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Shifting Perspective, Shifting Portrait:

A lithography print installation

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“To fly is to fall. To fall is to fly”¹. – George Maciunas, Fluxus artist.

I took Evan’s photograph at a potluck last November. As someone stood to announce something, Evan made the face: he lowered his head, *raised his eyes* and eyebrows. This was his look of skepticism, which I have seen often. While this look is a quintessential facial expression of Evan, I photographed him to capture a face. I did not make Evan as my subject in order to depict a particular emotion, moment in history, or social comment. Instead, I captured his face because I wanted to do something with it.

I was eager to do a lot of things when I began senior year. Evan’s photograph was at first for a drawing study - something that I could do in my free time to build my portfolio. I created a few monotype prints of the graphite drawing (figure 1) merely to play with color, layering, and composition. They were honestly experiments. However, I noticed that I had produced some good prints and that I really enjoyed making these monotype portraits (figure 2-5). At this point I realized I needed to create portraiture.

I enjoy observing people and rendering them through a photograph, drawing, or print. In the past, I’ve always stayed within the rectangular composition: medium scale and to be placed flat in a crisp portfolio. I desperately wanted to move away from that. With the resources of this University and guidance from professors, I seek to push the medium, myself, and create the art piece that may be outside of my skill set: *I want to transform portraiture and change the way we view printmaking.*



Figure 1

¹ *Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life*, 2011, p. 59 – Because “failure, Jones implies, is a form of flying, and the fear of failure is the number one impediment to creative freedom”.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Creative Construction

My art piece is a lithography print installation of a portrait. Lithography is a print method based on the idea that water and oil repel each other. In the piece there are individual prints that hang from the ceiling and fill a 3-dimensional space. Each print is a segment and when aligned they create a portrait. At different vantage points, the segments present themselves as independent images, appearing abstracted and focused on line quality. The portrait is a close-up of Evan's face, drawn from the photograph I took of him at the potluck. When the viewer steps away from the artist's eye-line, a different vantage point is reached. Evan then becomes fragmented and abstracted. Essentially there is a play with abstraction, space, and depth perception using parallax error. A parallax error is the shift in perspective when the viewer changes position. I wanted to give physicality to my piece, something I have not done before. Overall, my intention was to resist the editioned print.

I am very curious and questioning when I look at figurative work. When I look at figurative work, I often ask myself: who are the subjects? How are they related to the artist? How did the artist initiate the portrait? Is it posed? Is the subject portrayed differently from reality? I try to answer these questions for my own work.

After drawing the face for a while you become more observant. You start to notice distinct forms and repeating shapes and you begin to say things like, "the eyebrows on his face appear a little higher than on her face". *The face is a map*. I enjoy observing its sculpture, which is why I chose to do hand drawn lithography instead of photolithography. I desired to use my skill set of drawing and printmaking to fill the three-dimensional space.

Contextual Discussion

To present my portrait in an unconventional and fresh way, I decided to study artists who had already altered the traditions of portraiture. I chose to refer to Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol, and Chuck Close. I examined *Bust of Woman in Blue Hat*, 1944, by Pablo Picasso who is one of the best known artists of the 20th-century and founder of Cubism² (figure 6). His portraits are distinguished by their distorted figures with dramatic expressions. As you can see, the woman's face is crooked and has lost symmetrical shape. One eye is lower than the other eye and the lips are off-center. Also, the sculpture of the face has been reduced to flat shapes of color. At the same time, we still make out a woman who seems presentable, classic, and beautiful. Although her clothing is over-accentuated, we can tell that she



Figure 6

² Picasso: *Metamorphoses 1900-1972*, 2002, p. 35 – Cubism is defined as the “equivocation between representation and reality” and a “fragmented representation of the world”.

wears expensive clothing. Therefore, we get an effective reading of the type of person Picasso is portraying through distortion. We feel her essence. In fact, the woman in the painting is believed to be his lover.³ Picasso was focused on his process and the style he would use to form this woman. His distorted figures, a hallmark of Cubism, changed traditional portraiture.

