

# **The Role of Contemporary Art in Dismantling Problematic Social Construction**

Mikaela Darnell  
Bachelors of Fine Art  
The University of North Carolina Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisors: Suzanne Dittenber, Eric Tomberlin, Jackson Martin, Robert Dunning

## **Abstract**

This research explores the problematic aspects of identity construction that are perpetuated within social institutions and mass media in the United States and the way in which contemporary artists are working to challenge these ideas. The impact of social institutions and mass media are considered to be more influential on an individual's concept of identity in the contemporary age due to increased access to technology and information. It is argued that by mimicking vehicles for social construction, contemporary artists are able to draw attention to methods of identity construction and critique the stereotypical and negative ways American mass media and social institutions categorize individual and group identities. Through an examination of several contemporary artists, the manner in which this is done is made explicit. This type of exploration into social construction in contemporary art allows for artists to participate in and challenge the contemporary social construction of identity. The author further explores how this manifestation of social commentary takes place in their own work through mimicking and satirizing contemporary methods of social construction via collage and painting.

## **1. Introduction**

The social construction of reality is a theory in the field of sociology that examines the ways in which humans develop a shared understanding of society. Social Construction Theory generally asserts that all aspects of society, regardless of how natural or unchanging they may seem to be, are actually created, maintained, and altered through a variety of social processes.<sup>1</sup> These social processes guide us to a common understanding of the world we live in and an understanding of who we are as individuals. Two of the main vehicles for social construction are mass media (television, advertising, movies, etc.) and social institutions, such as the public education system, the family, and organized religion. In the twenty-first century the roles that these two vehicles occupy is being magnified through access to information about social institutions and a constant bombardment by media. The art world is by no means separated from this social reality. Contemporary artists are not only being influenced by these changes, but their work also contributes to this social construction and often mirrors it. This relationship blurs the lines between the social construction of identity that occurs in institutions and mass media and the visual art that is exploring these constructions. Artists can use their work to critique, break down, and reconstruct problematic ideas about identity that are perpetuated in social institutions and mass media. Many of these problematic ideas arise from overly simplified and stereotypical ideas about race, gender, wealth, political ideologies, religious affiliations, and other group or individual identifications. These strict categories create an unrealistic view of the world that further divides various groups of people and the consequences of this can not only lead to misunderstandings about oneself and others, but also discrimination and violence.

Issues with prejudice and bias have always persisted in American culture, existing long before the creation of our nation. Problematic ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and religion have for many years divided our nation. The increased access to media through rapidly advancing technology, however, has allowed this concerning construction of identity to permeate everyday life more than ever before. In addition, technology has allowed for people to more

readily share their problematic interactions with institutions. We can also share knowledge about groups some may not be familiar, thus breaking down age old stereotypes and allowing us to work towards equity and social justice. Many artists working today feel compelled to address these social issues and they often challenge the way that individuals and groups in our society are being defined and organized. One of the most salient ways of addressing these problems is by pointing to the institutions and media campaigns that sustain them. Several contemporary artists are doing this by mirroring the factors that have led to the current state of our social reality. By pulling from mass media and experiences with institutions, contemporary art often mimics the way that identity is socially created in the twenty-first century and does so in a manner that critiques the media, social institutions, and their perpetuation of problematic identity construction.

## 2. Mass Media and Social Construction

In the twenty-first century we are consistently being influenced by mass media platforms that tell us who others are, who we are, and who we ought to be. A market research firm known as Yankelovich estimates that a person living in a city today sees about five thousand advertisements a day compared to two thousand advertisements thirty years ago.<sup>2</sup> Michael Chapman expresses this in his discussion of the post-consumerist city taken over by billboards and advertisements: “the city was transformed into a colossal inhabited collage.”<sup>3</sup> Contributing to this, the computers we carry in our pockets give us complete access to the digital world. We use these computers to scroll through endless posts on social media and compare ourselves to one another. According to a 2016 Nielsen Company audience report, the average American adult now spends ten hours and thirty-nine minutes looking at a screen every single day.<sup>4</sup> Even without our phones, we are regularly bombarded by billboards, radio, televisions, magazines, a constant stream of fact and opinion.

