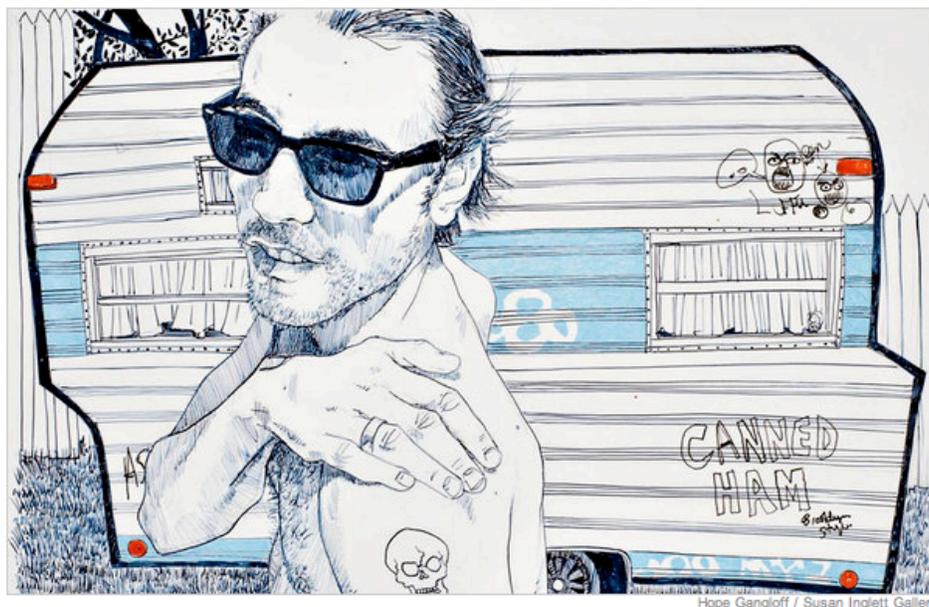


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In These Portraits, a Challenge to Labels of 'Sitter' and 'Artist'



Hope Gangloff / Susan Inglett Gallery

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By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

The people have spoken, and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum listened. Research conducted by the museum found that community members would like to see more exhibitions linked together by a common theme. And while giving the people what they want is not always a successful strategy – either for increasing museum attendance, or for art in general – it works well in the first exhibitions under the new plan, a group of six solo projects by contemporary artists titled “Portraiture at the Aldrich Contemporary Museum.”

Portraiture itself is an ancient, and often rather conservative, practice. Oxford Art Online, a widely accepted academic source, cites a 1974 British Museum catalog that defines a portrait as an image “in which the artist is engaged with the personality of his sitter and is preoccupied with his or her characterization as an individual.” Putting aside the old-school gender designation of artists as men, the artists at the Aldrich challenge most of these assertions. In this group of projects, the “sitter,” the “individual,” the “personality” and even the “artist” are contested labels.

The most conventional and commercial of the works on view is a selection of large-scale celebrity portraits by Timothy White. Mr. White has worked for movie studios, record companies and glossy magazines, and his photographs follow a milleniums-old model for portraiture: They make famous people look good – or, more important for our era, interesting. There isn’t much room to have a three-dimensional personality with this formula, so celebrities are presented as we already know them: Bjork and Liza Minnelli as zany oddballs; Raquel Welch and Sophia Loren as aging sirens (and Angelina Jolie as a young one); Julia Roberts as the affable girl-next-door; and Paul Newman, eternally handsome and sporty, cruising through Central Park on a mini-motorcycle. The only celebrity who defies easy packaging is Elizabeth Taylor, shown laughing as she flips off an imagined paparazzo – just as she flouted Hollywood protocol in her lifetime, supporting fellow actors with AIDS, or an embattled Michael Jackson, who is shown here in a soft-focus image that assuages the jolting peculiarity of his surgically transformed face.