Andy Warhol⁴ has made portraits of some of my favorite celebrities. When I flipped through Robert Rosenblum's *Andy Warhol: Portraits of the 70s*, I instantly halted at his portrait *Liza Minelli, 1978*⁵ (figure 7). Similar to Picasso's strategy, Andy Warhol changed the codes of people in art. Furthermore, he brought back portraiture when it had been considered "extinct."⁶ In his images of celebrities and other personages, he used a process of silk-screening⁷ and photography. Through these methods he would enlarge the person and drain out the photo to flatten the sculpture of the face. Also, he would highlight the prominent characteristics of the personality's face with color from the silk screen.

Warhol accents Liza Minelli's hair, most telling features, her lips, and heavy eyes. He uses flat color blocks but keeps photographic elements to give dimension to certain facial elements. We see Liza Minelli, but certain attributes are emphasized. Aside from these accents, Warhol did not make any personal comments or judgments, nor create profound meanings for his famous sitters. Rather, his photography and silk-screening (considered a low-art form at the time) were his practice's critical variables. Tony Shafrazi writes, "Warhol recognized not only the centrality of the photography to modernity but its impact and transformative influence on new modes of production that resulted in postmodern image making"⁸ That said, Warhol was focused on creating a distinct process in which he changed the rules of portrait making.



Figure 7

³ *Picasso: Metamorphoses 1900-1972*, 2002, p. 106

⁴ *Andy Warhol Portraits*, 2007, p. 12 – Andy Warhol was initially a commercial designer but wanted to gain recognition in the art world. He referred to his artwork as "products" and himself, the artist, as a "machine".

⁵ *Andy Warhol: Portraits of the 70s*, 1979, p. 106

⁶ *Andy Warhol: Portraits of the 70s*, 1979, p. 9 – "Andy Warhol, in fact, succeeded virtually single-handedly in the early 1960's in resurrecting from near extinction that endangered species of grand-style portraiture of people...."

⁷ *Andy Warhol*, 2001, p. 52

⁸ *Andy Warhol Portraits*, 2007, p. 14

On three separate occasions, I checked out Chuck Close books from the library. However, it took time before I made a direction connection to my own work. When I met with a professor, Close's methods of making portraiture finally "clicked." Chuck Close uses photography as a medium to create his portraiture, but he was not producing his work from his human subjects. Close's "paintings are portraits of *photographs* of his subjects – never of the subjects themselves."⁹ Photography was the direct material for his art. In Close's work *Self-Portrait / Etching*, 1977¹⁰ (figure 8), he used aquatint in an intaglio¹¹ print to develop a range of values to construct his image. In this technique, he segmented the portrait by values to model his face. In other words, he used squares of different shades for his face to appear. Individually, the segments stand as squares of black, white and grey, similar to photographic pixels. Close was commenting on the swiftness of the camera's photo capture and how that influences his process.

Therefore, Close created methods to depart from regular portrait making.

Process

"He will be there no matter what you do to him," my professor told me when I was unsure of the final presentation of my portrait. Picasso, Warhol, and Close all moved away from the traditions of portraiture by choosing a certain method of their process to emphasize. Accordingly, this is my approach to further develop portraiture: I am using the three-dimensional space of an installation to accentuate Evan's facial characteristics. When I studied at my drawing of Evan, I let his facial features in that skeptical expression *inform* my process. My priority was not to focus on Evan's identity, or his background, but to focus on the "how do I do this?" in my piece.

