



The Roving Eye:

Aura and the Contemporary Portrait

Noah Becker

Michaël Borremans

Jeff Burton

Andrew Bush

Kent Dorn

Charlotte Dumas

Anh Duong

Pierre Gonnord

Debbie Grossman

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Rosemary Laing

Loretta Lux

Scott Schuman

David Shrigley

Tereza Vlčková

Matthew Watson

Nicole Wittenberg

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

curated by Dick Goody

The Roving Eye:

Aura and the Contemporary Portrait

This exhibition explores the work of international contemporary artists (temporarily or permanently) fixated with portraiture. It considers: the sitter (object), the artist (depicter) and the viewer (subject). By degrees, these three things are inextricably linked; but it is the artist and the object that she or he renders that takes precedence in the sense that the viewer's role is not active in the making of the work.

Nevertheless, the role of the viewer and their subjective position in the context of portraiture is not insignificant. Whether Old Master paintings, traditional photographs from before digitalization or everyday smartphone images, portraits are not immediately mediated by “the gaze” — not unless they are being made or interpreted by someone interested in Jacques Lacan's inventory of how an object's gaze manipulates the subject or viewer of a portrait. Yet the currency of the gaze is pervasive, not in everyday life, but certainly within the academy. Visual artists understand the conditions of the gaze and know that absolute control of the object (sitter, and what they project and convey) is of the utmost importance. The role of the viewer is ancillary to the more important roles of the artist and sitter.

Having already alluded to it, the timing of this exhibition owes much to the ubiquity of portrait photography. As a contemporary practice, we could argue that the smartphone has hijacked portraiture. The million digital portraits taken every day are little more than performative clichés.

In short, the portrait in this context, with its banal smirk, has been rendered formulaic and trite. At least in 19th century photographs, smiling was a rare practice; but the deadpan stare in this instance was another sort of deceptive mask, albeit one of rectitude. Historical portrait paintings were also vehicles of deception, their logic tied up in rendering a standard of flattery covered by an agreed upon fee.

This exhibition, then, is concerned with — as constructed by the artist — the authenticity of the object's, or sitter's, visage. From our various perspectives, when we look at a portrait we are naturally wary of falsity or the staged guise. Performative charm betrays disingenuousness. What makes a portrait genuine? What constitutes artificiality? Each viewer must decide for her or himself. Only when we are satisfied by the integrity of a particular portrait can we begin to question whether the artist has properly captured the aura of the sitter. Eye contact is invariably a mediating factor, helpful because it allows for a sincere exchange to occur. Still, what the artist is capturing to a great extent is going to be conditional, arbitrated by the “authenticity” of the person under scrutiny. Hence, the curatorial selections in this exhibition are dependent on two things: the capacity of the sitter to convey authenticity, and that of the artist (author) to capture it.

It is paradoxical in this context that physiognomy (judging character from facial characteristics), which was popular in Victorian times, fell out of

favor, but is now being revived by scientists who believe that we actually do make ingrained judgments about a person's character based purely (or initially) on their facial characteristics. The face speaks to us immediately and subliminally. And the authentic portrait speaks frankly through its eyes, expressing its unique character. Portraits that do not meet our gaze are also admissible, provoking as they do a different relationship with our subjective gaze.

When a portrait fails to make eye contact, something different happens (different still from looking at an inanimate artwork — if a work of art could ever be said to be inanimate). When the eyes do not confront us, we are free to stare back with impunity. We can scan and mine the surface, and ultimately pass judgment because the eyes of the sitter are not judging us. Our subjective, shifting position becomes that of a voyeur and therefore, ultimately over time, that of a connoisseur.

Portraiture has the great advantage of being captivating in ways that non-portrait artworks cannot. The contemplation of a sitter-less artwork tends to be a one-way trip. The work broadcasts. The receptors, i.e., you and me, capture the image/data of the work and then process and digest it. We consume. But we can never devour a portrait so completely, because we also communicate with it and, therefore, initiate a relationship with it. Empathically, we project our thoughts and feeling (through our eyes) back to the eyes of the sitter, because it is not just a work of art with which

we are communing. We interact with the mind of the sitter. Yet, really, we are looking at an illusion — merely inked paper or painted canvas — an immaterial thing: artifice. The artwork is but a representation, merely a trace of the sitter, but apparently we are not dispossessed by this delusion. Portraits that meet our gaze possess a distinct advantage. They have already pre-empted us, because when we stare back at them their expression remains infinitely impervious. Winning them over is impossible. In their defense, assisting them in this exhibition is a perceived degree of honesty — that is to say, the implied authenticity of the sitters before they are ever photographed or rendered. But the basis of this exhibition is rooted in the desire and success of the each artist as they capture, with their roving eye, the aura of the authentic sitter.

