

8-2012

"The Beauty is in the Honesty".

Melanie K. Norris

East Tennessee State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/honors>



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Norris, Melanie K., ""The Beauty is in the Honesty"." (2012). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 44. <https://dc.etsu.edu/honors/44>

This Honors Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

The Beauty is in the Honesty

An Honors College University Honors Scholar

Thesis and Exhibition

East Tennessee State University

Submitted in fulfillment of Honors by

Melanie Kathryn Norris

2 May, 2012

Scott M. Koterbay, Faculty Mentor

Mira Singh, Committee Member

Michael Cody, Committee Member

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Artist's Statement | 3 |
| Chapter 1: Portraiture of the Past | 4 |
| Chapter 2: The Approach | 8 |
| Chapter 3: Influences of Subject Matter | 12 |
| Chapter 4: Discussion of My Work | 16 |
| Chapter 5: <i>Conversations and Women</i> | 20 |
| Chapter 6: The Subjects Respond | 25 |
| Bibliography | 29 |

Artist's Statement

My work deals with the duality of soul and body. I try to reconcile the two through portraiture and figurative paintings. The body itself is not existence; it is only a vessel animated by the soul within. They are invariably linked in a constant pushing and pulling relationship. In his work, novelist Milan Kundera talks about how, as one ages, weight and gravity cause the body to fall slowly back toward the earth while the soul reaches ever higher, seeking lightness. A true separation of the two only occurs in death. My paintings address this separation by showing the weight and physicality of human bodies. In the *Women* series, I render only the skin and focus on its texture and how it interacts with the negative space. Each painting deals with a different body/soul interaction. Some focus more on the physical, and others, the more ephemeral. This series serves as a transition between my other work groupings.

My oil portraits are more fleshy and painterly – very much steeped in the physical: both the physical existence, life, energy, and the physical act of painting. I paint men whose stories I feel I can literally read in the lines of their faces and the expression in their eyes and mouths. This series is influenced by the literal painting styles of Jenny Saville and Lucien Freud. The blatant handling of both the medium and the subject is reflected somewhat in my work. My watercolor paintings are more invested in the personality and spirit of the person I'm painting and the conversation we have while I photograph them. I try to capture the things not said, the expressions that come candidly while the person turns inward to examine themselves. Whenever a subject is told the conversation will be photographed, they immediately become self-conscious and introspective. A pure honesty emerges and this gives the series a quiet and searching attitude that lends itself well to the language of the watercolor medium. American painter Andrew Wyeth has been influential of my process of finding a meaningful relationship with my subjects and letting their soul quietly emerge through the painting.

My paintings are about process – with the materials and with human interactions. Relationships take time as do paintings. I document my fascinations and bonds with people, however fleeting or lasting, through my work. I observe the originality, purity, and honesty of their being as a whole, both the soul and the body that houses it, and try to translate it the best way I know how.

Chapter 1: Portraiture of the Past

In past societies, portrait painters were expected to be liars. Artists were hired to paint a symbol of status, not a likeness. A literal and meaningful depiction of the sitter was irrelevant; they simply wanted to look rich and powerful, even if that meant looking nothing like themselves. Katharine Knox, in her book about post-Revolutionary War era portraiture summarizes: "Portrait painters had to walk the fine line of producing the image the depicted desired to display while retaining some of the original lineaments" (Knox 15). The people of this time used their "likenesses" as a way of establishing the social strata and superior cultural identity. This not only condemned the artist to being a laborer whose craft was at the withering mercy of an untrained, and typically untalented patron's eye, but it also chained art invariably to wealth, not beauty. In "The Face of the Public," Christopher Lukasik discusses with scorn the raging commercialization of portraiture at this time and the fact that the only claim the rich had to appear before public in such a fashion was their wealth, not exemplary moral character or any other outstanding attributes (Lukasik 417). The artist-for-hire mentality made technical skills grow, but stymied any emotional depth.

In the late nineteenth century, John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) exemplified this notion. He was rejected by many contemporaries for his lack of innovation and passion. He played by the societal rules, and was heavily criticized by modern artists for this. English critic and painter, Roger Fry summarized that Sargent's paintings were "art applied to social requirements and social ambitions" (Ratcliff 177). As a painter, he was incredibly talented and unique in his painterly style that gave the impression of ease and perfection with few large strokes of paint.



John Singer Sargent. *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw*. 1892. 49x39 inches. Oil on Canvas. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

He was also acutely attuned to nuances in people's personalities and character which gave his portraits a mysteriously insightful and anxious tone, as in *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw* (1892). A wealthy European socialite commissioned this portrait of his wife, Gertrude Vernon. Sargent, a socialite himself, was aware of the social constructs of the age and noticed how it affected his subjects. When commissioned to paint the wives of affluent members in society, the portraits, nearly without fail, exude an interesting duality of regal pride and anxiety or tentativeness.

