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Portraits

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Portraits

Nicholas J. Bontorno

A selected project submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Portraits

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This paper is a documentation of and supplement to my thesis project, which is on display in the Harold B. Lee Library Auditorium Gallery from April 2 - May 25, 2012. The seven paintings on display are included in this report are found on the following pages:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Portraits

It has always seemed clear to me that feelings and ideas, even very abstract feelings and ideas, could be expressed visually. In this way a picture can be a type of language, using its symbolic nature to communicate. When I was young, my dad would take us hiking in the woods. I think this is where I first learned to look beyond what I saw on the surface. The woods were quiet and subtle and needed to be discerned. I revered the woods, and as I looked closer I could start to read into what I was seeing. I learned about patience, birth and death, and independence and community. I learned about function and beauty. The cycles of the natural world began to unfold to me. My dad rarely explained anything to us about the woods because he knew we would understand what we needed to. The woods are poetic; they are full of signs and symbols that are imbued with meaning.

A visual poetry has the potential to encapsulate an essence and invite a reader's discernment. The reader must discern the language of what he sees- he must internalize signs and symbols (both formal and conceptual) and deduce a meaning, even if that meaning is an emotion, impression, or confusion. Occasionally a connection is realized that transcends both the viewer and the visual, bringing them together. Maybe this is beauty. French-American artist Louse Bourgeois claimed that "Beauty is the pursuit of 'the Other'" which suggests that beauty is observed outside ourselves

When I look outside myself I am most impressed and challenged by other people. "The greatest unknown," writes Wendy Steiner, "the challenge of challenges is another person… the self reaching beyond its own limits to encompass a beyond, and in the process coming to know itself" (151). The sense of *other*, contained within a portrait, seems to have an immortal nature which exists outside of time. This phenomenon of creating a representation that permanently

contains an essence of another can be found (more or less effectively) from cave paintings to the commissions of royalty, to folk circles, to Wal-Mart photography. It is arguable that no consciously created image is void of meaning and otherness to some degree. The very nature of an image-creation or image-observation contains a reach outward that is dependent on something other than self, which helps us find and define self. This striving for objective otherness in the arts is a noble plight that helps us get out of the self-referential commentary or market driven sensationalism which does more to alienate viewers than unify them. The images that flood our culture daily are not like this small sphere of art-images. Art is intentionally created to explore ideas that have little to do with function or commercialism. They are also not to be read as quickly and carelessly as commercial or functional images. Art is willed into existence methodically, and for the sake of this beauty; much like a short, simple travel poem differs from short, simple driving directions.

The only way I can begin to address the complexity of *otherness* in my portraits, or even to address myself, is poetically; I can use a combination of symbols that work in harmony together to create a vibrant whole. When looking at another person, I see many signs. Every nuance of the face speaks or hides volumes. Posture, position, movement, and especially the expression of the eyes and hands all come together to create an essence that can be felt or sensed but not analytically comprehended. The viewer then must discern: what, if anything, does this portrait mean? What do we make of these people? I believe good portraiture begs empathy and the emotional investment of the viewer by creating a visual that has the complexity and poetic depth of a real person. I also want to make portraiture that is useful to my own culture. I would like to invite a current humanistic exchange in our sometimes inward and removed contemporary world. I've chosen for my paintings specific models, particular structural compositions, and a

common way of showing my sitter to create a visual poetry that is literal, psychological, and emotional, and complex enough to be explored.

My portraits are usually of young people. There is a fragility at either end of life, but the instability of youth intrigues me right now. These young sitters have all the questions of life present and in paradox: the open hope of future and the dread of the unknown, interest and apathy, and the constant awareness of youth turning to age. The heightened fire of spirit that thrives on a beautiful mixture of confidence and naiveté is, as Yeats realized, "no country for old men". I pick models based on their appearance and if they seem to carry these paradoxes in their demeanor or expression. When painting faces, I take great care to be sure there is a balance between readability and ambiguity so that the model is not confined to my authorship. I want them to be taken seriously; they can't be caricatures of youth or in any way insincere, ironic, or too easily psychologically pegged. They must be believable and sincere enough for depth. This leaves them with very nondescript clothes and expressions, which begs the viewer to go beyond the surface to feel what the models are feeling.

The structure of the painting compliments the psychology of the sitter. Flat spaces create emptiness, calmness, and aloneness. Lone fields, plain skies, blank walls, and nondescript clothes all encourage this simplicity. If the scene is outdoors I almost always include a horizon, to indicate space. Maybe retreat and calmness are necessary for solitude or for reflection. The emptiness has a sadness to it. So much of life is spent alone-- it seems suitable to portray my models up against this realization. We are completely independent and alone in mind and spirit. As I paint, I am alone. We are born and we die alone.

