

Natalie Schwartz
Senior Thesis Paper
Girls Without Pearls
A gross-face contest

Introduction

Our Digital & Physical Presence

Do social media platforms encourage us to create multiple selves, and curate these different personae for an intended audience? What does it say about us if we have so many faces? Do our profile pictures become masks? Are our faces rendered meaningless by the number of images we put out there? Do our faces need to be perfect or can authenticity transcend conventional beauty ideals?

To explore these questions I sought out Snapchat, an application that elicits an opposite portrayal. Snapchat serves as both a mode of communication and as a response to the “beauty culture” in the world we live in. Popular for its ephemeral nature, it allows users to share images of what they are doing in present time limited from one to ten seconds. By using my three best friends, from my hometown, as a case study I comment on how beauty culture influences social media platforms while shocking the audience with a counter aesthetic.

I am exposing these curated self-portraits by glorifying the “ugly” extreme through the traditional and historical medium of oil paint. Traditionally used to depict royalty, and those of affluent means, I am updating this rich medium to its current visual counterpart, the easily accessible and often visually repellent present. I am painting twelve portraits, four of each three girls to showcase the disposable nature of the face today.

Thesis: By painting these Snapchat portraits I am not only connecting this contemporary medium to its historical past, but I am making what was once intended to be fleeting more permanent while also exploring the multifaceted sense of self perpetuated by various forms of social media. This manifestation of masks arguably exhausts today’s youth, and as a result a counter aesthetic has arisen. To illustrate this trend I paint these representations of selves at their most shocking or “ugly” in a society that often propagates “beauty”.

Contextual Background

Portrait Painting & Photography

What was first recognized as portraiture were wall paintings of gods and goddesses of Egyptian origin as well as the Ancient Greeks but instead with sculptures of both gods and commoners. Later during the Renaissance period, portrait paintings were primarily of wealthy people, the regal, and religious. Having your portrait done was a status symbol and marked your social standing in society due to the great expense of commissioning an artist as well as the cost of the material. Portraits at this time were available to those of affluence.

Then in the Baroque Period portraiture shifts from subjects of affluent and religious figures to those of the common man (Plasencia PDF). This can be attributed to the humanist philosophy of the time. Vermeer's *The Girl With the Pearl Earring* becomes one of the major portrait pieces of this new aesthetic. Not only would he become a major influence for realist painters in the mid 19th century but would inspire the title of my piece. His piece was a dramatic shift in the right direction, painting the portrait in a way that was easier for the general public to relate to, yet sustained traditional notions of beauty. I wanted to take this a step further, painting my portraits in a way that depicted all flaws as well as implying the very real risqué behavior of today's youth. Pearls today are seen as a very pristine and proper form of jewelry, by titling my piece, *Girls Without Pearls*, I am alluding to the fact that my portraits are anything but proper and pristine. Nonetheless, Vermeer and other humanist painters were extremely influential to the future of portrait painting. However the cause of this shift had much to do with the technological advancements and history of the time.

During this time, people had experienced the age of reason, logic and the industrial revolution. The standard of living increased as well as income for the average population. Thus, brought painting into the homes of the middle class. Mass production made oil paint and other supplies available to the masses; anyone could paint anything he or she wanted. Artists now sought to depict the truth. There was this tension between depicting said truths versus creating grotesque imagery.

Often their subjects were referred to as “ugly” due to the kinds of people chosen as the subject as well as the manner in which they were painted. Artists like Courbet and Millet painted those of the working poor as seen through his painting of *The Stone Breakers*. These depicted truths were in stark contrast to the idolized paintings of the past.

