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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the College
of Imaging Arts and Sciences in candidacy for the
degree of Masters of Fine Arts

A Series of Portraits

by

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Pamela Gordon

Date 3/19/99

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Part 1

The Introduction and Artists Statement

The series of paintings that I have created for my thesis exhibition represent a portion of the youth population in America today. These young adults that I have made the subject of my paintings live an alternative life style from the norm, or traditional culture.

I was raised to see that a traditional lifestyle would consist of graduating from high school, continuing on to college, working towards building a career, meeting a mate, and settling down to have a family. As I grew up, and had new experiences, I realized that this concept seemed to be a very old fashioned tradition. I had limitless options as to what I could do with my life. Once this reality sunk in I began to notice different people dealing with these options of life in a wide variety of ways. The people that I have created portraits of, exemplify some of the different ways that people exist in society, without giving way to that ingrained tradition of “normality”

Most of the images are of friends or acquaintance of mine that I have connected with due to similar ideas and common interests. The source for these images is a collection of snapshots that I have been taking over the past two years. The places that the pictures were taken are integral parts of the pieces as well. Some of them, for example, were taken at concerts or music festivals. Many people who attend these events travel from city to city across the country to attend the shows nightly. They live out of their cars, vans, and tents, sometimes for long periods of time, selling food and other various things that they have created to other concert goers in order to earn their keep. This is a very free lifestyle, so I attempted to carry out that feeling and flavor throughout the images.

The portraiture was designed to enhance the theme as well. In other words, the images were distorted in ways to stray from what has developed through history as traditional portrait poses. Some of the figures are shown at extreme close ups, or twisted, and angled somewhat awkwardly to cover the entire picture plane.

The style that I have developed over the period of time that this series was created, is linked to the work that I have done in undergraduate school. It was there that I had originally become interested in creating portraiture of my friends and acquaintance. These initial images were more straight forward than my most recent work. The poses along with the background were more closely related to traditional portrait painting. As time went on, I began to distort my subjects and flatten the backgrounds in order to emphasize the figures and faces. My style continued to develop, as did my interest in several craft mediums, such as sewing, crocheting, and beadwork. Eventually all factors, the people I surrounded myself with, my interest in the figure, and

portraiture, as well as a growing interest in a wide range of craft mediums, began to overlap, and it all came together in this body of work.

After beginning work on my Masters degree, I had an opportunity to do some research on contemporary female artists. One artist I was exposed to, was a painter named Alice Neel (Hill). Her work sparked an interest in me, so I continued to do extensive research into her work and her life story. She was a portrait artist, whose work shows distinct personality, and the individuality of the subjects who posed for her, first, and foremost. Often she would paint family members, and close friends. In these instances, the individuals personality seemed to be captured most easily, and efficiently; after all, family and friends are the people whom we know best. Neel would also choose subjects from people she might encounter during daily activities, such as walking down the street, or simply sitting in a restaurant. These people would catch her eye and she would feel compelled to walk right up to them, and ask them if they might be interested in posing for her. With all of her subjects, Neel would invite them into her studio and sit down with them prior to beginning painting. They would engage in conversation over tea, allowing Neel to have a glimpse into this particular individuals personality. Her paintings of complete strangers were equally as expressive as the work done of her closest friends. The gift she had of expressing personality through the image was the essence of her work, and had a great influence on my own work.

Many people that I have painted are people that I know quite well. In these instances relaying the individuals personality came quite naturally. Often I would think solely of the individual of whom I was painting, and the times I have shared with them. Their personality seemed to transfer on to the picture plane quite naturally. In other instances, the photos that I worked from were candid shots of people that I did not know well, or even at all. For these images I developed an element of fiction. By using the information from the snap shot, and context in which it was taken, I created an overall feeling of each individual's personality.

My style of portraiture is a type of stylized realism. I look at the features of each individual, then slightly exaggerate some of the more prominent ones, and distort others. I've always been attracted to a super realistic style that painters such as Chuck Close used in their portraits, but at the same time, such an approach seems all to mechanical. I wanted my work to be less rigid, more painterly. Working with snap shots helps me create my image, because the people in the pictures are somewhat flattened by the flash. I try to translate this with paint. I will use the figure in the photograph as the main reference and then darken the shadows, and lighten the highlights some, and create

exaggerated areas to emphasize certain notable qualities of that particular individual. The result is a figure that greatly resembles the subject, with a twist.

