

ART • WEEKEND

The Other Side of Portraiture

Thomas Micchelli July 11, 2015



Brenda Goodman, "Self-Portrait 13" (1994), oil on wood, 48 x 40 inches (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

It may be a stretch to say that portraiture is in the air — given that there are all of two exhibitions devoted to it in New York City right now, one in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn — but their confluence can feel like the kind of Marxian (Groucho, not Karl) charge you get from watching a tradition-bound idiom seize up and explode.

I [reviewed](#) one of the two shows last week, [Life Lines: Portrait Drawings from Dürer to Picasso](#) at the Morgan Library & Museum. The time frame for that exhibition began in the early 1500s and ended, for all intents and purposes, at the dawn of the 20th century, stopping short of the revolutionary aesthetic

that swept through Western art in the years preceding the First World War.

Consequently, as I wrote in the review, “Criticality, in the modern sense, doesn’t come into play; the social and psychological compact between painter and sitter remains inviolate.”

That can’t be said about the works currently on display at the avowedly painting-centric Life on Mars Gallery in Bushwick. The show is officially called the [Second Annual Summer Invitational](#), but it is in fact a celebration of the contemporary portrait, mostly in wildly subversive terms.

The final section of the Morgan show (infelicitously titled *Portraits?*) presented “images that stretch the limits of portraiture.” Among these eight drawings were some grotesques by Jacques de Gheyn II, a caricature by Gian Lorenzo Bernini and a

pastoral scene by Gerrit van Honthorst. But in the context of the exhibition, which featured 43 straight-ahead portraits as opposed to eight outliers, the categorical expansion felt forced and arbitrary. At *Life on Mars*, stretching the limits of portraiture is the rule rather than the exception.

None of the likenesses flatter their subjects, and a few obscure the individual altogether. Often it is reasonable to wonder whether the portrait category applies at all. But the cumulative effect of curator Michael David's fast-and-loose interpretation of portraiture is to dissipate any stuffiness or reserve lingering around the concept, as virtually every work comes at it from a different stylistic or thematic angle, often with an intimately personal touch.



James Prez, installation view of "Joltin' Joe DiMaggio," "Jim 'Catfish' Hunter" and "George Herman 'Babe' Ruth." All paintings 2009, house paint and Sharpie on Luan, 15 x 12 inches

Take James Prez's deeply affecting trio of silhouetted baseball players: Joe DiMaggio, Catfish Hunter and Babe Ruth (all 2009). Each of these small works (15 by 12 inches) in house paint and Sharpie on Luan (a variety of plywood) present the player in action — throwing a pitch or swinging a bat — along with his number and a handwritten capsule bio that reads like stream-of-consciousness fanboy idolatry. The snippet on Catfish Hunter concludes:

He became the highest paid ball player when he signed with the Yankees in 1975. Bob Dylan wrote a song about him: "CATFISH, MILLION DOLLAR MAN" Nobody can throw the ball like Catfish can. He died, at 53, of Lou Gehrig's disease.

Much is made of the childlike in contemporary art, which seems dominated by cartoon characters and other forms of kitsch, but what is truly childlike, in the Baudelairean sense, is the combination of playfulness and obsession that cuts to the root of the imagination. And to come across a work that accomplishes that, as Prez's vulnerably artless ballplayer icons do, is both startling and poignant.

A minority of the portraits in the *Second Annual Summer Invitational* are that specific. For the most part, no surnames are cited in the titles, if names are used at all. Among the paintings whose subjects can be fully identified are the self-portraits by Arnold

Mesches and Brenda Goodman (from 1980 and 1994, respectively: his, slashing and expressionistic; hers, expressionistic and slab-like) and Edith Singer's "Abe and me" (1993), presumably the artist and her brother as children, rendered in snapshot style in apparent homage to Arshile Gorky's "The Artist and His Mother" (c.1926–c.1942).

Karen Heagle's acrylic and ink "Untitled (Pierre Clementi)" (2013) is an Elizabeth Peyton-ish homage to the French actor who died in 1999 at the age of 57; Kerry Law contributes stolid but affectionate pendant portraits of his father and mother from 2005; and with "Lucian" (2014), Karen Schwartz turns the tables on Lucian Freud (1922-2011), making a portrait of the serial portraitist and in the process swapping the thick layers of oil paint that typically encrusted his canvases for thin swatches of oil stick, oil and acrylic on unprimed linen.

Some other works draw upon the tropes of portraiture even as they sidestep conventional realism. Garry Nichols offers portraits of the same woman — "Jimena (with Leaf on Head)" and "Jimena (with Iguana)" (both 2012) — in crisply painted, naive-looking forms that recall early Mexican Modernism. Farrell Brickhouse's "Aunt Libby's Blue Plates" (2011), a smallish (24 by 20 inches) oil on canvas, shows Aunt Libby standing in front of a wall mounted with eleven of her decorative blue plates. The diminutive scale and brushy application of paint conspire to make her features as amorphous as Jimena's are sharply defined.