During the late 19th century to the 1920s portraits started to become more abstract, and with abstraction came the freedom to play with more risqué subject matter. This is seen through both mark making and expression of both impressionist and post-impressionist painters like Picasso and Matisse. For Example Picasso’s painting titled, *Celestina* created during his blue period depicts the grotesque, but authentic. The woman is painted with all her flaws exposed in order to elicit the intended response from the audience. Another major shift for portraiture came in the 1960s with pop art; the face becomes an important icon. Artists like Warhol and Lichtenstein use the portrait to comment on larger ideas about popular culture and the commercialization of art and the consumer society in general. Lucien Freud, who’s aesthetic of painting changes over the years, masters the art of the ugly as can be seen in his self portrait, *Reflection*, 1985. What is arguably most striking about his work is how they “depart from conventional definitions of female beauty” (Sooke). This would inspire a great following for many contemporary painters. More specifically, artist, Jenny Saville who was significantly influenced by Freud illustrates large-scale nudes, in a similar aesthetic.



Lucien Freud, Reflection, 1985.



Lucien Freud, Woman in a White Shirt, 1957.



Jenny Saville, Triptych, 1993/4

Abstraction was also influenced by the development of the camera and portraits were no longer seated, time-consuming events. Portraiture changed because you no longer had to sit for several hours to complete the piece. Alongside the medium of paintings in 1000 AD was the development of the Alhazen Pinhole Camera, also known as the Camera Obscura and required eight hours of exposure. In 1827 a huge technological breakthrough came about via Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. He was able to make a photograph image using the pinhole camera with an exposure time less than thirty minutes. The next turning point for photography was in 1839 with the Daguerreotype, named after the inventor, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. Each daguerreotype is a unique image on a silvered copper plate. What was significant about this was the process; it did not require hours of sitting to produce a portrait, therefore the medium became more accessible and very popular (Plasencia PDF). Thus paving the way for expedited art, and eventually the technological advances we have today. This date is recognized as the birth of the practical photograph. Later in the late 19th to early 20th century comes the introduction of film, which continues the process of manual photography with increasing efficiency. The next pivotal moment for photography came in the 1990s with the digital, computer, and pixel-based camera. This made it very easy for consumers to take as many photos with little consequences, no longer did they have to worry about paying for film and its supplies and development fees.

With this came the rise of the digital culture we know of today the 21st century. Through the introduction of the hand held digital camera as well as camera-phones, and other devices equipped with photo capabilities the face has become ubiquitous. These devices led to the popularization of taking and sharing self-portraits and portraits instantaneously, and thus the birth of the "Selfie" (Plasencia PDF).

Post-Internet Art

With the camera and communication (cell phones) combined art was again influenced by technological advancements. Recently it has been in a self-aggrandizing manner with the self(ie) portraits youth are constantly snapping on their phones. This speaks to Post Internet art. Critics comment on how “networked technologies have changed artistic production in the recent years” and they are absolutely right. Looking at contemporary painters like Jen Mann and Elizabeth Peyton I can see the media presence and technological influence through simple elements such as color choice or subject matter.



Jen Mann, Rainbow, 2013



Elizabeth Peyton, Never Say Never (Justin), 2013

It is now being seen more than ever that artists who participate in these specific networking platforms are making “distinctive approaches to art-making” (Droitcour). Like the current media, and social media, “Post-Internet Art is in love with advertising.” And so is social media. It’s often a goal on some platforms, like LinkedIn, to market ourselves the very best way in order to succeed. Then there are Facebook and Instagram sites that studies have shown to literally provoke jealousy in others. It’s always a competition of who can look the prettiest, or appear to have the best life. These images are often posed, manipulated through various filters with this exact goal in mind and these ideals are only reinforced through commercials or ads of seemingly flawless women. So what becomes of the counter-aesthetic, the one we cover up with makeup? This self, the authentic self is rarely published for the world to see. However this “ugly” aesthetic is being shown, just to a selective group of people. But not for long, because I plan to make these private moments public.

