

ARTFORUM

Review: "The Politics of Portraiture"

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Josh Kline, *RAID Drives*, 2015–16, plaster, ink-jet ink, cyanoacrylate, handcuffs, commercial shelving, LED lights, 37 × 27 1/2 × 15".
From "The Politics of Portraiture."

The six-person show "The Politics of Portraiture" suggested that portraiture, as both a tradition and a practice, now lies in fragments. The works on display were linked by tropes of shattering, reconstruction, and hybridization. The sawed and stacked zebra jawbone of Matthew Angelo Harrison's *Bodily Study of Unthinking Groups*, 2016, echoed the set of teeth roughly molded in plaster and wax and embedded in an open lunch box in Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Lunch Box*, 1966. Disembodied, floating forearms appeared as fantasmatic in the work of Cécile B. Evans and uncannily real in the work of Josh Kline. Prominent throughout the show were the fragments that define us for the public—our genes, psychological symptoms, identification cards, and books.

If portraiture remains a bellwether of our conceptions of identity, this show asked what the genre can tell us when biological, social, and depictive technologies are unmooring, shifting, and remaking "identity" as never before. Portraiture is necessarily mutating. As Pamela M. Lee observes in an essay that accompanied the show, the works on view eschewed the affirmation traditionally associated with the genre. Instead they explored how "representations are linked to a sense of an individual's domination" and revealed the ways in which selfhood is now inscribed by information and

surveillance practices.

“The Politics of Portraiture” moved along two axes: Hershman Leeson’s contributions, made between 1966 and 2016, provided the historical trajectory, while the work of five young artists represented an array of contemporary approaches and concerns. Hershman Leeson’s eerie *Lunch Box* greeted the visitor with a pointed reminder that we are in debt to feminist art for transforming the bodily fragment from fetish into conceptual weapon. *Roberta’s Physical Stance*, 1976, a photograph that features psychiatric diagnoses literally overwriting a reluctant yet coy portrait subject (performed by the artist herself) likewise revisited Hershman Leeson’s groundbreaking investigations into the institutions that define femininity. But works like *Feline-Jellyfish*, 2014, which depicts a glowing green cat whose genetic makeup has been spliced with florescent jellyfish protein, brought us up to the artist’s present interest in genetic experimentation as identity engineering. A work in the form of printed wallpaper, *GMO Animals, Crops, Labs (The Infinity Edge)*, 2014, presented an ocean of downloaded and captioned images of animals, vegetables, and plants produced through genetic engineering, interspersed with downloaded snapshots of lab scientists themselves. All are equally banal and textbook-cheery, despite the black bars stamped across the eyes of some scientists who, presumably, claim a right to privacy even as they splice and rebuild our fellow species.

Whereas Hershman Leeson’s work emphasizes the engineering of “perfected” identities as a dangerous Franken-project, her younger counterparts seem more preoccupied with the ways in which representational technologies create mutants and mutations. The strongest work along these lines was sculptural. Cécile B. Evans’s *Handy if You’re Learning to Fly*, 2016, pairs dollhouse dioramas of tiny tools and books—building blocks of the self—with projected mandalas of whirling, hypnotizing holographic hands. Josh Kline’s *RAID Drives*, 2015–16, is a collection of 3-D-printed forearms. Installed like specimens in a natural history museum, each clutches a Sony Handycam, a reference to the filming of Occupy Wall Street protesters by NYPD officers. At first glance, the arms appeared to be meticulously naturalistic, but on closer inspection the clothing and skin of one was revealed to have the same surface texture as the accompanying camera, down to the device’s small control pads—raising the question of who, in a surveillance society, can escape becoming an extension of its operations. Meanwhile, Matthew Angelo Harrison displayed his own 3-D printing machine, *The Consequence of Platforms*, 2016, a slick steel and marble object that churns out rough strings of clay. The input was a scan of an African mask the artist saw at the Detroit Institute of Arts; the low-tech output evoked the transformation of ritual art into degraded, mass-produced souvenir. It prompted a melancholy meditation on how an artwork that once embodied identity can be dislocated from its context and turned into another kind of disembodied fragment. More pointedly, the friction between the original mask and printed knockoff also worked to critique the Western preference for generic signs of “Africa” over encounters with real individuals of African descent. The mask, one could say, precluded the portrait.