This exhibition proposes to facilitate a fresh look at portraiture, to re-evaluate and reclaim it as the domain of the artist rather than the amateur. In this context, the mediator, that is to say the artist is the only genuine author of authenticity (if the object itself is genuine). It further proposes that if we are to liberate authentic aura — this elusive thing that possesses immense psychological and emotional octane — the form must be nurtured, re-presented and its practitioner supported.

Dick Goody, January 2013

Noah Becker

b. 1970, Cleveland, OH. Lives and works in New York, NY.

“The source material for my recent portraits are photos of hair models from the 1960s and 70s. These hair models display a stillness, blank expression and lack of action. The backgrounds of these paintings show a single mode of color. The minimized action and repetition found in the work of Samuel Beckett has been instructive to me in this sense. Minimalists such as Frank Stella and his peers found Beckett influential during their rebellion against late period abstract expressionism. My work shows a kind of mood that engages with similar ideas and rebellions. I also have an interest in portraits by Andy Warhol, Francis Bacon and other works where an esoteric sense of abstract expressionism and minimalism is used. A minimalist approach to portrait painting makes the inner thoughts of the figure the central action of the piece.”

Noah Becker, artist's statement



(left)
Our Mutual Friend, 2012
oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist



(right)
Angel, 2012
oil on panel
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Michaël Borremans

b. 1963, Geraadsbergen, East Flanders, Belgium. Lives and works in Ghent, Belgium.

“I try to show figures — I don’t want to use the word ‘individuals’; they’re not individuals. I try to place them in a space that is familiar yet undefined. It’s very strange. I used to make images that were based on photographs from the 1930s or ’40s, but that was too recognizable. I heard that the work was nostalgic, and that was absolutely not the idea. So I try to avoid that, and now I usually work with models who pose for me. I have a room in my studio where I photograph them. It’s a room that’s anonymous, with a certain light — I call it my ‘Earth Light Room,’ like in the spaceship in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where they have an Earth Light Room, whatever that might be. So it’s an artificial environment. I made my latest film, *Taking Turns* [2009], there as well.”

Michaël Borremans interviewed by David Coggins, *Art in America*, March 2009

Portrait, 2005

oil on canvas

31 1/2 x 23 5/8 x 1 1/4 inches

Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp



Jeff Burton

b. 1963, Anaheim, CA. Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA.

“... these days, magazines often ask me for portraits of young actors and celebrities. Usually I turn those down. Until they’ve had some lumps and bumps and ups and downs, I don’t find them so interesting, and I don’t want to support that young-celebrity machine in Hollywood. I like them when they have stories, and a body that tells those stories.”

Jeff Burton interviewed by Gert Junkers, “The Pornographer, the Artist,” *Butt Magazine* 20, July 2007



Bret Easton Ellis, 2010
hand-coated pigment print
20 x 14 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Casey
Kaplan Gallery, New York



Kenneth Anger, 2010
hand-coated pigment print
20 x 14 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Casey
Kaplan Gallery, New York



(right)
Jörg Abderhalden, 2010
hand-coated pigment print
20 x 14 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Casey
Kaplan Gallery, New York

Andrew Bush

b. 1956, St. Louis, MO. Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA.

“Living in Los Angeles, you’re surrounded by cars and very few pedestrians, and I was looking for a way to show people in an environment they created for themselves. Over a period of time, I began experiments with making these pictures of people as they were driving and driving on freeways. I was interested in the notion of making very still images of a person moving at a great velocity.”

Andrew Bush, YouTube clip, in conjunction with “Car Fetish: I drive, therefore I am,” Museum Tinguely, Basel, Switzerland, July 21, 2011



Woman gliding southeast at 70 mph on Highway 101
sometime in March 1990 (*Listening to the Silence*)
(from *Vector Portraits*, 1992-1993/2008)
chromogenic print
30 x 40 inches
Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery, New York

Kent Dorn

b. 1977, Greer, SC. Lives and works in Houston, TX.