To carry these concepts further I chose to deal with the background in a similar manner. I did not want to use the actual background that was in the snap shot, I wanted the focus to remain primarily on the figure. I decided to abstract the background, by dramatically flattening it. I did this by simplifying areas into blocks of colors. In the early stages of developing these images, flat, solid, painted surfaces comprised the background. The concept was what I wanted but the feeling was not corresponding, or supporting the figure. During this time, I was working with handmade paper as well as textiles in some of my other artwork. I chose to use these materials to create the blocks of color and pattern in the background and negative space. First I painted the portraits on paper, and then cut them out and placed them on the the handmade paper and/or fabric background. In some instances I used large areas of solid colors, while in other areas I used prints in order to create more animation, and movement so it is just as much a part of overall image, as the portrait itself.

Bringing all of these materials together to create a coherent painting was a challenge in and of itself. In the early stages of this series I was working with oil paints on primed canvas. The oil paints were giving me the the smooth look that I desired, but the canvas that I worked on seemed very rough to paint on. I looked for a smoother surface to work on. I used a type of paper called stretch paper that can be moistened and stretched over a surface, it will then dry wrinkle-free. This gave me a very smooth surface that accepted oil paints well. In later stages I introduced textiles, and handmade paper, as well as ribbon, and string. The idea of bringing these materials into my paintings originated from my interests in a variety of craft media. By doing this, I give the viewer an overview of all of my interests which includes craft media.

Part 2

The Paintings

I will now examine the individual works that make up my exhibition. I will discuss them in chronological order in which they were created, in order to follow the development of style and concept, and look at how each piece had an impact on the work that followed.

The first piece in this series was *Leah, Desere, and Me* (figure 1), Leah and Desere are two woodworkers that I met through school, who became friends of mine. Leah was my roommate at the time, and Desere spent a lot of time at our apartment. The photograph was taken while the three of us were on a road trip. Our destination was Limestone, Maine, to join in a giant music festival. At the time of this photo, we had pulled over at the side of the road to admire a mountain view. We were all taking photographs of the view, when we decided to take a picture of ourselves by standing close together and holding the camera out in front of us. Little did I know that the zoom lens was on, so the image turned out to be an extreme close up of our eyes, foreheads and hair. The lack of skill of the photographer turned out to be beneficial, for the image now has an element of humor to it.

When looking at the figures, the viewer is very close to these faces, invading their personal space, creating a sense of awkwardness. Yet our expressions are happy and warm, which is inviting to the viewer. This combination of feeling happy and uncomfortable creates an interesting juxtaposition.

I used this cropped image, and painted it onto a canvas. I painted the negative space around the heads a sky blue as it was in the snapshot. At this point I realized that the concept of the piece needed to be enhanced. Next, the canvas was cut, cropping the image into a square. I stretched a piece of unprimed canvas over stretchers that were several inches larger than the image, and the painted image was then mounted onto the canvas in the center. By choosing red velvet ribbon to create a definite border, it created tight space around the image, that was a feeling that was repeated in the portrait. Using ribbon was just a small beginning that triggered ideas of integrating mixed media concepts into future paintings.

After I had cut out and mounted that first image, I needed to build on and expand the idea. I created *Mother and Child* (figure 2) by first painting the image and the background on canvas, and cut it out, as I had done earlier. I had decided to stretch some printed fabric, as I had done with the unprimed canvas, and then mount the image.

The portrait is of a young mother I met at the same festival in Maine. She and her husband and child sat down with me and my companions and chatted with us. The

image I caught in my photograph is of the woman, who looks pretty scraggly, as though she has been living on the road for a while, and she is holding her child in her lap. The baby is wiggling all around, yet the way she is holding her child, she seems quite competent, and comfortable with him, as if she possesses natural motherly instincts. She appears to be loving, and patient. We didn't get to know each other all that well, because she sat and chatted for only a short while. She left me with a warm impression of her. The pattern of the fabric that I chose for the border, sets off the same feeling. It was a plaid flannel in autumn colors such as rust, gold, and dark green. The interplay between the figures and the fabric in the background suggests a feeling warmth this young mother exudes.

By using this print as a border, it creates a whole new element involved in the picture plane. The plaid creates a vibration, or movement, that helps carry ones eyes around the painting. I used a band of unprimed canvas as a thin border to cover the seams of the canvas against the fabric. I also attempted to incorporate some glass beads into this painting. I arranged them in several different manners, after a few attempts, I decided the piece was stronger with the more simplistic border.