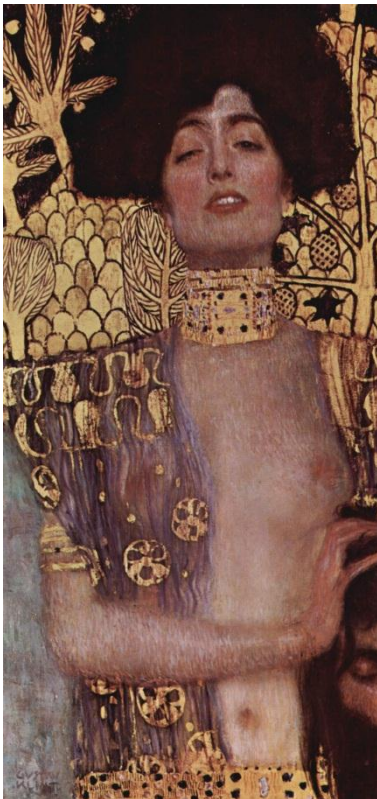
Sargent used such a smooth, elegant technique to allow the psychological implications to subtly pervade the portrait. If they were too overt, if the paint quality pushed them on the viewer, the patron would surely reject it. Society did not want the painter's opinion on the lives and emotions of their wives. Sargent painted carefully and knew where to take freedom. In his biography about Sargent, Carter Ratcliff notes the reason being the perplexities and anxieties of the age and says that it especially affected the women and he states:

Sargent offers the play of social type against personality, of the sitter's inner nature against fashion's constantly shifting ideals. 'Women don't ask you to make the beautiful,' he said, 'but you can feel them wanting you to do so all the time.' On the evidence of his best portraits, Sargent felt these pressures in the endlessly delicate, persistently tangled terms of the international society in which he moved (Ratcliff 171).

Sargent understood the game and willingly played along. To the chagrin of his contemporaries, he used his talents of perception to give the wealthy what they wanted; a grand portrait, a 'Sargent' to hang in their homes and cling to as social validation. Yet he did this in his own way.

He was not a portrait-painting automaton, but a rational person commenting on the circles in which he ran.

In the same time-period as Sargent, Austrian portraitist Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) was asserting a new approach to commissioned paintings with even more fervor. He too was hired to paint influential members of society, but he did not play as nicely as Sargent. He was a notoriously controversial artist, taking commissions and absolutely disregarding the wishes and preferences of the patrons. This eventually solidified him as one of the best artists of his time, gaining him significant artistic freedom and allowances, but he still managed to frustrate clients for the entirety of his career. The wealthy Austrian women painted by Klimt were granted their



Gustav Klimt. *Judith I*. 1901. 60 x 52 inches. Oil on Canvas. Osterreichische Galerie, Vienna.

status symbol in a unique way. Frank Whitford, speaking in his book about Klimt's approach to the subject says: "He worked hard to negotiate the path between his desire for self-expression and the conflicting demands of his clients. In Klimt's portraits there is evidence of conflict and of compromise in the highly visible tension that was the result of ultimately incompatible motives" (Whitford 100). There were several abandoned contracts in his career, either by him or the client. Klimt was unconcerned with being accepted or praised for a job well done; he used the commission as a vehicle to express a personal statement. Instead of carefully constructing surroundings that complemented and enhanced the sitter, as Sargent would do, Klimt would use the figure as an inlaid layer in a

loud, visually vibrant composition. In the painting *Judith I* (1901), the background literally

invades the shape of the body, pushing it behind. The painting depicts the story of Judith decapitating Assyrian general, Holofernes, in order to save her city. The sitter for this portrait was incontestably Adele Bloch-Bauer, the wife of a wealthy German, Ferdinand Bloch. Klimt had taken and completed a commission for her portrait by her husband, but kept her as a model. In the incredibly erotic portrait of Judith, Bloch-Bauer's features are undeniable, as is the choker she wears, given to her by her husband (Whitford 12). Klimt painted with social arrogance, not caring to flaunt an affair to all of Vienna. Gold leaf and complex patterns dominate the plane. The significance of the woman shifts from subject to object. She is a part of the decoration, yet she still stands apart. Her role functions in a nontraditional way. Klimt appropriated Bloch-Bauer for his own purposes and painted her in a simple way, enmeshing her in his dazzling and daring background. He was boldly claiming his personal art to be greater than the art that society requested of him. His loyalty lay with his art, the sitter had to either understand and accept that or find someone less passionately entrenched in their work to paint them.



Andrew Wyeth. *Christina's World*. 1948. 32 ¼ x 47 ¾ inches. Tempera on Panel. Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

American painter Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) is another of several examples who utilized traditional portraiture to convey the emotion, passion, and spirit of the sitter, the artist, and the situation. He used portraits to create an entire environment and

experience, eventually editing even the people from their portraits. Some of his most evocative