Hope Gangloff also traffics in cultural signs and signifiers, but of a completely different sort. Her paintings of Brooklyn bohemians borrow heavily from late 19th- and early 20th-century expressionists – Van Gogh, Egon Schiele, Gustave Klimt, Suzanne Valadon – creating a sympathetic link between the historic avant-garde and post-postmodern hipsterism. Humor is an important element in Ms. Gangloff's works: "Beauty and the Beasts" shows a lovely, bearded young man reading short stories in a bed of hay, surrounded by farm animals; "The Trouble with Paradise" features a female nude scowling at her uncooperative cellphone as she sits on a dock among water and pine trees. Soy-milk containers, beer cans, tattoos and cool books are all a part of Ms. Gangloff's lexicon, in which a community, rather than an individual, is deftly characterized.

Shimon Attie's contribution is theatrical and just this side of bombastic, but it also includes strains of humor and lightness. At the center of a darkened room, a circle of video screens displays various Palestinians and Israelis recruited from the ranks of New York's seemingly endless supply of actors. Mr. Attie videotaped his subjects posing like Greek choristers in their everyday and work clothing (two are falafel makers, one Israeli, the other Palestinian; another two are pregnant), reciting passages from the 1948 Israeli Declaration of Independence and the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence. Several ideas are thus highlighted: The similarity of the texts; the disparity between "enlightened" charter-writing and everyday reality; and the way political differences are at least partially neutralized when individuals from conflicted regions are recast as immigrant Americans.

Questions of politics and artistic identity are equally intricate in James Esber's project, in which he invited people – mostly artists and art world types – to "translate" (that is, redraw) a pen-and-ink portrait of Osama bin Laden that Mr. Esber had drawn. Mr. Esber's original portrait, based on an unspecified media image, is not on view, but we can guess from the hundred-plus copies here that it's a mass of lines and squiggles, more of an elaborate doodle than a faithfully rendered portrait. As in many old master paintings, where the hand of the artist becomes a mark of authentication, the signatures on the drawings around the room practically supersede the images themselves, becoming – like Ms. Gangloff's paintings – a collective portrait of the artistic community Mr. Esber inhabits.

The individual identities of artist and sitter also become complicated in the contributions by Thilo Hoffman and Jenny Dubnau. Mr. Hoffmann's photographs of local teenagers call into question the concept of authorship, since the youths were given full agency to mastermind and title the portraits (Mr. Hoffman, however, is listed as the artist in the press and publicity materials). Unlike Rineke Dijkstra, the Dutch photographer famous for depicting teenagers as mute, awkward ducklings undergoing pubescent transformation, Mr. Hoffman portraits the young people here as self-determined, opinionated and rather diverse (although, befitting the region, most seem financially well-off). Art students are shown alongside musicians, dreamers, slackers, a skateboarder – even a young man in a military uniform, posing in a corporate office, who titled his portrait "Order".

Ms. Dubnau takes the opposite tack, requiring the sitters in her painted portraits to sign waivers stating that they won't interfere with the results. They are good sports, however: Most are other artists in the exhibition, or members of the museum staff, painted from snapshots that capture them mid-sentence, mid-blink or mid-grimace. Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, the curator of "Portraiture," suggests that Ms. Dubnau's paintings might be called "anti-portraits." But they aim toward a kind of micro-realism that is conceptually truthful (Ms. Dubnau goes further, calling it "political"). The artist also includes herself in the lineup – the only self-portrait in the whole Aldrich show – in a painting that shows her with her mouth slightly open, mid-syllable, perhaps. If anything, Ms. Dubnau effectively captures the way time has sped up over the last century, affecting our perceptions of everything, including the nature of portraits. Unlike the ancients, who depicted their rulers as eternally young, we no longer accept the idea of a "timeless" portrait.

Contemporary portraiture can be even more provisional, immaterial and high-tech than anything on view here, and the Aldrich falls short of exploring the phenomena of Facebook and the billions of cellphone portraits that have become our latest ways of imaging the self. Few artists have taken on the task of cataloging these reservoirs of imagery. It is easier, for the time being, to stick with what art is prone to do: focus on single images and singular individuals before they become multiplied by science and technology into something verging on the post-portrait condition.

"Portraiture at the Aldrich Contemporary Museum," Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, through June 5. Information: (203) 438-4519 or aldrichart.org.