Re:Figure

Thursday, April 3 to Thursday, May 22, 2003
Grand Tradition of Portraiture

**Portraiture**

Consider: Portrait painting is as old as God, representations of individual human beings as ancient as notions of divinity, that notion of self-defining uber-humanity. Or, perhaps, portraiture, for humans, is as base as the sex drive, as basic as sexual difference, the representation of another mapped against ourselves, generating a particular construction of our specific selves. Iconoclastic wars were fought over idolatry — if God is representable, who gets to say what that may look like? And we’ve peeked at pornography for millennia.

The interface between the divine (ideal) and the secular (particular) is the zone in which portraiture gets interesting: Christ the specific Son of God vs. the Greek paganistic abstractions; roman emperors as real men then, as needed, god-like visages. In the Renaissance, a secular humanism gave rise to a frequency of portraits against the proliferation of Madonna-and-Child pictures, albeit in political collusion with religious power. (You may recall the small figures of Renaissance patrons kneeling piously next to the saints and angels in their commissioned altar pieces.) Later, in the baroque and rococo periods, the portrait reinforced the power and wealth of the sitter. Genre painting de-classed the portrait to being an everyman, though the power of the representation served to re-institute class difference. Both neoclassicism and romanticism continued to produce portraits that presented specific subjects as hybrids of the divine and the everyday.

In the 20th century, portraiture became a bit more problematic. With the takeover of photography, the portrait was commodified and democratized, debased into every person’s family photo scrapbook, un-classed by the ubiquity of snapshots. Pictures of people were universally used by the news media and advertising as a selling tool. Avant-garde fine art in the west shunned the representation of the human figure as so much kitsch, while Soviet social realism glorified figuration as a, in retrospect cynical, tool for propaganda.

The figure, eliminated along with all types of representation in modernism, made a comeback because of, and in spite of conceptualism, feminism, the photograph, and multiculturalism, loosely defined as postmodernism. Chuck Close blatantly embraced the genre, but only within a system of highly rigorous conceptualism, his portraits embraced the illusion of the photographic pictorial plane played out within a modernist grid. Cindy Sherman’s black-and-white film stills, in which she photographed her own body acting out Hollywood stereotypes, were a feminist critique of the desire of the male gaze to own the representation of the female body for consumption, while asserting her own power of self-construction. Thomas Ruff’s giant portraits of art students inserted the idea of portraiture into conceptually based photography that went beyond the dangerously fascist classifications systems of August Sander’s German portraits of the 1930s. Multiculturalism renewed a glorification of identity via ethnicity and role playing, championing the image of the body as the site for creation of meaning. After that, post-modern painting re-embraced its roots, but with a non-hierarchical play of the languages of representation. Landscape, still life and figuration are all fair game, and John Currin’s baroque/Vogue girls and Elizabeth Peyton’s dreamy rock-star-fan paintings resuscitate the portrait as viable again, god and sex again wearing human form.

It is within this long history of portraiture that new types of figurative painting continue to be invented. In the work of Conor McGrady, Kehinde Wiley, Anja Schrey and Su-en Wong, new hybrids emerge that mix specific contemporary identities with art history, politics, fashion, sex and ethnicity to further mine the power of representation.