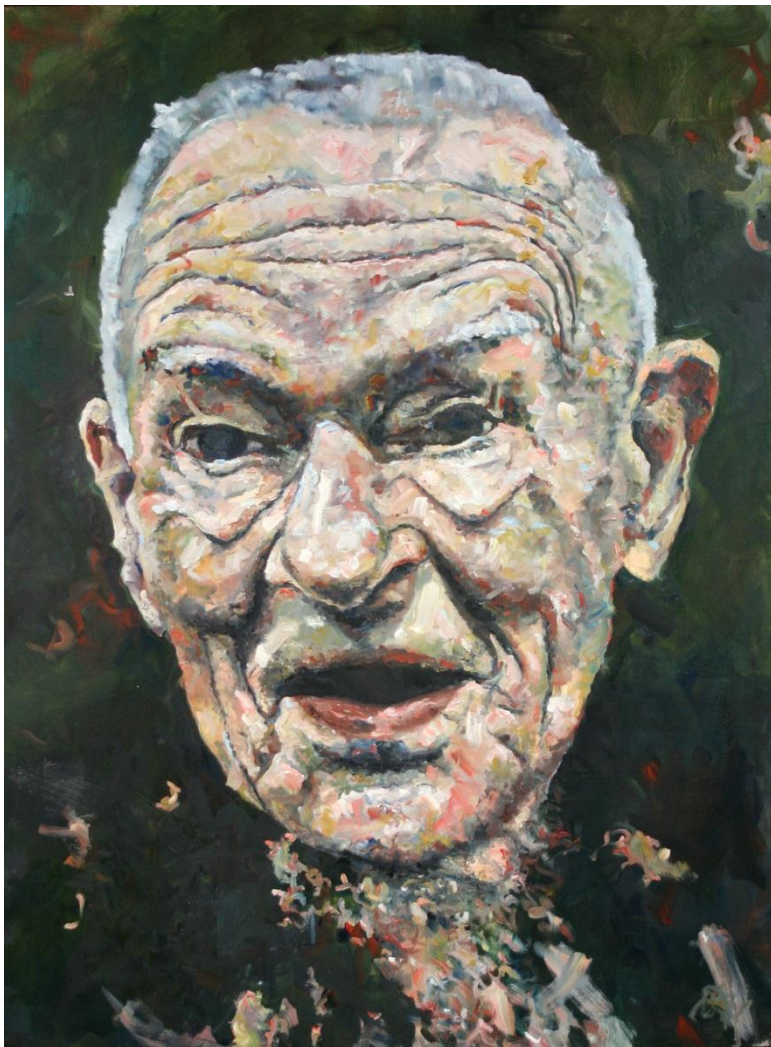
works about a subject do not show their faces, just their spirit as *he*, the painter saw it. This is also an example of how the artist reclaimed their role as *artist*, not merely crafts-person. He himself stated: "I want to get down to the real substance of life itself. The object is the art, not what I make of it" (Meryman 116). Wyeth surrendered himself to the essence of the painting. The portrait was not a person, it was an emotion, an instance, something that snagged the fascination of Wyeth and held him tight until he painted it justice. In his work, *Christina's World* (1948), Wyeth used his wife as the model for Christina. The actual Christina was an overweight, homebound older woman who could not walk, but instead dragged herself by her hands. To Wyeth, the portrait was not in her person, but in her story. It did not matter if Christina was physically in the portrait because the entire work was invariably *her* (Meryman 112). Wyeth painted her with laborious delicacy, trying to fully capture Christina's spirit using small calculated strokes. This is an artist visually asserting themselves into validation through their own confidence and talent. His art was his life, meshed into his thoughts, actions, beliefs, the all of his being. The money and the status were residual effects for both him and the people he painted. His honesty created their worth.

Chapter 2: The Approach

I am not conceptually driven. There is no great meaning or message I'm shouting to the world from behind each of my portraits. They are truly and simply meditations on and investigations of the people that prick my heart. I paint them to study them; in a fast-paced life with superficial relationships, this is my way of pausing to look at the people who make up my world. I look in order to understand them; I have to internalize their character and essence by observing them as they sit and think. Conversations that are only about the words do not process in my mind; there must also be the physical act of conversing, talking with our bodies. It's as if the souls communicate through our nonverbal actions. Either the result of years spent together or an instantaneous glance, these are people with whom I have a range of relationships. I am drawn to the life-map of their wrinkles or the energy that emanates from their being, and there are things within each of my subjects that I hold within myself. The pictures I paint are not only of others, they are of me. Through every different face or figure I see a new facet of myself. When I look upon a finished portrait, I don't see the subject as much as I see the process of myself being joined to that person. The expressive strokes show my hand in their face. I begin to identify, not necessarily with the person, but with that particular face and expression. Their physical act of talking or smiling or looking becomes my physical act of recording it. In true self-absorbed-artist fashion, I paint myself into each person. Their lips become the stroke of my brush; their eyes, my frustration while daubing ultramarine blue on wet black paint. Through the direction of the conversations I use to get my images, I paint myself into each person. I throw myself into the dialogs, becoming consciously aware of our

physical interaction and the meanings pinned beneath our words. I gather what I can from them and give what I can to them. I offer advice, condolences, understanding, and silence while I absorb our exchange. Be it in the expression, the awkwardness of the pose, or the texture style of the medium, *I paint myself into each person.*

I'm an observer. I enjoy watching people, investigating their true character and personality even before meeting them. It's interesting, the face we put on for people. Even our demeanor, body language, and voices change when we're faced with different social situations.



Frank, 2012. Oil on Canvas. 48 x 36 inches.

It's easy to become lost in the masks we use for the world. True identity gets mixed and bled and diluted until we, as people, are confused about who we are at the root of our being. I observe to find the things that hint at truth - the unadulterated passion and emotion that we knew as children, have since stifled, and are now strangers to. I don't necessarily want to uncover and portray this truth.

Rather, I like to point out the ways we hide or suppress it. The faces we've learned from society: the way to set one's mouth

into a pleasant smile, for example, homogenizes us as a human race. There are ways we are universally expected to look. When we are happy, we smile. How many of those smiles are natural? When sad, we have some variation of a frown. Have we been conditioned to use these emotional cues to the point of it seeming like a natural impulse? With my work I find the smiles that seem to emanate a true and internal joy. Then, in a sense, I exploit them. I want to use them to cause the viewer to think about the honesty of them and compare it to their own honesty or dishonesty. Are they capable of feeling such raw delight? My *Frank* painting most effectively addresses this issue. It's large and almost leering, but it exudes a happiness that is unequivocally real. The skin of the neck breaks and fragments down into swaths of color that represent his energy, showing that he is real, he is sentient and growing and not bound by the body and the things it has learned.

Alternatively, many of my watercolor paintings deal with the moment when guards are at their highest; I embarrass my subjects by photographing them, so they drop their eyes and play with their hands. This is a defense, a mask. In this mask, however, I find an exciting veracity. They are silently declining me, checking out of the conversation to get respite, they withdraw inside of themselves behind the lowered gaze and wringing hands. I watch this and document it; noting the mask and noting the whirlwind of thoughts flurrying behind its passive façade. These figures are more contained, the watercolor held inside the white expanse where clothes meet the background. I edit the image down to the most significant part, removing visual noise, reflecting the solitude of the mind of the subject.

