Portraiture: An Interactive Experience

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PORTRAITURE: AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

Linking his thematic inspiration (the strange, the bizarre, the weird and the odd) to his artistic reflection, Lopez conceives of his work as based on his fascination with human facial expressions. “It is there where it is born”, he says. Like Leonardo, he believes that the eye is the superior organ. Lopez’s use of form and color represents his main objective: to show emotion, humanity and elegance. For that, it is necessary for him to reveal character as well as beauty. It is again, the approach used by the great masters such as Leonardo, Velázquez, Géricault and Goya in representing integrity inside the strange, the bizarre, the weird and the odd. Lopez’s art invites the viewer to stare at it, to establish a cordial exchange and to venture into the fascinating world of the unusual.
For Mom and Dad
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

My most recent body of work has been focused on documenting the lives and history of sideshow performers, who, though marginalized by mainstream media, still enthrall and entertain throughout the country and world. It is a prerequisite of my artistic process to find compelling subjects that I am passionately interested in and through exploration can begin to develop a deeper knowledge of and understanding towards the particular circumstances of their lives. Since the primary form I utilize in my most recent paintings, drawings and prints is portraiture, it has been essential for me to develop an intimate understanding of the people I am depicting. I have selected people to paint and draw who meet my lifetime interest in unusual people.

In 2004, I started frequenting a small town in Florida called Gibsonton, although carnival performers know it as Gibtown. This town was founded by retired circus and sideshow performers such as Al “The Giant” and his wife Jeannie “The Half Girl” Tomaini. Over a period of three years, I made multiple visits to Gibsonton and began to get to know several people who have long histories in the sideshow business, including Poobah, “The Fire Eating Dwarf” and Ward Hall, “The King of the Sidehow.” My developing friendships satisfied my curiosity in people who push their bodies to rare limits and who choose to have a different path in life. Many of these people are ignored if not rejected by the mainstream. Shortly after developing friendships with several of the Gibsonton performers, I began making images of these unusual people.

It was important to me that my images honored my subjects and show them to be people of great humanity. I want those who view my artwork to see beyond the normal
classifications of “freak” because I witnessed their profound humanity at first hand in all my interactions.
PROCESS

In my artistic process, the desire to paint a portrait may arise simply from a story they have told me or from seeing them perform on stage. Regardless of the impulse, my desire is to capture an inner humanity. I am compelled to explore the curiosity these individuals have peaked in me. My goal is to record my reactions as an artist and friend. My paintings though seemingly objective, are highly subjective and are as much about me as they are about the person I am painting.

When I start a painting, I apply seven to ten coats of gesso until I get the smooth surface I desire. This way of preparing the canvas allows me to eliminate any issue of texture and to achieve glazing and lighting effects that are similar to 17th century tenebrism, a dramatic form of chiaroscuro developed by Baroque artists such as Jusepe de Ribera, Francisco de Zurbarán and Georges De La Tour who were known for their interest in light and dark for the purpose of creating dramatic images. I use a similar technique to emphasize the enigmatic personalities and drama of the people I depict in my paintings.

I employ printmaking in my artistic process as well, focusing my attention on the intaglio technique of mezzotint. This painstaking process involves preparing the surface of a copper plate to create a textured surface, which if printed by itself would be completely black. By using a burnishing tool and a scraper, I coax the lights from the dark; much like a performer on a stage emerges from the dark and stands in the spotlight for all to see. Overall, the mezzotint process is similar to drawing with an eraser on a charcoal covered surface; it is a subtractive process and, in many ways, the inverse of what I do in a painting, which is mostly additive. By approaching my subjects in both
additive and subtractive ways, I find I develop a deeper connection with them as people, as performers and as individuals. It should be noted that in both paintings and prints the preparation of the surface is as important as the rendering of the subject. I equate the labor intensive preparation of my surfaces to a performer practicing their craft long before their performance in the spotlights can amaze the audience.

