Omitting the Gaze

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Abstract

Figurative artists have both embraced and eschewed facial expressions for various reasons: stylistic norms of portraiture; the desire to depict a narrative realistically; showing the subject as shy or demure; or the conveyance of distance and disconnect. The research aims to explore the necessity of a facial expression or gaze for the viewer to glean emotional meaning. The accompanying body of work conveys emotional content without the subjects' eye contact or demonstrative facial cues: through cropping and rotating the figure and background, positioning, or additional covering, the face or eyes are obscured. Therefore, the work must rely on other aspects of the composition to convey a psychological state and create an intimate connection. Pose, extreme perspective, and body language are used to evoke feeling and mood. This series and research show that while a conventional portrait including all the typically visual cues is valid, there is equal validity in omitting the gaze.

1. Introduction:

"Science interprets the gaze in three (combinable) ways; in terms of information (the gaze informs), in terms of relation (gazes are exchanged), in terms of possession (by the gaze, I touch, I seize, I am seized). …But the gaze seeks: something, someone. It is an anxious sign: singular dynamics for a sign: its power overflows it."[1] — Roland Barthes

There are few things more important in the realm of communication than eye contact. Its presence or absence affects all of our relationships, and is truly crucial in the first few days of our lives. A mother's eye contact with a newborn child can have an enormous impact on the child's ability to develop social skills throughout life. A mutual gaze aids tremendously in the comprehension of an individual's mental state at that moment. Without a basic understanding of what others may be feeling, we can become confused, angry, and lonely. Even more importantly, eye contact is a major component of intimacy, a prized commodity in an increasingly alienating landscape.[2]

It may seem counter-intuitive for an artist to create depictions of figures that lack this eye contact. However, this idea of counter-intuitiveness operates under the assumption that subjects portrayed via an artistic medium desire that intimacy, or wish to be vulnerable in some way. Yet these are not flesh-and-blood individuals; they are merely representations of them, and therefore devoid of desires or wishes. This idea also relies on the theory that other ways of communicating an emotional state are lacking enough to be deemed invalid. My research and body of work seek to prove otherwise, and are spurned by an inquiry about my own desire for privacy, but with the knowledge that there is only so much that can remain hidden.

2. Methodology and Influences:

To begin creating this work, a personal photographic reference is chosen or staged, based on the presence of a human or animal figure, or both. Subjects are known, and aware of being photographed. Settings are minimal and

typically contain a surface or element of interest to recreate in paint, such as grass, wood, cloth, concrete, and water. The figure's pose is of particular significance, creating a reliance on body language to create a mood, from high-energy moments, such as dancing, climbing, and playing, or more subdued states of bathing, sleeping, and relaxing. Subtleties of the pose take on new importance as clues to the figure's state of mind. An open palm gently embracing a rubber duck suggests a mood of relaxation, while a slightly clenched fist flung across the eyes belies a moment of anxiety or annoyance. Bodies are both stretched and compressed, suggesting the figure's level of emotional openness at that particular moment. The paintings *Duck* and *Shoe* (Figures 1 and 2) illustrate these ideas.

Figure 1. Christine DeLorenzo, *Duck,* 2014, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches.

Figure 2. Christine DeLorenzo, *Go Away!,* 2014, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches.

In "Elaborated Knowledge: Reading Kinesis in Pictures," Ellen Spolsky discusses the tendency of people to attempt interpretation of body language when other typical ways of gathering information are not available. She touches specifically on this idea in the context of the visual arts: "Artists make use of their own kinesic knowledge and count on our understanding of it."[3] Simply put, our own bodily experiences assist us in interpretations of others', and in turn we apply what we consider an appropriate emotional component.

Joan Semmel is a good example of an artist who uses body language in figure painting. Born and based in New York City, Semmel began exhibiting work in the 1970s and continues to be a presence in the contemporary art world.[4] She is well known for her paintings of nude figures, with many of her series using photo references of couples engaging in sex, or later, photos or mirror images of her own body. Her figures' bodies are sometimes relaxed and loose, suggesting a post-coital mood, or actively engaging with each other. It is easy to imagine what her figures might be feeling based on these positions.