Chapter 3: Influences of Subject Matter

There is something about an expression stemmed from pure emotion, not one that was thought about and arranged, that is so refreshingly beautiful. They are often grotesquely contorted; the beauty is found in the honesty. The entirety of my work, however, touches on this theme in more subtle ways. Catching people lost in thought, showing the insecurity they feel within their own bodies; the weight of the self goes slack and pulls away to reveal reality. In all of my work I try to show raw and natural truth, either in expression, posture, paint quality, or a close and un-idealized face.

In his book simply named *Portraiture*, Richard Brilliant speaks about why portraits have such a formal, stifled quality and reputation:

Portraits exist at the interface between art and social life and the pressure to conform to social norms enters into their composition because both the artist and the subject are enmeshed in the value system of their society [...] Adding to their force is the conscious or unconscious wish to 'put one's best foot forward' which increases the tendency to conceal the individual's personal idiosyncrasies and expose only those features that are known to make the best impression... Portraits reflect social realities (Brilliant 11).

That unconscious wish that everyone has to show their best to the world is exactly what I am trying to avoid granting in my work. Rather, I want to show a different sort of best; the best that no one would recognize without the aid of seeing it as a piece of art on a gallery wall. The best that comes only from a raw honesty in the sitter. I also want to quash the weight of these social 'realities' that stigmatize and box people without giving them an opportunity to prove otherwise. Overweight women become muses in art, an old and wrinkled face, a pained and lost expression also earn a respected glow once they've been recognized by an artist and

painted with spirit. I see it as my duty to recognize these things in my everyday life and be the vehicle by which they are shown in their true and beautiful state.

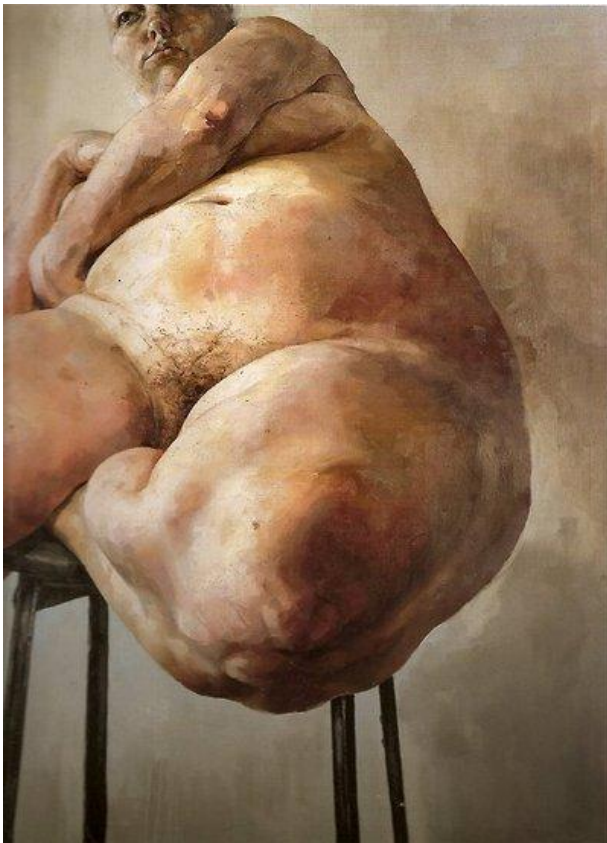
The influences in my work are incredibly peripheral. Much of my style comes from internal frustration and the necessity of visual problem-solving. Through my inability to retain crisp color in oil paint with smooth, velvety strokes, I developed a stippled application that mixes daubs of color directly on the canvas. I realized that this style had a reciprocal relationship with the energy of the subject's personality. It helped breathe life into the soul of the painting. After working in this style for some time, I began to look at other artists who used a painterly application in figurative work.

Well-established contemporary British artist, Lucien Freud (1922-2011), epitomizes the idea of utilizing the common-verging-on-ugly person to show true, harsh beauty. His subjects are almost exclusively his family and friends. His portrayal of them is starkly honest. They are stripped bare both physically and emotionally. His oil painting of a large nude woman reclining on a couch titled *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995) exemplifies this notion. In a typical social setting, this woman would most likely not be given another look; instantly dismissed by society's standards of attractiveness. However, painted by Freud and hung upon a gallery wall



Lucian Freud. *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*. 1995. 59 x 86 ¼ inches. Oil on canvas. Private Collection, Europe.

instantly *immortalizes* this woman. She becomes the subject of adoration and attentiveness; people are intrigued by her and want to know her story, her life. The expertise and skill and oeuvre of Freud transformed her into a siren. His own interest generated global interest. The undulations and mass of her flesh are not traditionally repulsive, but rather grotesquely beautiful. Further, Freud brings the psychological implications of his choice in subject to the forefront of the viewer's mind. The woman has closed her own mind to what is happening, she leaves the viewer to look in peace without the uneasy gaze of her eyes following them. She is relaxed, yet holding herself on to a couch that is tipping forward, threatening to throw her fully onto the gallery floor. There is an incredible vulnerability in this, but she remains solidly in place, in the environment where she is queen. She refuses to be pushed into the living world where she is ignored. Freud paints his subjects with a visceral cruelty that I do not typify in my



Jenny Saville, *Prop*, 1992. 84 x 72 inches. Oil on canvas. Nationalgalerie, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin.

work, but our literal approach is similar. There is a desire to strip down to walls constructed by the subject. Freud does this literally, while my approach is more empathetic and emotional.

