# CONTROLLED IDENTITY



## PORTRAITURE FROM THE DEPAUW UNIVERSITY PERMANENT ART COLLECTION

February 5 – July 15, 2018
DePauw University, Richard E. Peeler Art Center

The DePauw University Permanent Art Collection houses more than 200 "portraits," the majority of which have never been on display during their time with the University. *Controlled Identity* offers a space and a time for such objects to not only be seen, but to be showcased. These portraits span across media, across cultures, and across time to showcase the best of the best, as well as to point out the vast use of the "portrait" as a visual means to communicate objectification, identification, and subjectification.

**What role do portraits serve?**

In current visual culture, images pass by us at an unprecedented rate. One of the most common images popping up in newsfeeds is that of the self, or as popular culture labels, the "selfie." We like to think this "selfie" is something new, exciting, and only of our time; however, in looking at the history of portraiture as a visual, artistic means of communication, we see the "selfie" is nothing new.

Portraits developed through time first as official records of persons. "In fact, portraiture in general is thought to have originated from the desire to preserve likenesses of the dead … Some of the earliest portraits known to exist are funerary portraits from ancient Roman Egypt … ."[1] We see the aftereffects of this practice at funerals today where the deceased's face is printed again and again in media for remembrance.

The thought of portraiture as a distinct art form developed when our ideas of the person and the self were formulated. This is when we see the distinctions in types of portraiture: the historical portrait, the family portrait, the royal portrait, the self-portrait, etc. Each distinction tells us something different about both the individual being depicted and the artist who created the depiction. As a visual language, these distinctions have allowed us to utilize portraiture as a means "for us to look at the history of our society through images of its people."[2]

Alen MacWeeney, Irish-American photographer known worldwide for his portraits, uses our knowledge of past portraiture to reveal the character of his seemingly everyday subjects through drama and light. In *Little*

1    Freeland, Cynthia A. *Portraits and Persons: a Philosophical Inquiry*. Oxford University Press, 2010, 46.
2    Wiedemann, Julius. *Illustration Now! Portraits*. Taschen, 2011, 007.

*Tinker Child, Ireland,* we are faced head on with a dirt covered girl in a field complacently smiling at the viewer. We are left wondering who the subject of MacWeeney's work is: the girl or the viewer.

## Objectification vs. Identification vs. Subjectification

"Portraits reflect social realities."[3] To understand a portrait and the social reality it is depicting we have to ask a lot of questions:

- Who is the portrait of?
- Who created it?
- Who commissioned it?
- In what context was it made?
- In what context does it currently exist?
- Why does this person deserve to be immortalized in visual form?
- Is someone being exploited or violated?
- Where is this taking place?
- What is being forced, if anything?
- What details do we see?

Unfortunately, rarely are all of our questions answered at once, or ever by the work itself. Thus, we are left making assumptions about the portrait without all the answers, leading us to a confusion between objectifying the individual, simply identifying the individual, or seeing the individual as the subject of our gaze. "The key to dissolving the subjective/objective paradox is to dissolve the sharp distinction between objects and subjects ... Portraits aim to show a person who is a subject – an autonomous individual with inner states, and not a mere object or thing."[4] As is the case in *Ensenada, Mexico,* by Robert von Sternberg, where the subject of the work is the location in which the piece takes place; however, the object of the viewer's gaze is the unidentifiable and shadow cloaked figure staring back at us. This imagery is not uncommon for von Sternberg's work where he focuses on the human incursion into the natural world. The social reality reflected in portraiture is not that of just the individual being depicted but of the setting in an image as a whole.

## Portrait/Identity ... Portrait/Control ... Controlled Identity

We believe we know a person simply by looking at their likeness and trust that a portrait is a true visual representation of an individual that tells us the nature and personality of that person while asking us how to respond to this person. In addition, "[p]ortraiture is a slippery and seductive art; it





TOP:
1980.15.11
*Little Tinker Child*, Ireland, 1972
photograph
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert E. Vore
Alen MacWeeney
Image courtesy of Alen MacWeeney

ABOVE:
2016.4.6.3
*Nuti Mex, Maneadero*, Ensenada, Mexico, 1984
photograph
Gift of Robert von Sternberg with the Museum Project
Robert von Sternberg
Image courtesy of Robert von Sternberg

