



A Season of Portraiture

Curatorial Statement by
Guest Curator Jane Hart

The world's presumed oldest portrait was discovered in 2006 at France's Vilhonneur grotto Angoulême ^[1] ^[2] and is believed to be 27,000 years old. Located approximately 370 miles away, are the extraordinary Paleolithic cave paintings inside the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave in southern France, currently considered to be the world's earliest human made paintings with some dating back as far as being created approximately 37,000 years ago. ^[3] ^[4] ^[5] The trajectory of artistic expression as a reflection of ourselves and our environment runs deeply through the history of art across civilizations. The genre of portraiture has been a constant, representing both the religious, Royal and powerful, to the humblest among our species.

What has changed from the earliest intimate depictions of the human visage and figure is the incredible diversity with which it continues to be, not only socially and culturally relevant, but also radical in the wide ranging manner embraced by artists. With a fascination of contemporary portraiture, I determined to bring together the compelling work of various artists in three distinct exhibits (*Face to Face: A Survey of Contemporary Portraiture by Louisiana Artists*, *Francie Bishop Good: Comus*, and *Oliver Wasow: Hudson Valley Studio Portraits*.) The work by varying artists presents a deeper examination into the juxtaposition of contextual and aesthetic concerns as well as various media employed.

In the museum's main gallery over 120 works comprise the group exhibition *Face to Face: A Survey of Contemporary Portraiture by Louisiana Artists*. In selecting the artists, I sought to highlight the vibrant diversity of styles and mediums utilized by those whose roots are entrenched in various parts of the state.

Selected from the Hilliard's permanent collection is a group of photographs by George Dureau (1930 – 2014.) Dureau's elegant yet highly provocative photography of predominantly male subjects — athletes, amputees, and other fringe characters — are known to have had an influence on numerous artists exploring gender and identity. Most notably Dureau's student and friend Robert Mapplethorpe restaged many of his mentor's earlier black and white photographs.

Award winning multimedia artist Willie Birch returned to his native Louisiana after spending approximately two decades in New York. Birch creates work that is both politically and socially engaged. Included in this exhibition are a series of large scale mixed media works on paper, depicting denizens of his 7th Ward New Orleans neighborhood. Douglas Bourgeois' meticulous, small scale painted portraits combine aspects of the banal and surreal, using vintage frames to accentuate the unique quality of each subject's intense individuality. Gina Phillips' handcrafted works made of thread, fabric and paint create larger than life portraits that visually leap from the wall. Phillips is a narrative artist whose homespun approach resounds with the rich history of folkloric art forms of the South.

Many of the artists included use photography, including E2 (Elizabeth Kleinvelde and Epaul Julien), Aubrey Edwards, Deborah Luster, Tameka Norris, Jennifer Shaw, Jonathan Traviesa, and Heather Weathers. Some of these artists use traditional silver gelatin process, while others embrace digitally based photographic methods of creation. Rashaad Newsome is a multidisciplinary artist represented here by a series of digital animations, using collaged imagery and music to create personas in a virtual form displayed on a monitor.

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In the second exhibit, *Comus*, South Florida based artist Francie Bishop Good uses layering of digital processes and found imagery, (sourced from hers and her mother's High School yearbook entitled "Comus" from years 1942 and 1967) to produce a hybrid form of portraiture. Of the series Bishop Good explains:

My mother and I graduated from the same high school in Allentown, Pennsylvania. I am obsessed with both of our high school yearbooks and engrossed with the similarities and differences in the general and specifics. Allentown has gone through transformations and in many ways is a microcosm for much of the United States. This series is a staccato of medias. Cross-pollinating painting, photography, drawing, and collage empowers me with a freedom that I crave. The source material of my yearbook is something very personal yet universal. I am transforming the imagined.

New York based artist Oliver Wasow exhibits his most recent series of work Hudson Valley Studio Portraits. Wasow is widely regarded as a pioneer in the use of digital media to create fine art. This series is making its debut at the Hilliard Museum and represents his first strictly figurative portraits. Produced over three years, these photographs are of individuals, or groups of individuals, posed in front of virtual painted backdrops. About this series, Wasow has commented:

These pictures are both romantic and sincere, though not necessarily comfortably so. The personality of these pictures is located as much in the backgrounds as in the people. Ideally these two things complement each other.

The portraits are made utilizing green screens and, like much of his past work, they employ extensive post-production processes. They follow in a long tradition of prop and backdrop studio photography, from 19th century Carte de Visites to contemporary Olan Mills productions and are in many ways as much about painting as they are about photography.

In curating these three concurrent exhibits at the Hilliard Museum galleries, I hope to offer visitors an opportunity to see the vast possibilities portraiture can afford. It is a way to more fully comprehend not only the universality of the human condition, but also the uniqueness inherent to all of us as individuals in a global society. During this present moment, we are increasingly witness to social unrest and an escalating violent state of affairs, both at home and abroad. These disturbing conflicts often can be attributed to a lack of understanding amongst us based upon ethnicity, race, religion and other differences. Through depictions of people created by artists, seeing our shared humanity, we can collectively come together with a greater tolerance and acceptance.

[1] Sage, Adam. "Cave face 'the oldest portrait on record'", *The Times*, London. June 5, 2006.

[2] Jones, Jonathan. "Old masters". *The Guardian*, London. June 6, 2006.

[3] Thurman, Judith. "First Impressions: What does the world's oldest art say about us?", *The New Yorker Magazine*, June 23, 2008.

[4] Rohter, Larry. "Werner Herzog's 'Cave of Forgotten Dreams,' Filmed in Chauvet Cave", *The New York Times*. April 22, 2011.

[5] *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, directed by Werner Herzog, IFC Films, 2010.

Photos: Lyle Ashton Harris
from the "Chocolate Portrait" series
Untitled (Front) Jane, 1998
Untitled (Back) Jane, 1998
Polaroid, 24 x 20 inches
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