British artist Jenny Saville (b. 1970) paints overweight women in similarly brash ways. In her 1992 portrait, *Prop*, Saville uses a unique perspective, focusing on the knee of the subject, allowing it to be the center around which the body radiates, retreating into the

background. The figure is unidealized and, paired with its position, monstrously fascinating. The folds of the skin, the expression, the knee thrusting forward as the rest of the body pulls away in a protective and concealing gesture: all of these features make the woman mesmerizing. The viewer is captured by her seemingly paradoxical body language. Here is yet another woman, overweight, who gains admiration, an audience pleading with her to reveal her character, her intentions. Saville and Freud are the most prominent members of a group of artists who seek to solidify the movement away from portraiture for those who either command it with their expensive commissions or earn it with their socially-validated beauty. They concentrate instead on the exquisiteness of mass, solidity, and exposing one's imperfections. This awareness is echoed in my work in a subtler way. Where they paint crudely, grandly and boldly, I suggest and hint, expecting the viewer to take more expansive leaps and allowing them to use their own experiences to resonate with mine.

Chapter 4: Discussion of My Work

My art is very much about the process by which I come to the realization that someone has that indescribable beauty that I must paint. I watch my work develop slowly; I establish



The Sleeper, 2012. Watercolor on Panel. 35 x 60 inches.

relationships with my subjects and take steps toward the portrait. In this way my art becomes an integral part of my social life. My feelings for the people I paint are an incredibly influential part of my work. They range from curiosity to frustration to fascination, and their depth varies as well. Some of my subjects I've known my whole life, and I'm just now beginning to feel that I've never truly known them at all. The paintings of my mom, for example, are investigative. Through the multiplicity of images I've painted of her, I'm trying to cognize her role as a *person* in my life, not just as a mother.



The Awakening, 2010. Watercolor on Paper. 6 x 10 inches.

Our relationship is distant in some ways, and my work also addresses the frustration and abandonment I sometimes feel. By putting her in front of a camera, something I know she despises, I am cruelly scrutinizing her; by making her uncomfortable I try to see the honesty of her as a humbled human being, not only a mother figure. Other subjects, David, for example are the result of great conversation. I first talked with David for hours before realizing that I needed to visually document all of the thoughts that were bouncing between us. His face was

linked to the tone of our words; by painting his face, I recorded our words. I didn't know him well at all; many parts of his life will remain unknown to me, but the depth of our dialogue led me to believe I knew him better in some ways than I knew my family. It is what people are willing to give to me that I paint. My mom reserves her innermost thoughts for herself, while a near-stranger opens the depths of his mind and fears to me. The results are interesting and I'm still processing their implications. The David paintings have a more easy openness while the Sandra series is more emotionally shrouded. These feelings for my subjects are nearly impossible for me to rationally articulate; I need the language of the paint to help express my mind. When I step back from a portrait, I realize that I've painted things that have been subconsciously stored for some time. The paint helps to bring them forward. The transient and gentle quality of watercolor says a great deal when it's used to find the spirit inside of a person who normally guards themselves from others. The expressiveness that can be achieved with oil paint also lends itself well to some of my subjects. I choose a medium that best suits both the person and the situation.



Conversations: David, 2012. Watercolor on Paper. 22 x 28 inches.

The kind of paint I use is just as crucial to the aesthetic as the subject. I paint life and energy and joy exuded with oil primarily; I paint quietude and introspection with watercolor. I use chalk to dig out texture and carve away at the quality of the flesh. Oil has a luscious, staid, obvious quality where watercolor is muted and ready to dissipate into any pool of water. Chalk is scratchy and sketchy and easily blemished; these all have thrilling qualities that further the

spirit of my subject. In my portrait *Kelly*, I paired a watercolor base with a chalk overlay. The watercolor ran to the ends of the panel and acted as light, washy anchors to either end, while the chalk solidified the figure in its present space. This provides a transient yet electrically real veracity to the crouched subject. As I paint, I find myself at times using the portrait merely as an excuse to show my love for the medium and the act of painting. I think about the stroke, the pigment, the line, the color instead of the face and the heart. My ideas are about the person; they catch my eye and I am irrevocably drawn to them, but once I start working it becomes a meditation on *painting*. However, once I am finished, I can step away and rediscover the initial attraction and intensity of emotion I had for the person I was painting; the finished product



***Woman 3*, 2012. Mixed media on Panel. 42 x 24 inches.**

melds my two interests into one product. This feeling is reminiscent of the way Edgar Degas approached painting his dancers. He painted the dancers because of the beautiful line, color, and aesthetic that they afforded his work. He painted them from an almost purely formal approach. He says: “They call me the painter of dancers; they don’t realize that for me the dancer has been a pretext for painting pretty materials and delineating movement” (Pool 106). For particular collections of paintings, I consider myself every bit as callous as Degas.

While in the moment of painting the piece, my mental state resonates with his. I simply use the body as a means to put color on a panel. Especially in my latest series, *Women*, the idea is very much about the

subject; the painting is very much about the painting, and the result is all about the totality of the process.

Chapter 5: *Conversations and Women*

My figurative work with female subjects, titles *Women*, stemmed from the *Conversations* series. While taking photographs of people while talking with them, I realized just how much the body literally spoke to me. The hands gesture to say things the mouth cannot express. The torso, legs, body positioning and re-positioning told me things the face tried to hide or the mind did not even consciously realize. I was infatuated with this fleshy diary



Conversations: Sandra, 2012. Watercolor on Paper. 30 x 22 inches.

that the subject was unaware they were exposing. In fact, I chose to use watercolor because of the vulnerability and delicate nature of the conversations. French novelist Milan Kundera writes philosophical fiction that explores human nature and human interactions, and the relationships with self and with others. In his book *Immortality*, Kundera contemplates the betrayal of a woman by her body. He writes: “She blushed. It is a beautiful thing

when a woman blushes; at that instant her body no longer belongs to her; she doesn't control it, she is at its mercy. Oh, can there be anything more beautiful than the sight of a woman violated by her own body!” (Kundera 337). The vulnerability that this violation affords is crucial to my work. I do not relish in the idea of violation, but I am violating my subjects' privacy by

photographing them, and my work depends of their realization of this. Otherwise, they would not exude the uncomfortable honesty that I need.