A viewer can see the striking difference of my approach to different media when they compare my painting of Red Stuart (Fig. 1, 2008. Left) with my mezzotint etching of the same performer (Fig. 1, 2008. Right). In the painting, Red Stuart, an entertainer known for his dexterity to withstand pain and his ability to voluntarily control his natural body impulses, is depicted inserting a five inch nail into his nasal cavity. I aimed to depict Red in a way that dramatically captured his face at the time of the insertion while his facial lack of pain reaction shows how casual and natural this act is to him. This approach is mirrored in the mezzotint, which depicts Red Stuart swallowing a three foot sword. However, where the subtle color and light of the painting evokes a feeling of an intimate presence, the mezzotint captures a more direct mood harkening back to the past when performers where depicted in black and white photography, to the amazement of those too far away to see the performance at first hand.
Fig. 1: (Left) Red Stuart, acrylic on canvas, 5” X 4”, 2008 and (Right) Red Stuart, mezzotint on paper, 6” X 5”, 2008
Fig. 2: Insectavora, acrylic on canvas, 16” X 20”, 2006

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INFLUENCES

My current work portrays contemporary people who practice esoteric techniques that date back to ancient civilizations. My artistic process mirrors this aspect of my subjects, as my artistic process mirrors my influences, who are largely classically trained historically recognized artists. I use processes to make images that were developed and refined long before the invention of photography. This connection through media to the past enriches my work, allowing a greater degree of expression and connection to the people I am portraying. In the following section, I will explore some of these influences and discuss ways that they intersect with my own art and concerns.

“The artist is like the bee that gathers its honey from many flowers”

-Theodore Géricault.-

The same curiosity I have for the bizarre and the unusual has fascinated artists who have come before me such as Diego Velázquez, Theodore Géricault and Francisco Goya. The curiosity each human being has for what is different and unique to themselves and their cultural norms is what leads me to want to know more about my subjects. I believe this also led my artistic influences to explore human subjects such as human oddities and those who behave outside of the norm.

Diego Velázquez for instance, portrayed dwarves, court jesters and mentally ill people in his paintings. Having been appointed as court painter to King Phillip IV, Velazquez had access to the royal lifestyle, including access to the king’s entertainers which were often dwarves, jesters and fools. Velázquez’s fascination for these individuals is evident in his portrayals of Juan Calabazas (Fig. 14, 1639), Sebastián de
Morra (Fig. 13, 1644. Right), and Don Diego de Acedo or ‘El Primo’ (Fig. 15, 1644) to name a few.

Diego Velázquez’s influence can be seen in my portrayal of Poobah (Fig. 13, 2006. Left) where as in Velázquez’s Sebastián de Morra, (Fig. 13, 1644. Right) I was interested in capturing the humanity behind the spectacle. In both of these works, there is no intention to enlist pity or sentimentality. Like Velázquez who could look as sensitively at a Dwarf as he could a king or princess, I intended to capture Poobah as the human being he is. Unlike Velázquez, my application of paint is very different, he is known for his loose brush work while my style leans more towards the precision found in works by Jacques Louis David, who insisted on showing the least possible evidence of a brush touching the canvas.

Fig. 13: (Left) Poobah, acrylic on canvas, 20” X 16”, 2006, and (Right) Sebastián de Morra, 1644
Fig. 14: Juan Calabazas, 1639

Fig. 15: Don Diego de Acedo ‘El Primo’, 1644
Theodore Géricault, like Velazquez, also had a similar interest in the unusual. Between 1822 and 1823 he was invited by his friend Dr. Etienne-Jean Georget to La Salpetriere, the lunatic asylum in Paris to create a very particular body of work which was not intended for public viewing. Géricault painted ten portraits of patients suffering from various monomanias which are now ranked among the early masterworks of modern painting.

In these particular paintings, Géricault’s focus on a romanticized humanity can clearly be seen. On his portrayal of *The Kleptomaniac* (Fig. 16, 1822. Right), through the subject’s eyes, the viewer can sense mental instability and uneasiness. In my painting of *Enigma* (Fig. 16, 2006. Left), although not a mentally unstable person or a monomaniac, I gave the subject a solid and evident stare at the spectator. I wanted the subject’s eyes to reveal not only an intimate interaction but also an unusual feel that would entrance the viewer to look back and be captured by the subject unwittingly.