What is especially interesting about Semmel's work is that she creates a dichotomy by depicting seemingly intimate moments that ultimately evoke an opposing feeling. One way she does this is by cropping the heads of figures so that the intimacy one would glean from a gaze is absent. Writer Richard Meyer describes it this way: "In what would become a characteristic strategy, she excluded the heads of each figure thus disallowing any traditional sense of romantic sentiment or emotional intimacy."[5] While she is preventing the expected response to an intimate moment, she is actually replacing that feeling of intimacy with something darker, a disconnect.

The use of perspective in the composition of my work is also vital. Extreme perspective can create an intimacy simply by removing the distanced, observational quality that is present when viewing traditional poses in paintings. Perspective can create the illusion that the viewers are part of the scene. Through this, the potential exists to experience the feelings of the subject. In this body of work, there was a preference for depicting subjects from above, sometimes directly so. At times the extreme perspective was emphasized by including an extraneous body part, such as a foot or pair of hands, not belonging to the subject. These body parts could then be considered as the viewer's own, an extension of the body in front of the painting.

Semmel also makes use of extreme perspective in her work. In *Me Without Mirrors* (image at http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_alexandergray_com/64eee5dd2a72ac9f5a4118330a4447890.jpg), a self-portrait, she lies naked while rubbing her left foot with cloth. The perspective is all hers, and in turn, ours. There is a leisurely, casual feel to the pose, regardless of the fact that she is in a seemingly very vulnerable position. We can relate to this feeling of relaxation and the act of self-care, and imagine what her facial expression would be. Many of Semmel's paintings utilize the cropping of the head as well, a device found often in my own body of work, and addressed during the next phase of the process.

Once a reference is chosen for my painting, the photo is brought into a digital layout program to enable cropping and rotating, with careful emphasis on the fine line between eliminating information from the frame while still maintaining the integrity of the pose. Subjects are not required to remain the center of focus. Instead, they may be moved to any area of the canvas that can potentially create some tension between the figure and the background. This requires a process of elimination, as the same reference photo can be cropped, rotated, and enlarged in a myriad of ways, each creating a completely different look and feel. There is also great attention paid to the background that remains once the figure's position in the frame is established. The space around the figure can take on a life of its own, requiring conscious decisions about what is potentially too distracting in a background, and how it could affect the mood.

The cropping of the figure's entire head is sometimes utilized in the work. A good example of this technique is seen in *Paw* (Figure 4). Very little of the actual human figure is shown, and only slightly more of the dog. But there is a spirit of playfulness in the positioning, the action performed, and the bright yellow and blue. There is an alertness to the figure's straight, upright position.

Sometimes discouraged in formative art training for figure painting, the idea of extreme cropping in visual art, while still retaining understanding, is supported by Gestalt psychology. This area of psychology attempts to explain how the human brain perceives an entity as a whole, even when only snippets of information are available. In the context of visual art, a composition can lack what one may typically consider integral to understanding, such as the head of a figure, yet still be complete enough to project the image of an entire body. In his article "Artistic Unity and Gestalt," Harold Osborne writes, "an incomplete figure exercises a compulsive influence to be perceived as complete."[6] This may apply not only to an understanding that the tangible missing body parts exist, but also that those parts are potentially expressing emotion as well.

The photo reference is then gridded electronically to ensure precision in sketching the composition on a large-scale canvas. The necessary accuracy in the transition from reference photo to canvas enables the finished painting to

compensate for the lack of facial expression; flaws in execution could potentially detract from the already vague emotive quality, or send an inaccurate message.

Figure 4. Christine DeLorenzo, *Paw,* 2014, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches.

After an initial drawing is completed, the painting is blocked out, using thin layers of acrylic paint. Acrylic paint is chosen as a medium for its fast-drying qualities and flexibility, in the sense that missteps can be covered quickly and easily. Paint is built up slowly and deliberately, with smooth brushstrokes. This is an attempt at minimizing any influencing elements, such as erratic or rough strokes, that might confuse or agitate the viewer. There is also a great personal desire to maintain complete control over the painting, and this manifests in a compulsion for neat and orderly mark-making.

