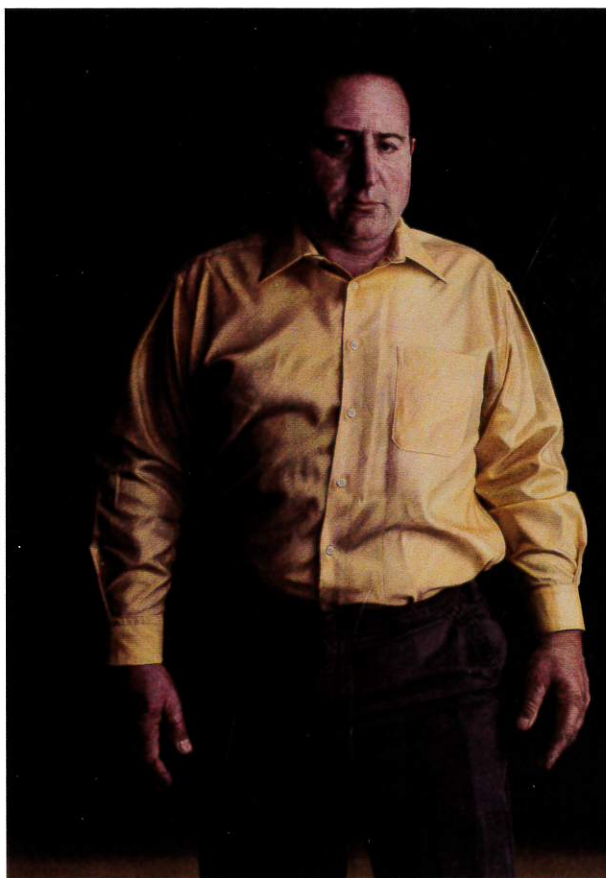
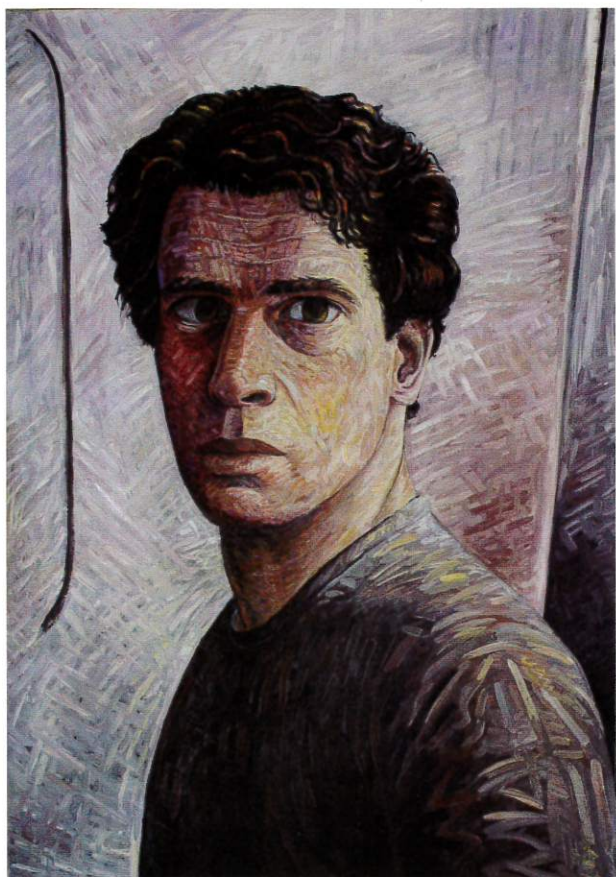


PEOPLE WATCHING AT FAM

PORTRAITS PAST AND PRESENT



REVIEW

PEOPLE WATCHING: THEN AND NOW

FITCHBURG ART
MUSEUM
185 ELM STREET
FITCHBURG,
MASSACHUSETTS
THROUGH
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From the first primitive marks people made to depict their external world or internal reflections, portraiture has been a major form of expression in art making. The genre has existed across centuries, cultures and art movements. The Fitchburg Art Museum's (FAM) current exhibition, "People Watching: Then and Now," is an outstanding survey of historical and current portraiture that reveals the continued interest in and evolution of portrait painting.

The show is the third and final part of a series of genre painting exhibitions conceived and developed to take a fresh look at works from FAM's permanent collection in relation to current works

of contemporary New England artists. The first two of these shows, "Still Life Lives" (still life) and "Land Ho!" (landscape) were organized by former FAM Curator Mary M. Tinti and Koch Curatorial Fellow Emily M. Mazzola.

"One of FAM's goals is to make contemporary art accessible to our visitors. Such shows set up a scenario in which viewers can see the importance of the past in the present and better understand contemporary art through links to historical examples," explained Curator Lisa Crossman who, with current Koch Curatorial Fellow Lauren Szumita, organized the "People Watching: Then and Now" exhibition.

Thirteen contemporary New England artists are represented in the exhibition: Philip Brou, Susan White Brown, Caleb Cole, Nayda Cuevas, Leslie Graff, Lavaughan Jenkins, Lucy Kim, Steve Locke, Ross Normandin, David Prifti, Kate Russo, Ann Strassman and Tabitha Ververs.

"In choosing the artists, I considered what combination of contemporary works would dialogue well with one another and with the paintings and sculpture from FAM's collection that would be on view," stated Crossman. "For this show, I was interested in different approaches to portraiture. Our region has a talented and

LEFT: Jon Imber, *Self Portrait*, 1984, oil on canvas, 66" x 54".