![Fig. 16: (Left) Enigma, acrylic on canvas, 20” X 16”, 2006 and (Right) The Kleptomaniac, 1822](image)
Fig. 17: The Gambler, 1822

Fig. 18: Delusions of Military Command, 1819-22
Considered by many to be the last of the classics and first of the moderns, Francisco Goya y Lucientes, shows a similar and yet more intense fascination for unusual subjects. We start seeing Goya’s interest for dark subjects in the 1790’s in his print series entitled *The Caprices*, works such as *They Spin Fine* (Fig. 20, 1790) and *There is a Lot to Suck* (Fig. 21, 1790) are some examples of Goya’s exploration of the grotesque. A few years later he painted subjects such as *The Colossus* (Fig. 22, 1808) and *The Old Ones* (Fig. 23, 1817) which clearly portray a bizarre and unusual subject matter. We see Goya’s interest in the macabre even more apparent in his later works known as *The Dark Paintings*, (Fig. 24 and 25, 1819-23), which were never meant to be seen by anyone but Goya himself.

In Goya’s painting entitled: *Two Old People Eating Soup* (Fig. 19, 1819-23. Right), we see Goya’s compulsion to depict the grotesque and macabre qualities of humans. The man on the left who holds the spoon shows a sinister smile and a very powerful wicked expression in his eyes which is enhanced by the artist’s choice of intense contrasts of light and dark, creating a gruesome environment.

My portrayal of performer John Shaw (Fig. 19, 2007. Left) employs a similar approach by focusing my composition on the look of his eyes and hands as he pulls down his bottom eyelids to reveal the expulsion of corn kermels from his lachrymal ducts. The palette and play of light I chose for this work was to enhance the intensity of his behavior and to create a sense of grotesque uneasiness similar to Goya’s painting. I find this to be a unique approach to painting and drawing, capturing something inside the humanity of John Shaw that no photograph could do justice to. It is through the prolonged study of creating a painting that I was able to bring this character into focus.
Fig. 19: (Left) John Shaw, acrylic on canvas, 16” X 20”, 2007 and (Right) Two Old People Eating Soup, 1819-23
Fig. 20: They Spin Fine, 1790

Fig. 21: There is a Lot to Suck, 1790
Fig. 22: The Colossus, 1808

Fig. 23: The Old Ones, 1817
Fig. 24: Two Women and a Man, 1819-23

Fig. 25: The Reading, 1819-23
CONCLUSION

I am excited to have exhibited my current body of work in several art galleries in the past four years. These venues include *The Smoke Gallery* in Miami, Orlando City Hall’s *Mayor’s Gallery*, *Gallery RFD* in Swainsboro Georgia, and the late *CBGB’s 313 Gallery* in New York City. My plan is to continue to pursue more public exhibitions for these artworks.

The ongoing project of my work is to bring the inspiration I get from art historical masters, like those mentioned here, into my studio in a meaningful way that provides a deeper experience of my own humanity as well as the humanity of others. Portraiture is one of the oldest genres of art because it shows us something of ourselves and our collective history. I reject certain contemporary modes of art practice in favor of labor intensive processes which date back to the 1500’s. I am passionate and knowledgeable about the people I paint and the influences which enable me to maintain focus and attention in my studio. Medium, subject matter and technique are all linked in the production of my paintings, which document the people who I maintain personal friendships with as much as they document my own growth and development as an artist and a person. I have foregone fashion and technology in order to align my work with a sincerity that I find in the art of the past.

Some criticisms I have received of my work overlook the link to art history in favor of focusing on the “contemporary.” It is not, nor has it ever been my intention to fall into a niche or fad, or the petty seasonal mentality that characterizes the hyper media environment surrounding contemporary art today. I am very much aware of what is going
on in the contemporary dialogue, but find the dialogue that began centuries ago in the genre of portraiture to be where I want to situate my own art.

The current focus of my work remains a desire to portray what I feel is relevant to my existence. The stories of my subjects are often interchangeable with my own story. I reject simplistic Post-modern criticism that we cannot communicate with one another, that we cannot have compassion for others, that we cannot learn from others because of the malaise of the media and the personality cult. Just like Velázquez did when he turned his attention to court jesters, Géricault to insane mental patients and Goya’s ventures into the bizarre, I focus my attention on people whose stories and personal power inspire me to work. I am a painter of stories and I find stories in the faces of others.
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