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GRETCHEN GARNER

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## Are Portraits Possible?

Among life's abundant mysteries, few are more quotidian yet more profound than unique personality. Everyone who lives is singular — even identical twins. Whether our personalities are genetically determined or environmentally formed or, what is most likely, a combination of the two, each individual is still precisely that, an individual.

Students of culture come to realize that the deeper they dig the more they feel this mystery, that to encounter a great work is as much to meet a strong personality as it is to savor ideas or aesthetic qualities. Certain works of art double that experience by taking individuals as their very subjects. In these works —biographies and portraits—we have a double encounter, as it were, both with the artist and with the subject.

Long before I became a photographer, I loved to look at pictures of people. My well-worn picture books were a chief joy of childhood, and now I am the kind of novel reader who flips frequently to the author's image on the dust jacket. Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* was the book that drew me to photography in my teenage years in the late 1950s. In that collection of photographs of the world's people I found hours of pleasure, yet even then I suspected that the meaning of the individuals pictured may well have been distorted by the photographer. The question I asked myself, contemplating, say, an African laborer or a Lapland child pictured in this book, was "What was this person *really* thinking?" I didn't know enough then to sense that the curator might have violated the photographer's meaning (a criticism leveled at *The Family of Man* by Hilton Kramer, among others), but I certainly knew that the subject's own truth could be bent to the photographer's purposes. So as much as I was drawn to those photographs, I sensed something problematic in depicting another person from the very beginning. As a photographer, it was not until 1983 that I began making portraits in earnest, for the most part because I had not been able to resolve this problem for myself. The question that begins this essay ("Are portraits possible?") is for me much more than rhetorical. Indeed, the work I have done in portraiture has been a constant effort to make portraits possible for myself and to evade the many landmines planted around them.

A definition might be useful here. For me, a portrait is an image that carries as its primary content something true and significant about the character of the subject. This sounds simple, but it is not. Most pictures of people are not portraits at all, of course, and even many commonly called portraits don't measure up to this definition. Either their main content is an idea (like virtue, beauty, or power) or else they are mere likenesses, often somewhat false in the interest of flattery. Others are just an excuse for the exercise of the artist's style or obsessions. Further, many of them touch only superficially on the particularity of the subject. This word is key, for it is uniqueness, the particularity of the character, that must be expressed in a portrait. The integrity of the portrait (though not necessarily its excellence as a work of art, but that is a topic for another day) can be measured by its respect for the integrity of the subject.

What are some of the landmines that lie in the portraitist's path? The first is the issue of flattery, that is, falseness in service of the subject's ego or delusions. This is the stock-in-trade, we might say, of a commercial portraitist. For the independent artist it should not be a problem, yet because photographers usually like or admire their subjects, problems of friendship and courtesy can cause self censoring for the sake of flattery.

A second problem is time. Life is never-ending change. Time is the river we travel and the body the vessel that takes us downstream, a vehicle that changes as we go. A still image, or even a series of stills, necessarily violates that sense of time by isolating one moment in the constant flow.

Then there is the problem of the inner life. The body, of course, is the way we identify another. We experience the world through our senses, and certainly the body determines character formation to a degree. Yet the body is a mere envelope hiding something more important but unseen. It seems to me that the inner person is the core person. How can one get inside? To the mind, the memories, the patterns of thought. Pictures must deal in visible substance, yet much of what one wants to communicate is not directly visible.

Another obstacle is the issue of the "other." Except for self-portraits, portraits are made by someone other than the subject. How does the subject's integrity or personal truth survive the artist's directive power? How can the artist understand enough to depict another? Can the artist truly cross the barrier? The question of the other also surfaces in the communication from the artist to the viewer. Can a mute image carry meaning between artist and viewer? If one accepts the presently fashionable notion that art is always mostly about other art, and that pictures can never be ana-

lyzed beyond their structure, their “language system,” then all the viewer can hope to do is figure out this structure. Somehow that doesn’t seem worth the effort; I hope that pictures can carry greater meaning. I want to say something in my portraits, and it is not about picture making. Rather, my goal is to understand, to empathize with my subjects enough so that when you look at the photograph you are not only communicating with me (and of course you are), but you are also touching and knowing something true about the person pictured before you.