RIGHT: Philip Brou, *The Warriors*, 2016, oil on panel, 48" x 36".



bracelets. The images were small enough to be taken along anywhere. Eventually photographs as portable portraiture supplanted the painted miniatures. The FAM exhibition takes examples of the miniature portraits and encourages us to make a comparison with the portable portraiture of today – the images and selfies pervasive on social media. For her work “#Latina: ReclaimingTheLatinaTag,” Cuevas painted one hundred 3” x 5” portraits of Latina women from selfies the women posted on the Tumblr blog “Reclaiming the #Latina Tag.” Some of the smartphone-sized paintings have quotes

of brushstrokes, that he is an artist who is searching and probing.

In her consideration of degrees of likeness, curator Lisa Crossman has included the works of Brou and Jenkins. The portraiture of these contemporary artists could not be more different. Brou presents hyperrealistic likenesses of film industry extras (people who appear in the background of movies) with meticulous precision, using rich, saturated, highly varnished paint. “The Warriors” and “Cold Was the Ground 1” are good examples. Brou’s subjects’ intentionally averted eyes and natural posture bid the viewer to spend time absorbing the strength of the artist’s workmanship, the clues to the character of the subjects, and the esteem the artist has for them. What defines Jenkins’s portraits of his former mentors is thick, rough textured impasto, layer upon layer of paint, scraped and then reapplied, from which emerges

Leslie Graff, *She Wanted to Get Out*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 40” x 30”.

diverse population of artists. I think my selection reflects this. Diversity in all its forms is important to FAM’s overall exhibition program.”

While researching the exhibition and visiting artists’ studios, Crossman saw three loosely-related themes emerging in her historical and contemporary portrait selections, themes that she felt would help the viewer in approaching the intended then/now concept in each gallery. Those intersecting themes were: portable portraiture and how it is defined today, degrees of likeness, and “looking” as an essential part of how artists represent themselves and others. The themes invite consideration of how the relationship between the sitter, the artist and the viewer has changed through time and how portraiture provides social, cultural and political clues to read the representation of an individual.

From the mid-1700s to the mid-1800s, portable portraiture was common. Painted miniature likenesses were worn as pendants, brooches, or attached to

from the virtual sitters expressing pride in their heritage; all are unique images representing the diversity within the Latina identity that Cuevas celebrates.

Likeness in portraiture is paramount, but likeness depicted by the artist and accepted by the public changes with successive generations and evolving art trends. A glance at two works from the permanent collection – John Singleton Copley’s “Mrs. Charles McEvers” and Jon Imber’s “Self Portrait” – is enough to confirm the evolution of style over time and in different social, cultural and political settings. From Copley’s perfectly executed realism, we immediately know Mrs. McEvers’s social standing, her refinement and opulent existence. And we immediately know from Imber’s expressionistic self-portrait, with his direct and intense stare, and with his head and torso surrounded by a flurry

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the gaze of his subject. This technique is demonstrated in "S. Diamond," "Harry," "PWL," "FHL," and "Hammel." In Jenkins' portraits, the subjects' unrelenting gaze is what draws the viewer in.

Using silicone applied directly to the body of her subject and then peeled off, Kim creates a mold that captures the subject's precise likeness. A soft mold is then stretched over the original silicone. The malleable mold can be manipulated to exaggerate features in whatever manner Kim wants. Numerous soft casts can be made from the silicon mold. Her work "Fitness Trainer" (of fitness professional Stephen Marino), shows how likenesses from the same mold can be manipulated differently to create unique bas reliefs that emphasize different aspects of the same subject.

The third theme explored in "People Watching" is the act itself of looking or watching and how the artists in the exhibit present their subjects. A probing self-portrait, an instant image taken with a smartphone, a quick gestural drawing captured in a few seconds, or a studied composition of strangers on a park bench all involve observations made by the artist and then revealed to the viewer.

In his work "Dolls," Cole used over 30 antique dolls of different sizes to create self-portraits. Each doll's face

has been individualized with Cole's characteristics – sideburns on one, balding hair on another, a full beard on yet another. Without costumes and of ambiguous gender, the dolls seem to raise the question of sexual identity.

Leslie Graff's series of self-portraits are reminiscent of illustrations from the 1950s and '60s. Bright and bold, the paintings show Graff in different domestic settings – in her bedroom, seated on a staircase, in the kitchen offering a slice of melon, reading in a chair – but we see the portraits only from the neck down. The head is cropped out, perhaps so we'll focus on

the domestic context, or perhaps so women can easily visualize themselves in the portraits.

Referencing a quote from American artist Robert Smithson: "A great artist can create art by simply casting a glance. A set of glances can be as solid as any thing or any place." Locke presents an assemblage of ink

drawings that capture the likeness of 100 different men. The portraits in "for Smithson" are gestural drawings that demonstrate the instant processing of visual information required in today's culture.

Strassman's portraits depict anonymous people in ordinary urban surroundings totally unaware that she is watching them. Consequently, in her paintings the subjects are unaffected and natural. The gentleman in the rumpled raincoat reading a newspaper on a park bench in "Boston Common I" is a good example. Interestingly, Strassman paints directly on corrugated cardboard boxes, or a combination of cardboard and canvas, resulting in the finished portraits effectively conveying the transient nature of urban life in America.

"Watching People: Then and Now" was developed to create a dialog between the old and the new, and to present the diverse interpretations and perspectives existing in contemporary portraiture. This well-conceived, comprehensive exhibit has accomplished those goals.

Flavia Cigliano



TOP: Installation shot of Lavaughan Jenkins, *Soltani*, 2016, oil on canvas, 20" x 16" (left); *Taylor*, 2016, oil on canvas, 20" x 16" (right); photograph ©2017 Charles Sternaimolo.

BOTTOM: Installation detail of Caleb Cole, *Dolls*, 2011-2017, modified found antique dolls. Photograph by Brian Goslow.

