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THE MUTATED MODEL: ARTIST AND SITTER IN CONTEMPORARY PORTRAITURE

William Platz

Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood and animation: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively; or they look back at us silently across a “gulf unbridged by language”. They present, not just a surface, but a face that faces the beholder.

WJT MITCHELL (2005, 30)

All art is “image-making” and all image-making is rooted in the creation of substitutes.

EH GOMBRICH (1985, 9)

If the portrait has a special bond with its object-referent, what Richard Brilliant terms its “vital relationship” (1991, 8), then the portrait-picture can never be emancipated from its antecedent master. Conventionally, the portrait is read both as an index of the transaction between an artist and a sitter and, although its iconicity has been largely destabilised in the past century, as a likeness of the sitter. Contemporary art practice indicates that conventional notions of the interface between artist and sitter need to be revised. Through my own artistic practice and research, I have concluded that the portrait-picture is not an imitation in the conventional sense of a substitute or a proxy, but in the Gombrichian sense of a thing in itself—an independent entity that does not *replace*, or *resemble*, or *represent* a referent. The portrait-picture is the reified sitter (figure 1). The sitter displaces both the artist and model, manifesting as the portrait-picture at the intersection of portrayal, pose, and performance. This manifestation becomes apparent when the portrait-picture is plotted on a spectrum that ranges from masquerade to dissimulation. These conclusions are borne out of my studio-based research degree in visual art. This paper will describe the technical and conceptual processes I completed in order to reach them. It begins by outlining my original concerns and intentions, and concludes with what they have become.

At the beginning of my program, I started experimenting with fibreglass as a substratum. After years of using polyester films, polypropylene, acetates, and acrylic sheets, I was seeking an equally fine, stiff surface on which I could synthesise portrait photography with painting and drawing in a robust manner. The ubiquity of the photographic portrait, as both product and referent, compelled me to implicate the photograph immediately in the work as collage. I found that the fibreglass-casting process allowed me to manipulate the photographic portrait’s scale and arrangement before sealing it between layers of transparent glass cloth (figure 2).

The resultant surface is hardwearing and versatile, yet lightweight and flexible. The process also fosters a more dynamic studio methodology in which the works are



Figure 1 *Screen Test* 2010, oil, crayon, and shellac on cast fibreglass with orthochromatic films, 61 x 47cm

developed through an ongoing exchange of photography and drawing, rather than a system in which the photograph exists as a passive reference picture to be disregarded upon completing the work (figure 3).

Before I began this project, I happily accepted the conventional dyadic assessment of portraits: an exchange between an artist and a model that results in a very specific picture type—the portrait of a sitter. I was aware that, perhaps owing to the myriad studio pictures by Victorian artists who frequently populated their own interior scenes, the typical idea of the artist and model in the artist’s studio conjures a distinctively nineteenth-century image. The imagery goes something like this: a dramatically lit space—perhaps by



Figure 2 Glass cloth, resin, and cast sheet with edge detail

clerestory, skylight, or stove—is rendered in tenebrous earth tones except for the punctuated hues on flesh, brush, palette, and ornament. The artist, typically male (as I am), may appear rakish, but more likely paternal, commanding, aloof.

He is, it seems, wholly unaware of the sexualised negotiation between viewer and object. Sharing his space—and it is quite definitely his space—is the artist’s model. She, typically young and female, may be holding a contrived pose, dressing, undressing, at her leisure, or even sleeping. Although this erotic myth of the artist and model does not survive the twentieth century intact, the studio remains, particularly when it contains artist and sitter, a place of mystery, fantasy, and subsequent paranoia (see Clark 1972; Postle and Vaughan 1999). I am not interested in destructing the myth of the studio, or even to parody it, as this would imply the cool detachment of an observer. As my practice and research is in the field of portraiture—and I am ensconced in the studio—I hope to illuminate the processes from within.

On a basic level, I engage and depict a model through drawing, photography, and digital video. I then manipulate these works into completed pictures. Here, I intentionally forego using the popular term ‘sitter’ to denote the subject of a portrait because, as already indicated, I intend to reframe that term in response to my current studio outcomes. Initially, my practice focused on the intricacies of the negotiations between artist and model and the reciprocal relationships



Figure 3 *Living White Whales* (detail) 2009, oil, charcoal, graphite, and shellac on cast fibreglass with orthochromatic film, 102 x 156cm

between them and the portrait. My research specifically addressed the contemporary prevalence of portraits that are congruous with an art-historical type known as the historiated portrait, or *portrait historié* (see Bakemeier 2002). The historiated portrait is understood as a portrait of a known individual in the guise of another, typically an historical, mythological, or allegorical figure (figure 4). I was particularly interested in the strategies used by contemporary portraitists (in which I include myself), which ranged from mimicry and masquerade to impersonation and dissimulation. From the simplest costume elements (as in the work of Renee Cox, Cindy Sherman, or Gillian Wearing) to elaborate and highly detailed tableaux (as in the work of Yasumasa Morimura or Matthew Barney), these strategies can all be read as indictments of the authority and status granted the sitter in a conventional portrait scheme. Each of these contemporary practitioners shift the locus of the sitter from without to within, rendering the model-body obsolete and unknowable.