And who may this person be? Just who is worthy of being portrayed? In the long tradition of portraiture, mainly it has been the rich, the handsome and the powerful who have been subjects. Perhaps this will always be true, and changes have happened only when a new group has been seen as having these qualities. Artists reflect values but they play a part in changing them too. A commissioned portrait substantiates the eminence of its subject, although the artist doesn’t assign that meaning; but by selecting a subject the independent artist is implying, “Look — this person is important.” Indeed, one of the forces driving my portrait work has been the great affection

Lorado Taft, “The Fountain of the Great Lakes,” 1913  
Art Institute of Chicago.



and respect I have for my subjects, most of them belonging to a subgroup our culture has seldom found picture worthy, middle-aged women. My subjects are not famous or public people, though you may recognize an artist or two. They are instead people whose lives are meaningful and beautiful to me. Through portraying them I am declaring their importance.

There is one more, final problem: to question my own urge to make portraits which then become satisfying aesthetic objects to me and, perhaps equally important, belong to me. (Although I do give a copy of each portrait to the subject, I keep one for myself too.) Is it possible to aestheticize another's life, and then claim the object as one's own? I hope so, but I'm not always sure.

This then is the minefield I have gingerly trod, and what follows are the stepping stones that have given solid footing so far. Among them are a decision to use deliberately posed (instead of "caught") photographs, attention to gesture, facial expression and handwriting, and the use of the subject's personal mementoes. In Annie Dillard's wonderful phrase, this has required "teaching a stone to talk." Through strategies of composition (convoluted or spare, for example) or tone (dark or light), I have tried to suggest qualities of mind not directly visible. Most important has been the process of collaboration — involving my subject directly and extensively in the creation of the portrait. More than anything this has allowed me to come very close to my subjects. In the end, I take responsibility (and credit) for the images, but without that collaborative process they would not exist.

Detail of photo sequence, 1974





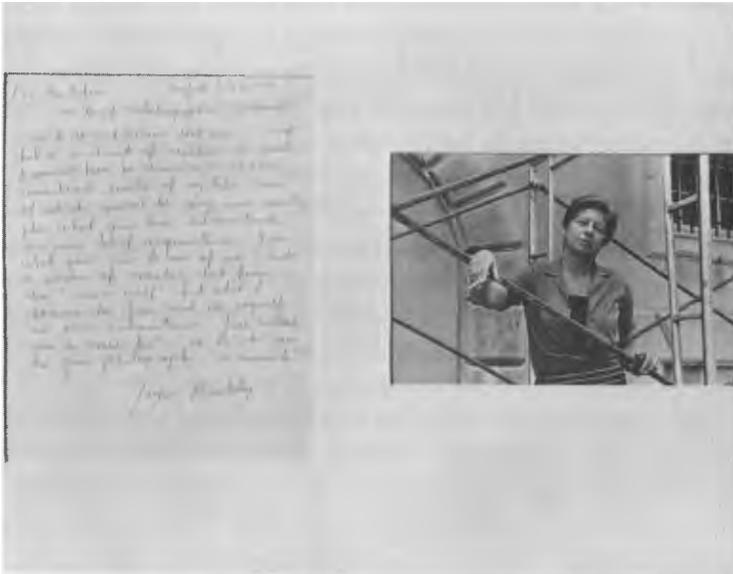
"Only a Little While," from *Vanitas*, 1980

As a young photographer, pursuing a medium that disposes itself well to that end, my pictures were largely a record of recognition of the world, not strongly interpretive but rather full of admiration. In simpler words, I photographed what seemed beautiful in terms of form, texture, and light. As for the composition of my pictures, they recalled the form of other pictures I found especially moving. Thus did I begin my work, slowly too, as it was without a photographic teacher. By the time I entered graduate school in 1973 I could compose and print; technique was not the problem anymore. Meaning was the problem. Armed with a degree in art history and a few years' experience in publishing as a picture editor, I was older than the other MFA students. Attached as I was in sentiment to the marvellous work of many who had gone before, I was loathe to abandon traditional genres to follow the then-fashionable trends of "manipulated imagery" or "space-and-time" as subject matter. Now that manipulated imagery of space-and-time has rather faded from the photographic horizon (that too is a topic for another day). I am not sorry for the decision. Yet meaning was still the problem, and with the accumulation of years it had become more pressing; there was an increasing need to deal with experience in my photographs.