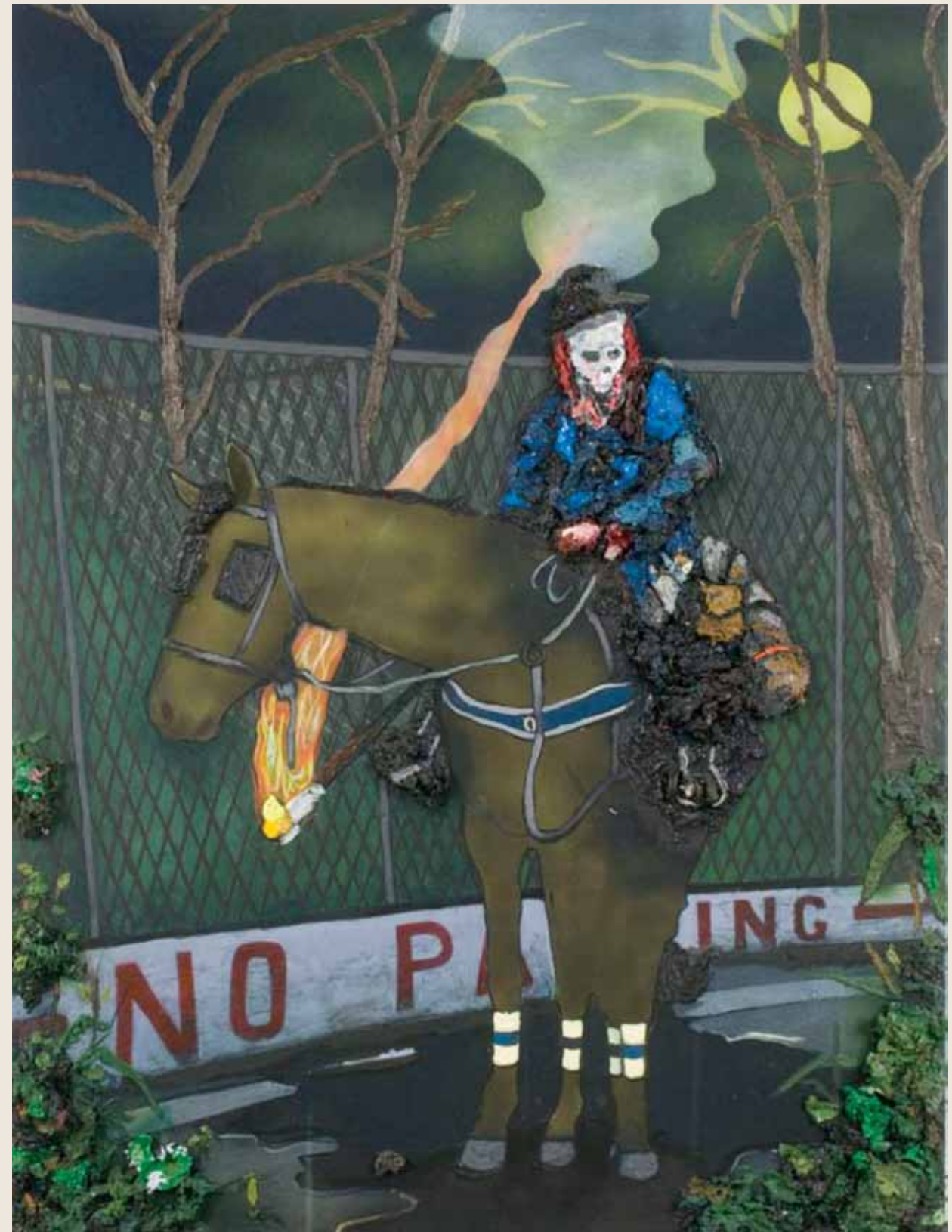
"A lot of my work is also driven by exploring a certain lifestyle that's played out in the epic journeys and survivalist tales of books like *Big Sur*, *The Road*, *Into the Wild*, *Alive*, *Endurance*, etc., where the figures find themselves in dire circumstances, often of their own making. ... The landscape in my paintings is a metaphorical space in which seekers, failed mystics, and drifters wander in search of a revelatory experience. ... I'm interested in representations of intoxication and drug-altered states and how they might be used to allude to the sublime. ... From the beginning, I knew the nomadic adventures of my drifters would pass and they would eventually find a settlement."

Kent Dorn, interviewed by *art-rated.com*, July 27, 2012



(left)
Fugitive (Blue with Cigarette), 2008
mixed media on canvas
16 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Freight & Volume, New York

(right)
The Reckoner, 2009
mixed media on canvas
32 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Freight & Volume, New York



Charlotte Dumas

b. 1977, Vlaardingen, The Netherlands. Lives and works in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

“In 2011, Dumas set out to photograph 15 of the remaining search and rescue dogs deployed by FEMA to the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Ten years after the terrorist attacks, Dumas located the dogs with the help of FEMA and photographed them in their homes, where they still live with their handlers across the United States.”

Artist’s page, Julie Saul Gallery, New York, NY

“These animals were all at the same place at the same time, one decade ago for the same reason: to work. That experience unites them and was the incentive for me to pursue this subject and to photograph the dogs. They now share the vulnerability of old age while symbolizing a full decade coming to a close.”

Charlotte Dumas, artist’s statement, 2012



Red, Annapolis, MD, 2011
Chromogenic print
12 x 16 inches
Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery, New York

Anh Duong

b. 1960, Bordeaux, France. Lives and works in New York, NY.

“I always started with the eye, and I feel like once I got the eyes of the person that I really got the person.”