3   Brilliant, Richard. *Portraiture*. Harvard University Press, 1991, 11.
4   Freeland, Cynthia A. *Portraits and Persons: a Philosophical Inquiry*. Oxford University Press, 2010, 292, 196.

encourages us to feel that then is now and now is then. It seems to offer factual data while simultaneously inviting a subjective response."[5]

A portrait is a highly contextualized conversation between two bodies. It never exists in isolation and is constantly surrounded by relationships: artist and sitter, artist and viewer, sitter and viewer, depicted and not-depicted, etc. "... [T]he viewer's awareness of the art work as a portrait is distinctly secondary to the artist's intention to portray someone ..."[6] As a seasoned celebrity portraitist, Bonnie Schiffman focuses her work on capturing the person instead of the celebrity – evident in her depiction of Muhammad Ali where we, as the viewer, no longer focus on the celebrity in front of us but rather on the man gazing back at us. "... [I]n a successful portrait the viewer is not only confronted with the "original," "unique" subjectivity of the portrayer, but also of that of a portrayed."[7] Together, our perspectives and our own personal contexts control our interpretation of the identity of the portrayed and leave us with either all our questions answered or asking for more.

Spring 2018 at the Peeler Galleries is focused on displaying works from our own collection, from our own students, and from our own community. *Controlled Identity* features over fifty works from the DePauw University Permanent Art Collection alongside works from students in surrounding Putnam County schools.  This exhibition was curated not only to highlight the best portraits from the DePauw University Permanent Art Collection but also to contribute to an ongoing dialogue grounded in perceptions of identity. We hope you, the viewer, continue in that conversation with us, and with those around you.

Alexandra Chamberlain
Assistant Curator of Exhibitions and Education

5   Pointon, Marcia. *Portrayal and The Search for Identity*. Reaktion Books, 2013, 28.
6   Brilliant, Richard. *Portraiture*. Harvard University Press, 1991, 7-8.
7   Woodall, Joanna, and Ernst Van Alphen. *Portraiture: facing the subject*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1997, 239.

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Portraiture from the DePauw University Permanent Art Collection
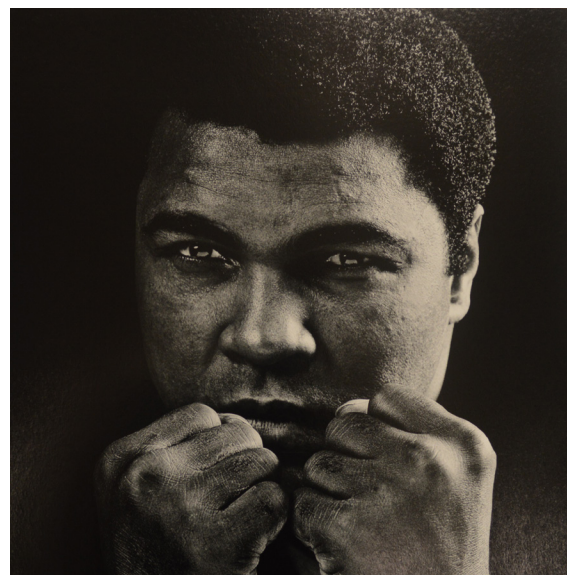
February 5 – July 15, 2018
DePauw University, Richard E. Peeler Art Center
10 W. Hanna St., Greencastle, IN 46135
Hours: Mon.-Fri., 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sat. 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sun. 1-4 p.m.
765-658-4336
depauw.edu/arts-and-culture/arts/peeler/





TOP:
1998.7.10
*Prince Genji and a Princess in the Palace*, 1850s
ink on paper
Gift of Steven G. Conant, Graduate of 1971
Utagawa Kunisada

ABOVE:
2016.4.11.1
*Muhammad Ali*, late 20th century
photograph
Gift of Bonnie Schiffman with the Museum Project
Bonnie Schiffman
Image courtesy of Bonnie Schiffman

Cover images, from left:
1937.2.1
*Master William Bellingham*, 1793
oil on canvas
Gift of William H. Thompson, Graduate of 1899
Sir Thomas Lawrence

1980.15.11
*Little Tinker Child*, Ireland, 1972
photograph
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert E. Vore
Alen MacWeeney
Image courtesy of Alen MacWeeney

2016.4.11.3
*Whoopi Goldberg*, late 20th century
photograph
Gift of Bonnie Schiffman with the Museum Project
Bonnie Schiffman
Image courtesy of Bonnie Schiffman