Then again, in these portraits neither I nor the models are completely alone because we acknowledge one another. They naturally look back at me, creating an intimacy in this vast

space where the viewer becomes part of the painting. The single figure acknowledges us in a placid scene. (Maybe there's no one else to talk to or be with.) This type of relationship of two individuals puts equal expectation on each-- it is arguably the most challenging relationship. We both must be givers and receivers. There is an obvious lack of drama, and we have each other's attention for a moment. It is quiet and unifying and allows a short exchange. Some of the models have their mouths slightly opened as if they are going to speak to us or have something to say to us. Others are smiling, ether in nervousness, or in passive contentment. Still, others have a reserved expression and maybe are not asking for much of an exchange at all.

These paintings have a lack of significant light source; this helps the scene feel less removed and more like an actual encounter. In a memory of talking to someone I don't really remember light source or the rendering of details as much as I remember how the exchange felt. I think this lack of clear light and shadow helps the painting function more in metaphysical memory than in surface details. I am much more interested in my sitter than in my paint quality, which I hope would generally take a back seat. If it were too noticeable it would get in the way. I want there to be very little between the viewer and the sitter. Some of my work that is less successful has this problem-- when I rely too much on spectacle or eccentricity there is an immediate reading that is caused and fulfilled too quickly, making the exchange less engaging. Much of my older work is very stylized, and if it is too purposefully manipulated it can look insensitive and forced. I think some Modigliani paintings are very successful for this reason. His are all very stylized, but some still contain a referential realism that grounds them enough to be taken seriously and explored poetically; others are limited in this way. The first (fig 1) Modigliani portrait below has a sensitive care in the model's nature; it seems to reverence the beauty of the sitter by paying attention to her facial features. The second (fig 2) seems removed,

careless, and easy which doesn't help us invest in getting to know her. The painting doesn't transcend its formal elements.
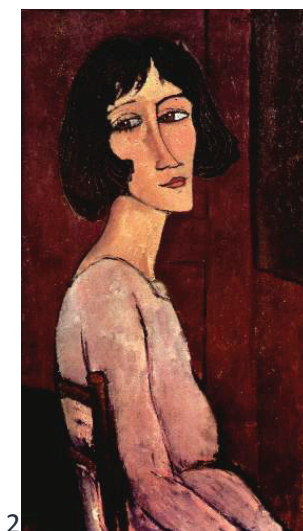
Modigliani has influenced me longer than any other artist. When I was young my two favorite artists were Modigliani and Andrew Wyeth, but I always liked Modigliani more because his portraits were not scenes like Wyeth's. Wyeth was exciting to look at and he had the ability to create a spectacular mood, but Modigliani had the ability to capture his sitter's souls without academic realism. There were no shadows in his paintings and his body proportions were usually wrong, but it was clear he did this only to enhance psychology. These portraits captured the spirit of the sitter more than Wyeth's Helga paintings did (which beautifully captured the physicality of the sitter and how it relates to its environment). Modigliani remains for me the most humanistic painter.

A painting that is less literal must rely more heavily on a viewer's interpretation. For this reason I believe portrait painting has an advantage over portrait photography. As a painter, I have complete control over every formal detail, which allows me to use formal elements to suggest a specific psychology. A charcoal line by Rembrandt says very different things than a charcoal line by Ingres, even if the subject is the same. A quick look at old master drawings

illustrates the variety of expression possible even when subject matter remains constant. Atelier-like studies were never the ideal outside of the academy. Certain models or effective photographers can reveal much in a photo, but there exists a big advantage in the tradition of painting in the freedom to control all formal elements. In painting I can get away from biography, which photography leans toward. Photography is often read as documentation or historic truth, which for my work is irrelevant. A painting exists outside of time. Its creation is an organic process and it must be willed into existence. This makes painting unique from other media (video, photography, performance) which depend on a continuum or specific moment to exist. The painted portrait's intentionality of existence means that it has great poetic potential.

Other artists that have influenced me since Modigliani are Giotto, Ingres, early Picasso, Edward Hopper, Horace Pippin, Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz, David Hockney, Peter Doig, and William Bailey. American folk portraiture has played an important part in my development as well. These untrained artists were limited by their lack of skill. Early American artist Henry Folsom (fig 3) painted no more than ten portraits his entire life, but his formal limitations allowed him to free his sitters' essence.

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The most common mistake in portraiture is when an artist lets craft get in the way of *otherness*, stifling it instead of enhancing it. The mechanics of the human body are naturally beautiful, but when it comes to portraiture artists do a great disservice to a sitter by reducing them to mere physical properties. This led me to think that the stylized interpretation of the figure would allow me to dig deeper into their psychology. My undergraduate work was all made on this premise.
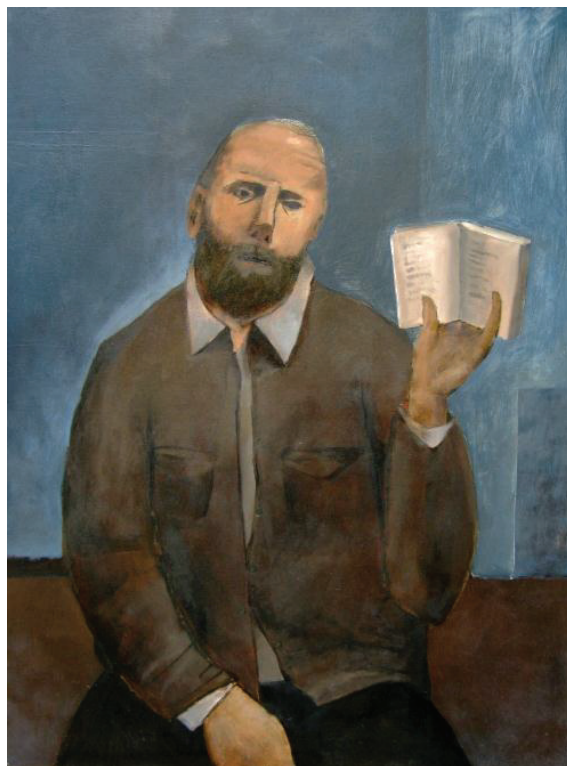
4