"Portrait of Elizabeth Ockwell," 1983

During the early 1970s I had become interested in public sculpture in Chicago. One sculptor in particular, Lorado Taft, drew me to him. Taft lived and worked in Chicago from 1886 to 1936, and he wrote the first (and still useful) history of American sculpture. Taft was at the tail end of the beaux-arts movement and participated, with the better known Augustus St.-Gaudens, in decorating the buildings at the Columbian Exposition in 1892. Because he was little recognized for his many public works around the state, I decided to document them. An exhibition, *Lorado Taft in Illinois*, resulted and toured for three years under the auspices of the Illinois Arts Council. Photographing Taft's work taught me a great deal about the expressive power of the human body, for Taft used body gesture to portray not only sentiment, but also ideas ("Fountain of Time" and "Solitude of the Soul"<sup>1</sup>) and even geography. His "Fountain of the Great Lakes" (Figure 1), in front of the Art Institute of Chicago, uses five women as symbols of the lakes, each pouring water into a shell-basin held by the figure below—from Lake Superior to Lake Ontario. Without consciously recognizing the connection (now I see it, then I did not), at the same time I was making little book-sequences about my own life, in which I acted with symbolic gestures and used environmental motifs in a symbolic way (Figure 2).



"Portrait of Joyce Brodsky," 1983



David Bailly, "Self-Portrait," 1651

From other photographers I was learning at the same time much that would eventually find its way into my portraits as well. From Wright Morris, the use of the familiar environment to tell about a life<sup>2</sup>. From Arnold Newman, the use of style and composition to express character (particularly for artists). From Wendy MacNeil, a visual sense of a long life in her combinations of documents and attention to facial topography<sup>3</sup>. From Abigail Heyman, a heightened sense of the experience of becoming a woman. A growing interest in Dutch art of the 17th century, those still-lives of sensual objects that are at the same time highly symbolic, taught me much about objects as carriers of meaning. In *vanitas* still-lives in particular I found a cornucopia of nourishment. These pictures — meditations on loss using symbols like skulls, overturned wineglasses, guttering candles and bubbles about to burst, often including a text — seemed especially meaningful as I felt my life reach its mid-point.

And so it was that in 1980 I produced a portfolio of still-lives entitled *Vanitas* (Figure 3). Each of the ten photographs was a meditation on loss or change, including a favorite text and personal mementoes. My urge was to resolve certain mid-life issues and at the same time to pay homage and participate in a venerable still-life tradition. Only after the project was completed (and I had been engaged in landscape work for a couple of years) did it dawn on me that *Vanitas* was actually an extended self-portrait,



"Portrait of Barbara Crane," 1984

and most especially a portrait of my mind. Once realized, I became eager to apply the same kinds of strategies to other subjects, to see if I could describe their lives too, particularly their inner-lives. These would be the first portraits I had ever seriously attempted.

From the start I determined to use both a still-life (for a sense of mental life and memory) along with a full-length photograph of the subject. My ambition for this work was great: to unite the present with the past, the body with the mind, and to make images that would be honest documents of real women's lives (this was the reason I asked the subjects to dress in everyday clothes for the photographs.) Each subject was asked to accumulate objects or texts of special meaning and then explain them to me. I would later select among them, arrange them and in the arrangement would try to communicate a quality of mind. Because I believe our minds are more various than our bodies, the still-lives would differ more than the shots of the per-



"Portrait of Eleanor Hovda," 1985

sons. They would be the larger of the two images as well, reflecting a scale for the inner life that encompasses and subsumes the physical life (Figure 4).

Often my requests for standing poses were met with initial dismay by my subjects. It's awkward enough to be before the camera, but to have to present one's whole body seemed a bit much! There was a reason for them, though: I wanted consciously to break the tradition of the woman subject in a seated or languid pose and to use the standing pose instead, which bespeaks action, wholeness and strength. Through the stark, almost clinical, presentation I hoped to avoid falsifying anything about the subject. Gesture was revealed naturally in conversation during the shooting session. Somewhere on each roll of film appeared the gesture that spoke to me about each individual. Engaging the subject with me during the shooting produced the direct gaze that provides the strongest link between the viewer and the subject. The particular full-length shot, like the arrangement of the still life, was my decision. As a final touch, I asked



"Portrait of Geri Michelli," 1986



"Portrait of Judith Roode," 1987

each of my subjects to add her signature to her image.