Anh Duong, “Diane von Fürstenberg and Anh Duong Talk Fashion and Art,” *whitewallmag.com*, July 29, 2012

“In my opinion, a portrait is more than a mere fixation of the memory. ... I consider it as a dialectical game with the mirror image, which I analyze and deal with in a pictorial manner. Every work of an artist is a self-portrait. I am just more conscious of that process than most. The subject matter disappears through repetition.”

Anh Duong, “Anh Duong Exhibition, Sonnabend, New York,” *Wallpaper*, by Apphia Michael, November 2, 2011

Louse Point, 2010
oil on canvas
96 x 72 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Sonnabend Gallery, New York

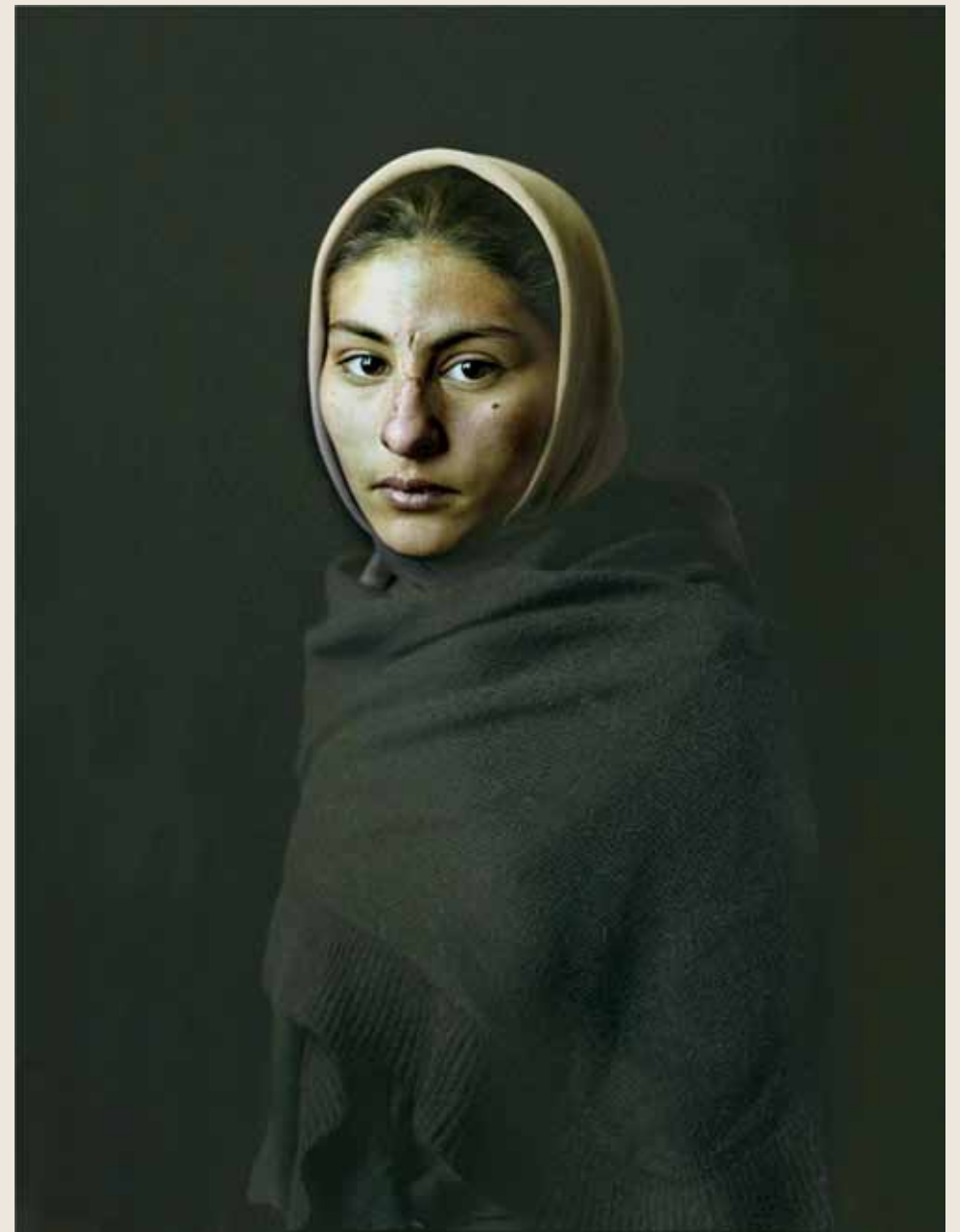


Pierre Gonnord

b. 1963, Cholet, France. Lives and works in Madrid, Spain.

“I choose my contemporaries in the anonymity of the big cities because their faces, under the skin, narrate unique, remarkable stories about our era. Sometimes hostile, almost always fragile and very often wounded behind the opacity of their masks, they represent specific social realities and, sometimes, another concept of beauty. I also try to approach the unclassifiable, timeless individual to suggest things that have been repeated over and over since time began. I would like to encourage crossing a border.”