The media has always impacted the social construction of identity; however these changes have allowed for the media to have a larger impact on the way we view others and ourselves. Seeing groups of people depicted in the same way over and over again creates reference points for perceiving an individual’s identity. This can be especially powerful when the group one is seeing presented is one that they do not belong to or are unfamiliar with. This phenomenon can be seen in the myth of the “Welfare Queen.” This racist and unsubstantiated stereotype about African American women enrolled in public assistance programs was perpetuated by the news media and politicians in the 1970s and it still persists to this day.<sup>5</sup> Media representations like this not only impact the way in which others may view groups of people, they also influence how a person sees themselves. This can lead some to express themselves in a way that they believe is socially acceptable, despite their actual preferences. Representations in the media can also contribute feelings of doubt or self-loathing if a person feels as though they do not fit the ideal of their group presented in media. Many people may also begin to believe stereotypes about themselves and others presented in the media, whether they realize it is happening or not.

To understand how this process works, we can look to the way femininity is constructed in the media. Media representations of women often define femininity and sexuality, while reinforcing stereotypes. Magazines marketed to teen girls often construct beauty in a very stereotypical way with columns that discuss how to get a man based on the perceived desires of heterosexual men.<sup>6</sup> Even media representations that claim to be fighting against these strict ideas about a woman’s body and a woman’s role in society are contributing to them. Take for example the Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty which aimed to promote body positivity for women of all shapes and sizes. This campaign continued to contribute to beauty stereotypes because the models used for these advertisements were still relatively thin and similar in their appearance.<sup>7</sup> The construction of femininity happening in the media is also racialized. Isabel Molina-Guzman examines representations of Latinas in her book *Dangerous Curves* which focuses on the ways that “ethnicity, and specifically minority female sexuality, can be savored, commodified, packaged, and safely distributed for the consumption of audiences throughout the world.”<sup>8</sup> These media representations affect the way that women are viewed in society and how they view themselves. Similar issues exist in the media regarding other aspects of identity seen in the representations of economic classes, racial groups, immigrants, and members of political parties.

Despite many of the misrepresentations happening in the media, there are also many forms of mass media that are actively working to change the current social construction of identity. Television shows and movies such as “Modern Family,” “This is Us,” “Moonlight,” and “Black Panther” are using representations that challenge strict stereotypes about gender, race, and sexuality. This is done in “Modern Family” by presenting family structures that do not follow the normalized idea of the nuclear family. In “Black Panther” gender stereotypes are broken through the use of a powerful all-female army. These types of representation are using mass media to reconstruct concepts about identity that have been in place for centuries. This change is an important aspect of social construction and without it our

societies would remain stagnant. Many contemporary artists are doing this as well by working in a way that mimics how mass media establishes identity, while also using their art as a way to critique identity construction that is stereotypical or negative.

### 3. Contemporary Art Mimics the Processes of Social Construction in Mass Media

Pepon Osorio is a Puerto Rican artist who is using the tools of mass media to challenge their representations. He creates installations to critique and reorder the way television and movies misrepresent the identities of Puerto Ricans. By recreating and exaggerating Hollywood's sets in a gallery setting, he calls attention to the absurdity of the misrepresentation of Puerto Ricans in American media. Osorio's installation *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)* depicts the Hollywood set of a somewhat surreal working-class Puerto Rican home. Filling the scene to capacity are figures of the Virgin Mary, various other forms of Catholic iconography, family photographs, magazines, chairs with the print of the Puerto Rican flag, and lights used in filmmaking. A female corpse lays in the scene draped in a blood-soaked sheet. Adding to the disconnection with reality caused by the overabundance of objects, several large and decorative knives stick out of the cushions on a large yellow couch. Red drapes covering the walls also add to the surrealism present in the scene. The surrealism alludes to the disconnection from reality in many media representation of Puerto Ricans. Columns of VHS tapes reinforce this idea because the films chosen are ones that depict Puerto Ricans in a stereotypical way.



Pepon Osorio, *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)*. 1993.  
<http://m.bronxmuseum.org/about/permanent-collection>

A doormat sits in front of the scene which reads “Only if you understand that it has taken years of pain to gather into our homes our most valuable possessions: but the greater pain is to see how in movies others make fun of the way we live.”<sup>99</sup> The fact that the scene depicts a private space on display speaks to the way the Puerto Rican stereotype is used in the media. Osorio says of the work, “When you come into the installation you’re standing in front of a dead body. She’s, well, a mannequin, of course, she’s right in the middle. You’re confronting yourself with the idea that



Hollywood has always presented the Latino as extremely accessible, extremely sexual, and here it is on a horizontal position, dead.”<sup>10</sup> By presenting the scene in this way, Osorio is mirroring the way the media socially constructs Puerto Rican identity while also using it as a way to challenge that construction.