Ugliness As Aesthetic

In Umberto Eco’s Lecture on the History of Ugliness he defines ugly in many ways. When defining ugly, he uses synonyms such as “disgusting, disagreeable, grotesque, obscene, and offensive to name just a few. However “ugly” could be defined in art as any figure that is not illustrated with the god-like qualities of the past, ie working class, the poor, or even suggestive depictions of the bourgeois. The ugliness could also be indicative of the horrors and sadness in the world. It could also be literal depictions of those with unpleasant or repellent features. What Eco found most alluring about assembling the images for his lecture was how “funny” it was, a response that is often elicited from my work. An element of humor is often found with representations of “ugly” and that is what makes it more enjoyable. He said, “beauty is in some way boring” and where “ugliness is unpredictable and offers an

infinite range of possibility [,] beauty is finite. Ugliness is infinite like God" of course this is only speaking to the theology of Western Culture. In terms of our contemporary definitions of what is "ugly" and what embodies "beauty" Eco states that they are "relative to various historical periods." Like many aspects of culture, concepts of beauty and ugly develop and change over time and are very much in the eyes of the beholder.

When commenting on paintings regarding women and ugliness Eco speaks of the inner powers of seduction, their "imperfections were described as an element of interest as well as sexual stimuli." This sexual element is imperative. I found his word choice to be extremely revealing when describing female ugliness. To describe the ugliness he used words such as "arouse", "allure", and "attract" potentially praising this kind of aesthetic. This is exactly the kind of "ugly" aesthetic I choose to sanctify through my paintings. An aesthetic that is largely created due to the advancements of mobile technology and photography but also appeals to the present human nature. Ugliness in this demographic is vulgar, crude, and silly. I am depicting the real; the ugliness under the mask of makeup or photo retouching which is propagated in today's media, social platforms, and applications.

What is shocking is the unrecognizable aspect of these women. One could argue that I am inevitably betraying the trust of my friends by screen shotting these images, printing, and then painting them with the plan to exhibit them for anyone who wants to see. And you'd be right, in a sense. But I am also liberating them in the same way snapchat does. I am painting "ugly" in a way that is beautiful, loveable, and ultimately hysterical in an attempt to comment on the "beauty culture" constantly marketed to us through all forms of media.

Living in a world where ads, photos, any image is photo shopped there will inevitable be those who go against the "preferable" more desired depicted, which brings us to the Internet Ugly

Internet Ugly Aesthetic

Aesthetic. Revolving largely around meme culture it is, "a celebration of the sloppy and amateurish" and images in this genre are "rarely sophisticated" (Douglas 2). This aesthetic seeks to "democratize participation" and like aspects of art history, bring the art to the masses. Having grown up with the Internet, I find this aesthetic, and art generated particularly representative of my age group demographic. Nick Douglas's, "It's Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic" attempts to define contemporary examples of Internet Ugly today. Douglas states, "Internet Ugly embodies core values of many online creators and communities; therefore, understanding this aesthetic is crucial to any study of online culture" (Douglas 1) Such aesthetics include crudeness, poor use of media, amateur editing and more.

However Internet ugly did not only give rise to the development of a certain aesthetic, but helped cultivate identities. Before my generation, there wasn't such a thing as "online culture" culture was primarily constructed through physical interaction, communication, but that is no longer the case. The development of the Internet has forever changed aspects of culture. And with the rise of social media platforms (most recent) like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and etc a person cultivates many online identities often depending on its intended audience. So although we have more access and more knowledge, you could argue that these advancements have lead people to have many masks, they have perpetuated the creation of multiple personas that the user then markets accordingly. So which one is real? Which one publishes the person's true representation or identity? That is not known, but I would argue that Snapchat elicits the most authentic portrait of a person, however it is conditional. According to the article, Sharing the small moments: ephemeral social interaction on Snapchat by Bayer et al. the kind of true aesthetic I am referring to is shared more often than not to those of "close ties" i.e. user directed communication. "Self presentational concerns" are often overlooked due

to both the controlled audience and the ephemeral nature of the app. Due to this impermanence the image sharing attitude shifts, "its much more laid back, just 'cause you can do anything." Thus with all of these factors considered, you arrive with the "ugly" or "authentic" aesthetic, a playful often crude "message in the form of a picture" (J B Bayer et al).