Hanging on the same wall as Prez's ballplayers is Maxine Hess's large (72 by 108 inches), quasi-Outsider-ish "Beauty Equals Power" (2014), a mixed-media work depicting a high-kicking chorus line made of cut-out paper, with stitched fabric for their red-and-white costumes. As with Prez's paintings, there is a sense of childhood play — the joy of constructing an imaginary world out of cut paper — coupled with a devil-may-care attitude about the decidedly unserious nature of the work.



Todd Bienvenu, "Iron Maiden" (2014), oil on canvas, 76 x 67 inches

Todd Bienvenu, the wild man of Bushwickian narrative painting, who [told](#) Jennifer Samet of Hyperallergic Weekend that his pictures "are about sex and death and enjoying your life," delivers an unexpectedly monumental work. "Iron Maiden" (2014) portrays a seated baseball-capped and tattooed slacker, his face in profile and his back to the viewer, wearing a muscle shirt emblazoned with the classic heavy metal band's logo and decorated with properly Satanic imagery.

Instead of the busy background detail typical of Bienvenu's paintings, the Iron Maiden fan's boulder-like form, which swells nearly to the edges of the 76 by 67-inch painting, is surrounded by a vacant purple field, not unlike the kind often employed by Francis Bacon, only grungier. The textural handling of the paint and the smoldering color lend the work both a material and atmospheric presence, a surprisingly formal magnetism that verges on the abstract.

If the focus of Bienvenu's painting is the subject's back, in Catherine Haggerty's "Best Hair II" (2015), it's the back of the subject's head — four subjects, in fact. The panel is divided into four sections and all we see is the hair, neck and shirt collar of each of the four sitters. It's a quirky, kooky piece, but its eccentricity is held in check by its sophisticated balance of bright and neutral colors. Another faceless portrait is Clarity Haynes' "Wilhelmina" (2010), a movingly realistic pastel of a woman's naked chest displaying a mastectomy scar.

Elsewhere, George Gilliland provides a photorealist portrait of a pigeon ("Pigeon Phenomena: Figure 4," 2012), which, upon closer inspection, is composed of tiny, raised, enamel-like brushstrokes, while inside the gallery's small Project Space, Joyce Yamada serves up four portraits of a spider collectively titled "Arachne's Larder" (2012) and numbered 01 through 04.

The Project Space is also where you'll find a face-off between two historically-based works by Barbara Friedman and Deborah Brown, which play extended riffs on Dutch Baroque and French Neoclassical painting (and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres in particular), respectively.

Several of the works obscure the subject's features entirely, such as Dana James's "Truth and Myths" (2015), in walnut ink on India paper, which depicts an old portable television in the upper portion of the sheet and a bather disappearing into a tub underneath. Another is "Heraclius" (2005-2013) by Len Bellinger, whose title refers to a 7th-century Byzantine emperor. The thickly rendered, highly abstracted image in oil paint and etching ink evokes a golden-yellow robe and white crown with the richness of a latter-day Klimt.



Also of note is Elisa Jensen's "Loke" (2006), a large black-and-white drawing in Sumi ink, egg tempera, gouache and pastel pencil. It depicts a nude man bound in rope against a backdrop of vertical slashes that could indicate a dense stand of trees. The blackness surrounding the figure is so intense that it creates its own densely pigmented atmosphere, pushing the figure forward. The

Elisa Jensen, "Loke" (2006), sumi ink,
egg tempera, pastel pencil on paper, 52
1/2 x 68 inches

nude's deeply shadowed face and unexplained
bondage make it less of a portrait and more of
an hallucination, and a stark, simmering one
at that.

The exhibition's freewheeling take on portraiture comes to full flower in Brenda Goodman's above-mentioned "Self-Portrait 13," which portrays a hulking, spindly-armed monster stuffing God-knows-what into its mouth. Clearly deriving her image from Francisco Goya y Lucientes's "[Saturn Devouring His Son](#)" (1820–1823), the most seriously unhinged of the artist's Black Paintings, Goodman inverts the original color scheme from Stygian earth tones to pale whites and greens, and trowels the paint on so heavily that the hand cramming that undetermined substance into the monster's mouth actually lifts off the surface, creating a three-dimensional form.

Right below the wrist of that hand there's a swatch of gray paint that amplifies the space between the arm and the body with a vaporousness worthy of Velasquez. It's a tiny detail on a large, scarred and pummeled surface, but it's absolutely mesmerizing.

[Second Annual Summer Invitational](#) continues at [Life on Mars Gallery](#) (56 Bogart Street, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through July 19.

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