

Against likeness

Nikolai Ishchuk

It's a lie. It's a bunch of sad strangers photographed beautifully, and... all the glittering assholes who appreciate art say it's beautiful 'cause that's what they wanna see. But the people in the photos are sad, and alone... But the pictures make the world seem beautiful, so... the exhibition is reassuring which makes it a lie, and everyone loves a big fat lie.

—this a heroine in Mike Nichols' s film *Closer* quips at an opening when prompted for her opinion. Arguably no other genre has been so irreversibly colonized by photography as portraiture. A lie it may have become, but to be fair, as painted portraits would traditionally be commissioned, the transactional nature of the enterprise made a little embellishment par for the course there too. At least in the beginning photography was seen rather as a technological innovation than an aesthetic one. First the daguerreotype, and then the calotype, the tintype and so on made it possible—and affordable—to immortalize oneself as a perfect likeness. Even now, when a photographic portrait fools the eye with the latest Photoshop plug-in, it does so with an aplomb of authenticity that a painted one just cannot muster. As far as we're concerned, a beautified evidential record is still, well, pretty evidential.

When any portrait would henceforth be assessed against a photograph, what's the point in competing on likeness? No wonder, then, that modernist painters turned to "primitive" art. According to Crowther, African sculpture corresponds to working with a memory-image, which in turn suggests that "the artist is not attempting to realize an abstract idea, but rather to reconstitute a subject matter on the basis of intimate contact with it over a period of time".¹ This would involve all the senses, including the tactile, and he calls the resulting exaggeration "hyper-phenomenal". In a recent article for *The New York Times*, Kandel explains on the example of "Vienna 1900" that our reaction to figurative distortion has a physiological component². As our brains allocate more resources to analyzing faces than any other objects, the corresponding circuits get a hit when we're looking at non-standard portrayals.

Extreme distension was championed across the board, and for instance the expressionists explicitly used it to conquer the ugly³. Alas, soon enough it was clear that when it came to redefining the unsightly, photography once again showed painting up. As both the cameras and exposure times shrank, photographers were freed from the transactional obligations of studio commissions and could now turn to the hitherto invisible and downtrodden subjects. In fact, so strong was the resulting tide of aesthetization that it was now photography that supplied the standard of the beautiful to which the real would aspire, and not the other way around⁴. As if in a tit for tat with painting for making abstraction a compromised choice⁵, photography first established likeness as an unattainable ideal and then discredited that altogether. The traditional portrait was put in an uncomfortable position of not so much looking for a way forward as a way out.

Another paradigmatic shift has occurred in the notion of the “sitter”. Before photography, a portrait was essentially an amalgamation of observations of a person over the time that it took to produce the painting; a likeness of synchronic rendition. Already in the early days of photography, this proposition would become tenuous even though the long exposure times required models to use neck supports and adopt rather sour but static facial expressions. With the freedom to snap away at 1/250th of a second, the sitting transformed into the session, which resists temporal amalgamation and instead results in a contact sheet, a spatialized representation mosaicked into discrete diachronic thumbnails.

It is only ironic that the medium charged with delivering the truth also made any kind of prolonged interaction between the model and the artist completely optional. Photography has enabled painters to work from snapshots without so much as ever having shared proper eye contact with the subject. In doing so, the painter may actually be more predatory than Sontag could have ever imagined for the photographer: poring over the trove of detail—perving—is a conscious decision for the former but an incidental byproduct for the latter. Reviewing Richard Phillips’s post-ironic paintings of Lindsay Lohan, Wyma calls them “populist and positionless” in that they “don’t celebrate or satirize or mimetically critique our complicity in the

distorted cult.”⁶ This is why photo- and hyperrealism should be considered a culturally salient yet conceptually inadequate response to the impasse.

Where does the portrait go from here then? In some of Jamie Barbor’s recent work, the primitive makes a sophisticated return. Vivid, vaguely physiognomic splodges seep in and out of billowing washes of color. Being familiar with his process, I know that these often first come into being as sculptures that I’ve affectionately come to call “macarons”. They do look like sweets you might have stuffed in your back pocket and on which you then accidentally sat; a grotesque jumble of textures and cheekily protruding bits.

Not only do they function as primitivist sculpture and thus as memory-images, these memory-images themselves become “sitters” for the artist’s subsequent paintings. The already exaggerated features undergo a tactile, hyper-phenomenal transition of the second order. Hence, although on the surface easily lending themselves to the lazy label of abstraction, Barbor’s results could be claimed as kinds of portraits. They may not tease us with concrete likenesses, but they are not lies either. They are synchronic, synesthetic, lingering traces of intimate encounters coming through the gleeful haze of the massive pomo hangover we’re nursing.

Nikolai Ishchuk is a practicing artist currently living in London and studying towards an MA in Fine Art at the Chelsea College of Art and Design. His work mines the potential for hybrid form between photography and other media and has been exhibited internationally, including at such venues as the Whitechapel Gallery and the Moscow Museum of Modern Art.

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Jamie Barbor’s work manifests through different conventions of communication. The abstraction of forms and figurative hints span and interdisciplinary practise bringing together an interest in adult playfulness and the more traditional modes of language. The work focuses on tonal sensibilities driven by themes such as physiognomy, allegory and the interpretation of identity.

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¹ Crowther, P. (1997) *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

² Eric R. Kandel (2013), *What the Brain Can Tell Us About Art*. The New York Times Sunday Review, April 14, 2013.

³ Bronner, S. E. (2012) *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁴ Sontag, S. (1977) *In Plato's Cave*, in: Sontag, S. (1977) *On photography*. London: Penguin.

⁵ Moore, K. (2008) *foRm*, in: Klein, A. ed. (2009) *Words without pictures*. New York: Aperture.

⁶ Wyma, C. (2012) *Is It Wrong to Like Richard Phillips's Post-Ironic Paintings of Lindsay Lohan?* Blouin Artinfo, September 27, 2012. <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/828851/phillips-tk>

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