"Man with a Book" from 2009 (fig 4) was my first painting completed in graduate school. I was

using a lot of the ideas I learned from Modigliani and the folk portraitists. A more recent

example of less literal work is "Boy with a cowboy shirt" from 2011 (fig 5). I was getting closer

to representation here by referencing a real person and not relying on a scene to create meaning.

5

   At one point I tried painting a friend of mine named Leann and I wanted to test my ability to stay true to how she looked.

6

This painting, "Leann" from 2010 (fig 6), was pivotal. I realized that poetry could be enhanced with realism, where I previously thought it would only diminished it. Though I regard this piece as only a study, a strong sense of otherness took hold which surprised me, and I found myself enjoying the honest observation of another person with less of my own interpretation. From here I started working on paintings that departed further from stylization and went more into a staged realism. "Claire" from 2011 (fig7) was another friend who sat for me as I tried the same thing with the figure but explored the flatness of the body and background.

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"Janell on a couch" from 2011 (fig 8) followed and I did the same thing but more effectively,

allowing the figure to be a very close likeness to the sitter while employing the flatness of the

clothes, and wall, and couch. Instead of inserting abstract planes to help with the composition, as

I did in the painting of Claire, I made the couch and wall function as abstract planes. There is

little modeling of any object in this painting. I only use a little shadow on her legs, neck and

eyes. It became important for me not just to paint an interesting person, but a person that I

personally knew. I could sense more about them, and what I could sense was deeper and more

beautifully complex than what I could invent using my imagination or unknown photos. I think

this improved the feeling of my paintings because I could feel more respect for them as individuals than as characters.

8

There is certainly a joy that I also feel when painting my friends. I like Susan Harrison's idea that "artists think they're being more 'critical' and 'objective' if they show misery. But you could be just as critical and objective, if that's what you want to be, about joy and friendship" (Wall, 1158).

The next two paintings deal with scene and poetry in clear ways. The two large paintings done in 2012 titled "My dad in winter" (fig 9) and "Mel in springtime" (fig 10) were my last works in graduate school. The painting of my father is more like a scene. It reminds me of a Wyeth and is not like any other portrait I had done to that point; however, this painting still retained a nonliteral poetry by lacking shadow and detailed information and relying heavily on the scene to give the figure meaning. Most of my other paintings rely on the eyes and subtleties

of the face-- this one doesn't. In these last two paintings I rethought what a scene could be. Rather than using it as a physicality for creating a scene (which I thought would deter from representation and the importance of otherness), I realized that the symbols within the scene could be part of the portrait if they were functioning symbolically/poetically. For example, the footsteps in the snow in "My dad in winter" are not just to create physical existence, but poetically trace the figure as a sojourner leaving a trail. The dark fading hills suggest secrecy or privacy. The rag in his pocket is not formal or incidental, but is enhancing the representation of the sitter by defining him as one who would carry a rag for something. Though the detail of a rag enhanced the portrait, the detail of grass and snow differentiation I thought would not add anything but more *scene*, which is why the entire field is a flat gradation of white.

9

I realized early on that "Mel in springtime" was going to be the boldest painting in the project if it came out well. I relied heavily on the specificity of the character-- she is a very quiet and aloof friend of mine from Grace, Idaho. In addition to the complexity of the character there is the reliance and juxtaposition of a psychological scene (like the previous painting), and there is a very daring confrontation of sentimentality (a pastoral scene with a young woman and flowers). The interplay became substantial and rich with poetry. These last two paintings are very large (84" x 96") and I think this helps their realism as they move away from being pictures and become more of a formal memory. The size of the world we view in these paintings

encompasses our field of vision and dissolves the actual object of a painting. Canvas and paint give way to mood and memory. Still they are without pictorial realism, and the scene is staged enough to suggest and encourage poetic interpretation: the scraggly flowers, the abandoned buildings, the alone but contented young woman with an uncertain smile, all against an expressionless sky and empty rural landscape combine to make this painting the most poetic of my pieces.

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It's been an enjoyable challenge to explore the most rehearsed of all genres: the portrait. I am able to participate in a long tradition of thought and in many contemporary ideas. In this

way I can help keep portraiture alive. The most exciting part of portraiture is when observing the

beauty of others-- a humbling encounter that causes ideas in the first place.

11

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