

Portraits 2013: The Center for Fine Art Photography Curatorial Statement

From the Renaissance until the early twentieth century, European painting and sculpture was created largely under the jurisdiction of artistic academies. First established in Italy, and then later in France, England and the Netherlands, the early state-sanctioned academies were organized to provide formal training in the arts with an emphasis on the intellectual component of artistic production.

Aspiring artists were required to successfully master the academic hierarchy, and portrait painting, second only to history painting in importance and prestige, was considered one of its highest forms. Accordingly, the commissioned portrait, which was typically reserved for royalty and noblemen, was often representative of one's station and status in life.

The invention of the photograph supplanted much of the distinction of the painted portrait. Photography not only offered equal opportunity—Jules Lion, a free man of color, opened the first daguerreotype studio in the United States in 1840—but the *carte de viste*, introduced a decade later in France and then in Britain and the U.S., made portraiture widely available to the masses while it was equally popular with the ruling class.

As with the genre of painting on which it is based, the photographic portrait is a visual representation of its subject; an impression or evocation of an individual and, at times, even of an animal, place or thing, the portrait is an object created as a remembrance. But the portrait can be also best described as a creative collaboration between artist and sitter.

Many of the artists featured in *Portraits*, the current survey at the Center for Fine Art Photography, have sought to challenge the framework and conventions of the traditional portrait, while others have committed to skillfully embracing them.

Miska Draskoczy's quiet but compelling photograph, *Turkish Family*, deftly captures the essence of both the personal and the collective. His 2011 image reveals a family standing before the Golden Horn, their backs all turned to the camera, with the Süleymaniye Mosque establishing the dramatic background.

The four, an hajib-wearing woman, a man in western-dress and two young children, seem transfixed, perhaps by something in the waters below them. The fact that they cannot be identified, or that whatever has undividedly absorbed their attention will remain unknown, lends itself to the potency of the work. Draskoczy's portrait creates an inexplicable conundrum, a work that serves to memorialize its subjects while ennobling one of the architectural masterpieces of the Ottoman Empire.

Ruthie Brownfield's poetically evocative photograph, *Entwined*, is a moving statement on the power and resilience of friendship. Two, young teenage girls stand side-by-side sharing a pair of earbud headphones. Dressed in black, the first of the two is captured only in profile, perhaps unaware she is being photographed, with all but the glasses on her nose hidden from view by the hood of a sweatshirt.

But it is the second of the two girls that imparts much of the real strength to the portrait. Staring directly at the camera, her expression appears calm and focused. Her arm is raised,

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her hand lightly touching her shoulder, as if she has been surprised pushing her short, bobbed hair behind her ear. Yet with her torso turned slightly forward, she appears to welcome the intrusion, almost in invitation; vulnerable but composed, she seems glad to commemorate the intimacy of the moment.

Social relevance plays a significant role in a number of the works featured in *Portraits*. Finnish photographer Meeri Koutaniemi makes a powerful, moving statement in her series, *Namibia: Re-customized, De-colonized*. Expertly employing the construct of the photograph to inform and create awareness, Koutaniemi's portrait of an Ovaherero man dressed in an early German military uniform sheds light on what historians regard as the twentieth century's first genocide—not in Europe but in Africa.

Over a span of three years, from 1904 until 1907, German colonists were responsible for the deaths of more than 100,000 Ovaherero and Nama peoples in extermination camps maintained throughout the colony of *Deutsch-Südwestafrika* (German South-West Africa). A century later on remembrance days, Ovaherero men wear the uniforms of their one-time colonizers in honor of their ancestors, who disrobed defeated soldiers in battle.

In *Uniform for Victory*, Koutaniemi's subject stands posed in a rigid salute against the thick, Namibian brush. Wearing dark, wraparound sunglasses, he holds an unfurled flag, his crisp, khaki uniform fitting as it might have more than a hundred years earlier. But this uniform is adorned with green and white stitching and lanyards, the latter draping down from the shirt's epaulets and from one front pocket across to the other. And as the uniforms have been incorporated into Ovaherero and Nama culture, so too has this chapter of African history, customized and adapted into celebrations to allow no one to ever forget.

The disparate but cohesive set of works showcased here represent a wide variety of themes, styles and approaches to contemporary portraiture. From the spontaneous to the formal and replete with people, animals, still life and landscape, this survey offers proof that the art of portrait has simply been redefined, the antithesis of the oft-repeated assertion that classic portraiture is dead.

For if the goal of the portrait is to effect a relationship between artist and sitter, to create a visual representation of a subject or to capture its essence, the forty-four talented artists in this show have more than achieved that aim. While each may have taken the broadest possible interpretation of the genre, every one of these creative collaborations, from the representational to the idealized, is as unique as the art form itself.