At the outset, my own method was to design a sequence of panels that could be read as parts of a fictional narrative, for example, a fabulated seduction of Eva Braun by J Edgar Hoover (figure 5). I would then scout a model to simultaneously pose and portray the historiated character. Typically, friends and other artists would indulge me. I would shoot copious

photographs, using small and medium-format films, and also create a body of sketches. The results of the photo and drawing sessions would amend the visual narrative, suggesting characterisations, plots and compositions that deviated from my initial outline. The photographs were then enlarged onto high-contrast, orthochromatic photo films using a variety of conventional darkroom techniques before being embedded in the fibreglass. Again, the visual result would amend the narrative. Finally, painting and drawing media were added to the surface, some marks being quite apparent and others disguised by *trompe l'oeil* effects. The *trompe l'oeil* was intended to further entangle the imagery and the media (illusion) with the narrative (delusion). As this account indicates, I was ensconced in the conventional portrait-narrative structure (even considering the unconventional and counterfactual nature of historiated portraits) that could have easily been the subject of an art-history or cultural-studies investigation. My practice, however, revealed a more problematic structure underlying the portrait process.

After six months of studio work, I held a solo exhibition to coincide with a formal review of my research. The critical reception pointed to several of my works' key elements. First, as I am an American artist, my work—informed by traditions of draughtsmanship, narrative sequence, and



Figure 4 *Index Case* 2009, oil, charcoal, and shellac on cast fibreglass with orthochromatic films, 76 x 230cm



Figure 5 *Edgar and Eva* 2009, oil, charcoal, and shellac on cast fibreglass with orthochromatic films, 102 x 320cm



Figure 6 video-still from *Kraal* 2009, single-channel digital-video installation

studio photography—is contextualised by the notion of American glamour. This manifests as the American portrait tradition (e.g., Thomas Eakins, James Whistler, John Singer Sargent), American pop (e.g., Mel Ramos, James Rosenquist, Larry Rivers, Tom Wesselmann), and American fashion photography (e.g., Richard Avedon, Steven Meisel, David LaChapelle). Second, my selection of models seemed simultaneously arbitrary and obscured by the narrative. A programmatic, or at least motivated, approach to the use of the model was deemed necessary. Third, through screening a single video on a large monitor, the work hinted at digital media and environments. It presented a set that was entirely physically constructed: a moving river with a wooden trap, moonlit, in which two white whales (the model and I in extravagant plaster masks) floated, were captured with nooses, and removed (figure 6). By being the only piece not constructed of fibreglass panels, and having a prominent soundtrack, it therefore diverged from the other works in several ways. Fourth, the narratives I scripted, although rooted in historical fiction, were opaque and ultimately flat experiences for the viewer.

This feedback led me to make further works, studies, and reflections that focus on the specific interactions and theatricalities that take place within the studio when creating portraits. These revelations were influenced by some specific texts. Like many visual-arts students, I was required to tote a copy of Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art* to every art-theory lecture I attended in my foundation year. It was Gombrich who guided me out of the notion of painting and drawing as forms, and towards the concept of the image as a form in itself, and

resemblance as the content. His *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* brought the notion of the substitute to a primary position in my understanding of the contemporary portrait. Gombrich's anti-mimetic position can best be summed up through his notion of schema and correction. The artist cannot depict a model, for instance, without first having some concept of how to effectively do so. This initial concept, or schema, precedes the portrayal of the model. Subsequently the portrayal is a process in which the artist 'corrects' the initial schema by 'matching' it to the present model. The result is not a mimetic copy, but an autonomous substitute, an independent entity, a mutated subject that does not really match the model, but creates the sitter.

It was a short path from Gombrich to the recent work of WJT Mitchell and his analyses of pictures. Although it may be tempting to charge fetishism, idolatry, or an uncanny animism to portraiture, none of these pathologies is necessary to suggest that portraits possess a special vitality, even autonomy. Indeed, Mitchell overtly confronts these concerns and concludes "...our task is not to overcome these attitudes but to understand them, to work through their symptomatology" (2005, 30). To extend Mitchell's "thought experiment" about the "desire" of pictures, and answer his titular question "what do pictures want?", is to conclude that they want to propagate, to make more pictures. Combining this notion with his analysis of multistable "meta-pictures" (1994, 35–82) the result is a portrait-picture, aware of its own nature as a picture, desirous of being seen, wanting to propagate, and displaying (portraying) pictorial evidence of that desire. If I return to American glamour, the glamorous

picture presents itself, draws attention to its allure, and exhibits the imperative to make more glamour (figure 7). This portrait-picture has an agency that is as clear and present as either the artist or the model. To twist André Bazin's proclamation, "It is the model" (1967, 14), I would instead say, "It is the sitter." It is a new entity, specifically adapted to its environment, and the model is abandoned.