After working on these portraits for several months in 1983, I attended a summer seminar on portraits at Columbia University, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Making portraits of my fellows in the seminar gave me the chance to try something new. Everyone was far from home, so mementoes were not available. Instead I asked my subjects to collaborate with me by choosing a location in New York that they felt was most expressive, and to write a statement about themselves to become part of the finished portrait. After working exclusively in the studio for months, it was a pleasure to be out on the street again, and sixteen of these portraits were completed (Figure 5).

During the same summer, I encountered Svetlana Alpers' wonderful book, *The Art of Describing*. Writing about Dutch art of the 17th century, she articulated clearly something I had been groping for intuitively — that is, descriptive art as a way of knowing. Alpers' basic argument is that this art did not have a hidden agenda, a secret symbolism as Erwin Panofsky and others had argued. Instead it was very close to the science of its day, devoted to the particularity of physical objects and to very direct, not hidden, meanings, "Northern images," she wrote, "do not disguise meaning or hide it beneath the surface but rather show that meaning by its very nature is lodged

in what the eye can take in-however deceptive that may be” (xxiv). It occurred to me why a photographer like myself had been drawn to this art when I read, “In Holland the visual culture was central to the life of the society. One might say that the eye was a central means of self-representation and visual experience a central mode of self-consciousness” (xxv).

On the cover of Alpers’ book was reproduced a self-portrait by David Bailly (dated 1651) (Figure 6), a picture that remains for me a model of the incredible range of meaning possible in one picture through description and clear association. No secrets or private allusions hide from a careful viewer here. Ideas are expressed through clear, if symbolic, associations. Bailly presents himself not as the young painter with the maulstick, but rather as the older man in the oval frame held by the young man — in other words, this is a legacy picture, made for his young protege. On the table is an array of objects that is a veritable dictionary of themes in Dutch still-life paintings (part of the legacy, no doubt, given to the young man). The roses, pipe, glass of beer, coins, and pearls tell of the pleasures of this life and the senses. The flute, pictures, sculpture, and book tell of the arts. Finally, here is also the *vanitas* theme: the skull, snuffed candle, empty wineglass and transparent bubbles remind us of life’s brevity and vanity.

Wondering as I had whether the meaning in my portraits was truly communicable, Alpers’ argument assured me that description suffices to communicate meaning. Perhaps not all the private associations of the still-life objects are clearly revealed, but within the objects, the gestures, and the arrangements themselves resides a natural meaning that can provide a link between subject/artist/viewer.

After another year of making the still-life portraits (Figure 7), I left Chicago for Minnesota. The move provided an impetus for change, change that was welcome and needed because a certain formulaic ease had crept into the work. In the portraits made since then I have tried to devise a unique format for each subject, a strategy that has slowed my production but satisfied me because of the challenge and variety of problems. To portray a new-music composer who sees herself as “an asymmetrical person in a symmetrical world,” I placed her eccentrically on the floor of a classically regular room. The odd sources of her music are suggested by the birds that seem to be entering the window and the music notation printed on the floor (Figure 8). For a photographer whose images are hand-colored, I showed only her face and her pencils in color, as she works on one of her images. To portray a film-historian moving regretfully away from Minnesota, I collaged a cinematic sequence of images over a long panoramic view of the Lake Superior shore. For an artist whose chief interests

are fly-fishing and Catholic symbolism (the title of a recent exhibition of her humorous icons was “Saints and Walleyes”), I placed her in her icon-shaped bedroom window decorated by her memorabilia (Figure 9). Finally, I produced a stark black-and-white multiple image of an artist whose bold charcoal drawings of double figures are really images about herself (Figure 10). Most important in all of them is the uniqueness of each portrait, echoing the singularity of the individual subject. This remains the deep mystery that is my real theme as a maker of portraits.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Taft’s “Fountain of Time,” 1922, is at the west end of the Midway in Chicago; “Solitude of the Soul,” 1901, is in the Art Institute of Chicago.

<sup>2</sup>For images from *The Inhabitants* (1946), *The Home Place* (1948), and *God’s Country and My People* (1968) see Morris.

<sup>3</sup>For examples of MacNeil’s portraits, see Wiesenfeld and *Exposure*.

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