Taking the design aspect of these images, I moved on adding new extensions to my concept. My next piece entitled *Hippie from Bangor* (figure 3), is one of two largest pieces that I have done. I painted the image of this man that I had met while camping in Maine. His tent was set up next to my own, and the first night that my friends and I had arrived, this man came right up to us and introduced himself, he told us that everyone calls him "Hippie". We all talked for a long while that night, and we learned of Hippie's colorful background. He seems to have found himself in all sorts of crazy situations throughout his life time. He traveled around on tour with the rock band, The Grateful Dead. He found himself in trouble with the law on a couple of occasions, but he did not get very specific as to what actually happened in those instances. Now he says that he is living in Maine, living a clean lifestyle, and working as a construction worker to get by. He was one of the most interesting characters that I have ever met. Hippie was a perfect subject for one of my portraits.

The photograph that I worked from was a much more traditional pose than the prior pieces. Hippie is looking straight on at the camera, smiling. I painted his image from his mid torso up. He has a long fuzzy beard, long wavy hair, and he is wearing a large brimmed floppy hat. He wears a cape around his shoulders with a traditional Native American print on it. The way that he wears his hair and clothes was the epitome of the definition of a "hippie" to me.

I decided that this image would be more powerful if the figure was isolated from the background somehow. I took his painted image, and cut around it, eliminating all of the negative space of the canvas. I put some stretcher bars together measuring to the size of the portrait image. I selected a plaid flannel fabric similar in color to the cape that he wears to stretch over the bars. The texture of the flannel is soft and fuzzy, similar to the texture of his hair and beard. The color scheme was bold in black, red and white, and I feel that it backs up and supports the image well.

Using the bold plaid in the entire background, including the negative space, took this image to a new link in my thought process. When looking at the piece, it is hard to decipher the background at first; is it painted, or is it a new foreign element, other than the painted canvas, brought into the picture plane.

After the image was mounted onto the fabric, there was a slight rim of white around it that was created when the canvas was cut. To tie the foreground to the background, I wanted something subtle, so I lined the edge of the image with thin black thread. This successfully covered the edge of the canvas, and made the transition from the foreground to the background much more smooth. The string is barely visible while looking at the entire image, but it adds a delicate subtlety to the overall composition.

The more traditional pose that I used for this image is not as strong as some of the other works that I did in this series. It is not as telling of Hippie's personality as it might have been had the snapshot been more candid. However, the idea that formed around the piece, of the painted image mounted onto stretched fabric, was a key element. It broadened my view of places I can go with this train of thought, and carried me along onto my next couple of works.

My next piece entitled *Matthew* (figure 4), was my most personally emotional piece I had done. Matthew was a man that I had recently met, and started a romance with. Much to my dismay we had met just two weeks before he had planned to move across the country to live in New Mexico for the winter. Before he left I had captured a polaroid of him at an extreme close up. He was walking towards me as I snapped the photo, which ended up capturing the right side of his face, and cropping off the rest. The offset image covering the left side of the picture plane, left the large negative area on the right hand side. This proved to be a very dynamic design.

Once Matthew was gone I wanted to capture his image on canvas to express my emotions as to how I was feeling about him. I referenced the photo closely, and set up the design of the picture plane as it was in the photo. I painted the figure on canvas and mounted it over stretched fabric. The fabric that I chose was a patchwork print

with deep reds and dark blues and greens. The richness of the color, as well as the activity of the print hints at my emotions towards my subject, and at the same time captures Matthew's warm inviting personality. The large area of negative space filled with the printed patchwork, gives energy, and movement to the portrait. The cropped face added a sense of mystery, in essence, my thoughts on the future of my relationship with this man who now lived across the country. In order to complete this piece, I used some of the red velvet ribbon that I had left over from *Leah, Desere, and Me*, as a border for the piece. When I completed the final touches, the color of the ribbon matched the fabric so well that it tied together the painted image with the printed image, and secondly, since this was a repeated element from another piece, it ties the two pieces of the series together. The last element that was added was a piece of hemp cord down the seam of the canvas along where it was touching the printed fabric. This helped the two entities come together as one, to create a strong dynamic piece.

While considering my options of how to carry out the concepts that I have been working on thus far, into my future paintings, I thought about works of art I have been creating outside of painting. I had been creating artist books with hand made paper, as well as other materials, including fabric, to create a collage of mixed media . I realized that hand made paper can be used in the same areas that I had previously been using fabric. This would create an effect that will add some variation, yet still carry out my theme. While deciding to use some handmade paper, I was also searching for a new surface to paint on. The primed canvas that I had been using up to this point had a rough texture to it. It was not enabling my paint to be applied as smoothly as I desire. This is when I began to use stretch paper.