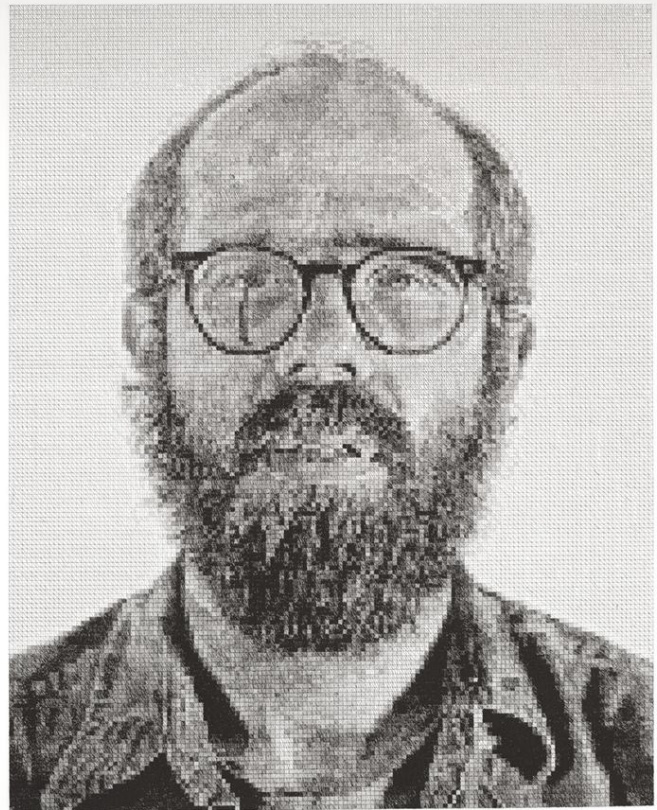


Figure 8

⁹ *Close Portraits*, 1980, p. 13

¹⁰ p. 53

¹¹ Intaglio is a print method involving etching, engraving, dry pointing, etc., onto a plate.

How did I do this? To make my lithography print installation, I started out with a mini-model about 1/8th of the life-size installation. The small scale made it manageable to work with the larger scale. The model helped determine the dimensions of the lithography images. Over the two strenuous weeks of printing, I used a rigid etching, inking, and printing process. When the prints are suspended, the play with depth perception begins. When the viewer stands at different points in the space, the segments can align to create Evan's portrait. At another point the portrait fragments into individual abstractions – a shift in depth perception called a parallax error.

My piece entitled *Shifting Perspective, Shifting Portrait* (figures 9-13). While the installation offers a physical perspective change, it also offers a conceptual perspective change for me, the artist. When viewers interact in the installation I attain their

perspective. I learn from the viewers' actions within the installation: whether they walk through or around it, or do anything. There are also rippled mirrors on the reverse side of the prints, so reflections of the prints will bounce off each other. Furthermore, the viewers can see their own reflections: fragments of abstracted images and fragments of their own portrait. The viewers are collaborated into the art.



Figure 9



Figure 10

People can walk in and out of the installation just like people enter and exit a person's life. This is the bigger theme. By standing at different angles and doing things that to me are unexpected, I gain perspective from the piece. I wanted to engage the viewer in order to be on the same level as them: to experience chance, unexpectedness, and fleeting moments. The artist's process can be a very private experience, but my experience is public. Just as my installation makes the viewers co-creators, it makes me an interested observer.



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

Conclusion

When I thought about my final piece as an undergraduate, I thought about creating something I *needed* to make that would ultimately fulfill my gut feeling. But to figure out what I would make exactly was the hardest part. I heard the following when my History of Performance Art class visited the Fluxus exhibition at UMMA: “To fly is to fall. To fall is to fly.” I make sense of George Maciunas’s quote by recognizing that flying is being free or experiencing an emotion that feels good. In order to reach those, I need to fall. Falling is risk, experimentation - doing something dangerous in my art making. In order to experiment last semester I had to be confident. Through confidence, and my drawing study of Evan and my monotype portraits, I learned so much.

In my installation the idea of learning from experimentation relates to the idea of learning from the viewer’s perspective. While I had to be free at times, I had to be really self-confident because I was creating a piece that forced me to lose control. I learned this idea by doing. If one wants to fly one has to fall. And in order to fall, one has to be open-minded to failure, novelty, and experimentation. Falling is part of the evolution of all art movements and art making.

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