfranchised, while to be visible was to be empowered. But at a moment when mass surveillance is the rule, not the exception; when identity is as much keyed to algorithms and data storage as it is conventional approaches to mimesis; and when the cloak of anonymity shelters our private exchanges, habits, fantasies
and behaviors, portraiture might well be thought of as a proprietary genre. A thought experiment for the Control Society: we could see portraiture as less generous than larcenous. Borrowing from artist Josh Kline’s observations, portraiture today might amount to a kind of identity theft: the visual inscription of self and other reduced to the use value of information.

II. For over four decades, San Francisco-based Lynn Hershman Leeson has mined these associations in a series of uncanny projects and films, testing the limits of identity relative to the instruments of uncanny projects and films, testing the

...Lynn Hershman Leeson incorporated novel techniques into her work from artificial intelligence bots to digital video and internet interactive artworks to excursions into Second Life. But rather than call her a “media artist,” it is more accurate to claim her as the inaugural portraitist of the human in an epoch of genetic engineering? The Self-Portrait with Aging Gene (2016) presents the artist as a split image, both in profile and face forward. A shadowy projection on her face suggests the caps of chromosomes called telomeres, which are nucleotide sequences that protect genes from deterioration and have been researched as potential sources to slow down, or even reverse, the aging process. Hershman Leeson’s portrait reflects on the acutely gendered implications of this biotechnology – youth assumes a highly charged value for women. Telomeres, photography itself, has often sought to preserve an image of youth in perpetuity. Such biotechnological themes are also at work in Feline-Jellyfish, (2014), a haunting feline visage subjected to DNA manipulation.

If Hershman Leeson regards identity as an assemblage of technological and institutional interventions, the work of Belgian-American artist Cécile B. Evans interrogates how these mediations impact relationships between self and other: the affective dynamics and personal politics that are the fallout of digital culture. Evans might be described as an intellectual descendant of Hershman Leeson: born in 1983, her widespread use of digital media reflects on its role in shaping our social interactions, while her former training as an actor introduces a performative note to her work. Portraiture is always a negotiation between subject and object, a dialectic in which artist and sitter strike a tenuous and ever-changing balance. Evans’s websites, videos, installations and now holographic sculptures go one step further in revealing how our technological encounters – imagined as lubricating social relations and forging connections between others – trouble strict divisions between embodiment and virtuality, affect and mediation, subjective interiority and objective information.

Evans’s web-based work raises the paradox entailed in sociologist Sherry Turkle 1997 notion of “life on the screen.” As we feed personal information to the Googles of the world, our representational presence online assumes the loss of a certain kind of identity offline. Evans has referred to the internet as an “intimacy generator” – a phrase that speaks to the highly calculated relationship between media and subjective emotion. AGNES (2014) was a spambot commissioned for the website of London’s Serpentine Gallery. She was a bodiless digital being with a friendly American accent expertly leading users into “conversation,” beginning with jokes and evolving into questions about emotions and wellbeing. One of the pathways through the work includes cheery desktops of sandy beaches and swaying palm trees, which lull the user into a pacific attitude, even as AGNES extracts more personal information. Although AGNES sometimes steered users to information on the Serpentine Gallery’s website, she was also a comment on how our affective projections have been naturalized by so many avatars and cyber fragments of human presence.

In recent work, Evans presents holographic sculptures that tap further into the contingencies of human presence. Black box theaters (based on a 19th century parlor trick illusion) are the sites in which mandalas of feminine hands with tapering fingers float disembodied in space. It’s no coincidence that hands recur in Evans’s work; they are symbols of gesture and touch, signatories of bodily presence and intimacy by extension. But “intimacy” might here register as code for design protocols that link together the most disparate bodies of information with contemporary portraits of the self. Such connections are by no means specific to new media, however. Where questions of portraiture and technologies of communication are concerned, the age-old medium of painting offers an especially incisive take on the interests of identity theft.

III. Consider the work of German artist Kenneth Bergfeld, a painter who studied at...
“I’ve been struggling with the self-imposed critique that looking at someone else and his/her complexities could be merely read as a way of mirroring oneself,” Bergfeld writes, or a “reflection of the preoccupations and obsessions of the artist who makes the portrait.” Portraits, rather, “should be viewed as cultural productions in their own right.” A testament to the formative capacities of representation to give shape to its subjects, fantasies and beliefs.