Kehinde Wiley, *Conspicuous Fraud Series (Portrait Study)*, 2001, oil on canvas, 28” x 22”, courtesy of Elissa Blount Moorhead and Mario Moorhead
Conor McGrady’s full-figure portraits of political figures in Irish society harken back to the court portraits of Velasquez and Goya, revealing in the details of posture, costume and facial expression the “true” nature of the subject, the transparency of the image to represent brute power. In his earlier depictions of Irish militants and skinheads, McGrady presented the aggressive male body inscribed with indicators of violence: paramilitary gear, firearms, and intimidating guard dogs. The men are sober and tough, muscular in their solidarity. McGrady paints from his own and others first hand experience of the political violence in his native Northern Ireland, and the aggressive demeanor of his portraits is palpable. Continuing to portray males who use their physical power to assert political fascism, McGrady has turned to the seemingly more innocuous “suits.” The personas — Fundamentalist, Racist and Intelligence Officer — aren’t so immediately identified as the violent sort like the skinheads with their fatigues and jack boots. These guys look more normal in their coats and ties, signifying a more conservative, upper middle class type who is assumed to be civilized and cultured. But McGrady clues us in that these guys might not be so nice either, their suits just another tribal costume, their ties not symbols of propriety but malevolent phallic power. The fundamentalist clutches a table, indicating ownership and authority; the racist stands feet akimbo, his hands stuffed confidently in his pockets, the intelligence officer has doffed his coat, his tie loosened, sleeves rolled up, as if just in from a rough investigative “interview.” These bureaucrats stare down the viewer in glowing, closed-down certitude. Through trafficking in the historical tradition of portraiture, McGrady exposes these men as more insidiously vicious and cruel than even the tough-looking punks.
Conor McGrady,
Intelligence Officer, oil on canvas, 72" x 40"
Kehinde Wiley paints African-American markers of identity, the hair, costume and gaze of contemporary hip hop, culture set in brightly colored backgrounds a-swirl with baroque decoration. Within African-American social spheres, style of dress indicates class, aspirations and allegiances. Wiley presents his male subjects in hooded sweatshirts and puffy jackets — athletic wear turned into de rigeur fashion statement or Malcolm X-like cool suits and ties. Their hairstyles are deliberately over determined: wild dreads or meticulous corn rows. Wiley surrounds his figures with curlicues and spirals which sit squarely on the paintings’ surfaces, referencing baroque and rococo decoration. Historically, this type of decorative mark began with simple embellishment of renaissance imagery, then got out of hand, and taking the upper hand, wrested pictorial importance away from any illusionistic subject matter. Wiley’s conflation of baroque decoration with hip-hop attitude, speaks to the similarity between them as privileging the surface and pleasing the eye, style perhaps triumphing over substance. But the popularity in hip hop culture of bling bling — iced out jewelry, huge garish pendants of fake diamonds — reveals that Wiley’s subjects are not mere eye-candy. The wearers of bling bling know that it is obviously fake. Like baroque decoration, it is a sign, a signifier of cultural awareness of the power of prestige, using that knowledge to forge a forceful identity within contemporary society. Wiley titles a series of works “Conspicuous Fraud,” suggesting that both baroque curlicues and out-of-control dreadlocks are obvious conceits, and therein lies their power of persuasion. Moreover, the portrait painting itself is a “conspicuous fraud,” easily consumed as mere representation. But Wiley uses the genre’s power to intentionally deceive, passing/posing as participating in traditional art history, inserting identities and subjects that have historically been exploited or erased by those very traditions.
McGrady and Wiley present portraits of men, employing representation to interrogate their images as social types, serving them up for the gaze of the viewer. Schrey and Wong, on the other hand, take things a step further. They resist any dangers of complicity of objectification of the subject by using themselves as subjects. The issues of representation are shifted to a personal investigation of the construction of the self via self-portraiture. It is a safer strategy — they cannot be accused of the kind of exploitation they are calling forth — yet risky — as a narcissistic image they may be acting out their own image production in a suicidal pictorial move. Being god-like may be dangerously close to being a sex kitten.

Anja Schrey interfaces her specific personality with the tropes of popular fashion in larger-than-life size self-portraits. In her detailed pencil drawings, she wears clothes that are hip in the cool-art-girl mode: a mixture of haute couture and thrift store chic. The positioning of her body is as forced as the fashion-model pose, but they seem anti-fashion, even taking into account the strangeness of fashion poses today. She “dances” awkwardly or squats down, her hands crossed on her bent knees, her chin resting on her hands. These poses call to mind Robert Longo’s yuppie drawings of the 1980s in which hipsters in fashionable dress — a parodic mix of business suits and little black dresses — were captured in action poses, ostensibly dancing, but in reality dodging hurtling ping-pong balls.