Finally, I processed the subject matter of the historiated portraits—the model in disguise—in relation to Peircean semiotics. Having been well aware of Charles Peirce's great triad—icon, index, and symbol—it was nevertheless revelatory to discover the deeper triadic relationships that unify his thought through the writing of others (Goudge 1950, 80–103; Greenlee 1973, 33–47; Almeder 1980, 13–33). In particular, his concepts of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness assisted my own investigations. Peirce once simply defined these three concepts as "An, Other and Medium" (Peirce 1991, 184). And, if I take considerable liberties with Peirce's grand scheme, I can use those concepts to create an accurate image of the portrait-picture, one in which there exists two metaphorical Firsts (the model and the artist—haecceities), a metaphorical Second (the sitter enabling a relative presence), and a metaphorical Third (the studio—the ground or ecosystem or medium of the present). Although each of these 'agents' can be read autonomously, the exigencies of the portrait-picture require a concurrent consideration of the three.

The concepts of substitution, Mitchell's work on the nature of pictures, and Thirdness have significantly contributed to the maturity with which I approach and conceptualise my studio work. They underpin the dynamic that I feel exists between the artist, model, studio, and portrait-picture (sitter). Recently, my works have further entangled these agents, as I have begun to make portraits of professional fashion, print, and art models. When the model is confronted with the studio medium, it provokes a response that is in keeping with my analyses of the portrait historiés. In other words, a performance takes place. I invite the model into the studio. There she sits, stands, ambles about while I prepare lighting, camera, easel, pad, whichever, or perhaps all. The model may be consciously projecting a persona or simply adapting to the implicit and explicit scrutiny, but at either extreme, the result is performative, transformative. I have come to think of this event as the 'performative mutation' (figure 8). It is necessarily co-operative, as the artist depicts the model. Depiction is the making of a picture: a synthesis of fetishism, description, and fantasy. Regardless of the medium chosen, some influence, large or small, of fantasy exists. As my sitter is framed and the carbon is smeared across the surface, or the strobes pop, I form, abandon, and reform a host of fantasies as I affix the picture. I have termed this event the 'depictive mutation' (figure 9). Both 'mutations' could be



Figure 7 *Mixed Portrait of Imi with My Navel: Big Rig* (detail) 2011, oil, crayon, and shellac on cast fibreglass with orthochromatic films, 102 x 102cm

read as 'corrective', in the Gombrichian sense of the word. The model masquerades as a sitter or impersonates a sitter. The artist manipulates the model until some correspondence with the idea of a sitter emerges. The model's self-corrective performance exerts pressure on the artist. The artist's self-corrective practice exerts pressure on the model. The sitter as an independent agent (portrait-picture), quite distinct from both the artist and the model, blinks into existence at the intersection of these two corrective metamorphoses. The studio contains, briefly, this event. The question remains, what processes lead to the creation of the sitter? And what are the alternative outcomes? It may be tempting to read this research as an attempt to quantify some sort of value in portraiture, to divine a metric by which portraits may be measured to be either simply avatars, simply descriptions, or exemplary pictures. Judgment is intrinsic to the concepts of performance and authority in portraiture, and so rather than shy away from such calculated assessments, my research seeks to use them within the studio context.

In light of Gombrich's analysis of substitutes and Mitchell's implication of the image's autonomy, my studio practice explores the idea that the sitter is not the figure in



Figure 8 *Mixed Portrait of Leah with My Mouth: Big Rig* 2011, oil, crayon, and shellac on cast fibreglass with orthochromatic films, 102 x 156cm

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Figure 9 *Untitled Gaea* 2011, graphite on paper, 22 x 19cm



Figure 10 *Mixed Portrait of Alexandra with My Eye: Big Rig (detail)* 2011, oil, crayon, and shellac on cast fibreglass with orthochromatic films, 102 x 156cm

the picture, rather the sitter is the picture that contains the figure. The challenge to the portrayer is in creating the studio conditions such that it enables the sitter (portrait-picture) to manifest and suggest the nature of its creation. In pursuing this, my recent work has begun to incorporate self-portraiture with the imaging of the model. I first made casts of parts of myself—the lower part of my face, my right eye, my throat—which the models wear as prostheses (figure 10). The fragment of me is animated: the tongue licks at the sitter's face, the eye regards the sitter from within, the throat flushes at the sitter's touch. Additionally, I am making videos, which are screened on extremely small flat screens, the size of mobile-phone screens (figure 11). The scale and quality of the presentation suggests the immediacy and tactility of the model.

I began this short essay with the aim of evaluating the progress I have made in my studio practice. I realise that each consideration, each reading of the primary texts, each studio session, and each contemplation of other artists whose works correlate with my own has contributed to my development.

Thus, only when taken as a whole program can my work coalesce into a significant contribution to contemporary portraiture and the studio practice of portrait-pictures.

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Figure 11 *Feejee 2010*, single-channel digital video installed on TFT screen, 6 x 11 cm

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