Jamian Juliano-Villani invests in similar issues, although the tone and tense of her acrylic works could not be more different than Bergfeld’s oils. If Bergfeld stretches the boundaries of portraiture as it relates to cultural production and images of hybrid masculinity, the Brooklyn-based Juliano-Villani explodes the category through the way she sources and summons her content. Cartoon-like avatars populate her riotously brash and colorful paintings; many are highly sexualized and presumably gendered as female. Popular culture meshes seamlessly with high-art; surface values are slick, shiny and frictionless. The artist’s catalogue recalls predecessors in New York Pop (James Rosenquist) and Chicago New Imagists (Jim Nutt) as well as legendary illustrators such as Ralph Bakshi. But the work is all her own, paradoxically, because the gesture of artistic “theft” – codified through the routines of appropriation – is fundamental to her practice. “Everything is a reference,” Juliano-Villani offers. “Everything is sourced. It’s important to realize that all visual culture is fair game for artistic content, ‘appropriation’ isn’t a ‘kind’ of work, it’s almost all art.”

Juliano-Villani likens her re-presentations of such materials as a form of re-animation, a way for her sources to be reborn and live in the present like so many long-gone subjects. “Once an image is used... it isn’t dead. It can be recontextualized, redistributed, reimagined,” she notes. “It should have several lives and exist in different scenarios.” This is a working definition of portraiture for digital times: as long as the image recirculates, so the subject lives on. And it’s consistent with her technique, which sources materials from extensive collections of books and magazines, cloning the web, snapping pictures with her phone, and collaging images together through a MacBook and Epson projector.

In a related vein, The Graduate (2016) is a painting that stems from the flow of references through the routines of appropriation – who seizes the image of an old-school truck placed where the space that contains it, save for the drone has incongruously invaded the space. The ID card is as empty of information as the space that contains it, save for the drone pressses in. The picture teases. What information can be extracted by such machines when one’s identity is reduced to a nameplate, an ID absent of information save for one’s collegiate imprimatur and the shell of a truck?

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Jamian Juliano-Villani’s distinct approach to the portrait calls for the reanimation of once-dead images. Hers is a virtual grave robbing of pictures, picking at the scrap heaps of popular culture and fine art both. Though her medium is painting, her process is wholly grounded in technologies of reproduction. Identity theft takes on explicitly political associations when it comes to such technologies – platforms that have the capacity to reproduce the self and other and then to disseminate, distribute and ultimately use such representations in the economy of information. An enduring trope within the literature of anthropology describes how the camera “steals the souls” of its (non-western, European and white) sitters, a notion taken as a given by 19th century ethnographers, but challenged as a necessarily imperializing conceit. Though we would want to steer clear of such colonizing implications, we might revisit (and invert) this idea in the present for two reasons: first, in light of the new media technologies that both converge with and depart from photography’s mimetic capacities and second, due to the balance of power inherent in the formulation: who takes possession of the image – who seizes it – and to what end?8

On this count, one notes that both Josh Kline and Matthew Angelo Harrison use 3D printing technology to address striations of power in the representation of others. Three-dimensional printing (more accurately “additive manufacturing”) emerged in the 1980s as a highly unwieldy and prohibitive reproduction process. Now affordable and ubiquitous, its applications are far-reaching, from pills to prosthetics; from handguns to architecture; to all manner of mass-customized products. The New York-based Kline has garnered critical attention for his interest in surveillance, democracy, the nature of contemporary work and precarity. His unsettling use of additive manufacturing captures the likenesses of individuals little noticed or represented within the greater
economy. Earlier works included a sculpture of several FedEx deliverymen who routinely brought him packages, unceremoniously displayed as crates body parts nestled in Styrofoam. The figure has become, in other words, literally rationalized by the terms of his employ, incorporated into the materials of the workplace. In his recent show “Unemployment” (2016), Kline reproduces workers who were laid-off during the 2008 economic crisis. Mid-level accountants and managers – the stock in trade of the middle managers – are cast on the gallery floor wearing business suits, curled up in fetal positions. Wrapped in translucent garbage bags, their status as “redundant” labor is rendered equivalent to their disposability.

3D printing supports Kline’s peculiar investment in the politics of incorporation – both literal and metaphorical. How does one embody citizenship and inhabit the workplace? How is one objectified – made and metaphorical. How does investment in the politics of incorporation – as well as brute force – have now been made the objects of a certain fetishistic scrutiny, displayed like scientific specimens on shelves. Kline gives us, in other words, the morphology of power.