In *Conversations*, I began to broaden the spectrum of my focus by including hands. With *Sandra Speaking*, the hands are close up and have much more visual and conceptual weight than the face; her gaze directing the viewer's gaze toward the hands is its most important function. From studying Leonardo da Vinci's sketches of Madonna-like women with serene faces and expressive hands, I moved toward a closer artistic relationship with the body,



Woman 1: Shirley, 2012. Watercolor, Chalk on Panel. 52 x 24 inches.

the flesh, the statement made by posture, and how I could investigate this. From here, I decided to begin a new series, *Women*, that dealt with weight, language, and strength. The visual weight and balance of a painting on a toned ground and how it interacts with its space, as well as the literal weight of the women I was painting became very prevalent in the beginning of the series. The language of the mediums I used; how different media interact both within the same painting and in a collection of works played with the body- language of the subjects, all saying different things. Particularly with *Shirley*, the first painting I completed in the series, my intention was to convey the regal, queenly command she has over a body whose weight sinks ever-nearer to the earth and

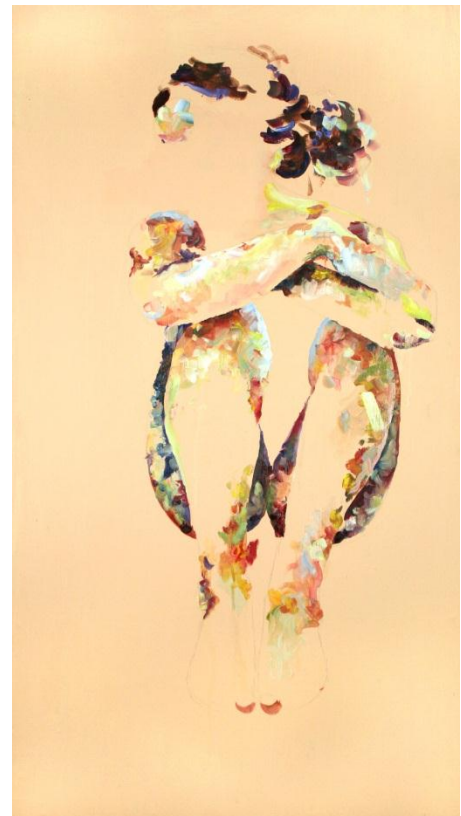
would be considered unattractive. Flesh is ugly; the body falls into wrinkly, weighted disrepair, but it is often the only honest thing about us. This idea resonates with an aspect of the pseudoscientific Lavaterian physiognomy.

In his theologically scientific research, Johann Caspar Lavater claims that a man's morals and personality can be divined from the physical characteristics of his face. He wrote an entire book giving guidelines for this "scientific research." For example, by looking at the slope of a man's forehead, or the distance between his eyes, one can divine whether or not he is dumb or lazy, passionate or cruel. I was initially interested in the theory; I thought the study of facial features would lend itself to my idea of painting the soul through the body; however it quickly ran into a dead end. This theory is generally discounted because of a total lack of evidence. Johann Lavater essentially used only his own experiences and opinions to create the theory and corresponding guide. My body of work focuses on the individuality and uniqueness of all people and experiences. However, Lavaterian physiognomy springs from a long history of studying the body in order to understand the mind, a concept that certainly resonates with my work. The body is a constant. Everyone shares the same basic physical existence and that is undeniable. In the book *Face Value*, Christopher Rivers points out that Lavater is proposing the acceptance of corporeal signifiers above verbal signifiers (Rivers 80). He basically claims that language is a relative thing. It is man-made and variable, where the body is the original language. He states:

The distinction being made here is clearly that between an original, natural semiotic system and its secondary, inferior reflection, which is human language. Their relationship is that of prototype and imitation. It is precisely because human language is not to be trusted that physiognomy must exist (Rivers 81).

This directly relates to my conversations with subjects where their hands and bodies said the truth while the mouth said words that neither of us fully understood nor cared about. So, while Lavater's science is rejected because it was based on his feelings and sentiments that arbitrarily assigned facial features meaning, it is relevant. All science is relative to its environment, and though there is no empirical data, the social and experiential evidence in the body proves that the study of it does afford insight into the mind. These insights, however, cannot be homogenized into Lavater's generalizations.

As my research of Lavater's physiognomy fell away, so did the spiritually corporeal meaning behind my *Women* paintings. They slowly evolved from regal Shirley into only bodies and shapes; vehicles for my paint. *Woman 4* shows the progression from a person into Woman. Her identity is no longer important, only the body she provides. As the identity becomes more ambiguous, the paint transitions into oils and becomes more freely applied. It is less careful, but more aesthetically pleasing.



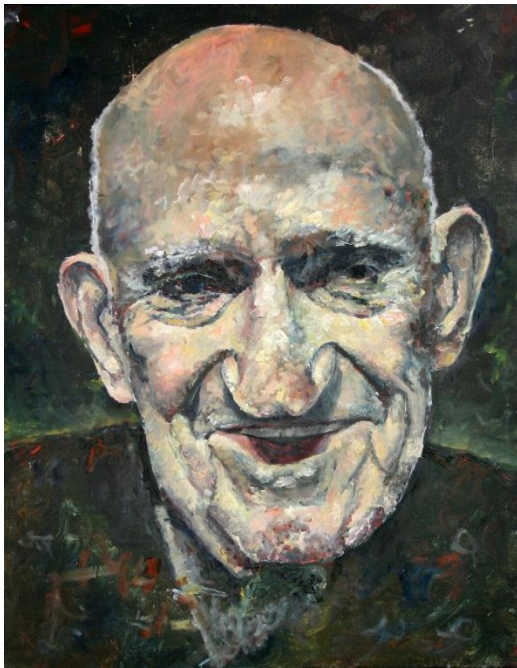
Woman 4, 2012. Oil on Panel. 42 x 24 inches.