I then created three pieces in a similar manner using the stretch paper to work on, and handmade paper in the background. The first of three was a portrait of one of my best friends named *Carol* (figure 5). I had met Carol my freshman year in college, and we remained friends throughout four years of school and beyond. She is a wonderfully interesting and beautiful person inside and out. I had painted portraits of her several times before, but I never cease to tire of painting her image. The piece that I created this time is taken from a snapshot in which Carol is looking at the viewer out of the corner of her eye, with her body and head significantly turned away . This pose described an aspect of her personality well; a playful side. I chose a sheet of paper to place in the negative area that was a bold navy blue and white tie dye. The shirt that Carol wears is a dark blue as well. These are rich, dark, velvety colors that she often wears, and are appropriate in terms of her personality. I mounted the hand made paper

onto plywood that had been cut into a rectangle of appropriate shape and size for the image, and positioned the portrait off center on top of the paper. The visual effect the patterned paper creates in the background, combined with the space where the figure was placed, created an effect that illustrates an aspect of her personality through color, design, and pattern. This was the most successful image of my friend that I have created.

Paper in the background with the portrait in the foreground proved to be a successful venture, so I carried on and began to develop a portrait of another friend of mine, named *Desere* (figure 6). I had met Desere at R.I.T., shortly after I began my studies here, and we ended up spending a lot of time together my first summer in Rochester (she is the same Desere as in *Leah, Desere and Me*). We had taken several road trips together once we had realized that that we both liked to travel and attend the same types of events, such as concerts and festivals. The snapshot that I worked from for this piece was taken on the same trip that *Leah, Desere, and Me* was taken from. We were driving for many hours, and I was slightly stir crazy, so I had started snapping photographs of anything and every thing. I quickly turned to my right where Desere was sitting, and snapped a picture of her that captured her so well. Desere has a huge smile, and it was shining bright. She has on her dark sunglasses which added an element of humor to the scene, as well as creating a nice contrast with her white teeth. In the background of the photo one can see land and sky rushing by as we traveled on to our destination. I had come across a handmade paper that seemed to simplify that scene. The paper is mostly blue, and since it is recycled, there are speckle of other colors; variations of blues, and greens. I painted the image of Desere at the far left of the picture plane, with intention to mount it in the same manner. I placed the paper onto plywood, as I had done before, then I mounted the image on to the picture plane going all the way to the edge. The way that the image was cropped added an element of motion creating a juxtaposition between the painted image and the movement of the paper. Though the idea of motion is only suggested, the combination of the elements that I had put together successfully set up the scene that I had captured in my snapshot. Desere was not facing the camera directly, so again the idea of non-traditional portraiture is evident.

I had the notion to push this idea forward using an old snapshot that I had previously regarded as a waste of film. I had taken a photo of another one of my college friends, named *Natalie* (figure 7). Natalie and Carol had been roommates in the dormitories our freshman year of college, so I had met the both of them at the same time. We had developed an extremely strong friendship. Natalie is a very free spirit, and lives her

life by her own rules. This photograph that I had of her is an extreme closeup, in a similar manner as *Leah, Desere, and Me*. In this instance I had captured a large portion of her torso, and the top of her thighs. This part of her body comes up the right side of the picture plane, and she is bent at the waist so that her shoulders start across the top of the image while her head is very close to the viewer in the top right side. I rendered the portrait referring closely to the photograph, in terms of composition. When the painting was finished Natalie's face seems to be right up close to you. I chose to alter the color of the dress that she had on from browns and yellows to purple to continue the intensity of the portrait through her clothing. The flesh tones are very subtle, almost a translucent wash. This sets up a strong contrast with the vibrant purple. The combination of texture and colors led me to chose a type of paper for the background negative space that contained similar elements. The paper is a fibrous rice paper that is tinted light purple. The quality is very thin and translucent and one can notice the various weights of the fibers that make up the paper. Once the piece had been assembled the image of Natalie was taking up a large portion of the surface area, and the figure extended to the edge on all four sides. This arrangement of positive and negative space creates a certain dynamic that may lead the viewer to feel slightly ill at ease. The high intensity and low intensity purple combination seems to have a soothing effect to counteract that uncomfortable feeling from the extreme closeup. All of this interplay between color, texture and composition set up a strong combination of elements to create this bold piece.