While posing similar questions and deploying advanced printing technologies as well, Matthew Angelo Harrison arrives at a different perspective on the reproduction of others in portraiture. The Detroit-based artist is not only interested in what these processes reproduce but how they reproduce – and what control over these processes both entails and implies. On the first count, Harrison scans and prints traditional African masks, as if translating one form of vernacular image making to another. The dark, polished surfaces associated with the visual cultures of the Baule, Chokwe and other Sub-Saharan peoples undergo a digital transformation to colorful objects whose crenelated surfaces recall the pixilation of data in rudimentary raster graphics. Hard wood has now been rendered in polyurethane foam; organic associations of craft, even if produced for the tourist market, have been effaced. As widespread icons of “Africanness” – and blackness by extension – the masks’ digital metamorphoses remove them further from any putative source of origin and beg an implicit question about culture and technology: what constitute the boundaries of culture today when modes of digital reproduction have generalized sites of production as global?

“Cultural appropriation” is a key topic in current debates on race and ethnicity: to whom do certain cultural forms belong and what constitute the diverse technologies of representation continuous with processes of subjectivization. The politics of portraiture will turn on these mechanisms as much as the image itself.


2 This famous episode in the history of portraiture is recounted in Loren Patridge and Randolph Sterne, A Renaissance Likeness: Art and Culture in Raphael’s Julius II (Berkeley: UC Press 1980).
3 The literature on photography has been critical in describing its deployment as mode of control and a technology of surveillance. Among many examples, see the classic essay by Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” OCTOBER, Volume 39 (Winter 1986), 3-64.  
4 This can be explored in the Lynn Hershman Leeson monograph Civic Radar, Edited by Peter Weibel (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2016).
5 Kenneth Bergfeld in an email to Jessica Silverman, forwarded to the author on May 13, 2016.
6 Ibid, Kenneth Bergfeld in email to Jessica Silverman.  
BORN 2011 Mayo Clinic U.S.A.
RESEARCH: Tracks AIDS HIV virus
DNA MANIPULATION: Cat+Jellyfish Gene
Kenneth Bargafield
Androgynous Angel, 2015
Oil on canvas
15 5/8 x 11 3/4 in.

Cécile B. Evans
AGNES, 2014
HD video
Courtesy of the artist and Serpentine Galleries

Kenneth Bargafield
Friendly Competition, 2015
Oil on canvas
15 5/8 x 11 3/4 in.

Cécile B. Evans
Handy if you're learning to fly: A, 2015
Custom-built holocube, assorted miniature, HD video, plexiglass stands, corn syrup, lacquer, C-type print, book
Stand: 28 x 24 x 18 in.
Holocube: 17 x 22 x 16 in.

Matthew Angelo Harrison
Post-Chronology Series, Head #1, 2015
Open-cell polyethylene foam
20 x 17 x 12 in.

Josh Kline
Packing for Peanuts (Fedex Worker's Hand with Scanner), 2014
3 3D-printed sculptures in plaster, inkjet ink and cyanacrylate, cast urethane foam, packing peanuts, styrofoam, cardboard, MDF
35 x 36 x 12 in.
Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse

Jamian Juliano-Villani
The Graduate, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
73 x 50 in.
Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York

Lynn Hershman Leeson
Portrait with Aging Gene, 2016
Ed. 1/6
Archival digital print
11 x 8.5 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery

Kenneth Bargafield
Friendly Competition, 2015
Oil on canvas
15 5/8 x 11 3/4 in.

Cécile B. Evans
AGNES, 2014
HD video
Courtesy of the artist and Serpentine Galleries

Matthew Angelo Harrison
The Consequence of Platforms, 2016
Aluminum, stainless steel, ceramic, marble
75 x 33 1/2 x 33 1/2 in.