Kehinde Wiley is also working in a way that uses visual imagery of mass media as a vehicle for critiquing the way it socially constructs identity. His paintings use images of contemporary young African American males and places them in the context of classical painting. In many of the paintings the figures are wearing stereotypical markers of young African American men: sagging pants, gold chains, basketball shorts, large brimmed baseball caps, and baggy hooded sweatshirts. Yet some paintings contain no such imagery; in these paintings, individuals are dressed in seemingly ‘unmarked’ clothing or extravagant attire. However, each figure is presented in a way that gives them an air of control, grace, and elegance. Some of Wiley’s paintings such as *Officer of the Hussars* (2007) present black men in a powerful and regal manner, while others like *Femme Piquée par un Serpent* (2008) present black men in a way that highlights their vulnerability and sensuality. His paintings challenge stereotypes in mass media that write off young black men as “thugs” who are incapable of achieving success or having a complex identity and ‘feminine’ attributes.



Wiley, Kehinde. *Femme Piquée par un Serpent*. 2008.

<https://www.culturetype.com/2015/02/15/new-york-times-paints-portrait-of-kehinde-wiley/>

This misrepresentation of black men has a drastic effect on society, breeding fear and distrust of young African American men that leads to racist rhetoric and acts of violence from citizens and police. In an interview with the New York Times, Kehinde Wiley expressed his concern with the way black men are perceived in American society, “I know how young black men are seen. They’re boys, scared little boys oftentimes. I was completely afraid of the Los Angeles Police Department.”<sup>11</sup> Kehinde Wiley is using both the art of the past and the visual signifiers of stereotype from the present to reconstruct the social identities of African American men in his paintings. These works not only challenge the current state of social construction, but present positive and realistic ways of conceiving of the identity of African American men. Osorio and Wiley both take advantage of the ways that the media constructs identity and use those methods to reconstruct the social identities of their subjects. The concepts they are considering — the racialized body, the media, political and social discourse — are tightly connected to the way institutions construct and conceptualize identity.

#### 4. Institutions and Social Construction

Our interactions with institutions — our families, our workplace, our government, our religion organizations, our economy, etc. — affect our group identity and our individual identity. This is influenced by our position in such institutions, the way those institutions impact our lives, and the way those institutions categorize or define us. In the field of sociology, role identities are defined as the different identities held by one individual based on the roles they play in different groups within society. Each individual can have many different role identities based on their position in various institutions such as their family and workplace.<sup>12</sup> These different roles help to construct one’s self conception of identity, leading them to frame themselves as a mother, busboy, CEO, or citizen of a state. Some of these identities can change while others cannot. The role identities can also be validated or contested by individuals within the institution. When a role is adequately performed by the individual they will receive validation, however

failure to perform such roles in the expected manner can lead to self-doubt.<sup>13</sup> These identities are important because they influence the ways that individuals interact with and are perceived by the society at large or the institution they are a part of.

## 5. Contemporary Art Mimics the Processes of Social Construction within Institutions

Many contemporary artists work in a way that mimics how institutions lead us to various role identities. Painter Kate Abercrombie delves into the experience of participating in the institution of the American economy in her work at the exhibition *Collage as Painting*. These works not only convey the stress of those struggling within the American economy, but they mimic the way institutions within the economy interact with those individuals. In the painting *Multiplier* (2007) Abercrombie puts on display the methods that lotteries use to entice individuals to risk what money they have. The painting is completely covered in used lottery scratch offs that advertise prospects that are too good to be true: “10x the Money” and “\$1,000 a Week for Life” mirror the way that lotteries prey on lower income individuals who may be unsatisfied with the role they play in the economy.



Kate Abercrombie. *Morning Sun... Evening Moon*, 2017.

<https://hyperallergic.com/423125/collage-as-painting-kate-abercrombie-and-trevor-winkfield-fleisher-ollman-gallery-2018/>



Abercrombie's painting *Morning Sun... Evening Moon* (2017) uses a similar strategy by depicting a surface covered in unpaid bills. Mimicking the way debt collectors constantly bombard individuals for their payments, this painting reflects the position that many Americans carrying debt are placed into. The scattered and abundant nature of the bills reflect the anxieties held by people in these positions.<sup>14</sup> However, this painting does give the debtor autonomy — among all the unpaid notices from debt collectors is a donation slip for the ACLU marked paid. This moment speaks to the fact that individuals can play various roles in different institutions and decide which role is of the most importance. Abercrombie is using her work to put on display the way the institutions working within the American economy actively construct the identities of those participating in the system as winners or debtors, while also examining the reactions individuals have to being placed in those roles.