Pierre Gonnord, “Outsiders: Beautiful Portraits of the Overlooked,” by Benjamin Starr, *visualnews.com*, June 12, 2012



Konstantina, 2008
digital chromogenic print
65 x 49 inches

Courtesy of Pierre Gonnord and Halsted Kaetler, New York

Debbie Grossman

b. 1977, Rochester, NY. Lives and works in New York, NY.

“My *Pie Town* reworks and re-imagines a body of images originally photographed by Russell Lee for the United States Farm Security Administration in 1940. Using Photoshop to modify Lee’s pictures, I have created an imaginary, parallel world — a Pie Town populated exclusively by women. ... Because the images of Lee’s time in Pie Town are available in high resolution form from the Library of Congress, I was able to get close to Lee’s images on a pixel level. This work creates something that reads as a photograph and is infinitely reproducible like a photograph, but at the same time depends heavily upon the intervention of my hand.”

Debbie Grossman, artist’s statement, 2011



Mildred Anthony, standing by mounted animals which she killed, 2010
pigment inkjet print
10 1/2 x 14 inches
Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery, New York



Doris Caudill, 2010
pigment inkjet print
10 1/2 x 14 inches
Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery, New York



Anne Hesse, homesteader, 2010
pigment inkjet print
10 1/2 x 14 inches
Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery, New York



Ruth Leonard secures a calf in her pasture, 2010
pigment inkjet print
10 1/2 x 14 inches
Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery, New York

Andrew Guenther

b. 1976, Wheaton, IL. Lives and works in New York, NY.

“I used to depict more naturalistic faces. I had a dilemma with the image of any representation of an individual, whether it was myself or friends, or just even made up. I don’t draw from photographs or from friends, because there’s a spirit element that I don’t want to enter the work. You’re conjuring entities.”

Andrew Guenther in conversation with Kaycee Olsen, in conjunction with “Corn, Tobacco and Other Stories,” at the Kaycee Olsen Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, June 2, 2011.



(left)
Plate Face, 2010
acrylic and papier-mâché on
unprimed canvas
78 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the artist

(right)
Will To Change Things, 2007
acrylic, beads, spray paint, mini
cigars, plastic bottles, vinyl
slippers, comb, lotto tickets,
toothpaste tube, sunglasses,
chain and wood on panel
98 x 66½ x 7¼ inches
Courtesy of the artist



Rosemary Laing

b. 1959, Brisbane, Australia. Lives and works in Sydney, Australia.

“Photography has a long history of representing tragic events and responses to them. These images become iconic and powerful conductors that provide a subject for our emotional responses. ... To be honest, I think we are overwhelmed with too many images that we don’t need, and that to make images that have any possible significance amidst this is most difficult.”

Rosemary Laing, interviewed by Anna Sansom, *Eyemazing mutualart.com*, fall 2009



(right, top)
a dozen useless actions for grieving blondes #1, 2009
C-Type photograph
30 1/2 x 52 9/16 inches
© Rosemary Laing
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York

(right, bottom)
a dozen useless actions for grieving blondes #2, 2009
C-Type photograph
30 1/2 x 50 3/16 inches
© Rosemary Laing
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York

Loretta Lux

b. 1969, Dresden, East Germany. Lives and works in the Principality of Monaco.

“In children, you soon detect signs of what they will be like as adults, and, vice versa, you see traces in adults of the child they used to be. This fascinates me.”

Loretta Lux, interviewed by Jochem Rijlaarsdam, *gupmagazine.com*, July 7, 2011

“My subject is the forlornness of man in the world, the absurdity of human existence. Children are a sub-subject. ... A human defines himself through his past experiences and his aims for the future. In a child, you can see hints of the adult he will become; and in the adult, you find traces of the child he used to be. Early childhood experiences form a person more than anything. This is what makes childhood so interesting to me. Also, children are great to work with. They don’t have fixed expectations and are unconcerned with appearances. ... Photographs are much easier to produce than paintings, but it is also more difficult to develop one’s own style as a photographer. There is a huge flood of photographs, especially mediocre ones.”

Loretta Lox, interviewed by Eduardo Muylaert, *paratyemfoco.com*, July 12, 2009



(left)
Study of a Boy II, 2002
ilfochrome print
19 ⁷/₈ x 19 ⁷/₈ inches
© Loretta Lux
Courtesy of the artist and
Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

(right)
Portrait of Antonia, 2007
ilfochrome print
15 ³/₄ x 11 ³/₄ inches
© Loretta Lux
Courtesy of the artist and
Yossi Milo Gallery, New York



Scott Schuman (The Sartorialist)

b. 1968, Indianapolis, IN. Lives and works in New York, NY.