The irrefutable honesty of body compared to the less certain and more personal, relational existence of the mind and soul is again discussed by Milan Kundera. The novel *Immortality* by Kundera initially got me interested in the differentiated relationship between the person and the body. In the book he observes a woman and the life her body lives versus the life her mind lives: "An aesthete might say that her behind is too bulky and a bit too low,

which is all the more disturbing as her soul longs for the heights. But it is precisely in this contradiction that I find the crux of the human condition: our heads are full of dreams, but our behinds drag us down like an anchor” (Kundera 241). Such is the paradoxical nature of our being. Our bodies sink, reach, fall slowly back into the earth from which they sprang while the mind and the soul are still reaching for immortality. Only through death, the ultimate separation of body and soul, can the soul finally attain its goal and the body fully descend back to its origins. *Women* collectively explores the different and unique stages of this process. Varying weight, ages, and positions provides a more encompassing dialogue with the viewer.

Chapter 6: The Subjects Respond

To provide closure for this exhibition experience, it was important to observe, record, and consider the responses of my subjects to their portraits. The reactions were surprising and varied. Specifically, Frank Chapo, my subject for *Frank*, had the most negative response. Frank has a naturally vivacious personality; he will approach people warmly and shower them with affection. There is a contagious joy of life in his body that emanates energy. When he was shown a picture of his portrait, however, he immediately recoiled. His voice faltered and he simply began shaking his head. Still with a sweet smile, he said he didn't like it. He walked off and did not want to keep the photo. None of this was done rudely; he was truly taken aback and at a loss for words. I knew, however, that he wanted to distance himself from that sort of attention. Initially, I was hurt by this, but I remembered that my grandpa had a similar reaction



Leo, 2009. Oil on Canvas. 30 x 22 inches.

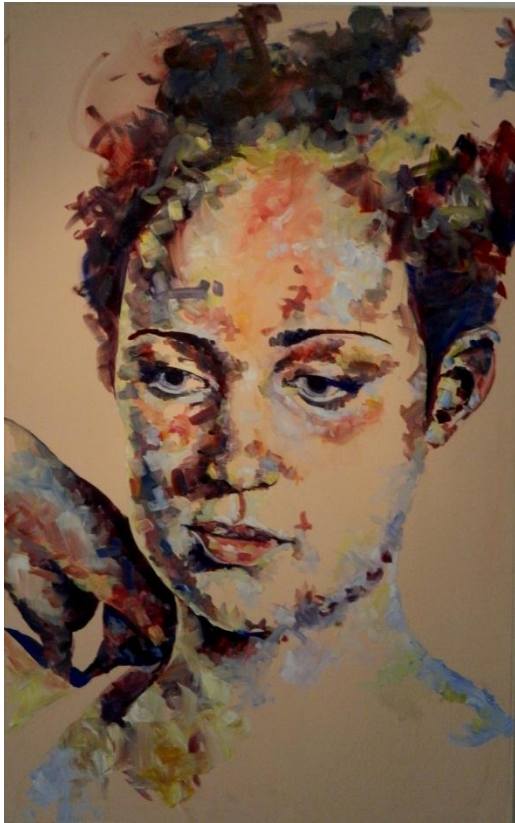
to his portrait, *Leo*. He, too, had an immediate distaste for his portrait. He would grumpily look at it when he thought he was not being watched. I realized that these men, both 90-years-old, do not see themselves as elderly men. The face I painted of them was not the face they saw in themselves. They saw themselves as the sum of their life experiences; they were ageless. The body that represented their person

had betrayed them by looking old and gaining wrinkles, and my painting it only amplified the betrayal. These men were hurt and confused.

Looking in the mirror and seeing one's self is much different than seeing it stamped down, frozen into place on a canvas. And where others see the personality and life-map of a well-lived existence, they only see the sagging skin and wrinkles that conceal their true identity.

Sandra, my mom, who was the subject of my *Sleeper* series and *Conversations: Sandra*, had a less definitive, but still palpable distaste for her portraits. They brought many of her insecurities about her body to the forefront of her mind. She considered some of the paintings ugly because she was the subject of them. However, she was obviously drawn to them. They provided an insight into herself that she had never been given before. To see herself through the eye of an artist confused her because the portrait did not match her idea of who she was. I watched as she sorted through the enigma that was exterior portrayal of self versus interior notion of self. American realist painter, Chuck Close, was made famous by the photo-realistic portraits he painted in the 1970's. He primarily painted close friends and fellow-artists. To further the depth of his portraiture, he wrote a book, published in 1997, that consisted solely of interviews with his subjects titled *The Portraits Speak*. Through the conversations with the 27 people he painted, he sought and gained an understanding of his art through the eyes of the subject. Similar to my experience, his interviews uncovered a skeptical confusion. The people painted have little sense of the way they are actually seen by others. He writes: "I have never painted people who see themselves clearly, who present a specific persona" (Close 434). Perhaps this ambiguity is what initially sparks the interest for both him and me. The absence of a perfectly clear and readable face is what makes the paintings dynamic and remarkable.