Kerry James Marshall is another painter who uses his art to mimic the way institutions impact the social construction of identity. His work depicts African Americans conversing, working, playing, and walking through scenes of barbershops, salons, neighborhoods, parks, artist studios, and gardens. The images portray black Americans going throughout their everyday life, but the paintings are disrupted by expressive marks and collaged aspects. The painting *School of Beauty, School of Culture* (2012) presents several African American women and two children in a brightly colored salon. The foreground is disrupted by the distorted image of blonde-haired white women painted in the style of the anamorphic skull in the famous painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) by Hans Holbein.<sup>15</sup> This disruption is a reflection of the way that American institutions, like cosmetic companies and women's magazines value the beauty of white women over those of women of color. The disregard of this intrusion, however, shows a disregard of these looming societal standards.



Kerry James Marshall. *School of Beauty, School of Culture*. 2012.

<https://www.npr.org/2017/03/28/521683667/kerry-james-marshall-a-black-presence-in-the-art-world-is-not-negotiable>

Race is a vital aspect to Marshall's work and the institution of racism in America is ever present. All of figures' skin are an exaggerated black color that can sometimes make it hard to discern facial features or entire bodies. The use of an intense black speaks to the "invisibility" of the African American experience and the ways that black Americans are often misunderstood.<sup>16</sup> Kerry James Marshall is not only using his work to comment on the experience of African Americans in smaller institutions such as housing developments and salons, but also the experience of African Americans in the context of the institutionalization of racism throughout the United States. By making the figures almost indiscernible and disrupting the scenes with various phrases, images, and marks, Marshall is mimicking the way institutions in the United States can serve as both places of familiarity and places of disregard for black Americans.

While many artists convey ideas about identity through the portrayal of institutions in their work, some contemporary artists are using the actual institutions they are exploring as the galleries for their work. Jason Saager is one of those artists. Saager's exhibition titled *Scenes from the Time Collapse* took place in the Church of St. Paul the Apostle in Manhattan in 2015.<sup>17</sup> The paintings depict figures and landscapes in a way that comments on the intangibility of time and space which is enhanced by the detail that they are all marked "undated". The presence of these works in an institution of religion provides them with a context that is useful in relating to their strange and fantastical imagery.



Jason Saager: *Scenes from the Time Collapse* at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle  
<https://hyperallergic.com/256056/fantastical-landscapes-that-ripple-through-time/>.

There are also symbols from Christian narratives present in the paintings, but set in an unusual context. In the painting *Flying Multicat* Christian monks are depicted as levitating in a forest. In *Explosion to Holographic Simulation* two naked figures run through the arctic while a portal to a world lush with vegetation hangs above them and a portal to another desolate and icy landscape sits in the background. This painting alludes to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, but in a way that resembles science fiction. These paintings are religious and heretical, speaking to Christian ideas while disrupting and reorganizing their conception. Artist and writer Rob Colvin describes Saager's paintings in this way, "The conceptual premise of these paintings — time and place coming into or out of being — is embedded within them. The works are in the process of self-realization, deciding where they want to go and how long it will take to get there. As someone who has taken up the task of deciphering what's been created here, I am left to my own devices and speculations. Completely adrift. Art that's worth your eyes can do this: it frustrates. It doesn't let you know what you've gotten into."<sup>18</sup> The works seem to do this intentionally and their location in a Christian institution adds to this sentiment. They seem to be criticizing the rigidity in institutions of organized religion, while also making the viewer ask for guidance and clarity. In this way, the paintings reflect the needs many have for services that religious institutions have to offer. The paintings mimic the spiritual confusion of many individuals and their presence in the church mimics the way institutions of religion can give those people answers to questions that seem to be unsolvable.





Jason Saager. *Expulsion to Holographic Simulation*. Undated.  
<https://hyperallergic.com/256056/fantastical-landscapes-that-ripple-through-time/>.