Thus what better way to update portraiture than to comment on this rising aesthetic. An aesthetic that is often hidden or fleeting. Instead of continuing to glorify the "beautiful" pictures plastered on Facebook and Instagram I chose to publicize the private moments, the real moments in an attempt to change the preferred representation of self. In Lauren Greenfield's documentary on Beauty CULTure, actress Jamie Lee Curtis questions society's definition of "beauty" when saying, "Don't you want it to be the way you look everyday is the epitome of beauty?" With Snapchat, you send and receive a moment present in time, not an archived image. What you see is what you get frequently accompanied by a witty bar of text to self-destruct in a matter of seconds.

So why portrait painting? Couldn't you get the same idea across (in regards to aesthetic) by printing these captured moments on nice large-scale photo paper? To answer that is easy, I am doing more than just appropriating a mobile generated photograph, I am re-contextualizing it through paint. I am taking a process that would historically have lasted hours and days only to available to those of high status and democratizing it. I am painting what was intended to disappear and making it permanent. I am publicizing arguably vulnerable moments, images that would normally be considered shameful. But by painting them in oil, I am linking this historically, luxurious form of art to the now. I am redefining what is a worthy subject matter for portraiture. And furthermore, I am having a lot of fun doing it. Like Umberto Eco said ugly is funny.

Methodology

How my mind worked

In the beginning of IP I was focusing more on art as catharsis and based my mark-making on the aesthetic of the impressionists. I loved the short brush strokes and the mindlessness of repeating them. I wanted to render these “beautiful” portraits out of short brush strokes in a full colored palette. But after a couple of critiques in class I found myself frustrated, the class understood I was “painting my feelings” but they weren’t connecting to the paintings the way I wanted. I wanted to evoke emotions like awe or wonder. I wanted the audience to see each stroke and get a sense of the meticulousness and time-consuming process.



Dana, 9 x 12 in, Goache on Paper



Steven, 9 x 12 in, Goache on Paper

I was too concerned with making something that everyone would think was successful and I thought these beautiful gouache paintings were the only way to go, but I was wrong. In art and a lot of the time life, I associated beauty as success. Whether that is a culturally reinforced stereotype or the old fashioned principles of the art academy, I do not know. But what I did know was that this notion of beauty as success was making me fail. This made me re-think aesthetic all together and conveniently I looked at my phone and got a Snapchat. First, I must explain how it all works.

Snapchat

When the creators of snap chat try to explain the application to older generations it is often confusing. CEO Evan Spiegel describes it simply, "... pictures are being used for talking. So when you see your children taking a zillion photos of things that you would never take a picture of, it's cos they're using photographs to talk... And that's why people are taking and sending so many pictures on Snapchat every day." What I have noticed is these conversations often involve the face, or self-portrait of the person. Which is how I came about this project in the first place. I realized that instead of calling or texting my friends that are quite a long distance from me, I would Snapchat them to keep in touch. Additionally, I found myself trying to make the grosses faces possible, knowing that no one but who I sent them to would see it. I started looking into how my friends portrayed themselves publicly, not just privately to me or to others of close ties and noted a major shift in aesthetic. Not only did I notice this in myself, and my three best friends, but also of many people I interact with. What they publish for the world to see (via internet) is an idealized aesthetic, a "best," more presentable version of themselves. So naturally, I wanted to publish the opposite. I compiled on the Snapchat images I had screenshotted over the years into a folder on my desktop. Like Eco, I couldn't help but laugh at the funny images I have amassed. I noticed that the most images I captured were of girls, all of whom I have "close personal ties" with (J B Bayer et al).