At the time after the completion of *Natalie* I had reached a sort of culmination where I had used various combinations of materials to get a richness that extends beyond that of paint alone. I needed to move ahead with these ideas, yet be cautious not to drive it into the ground and become exhausted with it. I wanted to utilize these concepts to continue to create new ideas. I went back to another painting that I had started when I was still working on canvas. This was a large scale piece (the same dimensions as *Hippie*) that I had worked on while I was still using canvas as my surface to paint on. The image was of a women that I had met in my "Women in the Visual Arts" class. I did not get to know her very well, because it was her last quarter at R.I.T. before graduation. I had brought my camera with me to school one day, and took a few photos of some random people that I knew around campus, and it was from this group of photos that I chose to paint *Brianna* (figure 8). She had appealed to me because she had a very natural, and down to earth look, and she was quite striking. I chose purple satin fabric to place in the background, and I went ahead and stretched the fabric over

stretcher bars, and mounted the image. This is where I ran into some problems; the fabric was very smooth and delicate, so the glue that I was using to mount the image was leaving highly visible stains on the fabric. I had set it aside giving up hope, but after I had worked with the hand-made paper, it occurred to me that combining the two materials would make for an interesting twist. I acquired some very hefty thick hand made paper that was made with grasses and straw, then it was dyed a rich shade of deep green. I used the image of Brianna as a focal point and cut out large starburst shapes exploding from behind her head. This design concept not only covered up the large spots on the fabric created by the adhesive, but it added an element of texture, as well as emphasizing a happy marriage between the non-painted surfaces in the negative space, and the painted image. Finally I framed the piece with hemp cord across the top and along the right side, this served as another element of texture in order to enhance the idea of mixed media. This worked out to be so successful, that that I began to reach the culmination of my thesis series of paintings.

My last piece for this group was entitled *Night Rhythm* (figure 9) I acquired the photo from the group of pictures that I took at the music festival in Maine. The night that the photo was shot was a magical one. I was elevated by music, and by vibrations from everyone's spirit, everyone was in high spirits it seemed. As I walked the grounds of the campsites, I came across a drum circle of approximately ten people. Everyone was pounding out a rhythm that topped off the mood, and that was when I spotted a beautiful woman playing her drum. My eyes locked on to her, she was so full of passion and intense vibrancy. The beat that she was creating, and her movements had me mesmerized. I crouched down behind some people dancing around the drum circle, and took some photographs of this spiritual woman. The photo that I used was of the woman in motion, in a trance created by the drum circle. I attempted to render this image at first by creating pastel drawings. The drawings did not capture the intensity that I felt while observing the drummer, either in person or in the photo. Finally I went to oil paint on stretch paper. Her facial expression was captured nicely, but her gesture was giving me some problems. The image moved me so greatly that I wanted to capture it as accurately as I possibly could. I reworked the image several times until it finally clicked. Once the image was completed I mounted handmade paper onto plywood. I used the same type of paper as I had used in the background of *Desere*, which was vibrating with various color speckles throughout the sheets, in two different colors. I used brown for a majority of the central background just behind the figure. On the bottom and the top I used strips of the same type of paper, but in blue to frame the

image. In the spirit of the idea of combining materials, as well as to enhance the emotion of the scene, I chose to create a patchwork border down the sides with scraps of fabric. I cut out various size squares of material that were of different patterns and textures. I placed them along both sides of the picture plane. The multitude of size, pattern, texture and color created a pulsating effect that mimics the beat of the drum. In order to create a smooth transition from one surface texture to the next, I outlined each element with colored floss. It is a very delicate line, that subtly ties every type of media within the piece together. Finally I used the red velvet ribbon to trim select areas for a final detail.

Part 3

The Conclusion

Night Rhythm was the culmination of all that I had been working towards for this group of paintings. I had taken the knowledge I gained through experimentation, and failure, and applied it to the pieces that followed. I am extremely pleased with the course that this group of paintings has taken, and the application of knowledge from one painting to the next. I chose to finish this group with *Night Rhythm* because the combination of materials seemed to draw the proper conclusions while considering all of the pieces. *Night Rhythm*, however, also serves as a strong starting point for further exploration, I have been inspired by this series to continue along this path that I have chosen, and hopefully expand my horizon.

Part 4

The Appendix

Paintings

Figure 1: Leah, Desere, Me

Figure 2: Mother and Child

Figure 3: Hippie

Figure 4: Matthew

Figure 5: Carol

Figure 6: Desere

Figure 7: Natalie

Figure 8: Brianna

Figure 9: Night Rhythm



















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