Saager is not the only contemporary artist who has placed his works in the context of the institutions he seeks to examine. While working as a Walmart greeter Daniel Bozhkov painted a fresco in the layaway department of the store. Bozhkov had become interested in working at the store after watching a German television show that discussed the odd phenomenon of being a paid greeter.<sup>19</sup> Bozhkov was interested in the relationship between Walmart's choreographed "small-town hospitality" and their tendency to create a competitive environment that leads to the closure of small local businesses. He was also compelled by the juxtaposition created by Walmart's marketing strategy to praise workers as the foundation of their success, while also refusing to pay them a decent living wage. This curiosity led Bozhkov to join the Walmart team in Skowhegan, Maine in the summer of 2000.<sup>20</sup>





Daniel Bozhkov. *Training in Assertive Hospitality*. 2000.  
<https://www.danielbozhkovart.com/assertive-hospitality>

The multi paneled fresco that Bozhkov painted in the layaway department included images of his family, products that could be found in the Walmart store, images of the Skowhegan landscape, and the blue and yellow color scheme that was used by Walmart at the time. The painting's presence in the layaway department meant that objects were routinely kept in front of the work while they were waiting for customer pick up. Bozhkov documented the way the placement of the objects affected the viewing of the painting. The objects had a transient effect on the interpretation of the painting, but they also left permanent changes when scraping up against its surface. Bozhkov had originally wanted to restore the painting, but after meeting with conservator Renato Giangualano, he came to see the piece as a work in progress — perpetually changed by the merchandise it encountered.<sup>21</sup> The painting depends on its location in this store. The relationship of the work to Walmart's existence as a corporation is essential to its meaning. The painting mimics the ideas set forth by the institution's marketing; small-town oriented, focused on hospitality, adherence to traditional family values, and access to goods used in everyday life. However, the effect that the corporation's practices have on the work mirror the ways in which the store wreaks havoc on some of the key foundations of their own values. This fresco by Bozhkov is able to operate on various conceptual levels: it participates in the institution that it is representing, it mimics the way Walmart works to socially construct itself as an institution, and it criticizes the effect that the store actually has on its community.

## 6. Working with Collage and Painting to Mimic Social Construction

My fascination with the social construction of identity arose while taking courses in sociology as an undergraduate. As a painter I was already compelled by the possibilities visual art presents for manipulating and exaggerating fantastical aspects of one's identity. In discovering the social processes that lead to the formulation of identity, I soon came to see even the most seemingly natural aspects of identity as manipulated, exaggerated, and absurd. As my studies

in art and sociology continued, I felt compelled to explore the ways visual images could be used to examine how individuals understand objects, places, other people, and themselves. I came to find that when placing objects in heightened proximity to a figure, a viewer would subconsciously begin building connections between that individual and the ideas that they held about the objects. This association would lead to a viewer making strong assumptions about the individual's character and behavior. Meanings that had been established through social construction caused a viewer to make assumptions about a person's identity based on their appearance and shared understandings of the connotations the objects held.

This phenomenon mimics the way the mass media and social institutions socially construct identity. By reducing individuals to a basic level of assumption and understanding, people are easily categorized and stereotyped. Behaviors and characteristics with strong common associations within a culture can help to manufacture links between those ideas and entire subsets of a population. Strict constructions of gender, sexuality, race, nationalism, religion, taste, and behaviors are manufactured in this way. In my work I aim to mirror this social process by reducing my subjects to one general aspect of their identity, particularly focusing on attributes or behaviors that are judged in the harshest manner. By interposing portraits, oversized objects, and logos I aim to ignite a quick moment of judgement and categorization. When my paintings are seen, I want the viewer to feel confronted by their own perceptions and understandings of others and themselves — considering how they are being socialized by the mass media and social institutions. In pointing to the ways we can be programmed by social construction, I want the viewer to question what they have been taught to believe and how. When people can see the ways in which they have been socialized, they can begin to wrestle with which aspects are positive to their understandings of themselves and the world and which are not.



Mikaela Darnell. *School of Beauty and Behavior*. 2018.

This goal is explicit in the painting *School of Beauty and Behavior*. This portrait uses logos seen on the cover of the women's magazine *Cosmopolitan* which are interwoven with oversized swords and lipsticks. Phrases like “21 Mind Blowing Sex Moves” and “Flatter Abs 9 Minutes Flat” point to the ways in which sexism permeates women's magazines — focusing on women as bodies for consumption, encouraging women to worry about their body fat and how they are going to impress their partner (who is almost always assumed to be a man) in bed. However, the subject of the portrait is not compliant. Surrounded by the giant lipsticks and swords, she seems defiant and disregards the outdated idea of femininity that this magazine perpetuates. The use of logos is important here, establishing the subject's relationship with a product that will be familiar to many viewers.