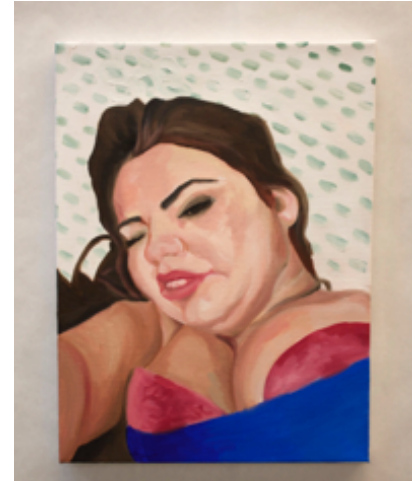
From here I decided to experiment by printed out large photos of Snapchats I had received (screenshots of them) and began painting them. Each print out was on 11 x 17in paper but in the aspect ratio I would see on my iPhone. At the onset of this idea, I created small oil studies of only one friend, Price, who I believed sent the best Snapchats.



Price, 6 x 6 in, Oil on Canvas



Price Study, Oil on Wood



Help, 12 x 16 in, Oil on Canvas

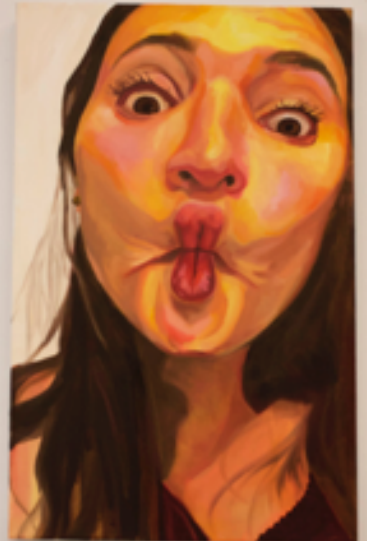
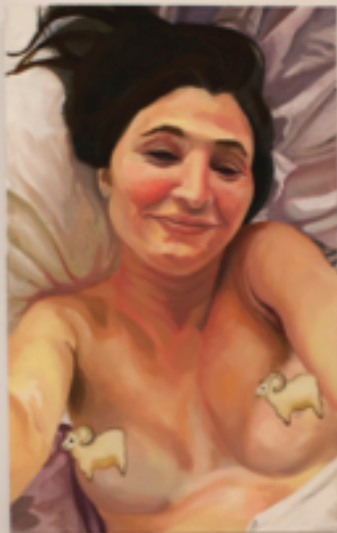
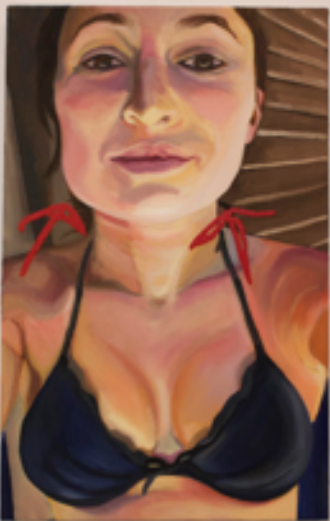
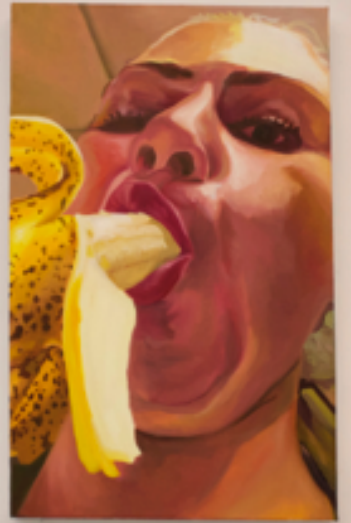
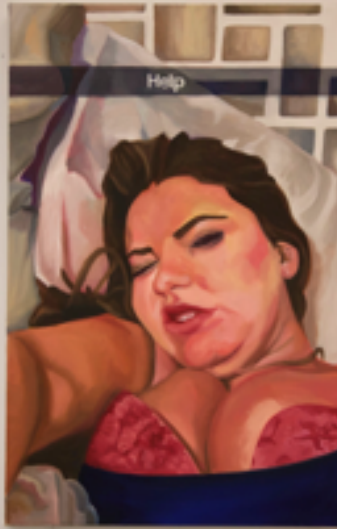
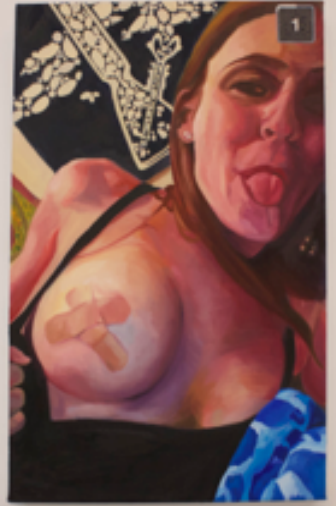
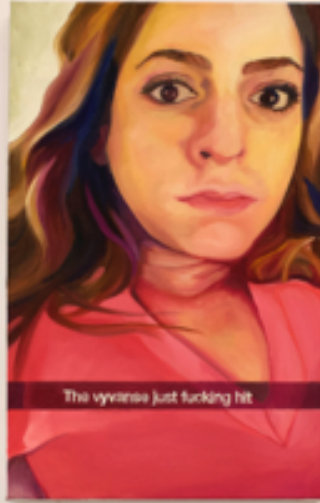
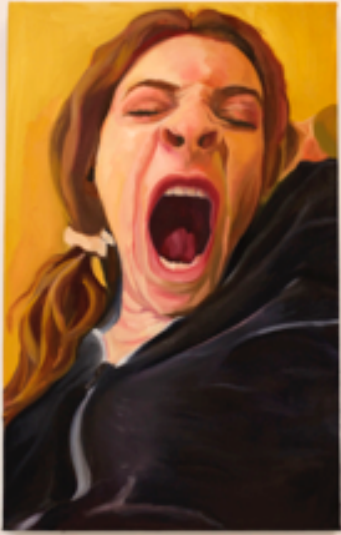
And it hit me, I had the “ah ha, eureka, light bulb moment that everyone loves and thought this imagery was exactly what I needed. I noticed a new value in ugly and it was very much in the present. It is funny, crude, and often vulgar and I thought it was just what I needed to connect to my present audience. So I considered the screen aspect of my work. Being that the images were sourced from my iPhone, I wanted to mirror this aspect as well as the traditional or stereotypical portrait. So I got larger, considered the context behind numerous works versus a couple large pieces and decided on twelve 14 x 22 in canvas (in aspect ratio to the iPhone screen) and got to work.