“My passion for photography is really for photography, not so much fashion photography. ... For me it was always about an image that inspired me. ... I never found anything I wanted to shoot until I had my own children, and then you want to take pictures of them all the time.” (Talking about fashion): “It’s the craft of making something beautiful, of designing something beautiful, of color, pattern, texture — mixing genres, proportions; when someone’s doing that really well, to me that’s much more exciting. ...”

Interview with Scott Schuman: “Street Fashion Photographer,” *iso1200.com*, September 8, 2012



Lynn Yeager, New York, 2006
digital print
19 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Danziger Gallery, New York



Maroon Suit, Hamburg, 2007
digital print
19 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Danziger Gallery, New York

(right)
Black Hat, London, 2006
digital print
19 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Danziger Gallery, New York

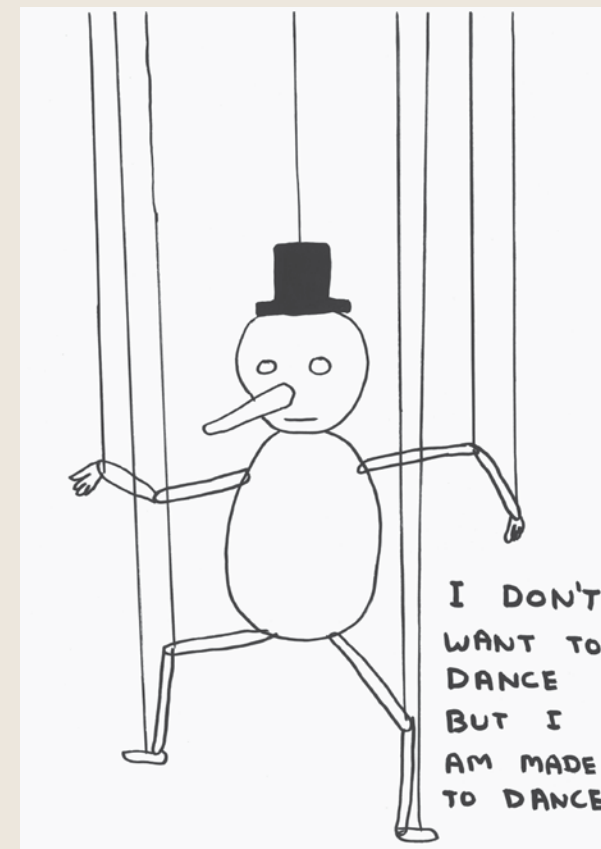
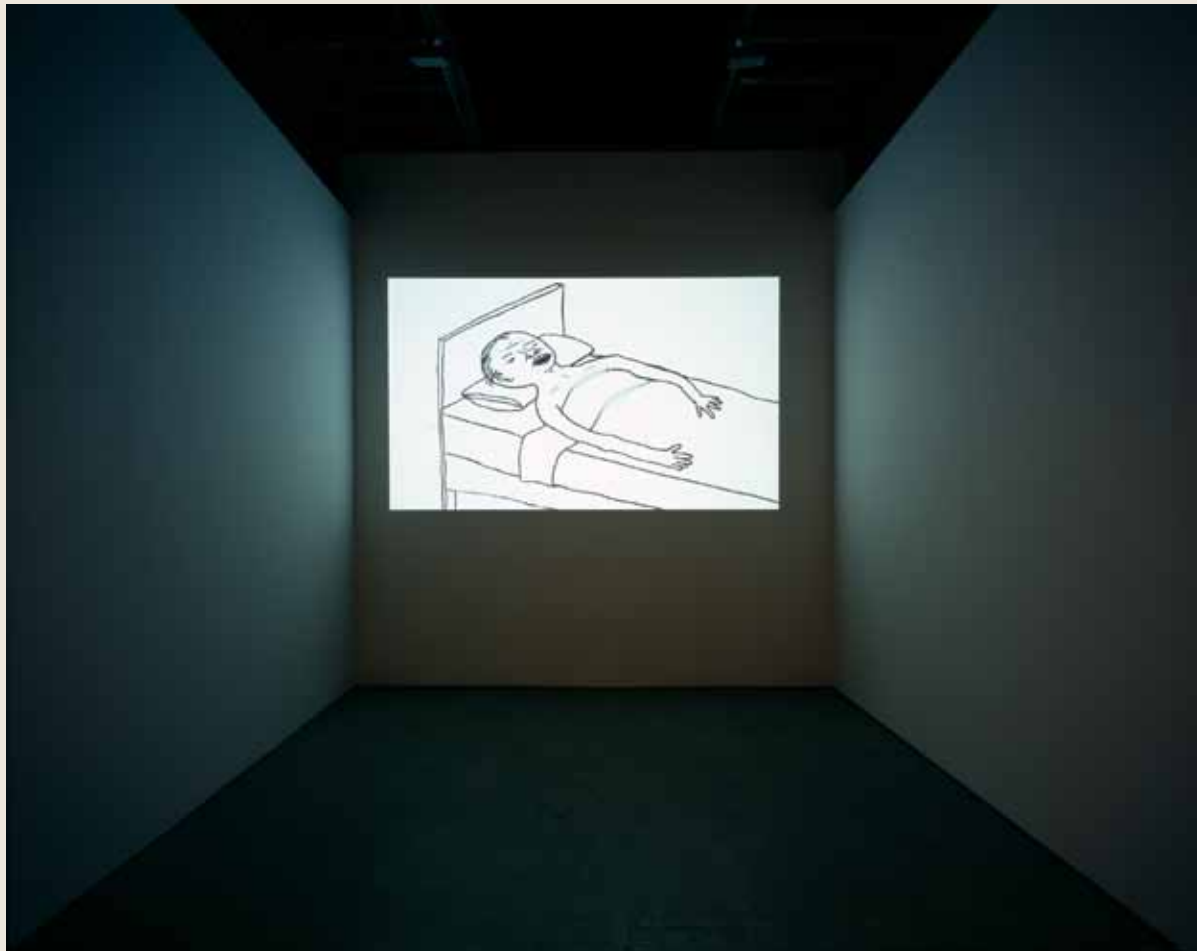