Decisions about color choice now also come into play. Countless studies have been conducted on the relationship between color and emotion. One such study found that while hue is important and has many attached associations, saturation is impactful as well. This may account for why a saturated color is seen as more energetic than a not-so-saturated one. More saturation seems to provoke a particular emotional response.[7] In my work, primary colors such as red and yellow are utilized to complement an upbeat action pose, while more subdued and blended hues accompany a figure's relaxed state. In *Watermelon* (Figure 5), the green of the grass and the purple of the shirt are in sharp contrast to the bright yellow and red found in *Burn* (Figure 6).

In an attempt to create balance, great detail is given to other aspects of the paintings. The care that may have been given to a facial expression is given instead to a shoe or the fur trim of a jacket. This is the part of the process that is the most time consuming, but also the most satisfying. This detailing is also, as stated above, a manifestation of the urge for complete control over the resulting work. It led to the discovery that my urge to control the painting process mirrors my need to control other aspects of my life, including what others see of me.
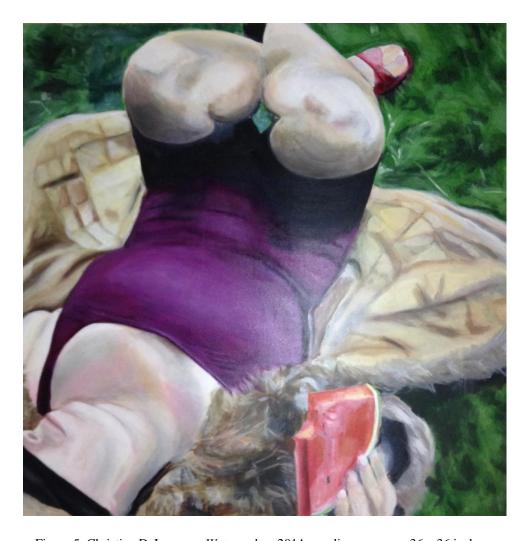

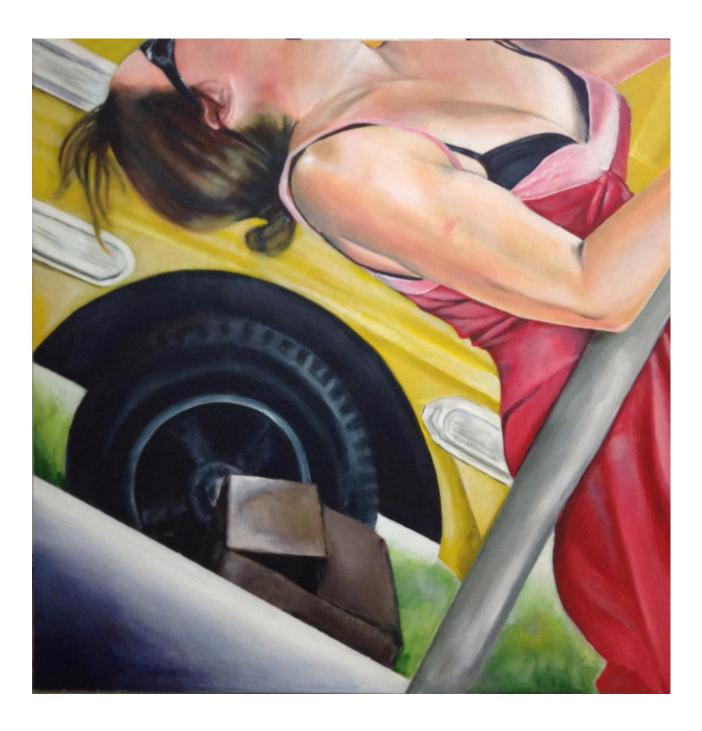Figure 5. Christine DeLorenzo, *Watermelon,* 2014, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches.

Figure 6. Christine DeLorenzo, *Burn,* 2014, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches.