Creative Work

The Series

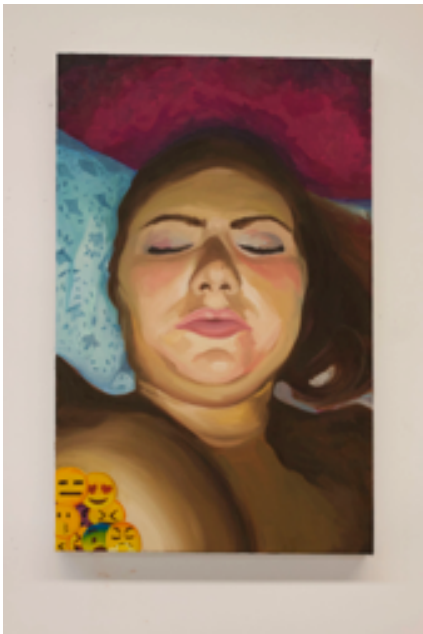
My work mirrors the digital qualities of the camera phone as well as a unique approach to portrait painting. When depicting the face I used colors that one would not find in nature which add screen-like, flatness to each piece. Mimicking, the lighting of the pixelated, printed images allowed for more creative licenses when painting the pieces. For example, I often found myself painting the rainbow-esque glitches of the print out when I knew that wasn't the accurate color of hair. Then I decided to enamel the Snapchat elements, such as text, the timers, emojis, and drawing elements to reemphasize the digital capabilities of the application while also adding complexity to the composition.