Through the process of completing three very different bodies of work: *Women*, *Conversations*, and *Men*, I externalized many thoughts about the mind and body duality, explored and contemplated the faces and personalities of several people close to me. I



Artist as Subject: Introspection, 2012. Oil on Panel. 40 x 33 inches.

watched them watch themselves. As they were put in front of a camera, they went to a place within themselves I could wonder at, but neither truly experience nor understand. As a culminating piece of this exhibition as a whole, it slowly became apparent that I had to do a self-portrait. None of the other paintings would be clear to me without also having the experience of being a subject. I used the same approach: a conversation. A former subject now wielded the camera, and I was trapped in front of its lens, squirming and at a loss for words. Eventually, the conversation fell silent as I allowed complete introspection to reign. From the source images, the faces I put on for the camera resulted in horrible photographs, but the moment where I allowed the awkwardness to engulf my body as I retreated inside my mind caused an incredibly truthful picture to emerge. From there, I painted myself with all of the nervous flits and twists of color that I felt inside of myself, and the result was *Artist as Subject: Introspection*. Through this painting, the rest of my work gained a greater significance. I understood the emotion behind the source images as well as my choices in medium. My own thoughts during the entire process were brought closer to consciousness.

Not until I empathized with my subjects did I understand my own work. The self-portrait also catalyzed the conclusion that my exhibition is not a showcase of completed ideas, but the starting point from which I can explore myself and others for potentially the rest of my career. Titling the show “The Beauty is in the Honesty” is the unifying keystone in my work. I forced myself to allow the truth of people and situations prevail in my work, and I believe there is no other way to achieve the quiet undertone of beauty in portraiture than to allow the honesty of the subject have control. It is the art of human nature; the art which I take and then searchingly paint as my own.

Bibliography

- Arnheim, Rudolf. *Art and Visual Perception*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1965.
- Atalay, Bulent. *Math and the Mona Lisa*. Smithsonian Books: Washington, 2004.
- Bernasconi, Robert and Wood, David. *The Provocation of Levinas*. Routledge: New York, 1988.
- Bonafoux, Pascal. *The Impressionists: Portraits and Confidences*. Rizzoli International Publications: New York, 1986.
- Borzello, Frances. *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self Portraits*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc: New York, 1998.
- Brilliant, Richard. *Portraiture*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1991.
- Chadwick, Whitney, and de Courtirron, Irene. *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*. Thames and Hudson: London, 1993.
- Close, Chuck. *The Portraits Speak: Chuck Close in Conversation with 27 of His Subjects*. A.R.T. Press: New York, 1997.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Leonardo da Vinci." *Continental Aesthetics*. Ed. Kearney, Richard, and Rasmussen, David. Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2007. 216-219.
- Jenkins, D. Fraser, and S. Fox-Pitt. *Portrait of the Artist*. Tate Gallery: London, 1989.
- Kant, Immanuel. "The Critique of Judgement." *Continental Aesthetics*. Ed. Kearney, Richard, and Rasmussen, David. Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2007. 5-45.
- Kemp, Martin. *Leonardo*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004.
- . *Leonardo on Painting*. Yale University Press: New York, 1989.
- . *The Science of Art*. Yale University Press: London, 1990.
- Knox, Katharine McCook. *The Sharples: Their Portraits of George Washington and His Contemporaries*. New York: Da Capo, 1972.
- Kundera, Milan. *Immortality*. HarperCollins Publishers: New York, 1990.

- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Humanism of the Other*. University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 2006.
- . *Totality and Infinity*. Duquesne University Press: Pittsburgh, PA., 1988.
- Lukasik, Christopher. "The Face of the Public." *Early American Literature*, vol. 39 (413-464). 2004.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Eye and Mind." *Continental Aesthetics*. Ed. Kearney, Richard, and Rasmussen, David. Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2007. 288-306.
- Meryman, Richard. *Andrew Wyeth: A Secret Life*. Harper Collins Publishers: New York, 1996.
- Parker, R. and Pollock, G. *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology*. Routledge&Kegan: London, 1981
- Peperzak, Adriann. *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. Purdue Univ. Press: West Lafayette, IN., 1993.
- Perry, G. (ed.) *Gender and Art*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1999.
- Pool, Phoebe. *Degas*. Spring Books: London. 1966.
- Powell, Richard. *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2009.
- Prescott, Theodore. *A Broken Beauty*. WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co: Cambridge, 2005.
- Ratliff, Carter. *John Singer Sargent*. Abbeville Publications: New York, 1982.
- Rideal, Liz. *Mirror Mirror: Self-Portraits by Women Artists*. Watson-Guption Publications: New York, 2001.
- Tsouna, Voula. "Doubts About Other Minds and the Science of Physiognomics." *The Classical Quarterly*. Vol. 48, No. 1 (175-186). 1998.
- Wegner, Daniel M. "The Mind's Self Portrait" *New York Academy of Sciences* 1001: 1-14, 2003.
- Whitford, Frank. *Klimt*. Thames and Hudson: London, 1990.

Images Bibliography

- Freud, Lucian. Benefits Supervisor Sleeping. 1995. Private Collection, Europe. Accessed April 15, 2012: http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5074074.
- Klimt, Gustav. Judith I. 1901. Osterreichische Galerie, Vienna. Accessed April 21, 2012: http://www.artchive.com/artchive/K/klimt/judith_i.jpg.html.
- Sargent, John Singer. Lady Agnew of Lochnaw. 1892. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh. Accessed April 17, 2012: http://jssgallery.org/Paintings/Lady_Agnew.htm.
- Saville, Jenny. Prop. 1993. Nationalgalerie, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin. Accessed April 17, 2012. http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5074074.
- Wyeth, Andrew. Christina's World. 1948. Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Accessed April 31, 2012: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=78455.