David Shrigley

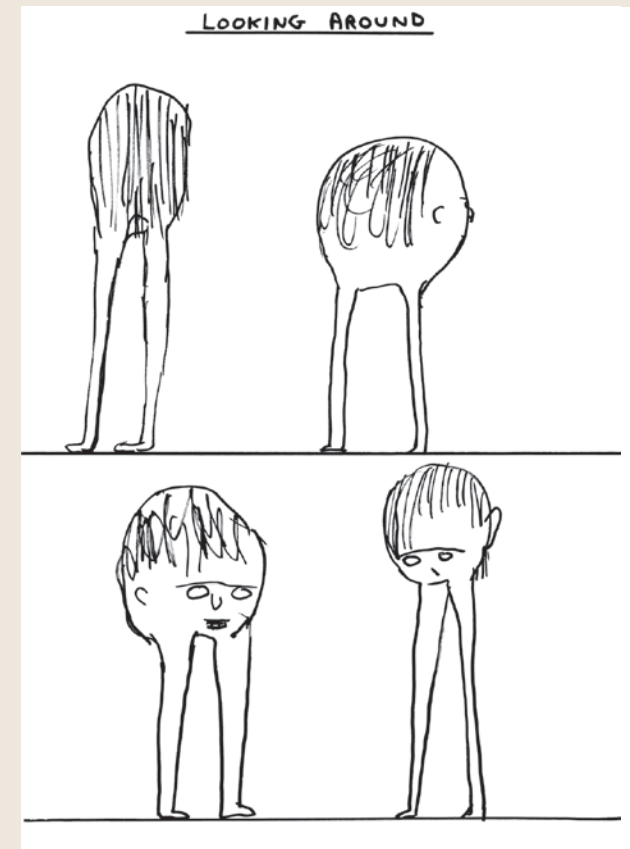
b. 1968, Macclesfield, England. Lives and works in Glasgow, Scotland.

“It’s not the kind of drawing where you’re trying to get their eyes in the right place, you’re just trying to tell somebody something as directly as possible. It’s non-drawing, in a way. It’s somewhere between handwriting and drawing. But then again, there are also certain rules to what I do, like I’m not allowed to re-draw or anything. The odd thing for me is that I am kind of a real cartoonist, as well as being a real fine artist, in the sense that my work is filed under humour in the bookshop, sometimes as well as being filed under art. ... I’ve got a foot in either camp, as it were. “

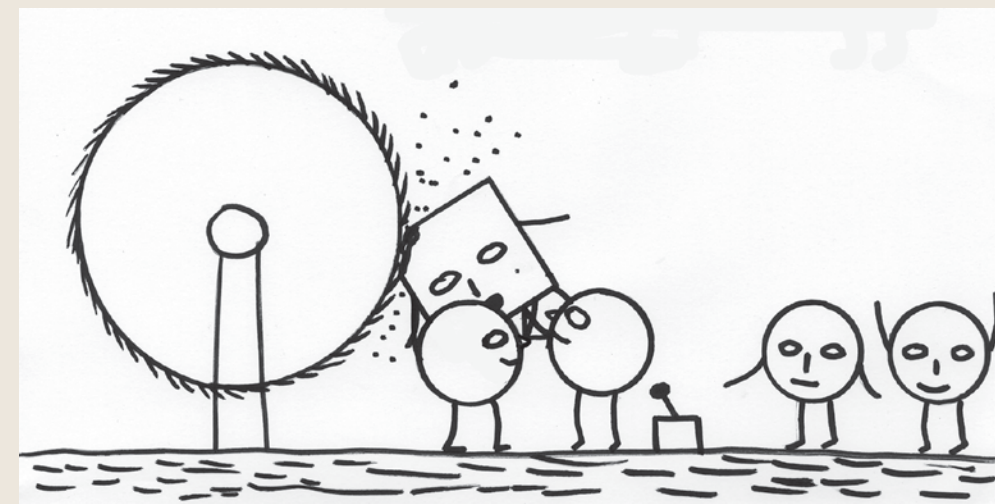
David Shrigley, interviewed by Dave Eggers, *Time Out London*, January 18, 2011