What I noticed after painting a few portraits was the unspoken criteria I checked off in my head. When talking with my professors, peers, and even visiting artists we all agreed that these images needed to stand out. I looked for ones that were most striking to me and would provide the most shock value for others. Luckily, I didn't have to look for long, since my friends had no shame sharing all of themselves with me. Now things get a little tricky when I call them "ugly" because by nature that word is very subjective. Whenever I say ugly I'm referring to it as un-presentable or inappropriate, aspects in which mass consensus would deem ill fit for all audiences. In traditional (or ancient) painting practices ugly was used to describe portraits of commoners, laywomen, the workingman, and basically anyone who wasn't important. So I am stretching the definition of ugly in order to draw attention to how the face is seen or published today. As for the criteria, I noticed that I gravitated toward images that were sexual, exposed skin, contained profanity, or some sort of "ill" behavior.

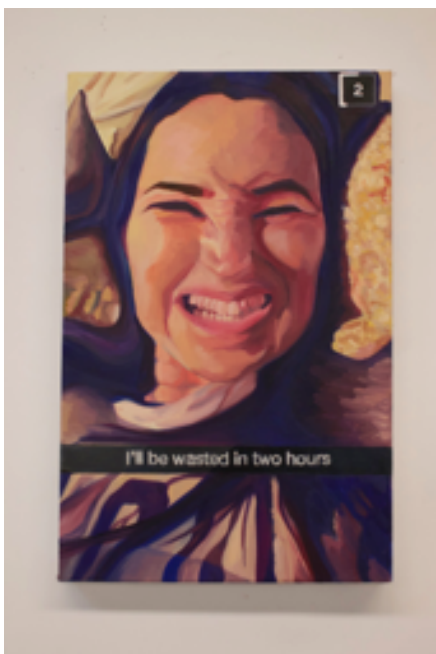




Here I have each painting displayed by girl. The first row is Dana, followed by Price and then Keren. Within the four paintings, one is sexual, one exposes the nude form, one is silly (specifically the yawn, the rainbow hat drawing, and the fishy face), and one references drugs or alcohol. What I found was that it was more effective to portray being hungover, or on some sort of substance, by including the text. I found the expression alone unable to provide the right context. This fact is most evident with the portrait of Dana, *The Vyvanse Just Fucking Hit*; without the text it's hard to view this expression as someone who has engaged in risky behaviors. The subtle bulge of the eyes and tight lip is almost impossible to see without looking at it for a long period of time. There are also overlaps in criteria for some paintings, for example Dana's portrait, *Dick Pic*, is both silly and sexual as well as Keren's *Eyes Up Here*. In the latter it is silly because her cheeks are still someone swollen from getting her wisdom teeth removed, and sexual because the main focus are her breasts. I find the digital elements in each portrait suggestive of the digital technology so accessible today and, this significantly helped me update traditional portrait practices to our digital era.



Although I feel the subject matter is more authentic compared to the overly posed images found on other social media platforms there is still an audience considered in these portraits. My pieces reveal that when trying to find the most authentic portrait there is still an element of feigning truth to them. The digital filters the app itself provides promote more masks, or even a more calculated image. Though, the content generates laughter, leaving humor as the most compelling element of the piece. I found this to be most gratifying human quality for people when observing my work, but it also left me with the biggest question: are these images truly authentic or do they just present a different mask?



Conclusion

The portraits in *Girls Without Pearls* suggest a liberation from the unobtainable beauty ideals broadcasted in the media. Ugly is more interesting anyway, so why must we always present ourselves as typical, boring, beauty cyborgs that mainstream culture wants us to be? However, this work also raised questions about the nature of authenticity—is there any way to be authentic in social media today? By examining these three women in various forms of social media, I came to the conclusion that Snapchat allowed them to be most true to themselves. But did ugly become the new contest to take the place of beauty culture? Nevertheless, Ugly has infinite possibilities that I intend to keep exploring. It's more entertaining and it's more exposing and it's f***ing funny.

The End

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