Another painting that works to confront the viewer's perceptions of others and themselves deals with mass media in an explicit way. *American Medicine: The First in Home Sedative Device* is a doubled portrait which is layered over two identical malfunctioning television sets. On first glance it is easy to judge this character with crooked teeth and a blank stare, mesmerized by the glow of the television sets. He is a stereotypical 'white trash' character, consumed by media. However, with a bit of reflection and a peek at the title, the viewer has the opportunity to consider how they can relate to this person. In a society with an abundance of screens we all can fall captive to this behavior. Beginning with the first televisions invented in the early 1900s and evolving into portable screens in our pockets by the early 2000s, Americans have been entranced with the escapism that electronic media offers. While the opportunities for more individualized and informative screen content has expanded, the opportunities for empty and mindless content followed hand in hand. The title works to encourage the viewer to consider the new home sedative devices they use and how this obsession with technology can lead one to be disassociated with their own reality.



Mikaela Darnell. *American Medicine: The First in Home Sedative Device*. 2018.

I am also interested in the way that mass media advertises certain products; presenting objects that are harmful and manipulate one's appearance or state of mind as normal. Cigarette advertising has been banned on most platforms in the United States, however many convenience stores still display slick ads encouraging one to buy into the relaxing power that nicotine holds. Although there are some restrictions on alcohol advertisements, these still permeate television and other forms of mass media. The advertisement of alcoholic beverages in a country with strict drug laws like the United States seems contradictory when one looks at the rates of alcohol related deaths in this nation and the addictive quality of alcohol. In *A Product of His Time* I explore the way that cigarette and alcohol manufacturers use the addictive quality of their goods to turn people into their own type of product. It is great to have a customer who picks up a twelve pack every weekend and smokes socially, but it is even better to have a customer that buys a case of beer and a pack of cigarettes every day. There is a huge issue in this country with alcoholism and cigarette related deaths. While there are efforts to control cigarette and alcohol manufacturers, much of the blame for abuse falls on the individual with a drinking problem or addiction to nicotine who often has little access to resources for help. This painting aims to not only consider the predatory nature of certain industries, but also the stigma against addicts that Americans hold and the susceptibility in all of us to fall victim to certain substances, accessibility, and marketing.





Mikaela Darnell. *A Product of His Time*. 2018.

The inspiration for these portraits comes from my relationships with others and the aspects of their identity that can often feel dominate and easily understood. I begin by exploring what part of the subject's identity I do this with, then examining the objects and behaviors I associate with that aspect of their identity. I then use photographs of that individual and the objects I am interested in to create collages. Collage is useful in this process because it lends itself to the manipulative properties that exist in social construction. It also allows me to pull in a variety of images and pick and choose which aspects seem most suitable for my goal. These collages are six inches by eight inches and I enlarge them all up to thirty-six inches by forty-eight inches. In sticking to the same size, shape, and compositional formula for each of the portrait paintings, I am able to further mimic the simplification and categorization that is taking place in the mass media and social institutions. The final products retain an otherworldly quality because of the scale of objects, the handling of paint, and the disruption of the figure ground relationship. The rendering of the image itself contributes to this feeling by not straying too far from reality, but not existing in our reality either. I work to use a variety of painting techniques in order further the idea of an intangible perception of others, self, and the society we take part in. This disconnection from the physical world points to the strangeness present in the subject's representation. These works are accompanied by smaller paintings that pull from the imagery in the larger portraits. They are slick, commercial, and their obsession with one object speaks to the materialism permeating the identity of American consumers. This series works to both mimic the processes taking place in the social construction of identity, while pointing to the problematic aspects of various types of identity construction.

## 7. Conclusion

Art mimics the social construction of identity because it is a product of the society it exists in. However, art is a powerful institution because it is not only affected by social construction, it contributes to it. Visual art is able to exist in a space where it is affected by, capable of mimicking, and is always inevitably participating in social construction. In the twenty-first century this relationship is being utilized at an increased level. People have more access to

knowledge and information and are able to better recognize and criticize the faults of the mass media and our social institutions. Many contemporary artists are working towards this as a result of living in a technological age that is influenced by the mass media and social institutions in a more prominent way than ever before. Their efforts help to continue the evolution of society and pull us closer to a reality characterized by social consciousness and equity.

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