Similarly but much more extremely, the German artist Gerhard Richter made great use of detail, color, and smooth brushstrokes in his Photographic Painting series, and in particular in his 1988 oil painting *Betty* (image at https://www.gerhard-richter.com/datadir/images_new/xxlarge/3651.jpg). Richter began making art in the 1960s, using photographs for reference. He is notorious for his general avoidance of any type of publicity, guarding his privacy and his motivations. It appears that he has taken a similar approach on behalf of his subjects, keeping them in blurred or inaccessible states. Richter is well known for obscuring facial expression using the technique of blurring, but with *Betty*, he took a different approach by using a photo reference of his daughter with her back entirely to the camera. The sharp edges and extreme detail do not lend themselves to the idea of great agitation or action. By focusing on the pattern of her coat, the smoothness of her hair, and the even tone of her skin, Richter creates a sense of serenity. Betty may be turning suddenly toward something, but the static nature of the detailed edges tell us that whatever she is looking at is not of immediate importance.

Again, body language is a key component in the conveyance of emotion in Betty. She is clearly sitting, suggesting a relatively calm state of mind. Her shoulders are not slumped, but slightly rounded to emphasize this calm. The surrounding neutral color and lack of any external stimuli also confirm this emotion. A feeling of "separation and exposure" is evident.[8]

While creating my paintings, focus was also directed toward the activities the subjects perform and the objects with which they interact. Objects included in the work were chosen for their physical softness, for example, a shoe, a down blanket, or a fur coat. This is due in part to my interest in these objects from a painting standpoint. Paint, to me, is a soft substance as well. I am interested in the sensitivity of rounded edges and forgiving shapes, which is different from the properties of harder objects. The objects, in a sense, become vulnerable.

Intimate activities such as bathing and dressing again serve as methods of communicating the mood of the figure. Similar to the effect of body language, subjects become relatable and their emotional state somewhat evident through our own experiences with these activities. Yet not every situation needs to be relatable as a first person experience. There is also the idea of the viewer as voyeur. The hope is that when privy to these intimacies, a connection can be made with the subject, and thus an understanding of the same can follow.

Alyssa Monks, a contemporary New York–based figurative artist, uses this approach in her Bathing Women series. Although often labeled as a photorealist, Monks does not define herself as such, despite her use of a photographic reference and high level of detail.[9] Her oil paintings are comprised of various female subjects bathing and showering, sometimes entirely visible, sometimes obscured by a shower curtain or door. Monks's painting *Tell* (image at http://flavorwire.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/tell_lg.jpg) shows a woman on her back, immersed in bathwater, covering her face with her hands. The position of her body is relaxed, but her hands press against her eyes in what seems like a slight moment of agitation, either from the irritation of soap or some intruding thought. While there is certainly some ambiguity about what the subject may be feeling, there are clues throughout. There is a softness to her surroundings that eliminates the possible emotions of intense anger or excitement. Color is light and bright. The content speaks; someone simply bathing for cleanliness purposes would likely not take the time to put bubbles in the bath, nor would she be completely immersed. Monk's motivation for making these paintings is encapsulated in this statement: "most of the shower and bath series are about vulnerability, empathy, and connection."[10] Of course, this brings to light the fact that whether facial expression or gaze is included or not, we are all still subjected to what our personal experiences bring to interpretation of any artwork. What is relaxing for one person could potentially be a stressful experience for another.

3. Conclusion:

This series and research has confirmed my belief that conventional figure painting rules can be broken, and that there is much emotional information to be derived from the figure outside of that given by a facial expression or gaze. However, there was a somewhat unexpected realization as well: The artistic process revealed and reflected my personal views on privacy, preserved in this case by obscuring the subjects' identity, and how privacy might also keep us from experiences that lead to new levels of connection with others. My process begins with a photo, and while this is not uncommon among artists, it immediately removes me from my subject. The majority of my energy is then devoted to technique, with concentration on such details as clothing, shoes, skin, and hair keeping me even further from an emotional investment. Mark-making is kept tightly under control, with sharp edges, manifesting in a deliberate flatness in the finished product that is somewhat reflective of my personal choice to maintain things on an even keel in my own life, wary of disclosing too much. By controlling the artistic process, I mimic my rigid control of my own emotions, and my desire to keep others at arm's length. It is this realization that inspires me to create

more artwork exploring this concept, with the hopes of finding even more creative methods of creating a connection with figurative subjects, and with people in everyday life.

4. Acknowledgments:

5. Endnotes:

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