Jamian Juliano-Villani
Stone Love, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
30 x 24 in.
Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York and Tanya Leighton, Berlin. Photo Gustav Lampert

Lynn Hershman Leeson
Robert's Physical Stereo, 1976
Ed. 2/5
Cprint with acrylic pen and pencil
Image size: 40 x 27 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery

Lynn Hershman Leeson
Poste, July 2014
Ed. 2/6
Archival digital print
24 1/4 x 20 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery

Lynn Hershman Leeson
Chips/Animals since 2006, 2014
Ed. 2/6
Archival digital print
30 x 40 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery
KENNETH BERGFELD
Kenneth Bergfeld (b. 1990, Bergisch-Gladbach, Germany) studied at Kunstakademie Dusseldorf in Germany. He has had solo exhibitions at Galerie Max Mayer’s project space (Düsseldorf, Germany) and Kunstverein Leverkusen (Leverkusen, Germany), and his work has been featured in group shows at the Museum Abteiberg (Mönchengladbach, Germany), Kunstverein Duisburg (Duisburg, Germany), and Kunsthalle Charlottenborg (Copenhagen, Denmark). Last year, Bergfeld’s performance group “Seiro’s” curated the Dan Graham Pavilion at K21 Ständehaus Düsseldorf and this summer, his work is included in an exhibition at Museum Abteiberg (Mönchengladbach, Germany). The artist lives and works in Düsseldorf.

CÉCILE B. EVANS
Cécile B. Evans (b. 1983, Cleveland, OH) studied at Tisch School of the Arts. Her work has been featured in solo exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Winterthur (Winterthur, Switzerland), De Hallen (Amsterdam, The Netherlands), Serpentine Sackler Gallery (London, UK), Kunstverein Munich (Munich, Germany) and Museum of Post Digital Cultures (Lausanne, Switzerland). Her work can currently be seen in the 9th Berlin Biennale and it has been included in group shows at the Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna, Austria), Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Paris, France), Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, National Museum of Contemporary Art (Lisbon, Portugal), and Fridericianum (Kassel, Germany). In 2016 she will have solo exhibitions at Tate Liverpool and Kunsthalle Aarhus in Denmark. Evans lives and works in London and Berlin.

MATTHEW ANGELO HARRISON
Matthew Angelo Harrison (b. 1989, Detroit, MI) has a BFA from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. He will have his first museum solo exhibition at MOCAD in Detroit in 2016, curated by Jens Hoffmann. He will also be included in the 2016 group exhibition “Take Me (I’m Yours)” at the Jewish Museum in New York, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Jens Hoffmann and Kelly Taxter. The artist lives and works in Detroit.

JAMIAN JULIANO-VILLANI
Jamian Juliano-Villani (b. 1987, Newark, NJ) has a BFA from Rutgers University. Her work has been shown at MOCAD (Detroit), Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), Jewish Museum (New York) and MoMA PS1 (New York). Most recently she participated in group exhibitions at the Swiss Institute (New York) and the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles). Juliano-Villani has an upcoming solo exhibition at Studio Voltaire (London, UK). The artist lives and works in Brooklyn.

JOSH KLINE
Josh Kline (b. 1979, Philadelphia, PA) will enjoy a solo show at the Portland Museum of Art (opening July 23). His work recently received critical acclaim in “America is Hard to See” at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and “Surround Audience” at the New Museum’s 2015 Triennial in New York. His work is in the collections of MoMA New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, Aishti Foundation, Rubell Family Collection and Zabludowicz Collection. He has also exhibited at Modern Art Oxford (UK), Moderna Museet (Stockholm, Sweden), Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, DC), Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco), Albright-Knox Art Gallery (Buffalo), Institute for Contemporary Art (Philadelphia), MoMA PS1 (New York) and Fridericianum (Kassel, Germany). Kline’s work will be featured in a solo exhibition at the Portland Museum of Art, opening July 2016. The artist lives and works in New York.

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON
Lynn Hershman Leeson (b. 1941, Cleveland, OH) has a career spanning five decades. Described as “the inaugural portraitist of the information age – a supremely astute observer of the protocols and institutions that at once consolidate, mediate and invert the interests of contemporary identity,” Hershman Leeson has enjoyed recent solo retrospective exhibitions at ZKM Museum for Contemporary Art (Karlsruhe, Germany), Sammlung Falckenberg (Hamburg, Germany), and Modern Art Oxford (UK). This year and next, the show travels to the Lehbrück Museum (Duisburg, Germany) and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco). Hershman Leeson’s work is in the collections of MoMA New York, Tate Modern, LACMA, SFMOMA, National Gallery of Canada, Walker Art Center, Berkeley Art Museum, Seattle Museum of Art, ZKM Museum for Contemporary Art and Museum of Contemporary Art Warsaw. She will also be included in the group shows at the Whitney Museum of American Art and Haus der Kunst (Munich, Germany) in 2016. The artist lives and works in San Francisco and New York.

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