Untitled (dance), 2012
ink on paper
11 ¹³/₁₆ x 8 ¹/₄ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York



Untitled (looking around), 2010
ink on paper
11 ³/₄ x 8 ¹/₄ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York



(left)
Sleep, 2008
DVD
8 mins.
Courtesy of the artist and
Anton Kern Gallery, New York

New Friends, 2006
animation, DVD
1 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York

Tereza Vlčková

b. 1983, Třebíč, Czech Republic. Lives and works in Prague, Czech Republic.

“For me, a story is crucial in photography. Each of my photographs carries a story. I would like for the viewer to recognize the story, to search in it and reflect their own story upon it. Fantasy is very important is for me. I couldn’t imagine that everything in this world should be real, totally identifiable. ... We don’t have only good qualities; there is also something negative waiting inside us. I wanted to capture the dark and unknown image of our other selves. ...”

Tereza Vlčková, talking to Katerina Kyselica, *dob2010.com* (Design Odyssey Beyond 2010), February 17, 2011



From the **Two** series, 2007-2008
digital print
19 x 19 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Danziger Gallery, New York



From the **Two** series, 2007-2008
digital print
19 x 19 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Danziger Gallery, New York



From the **Two** series, 2007-2008
digital print
19 x 19 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Danziger Gallery, New York

Matthew Watson

b. 1981, Roseburg, OR. Lives and works in New York, NY.

“The lapdog has a considerable advantage over other domesticated animals by way of prestige and pedigree. The cat, though above the bird and the fish, understandably ranks low in this regard, in part because it is least wasteful, and perhaps because it even possibly serves a function; that is, it’s ability to catch vermin. The temperament of the cat and its lack of obedience is also a factor in its low rank. At the other extreme is the prestige of the horse, especially one that serves no industrial use. Yet they are the most wasteful, and thus the monetary requirements for their cultivation grant them an esoteric distance within the hierarchy of prestige. The lapdog is an exceptionally wasteful creature, and equally useless, all the while possessing a certain propensity for servitude. In addition, the dog lover has bred them into exquisite deformity, the degree of which in seemingly relative proportion to the aesthetic value assigned to the dog. Above all, it is the lapdog’s disposition that warrants its rank. More than an assistant, more than a companion, its relentless pursuit of obedience is unwavering. The lapdog is a virtuoso of servitude, and it seeks its greatest pleasure in all the unfreedoms upon which its very existence depends.”

Matthew Watson, artist’s statement, November 18, 2012.

Chessy, 2012
oil on copper
12 x 15 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Joe Sheftel Gallery, New York



Nicole Wittenberg

b. 1979, San Francisco, CA. Lives and works in New York, NY.

“I am making paintings of subjective images based on Skype conversations ... : portraits on the telephone. The paintings are memory grabs of a transitory experience and a speculation about the remote environment produced under the condition of the voyeur’s physical distance. ... I propose the portraits and the interiors as a conflation of concrete and atmospheric pathos.”

Nicole Wittenberg, artist’s statement, 2011



(above)
N.P. (London on September 10, 2011), 2011
oil on canvas
20 x 25 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Freight & Volume, New York



(right)
A Spare Red Riding Hood, 2012
oil on panel
24 x 18 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Freight & Volume, New York

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

b. 1977, London, England. Lives and works in London.

“... I need the work to not be read as though these are friends of mine or family members. I’m not interested in that mode of working. I’m not really interested in people in that sense. In the past, I have had people sit for me. I had one man sit for me for many hours, but I couldn’t get anything because he was there. Why try and immortalize him? I couldn’t get him on to a page or canvas without it becoming all about that specific person. I want to think about painting, not the personality of the man sitting with me. I’m far more interested in how we can make people intelligible through paint, rather than getting bogged down in characters. I’m not interested in the personalities of specific people I know. I want the work to be pulled out of the air somehow, to play God and exploit that power of creation in paint.”

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, interviewed by Jamie Stevens, Chisenhale Gallery, Bethnal Green, London, 2012



(left)

6pm Madeira, 2011

oil on canvas

70 ⁷/₈ x 59 inches

*Courtesy of the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York*

(right)

11pm Friday, 2010

oil on canvas

78 ³/₄ x 51 ¹/₈ inches

*Courtesy of the artist; Corvi-Mora, London; and
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York*





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Curated by Dick Goody

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