But Schrey’s self-portraits are more pensive: Her eyes stare vacantly, referencing the self-possessed gaze of the fashion model, the goddess demure, but mapped on to the personal, specific body of the artist. In one picture she adopts a dance pose, arms and legs akimbo, wearing trendy cuffed jeans and hippy Scholl sandals, sporting pigtails. She seems posed for a still, not caught in some faked fashion shoot delirium. Her eyes are turned away from the viewer in a seemingly interior monologue, deliberately not offered up for the consuming scopophilic gaze. Rather, she seems intent in her self-determination of her own image. In the crouching image, Schrey presents herself as whole, un-sexed, complete in its circular interiority. Like Cindy Sherman’s film stills, Schrey’s self-portraits participate in image production that creates a desirable identity within the given social order. But contrary to Sherman, Schrey seems to see this not as a limitation, but as quiet potential: there is a more complex intersection between the given of socialized fashion and the specifics of personal choice. The works are part of a series titled Schokoladenseiten, referencing a German colloquialism: showing your “chocolate” aspect. Schrey understands that one is always aware of wanting to look as desirable as a chocolate, offering pleasure in a sweet and direct way, communicated through fashion sense and pose. But Schrey’s self-representations suggest that chocolateness can be more complicated than mere consumption, ultimately, like the Madonna and Madonna, a site for self-production.

Anja Schrey, Schokoladenseiten (Hockende), 2002, crayon on paper, 150 x 220 cm, courtesy of enders projects, Frankfurt, Germany

Anja Schrey, Schokoladenseiten (Tanzende), 2002, crayon on paper, 220 x 150 cm, courtesy of enders projects, Frankfurt, Germany
In her insistent self-portraits, Su-en Wong addresses the sexualization of the adolescent, the infantilizing of the Asian woman by the male gaze, and concomitant sexual stereotyping of the Asian woman as compliant and subservient. She presents multiple images of herself in blatantly sexualized poses, on vast monochrome fields of candy colored, girly pastels. These Martha Stewart colors: marmalade orange, apple green, an intense pink, are sometimes articulated with frilly ornamental borders. In contrast to these pleasing designer colors, Wong’s body is offered up as the potential site of pedophilia and sado-masochistic orgy, while her self-presentation as sexual object transcends her physicality to traverse a path from onanistic masturbatory narcissism to a representation of divine transcendence. In Marmalade Orient/Blush, 2002, Wong presumes a Christ on the cross pose in bed, while copies of herself bow in subservience. In Apple Green, Wong’s naked multiplied image does the pornographic pole dance, in which the female dancer “makes love” to the abstracted phallus. Wong’s diminutive body, small breasts and muscular limbs are, to a western eye, simultaneously adolescent and adult. In Flamingo Dream, she flagrantly addresses and sexualizes the viewer with her nakedness, splayed legs, and gaudy tchotchke necklace, as if to challenge the viewer to take responsibility for their own voyeuristic desire to consume. Wong conflates this trans-bodily desire to own via sexual consumption and voyeurism with a more sedate type of ownership. Her reference to modernist monochromes begs the comparison to transcendental abstraction, and the repeated image of Wong’s body, by virtue of scale and placement, always gives full reverence to the field of color. But there is no hierarchy: the monochrome field becomes as potent as a figure, while the depicted figure, loaded with its own sort of potential transcendence remains equal to the field. It is as if the figure-ground relationship has been eradicated, there is only figure-figure. Wong’s depictions are drawn with intense clarity — muscles highly articulated, skin tone fully chiaroscuroed — against the undifferentiated field of the monochrome. Wong’s depiction of her own facial expression is anything but seductive. Against the invitation of her body, her grim, determined, countenance is either accusatory or bored, undercutting with her mind any easy consumption of her body. By herself adopting stereotypical presence of the adolescent sexualized Asian girl/woman, Wong’s figuration transcends those stereotypes through the particularization of her own body.

Surveying the works of McGrady, Wiley, Schrey and Wong, it is clear that the tradition of portraiture continues to be a viable source for the construction of identity. These artists’ hybrids are evidence that the conventions of representation will continue to offer fertile ground for contemporary investigation about God and sex, historical portraiture and politicized propaganda, formal abstraction and social genre painting, of haute couture fashion shoots and everyday introspection, of pornographic eroticized fantasies and hard real bodies.

Kathryn Hixson is an art critic who teaches at the School of the Art Institute and the University of Chicago. She has written catalog essays for the Renaissance Society, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Inova, and was editor of New Art Examiner from 1996 to 2002.
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Barbara Wiesen, Curator and Director
Gahlberg Gallery

Gahlberg Gallery
College of DuPage
McAninch Arts Center
425 Fawell Blvd.
Glen Ellyn, IL 60137-6599

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