TABLEAU:
A SERIES OF PORTRAITS

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Richard Avedon once said, “A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or face is transformed into a photograph, it is no longer a face but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate; none of them are the truth.”¹ Yet, if a portrait is an opinion then what are the factors that control the way in which we define and view individuals? More importantly what part of that ‘opinion’ is determined by the photographer and what part by the viewer?

A portrait photographer’s objective is to capture the likeness, personality and even the mood of the subject in as accurate a manner as possible. One of the pivotal aspects of the portraits I’ve made over the past two years is the focus on the ‘personal environment’ and the manner in which that environment both broadens and underlines the means by which the subject is described. The environmental components that contribute to the portrait tableaus produce a complex intertwining of both factual and fabricated assumptions projected onto the work by the viewer, the photographer and even the subject themselves.

Larry Sultan suggests that “photography affects, and is affected by social relationships more than any visual art form.”² It is believed that most people make up their minds about individuals within the first two minutes of meeting them. The process I’ve embraced when making these environmental portraits – completing the sitting within the first thirty minutes of entering the subjects home


– draws parallels to this theory of first impressions. The assessment of a space is itself a social initiation process in which the viewer and I hastily judge and assume a persona based on what we perceive from the personal notes of each interior. Though a great deal of my subjects are people with whom I am well acquainted, their living spaces – at times unknown to me before the sitting – are never re-photographed as a means of maintaining a genuine first impression.

The navigational space is not only a frame for the subject, but also serves to better describe the subject’s personality. The constituents of the frame: the furniture, fabrics, textures, colors and objects act as a catalyst for building a story. Each portrait instinctually jogs the viewer’s memory and generates an opinion about the person – their character, their flaws and beauty – and that opinion is strongly amplified by the environment in which they are depicted. For example the white walls of Cait’s (figure 11) apartment may indicate a personality inclined towards simplicity and cleanliness. The bold red of the bedspread upon which she sits, symbolizes Cait’s fierce nature while the blurry background may represent the softer side of her temperament. The color palette of Emilia’s (figure 7) kitchen reveals somebody warm hearted but whose chaotic space is just as hectic as her systematic modus operandi. The cool blue and dark tones of Chuck’s (figure 12) surroundings reiterate his melancholic mood. He is indifferent to the presence of the camera and his half nakedness stands out against the stark sea of blue around him suggesting the presence of a blooming ego. The background sets both the subject and the viewer’s mood, making them inclined to judge and be presumptuous about who and what the subject embodies.
A common trend in today’s photographic world is a taste for staging. Such “images embody sensibility, the beauty of an object and can unravel an imaginary story for the viewer.”³ Jeff Wall, particularly known for using traditional paintings as a basis for creating elaborate staged photographs, is an epitome example of successful photographic staging. Unlike the deliberate stillness of Gregory Crewdson’s surreal scenes of American homes and neighborhoods, Jeff Wall’s narratives explicitly reference the history of art and philosophical problems of representation. His work closely echoes the evolution of Baroque art, particularly his choice to focus on the most dramatic instance of when an action is occurring.⁴ Unlike Jeff Wall’s connection to Baroque painting, I believe that the ideal balance between static and movement that exist in High Renaissance art plays an integral part in my work. The serene mood and luminous colors intertwined by calm rationality constructs a language that recapitulates a perfect harmony and control of the painterly medium. They border on what appears to be a highly staged photograph; in which the very stillness and composed poise of the subject may generate postulations as to whether or not the subject depicted is part of a preconceived image controlled by the photographer or genuinely natural.

What gives the impression of being staged photographs are actually very natural; not only in the pose but also the backdrop. Olivia, (figure 16) who appears to sit calmly on her bed, waiting for what seems like a never endless


perfect pose, was in fact an uncontrollable fidgetor. She incessantly changed the positioning of the doll on her lap when I was about to click the shutter. Others distracted by other things going on in the room are also frozen in time, i.e. Ricky (figure 14) sitting at the kitchen table looking out beyond the frame of the picture at the microwave making popcorn. These photos are very real and unique but the subject’s removal from being active within the space at that instant of the pictures making, results in what appears to be a staged image created by both the photographer and the subjects actions and rendered as such by the viewer.

All photographs, while identifying a subject, bear the stamp and influence of the photographer. “A portrait photographer depends upon another person to complete his picture. The subject imagined, which in a sense is me, must be discovered in someone else willing to take part in a fiction he cannot possibly know about. My concerns are not his. We have separate ambitions for the image. His need to plead his case probably goes as deep as my need to plead mine, but the control is with me.”5 The social relationship that exists in photography is shaped both by the subject and me and regularly blurs the line of absolute control the photographer has over his subject. I may decide on the perspective: the placement of the camera, the distance from the subject, the distribution of the space around the figure and the height of the lens but the subject has the freedom to choose how they present themselves in terms of what they wear and where and how they choose to sit.

Posture, attitude, vigilance and vulnerability is formed depending on how, where and when they position themselves within a given moment. As the photographer I accentuate the way the subject moves, react to the expressions as a means of acquiring the desired portrait. These pictures are forwardly confrontational – their persons have the control to be what ever they choose to be. They retain their dignity but choose to bend that perception in regards to what they want to divulge. At times what they reveal is revealed unconsciously. For example Papi (figure 8) is vulnerable to the viewer’s gaze. His age has left him susceptible, his appearance is unconsidered and is in fact a result of him almost forgetting the presence of the camera during that moment. But his expression and naturalness are what make the picture so moving and real.

The summation of these photographs, the milieu of all these opinions, forms a vignette, an exposition to the viewer of the type of person that the photographer might actually be. My photographs are of the people I choose to be an integral part of my life. They are in essence a reflection of who I am. “The settings are my life,” says photographer Tina Barney; they are what I examine and turn over continuously in my mind everyday. These photographs are a collection of my analysis of what I see and believe to be an authentic discovery of human exploration and emotion. I consider the connections to trends and the history of art while paying close attention to human natures ability to delineate ideas and opinions about one another.

Figure 1. Damien

Figure 2. Hana

Figure 3. Tom

Figure 4. Read
5. Mike
6. Mom
7. Emilia
11. Cait

12. Chuck

13. Charlie

14. Ricky
15. James

16. Olivia
REFERENCES


