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Anna Griffin

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Expression and Portraiture

By

Anna Griffin

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For me, the pain of observation can be incredibly great. Being photographed is one of the most uncomfortable experiences of my life. Yet I remain avidly curious about other people: what they look like, what their homes are like, what their habits are. As a child I was obsessed with Harriet the Spy and Matilda Investigates, books about strong-willed girls who were just as interested in finding and knowing as I was. Portraiture then seems a natural extension of my voyeurism. There is the saying, “the eyes are the windows to one’s soul.” The face, by extension, is the medium by which one’s thoughts and feelings are expressed, wordlessly, to the external world. Sometimes this expression can appear minimal or false, but sometimes it is the truest form of communication. Portraiture has the unique ability to reveal a person’s secrets through close examination or freeze framing of the face and its expression. Portraits can record both autobiographical and biographical information, depending on the artist and on the viewer. One’s story is made available to the world, leaving it open to viewers’ interpretations. This thesis studies the nuances of relationships and communication through portraiture and expression. I explore this subject through the triad perspectives of myself as artist, my subjects, and third party viewers. Additionally, I use the kinship I
share with each of my subjects, as well as some information about the actual biology behind facial expressions, as yet more layers through which to explore this topic.

Portraiture is an ancient tradition, and yet it remains hard to define and even mysterious. A portrait does not necessarily mean a painting of a face. Technically a portrait can refer to almost any type of representation of someone or something. To narrow that nebulous statement, however, I use the term portrait to mean a representation of someone: specifically, the artistic rendering of the face. A portrait can be created in any medium, and it can also use the body, a setting, and/or objects to further the impression or representation of a person. In my work I chose to focus solely on the face. The range of media and subject matter from which an artist can choose is considerable, but attempting to capture expression through painting is my passion. I am uninterested, at this point in time, in using other filler such as specific settings or objects to aid viewers as they try to decipher what my subjects are feeling and thinking. There are so many other elements to parse such as color, lighting, which way the face is turned, and personal items the subject may be wearing (such as glasses or jewelry or makeup or hairstyle). All of these details in the portrait create an impression of the subject without needing further background material.

For this project I chose to take photographs of my subjects rather than have them sit live for me. This was mostly due to time constraints. I tried two approaches: I would either give my subject warning or I wouldn’t. Either way it felt more natural than asking them to pose in front of a blank wall or other contrived blank space. This meant, however, that while I might capture a good photo of the face, the background could
present a number of elements that were most often completely unrelated to my subject. In discussion with my thesis director, Erika Greenberg-Schneider, she urged me to be careful about this. One photo (which, in the end, was not used for this project) showed a subject in front of a bookcase. Erika specifically noted she was not convinced the books had any personal relation to the subject. She was right. They were my books. As I was painting for this thesis and considering moments such as the bookshelf anecdote, I realized I have spent so much of my creative life focused on the face that I hardly know where to begin crafting a space that shares a personal connection and relevancy to the overall portrait of someone. I decided, however, to set that aside. While it is an avenue of study related to my field of portraiture, it is not specifically what I had set out to investigate in this thesis.

Instead, and as I mentioned above, I endeavored to capture expression. What a viewer conceives a subject’s expression to be depends on nearly innumerable things. For instance, the subject’s choice of ornamentation and his or her actual thoughts and feelings internal to themselves and towards me as photographer and also the choices that I as artist make in terms of color and style: All of these elements mix with the viewers’ own set of notions and values. I felt that was enough material to deal with without adding objects or a finite space for my subjects to inhabit. In *Notes of A Painter* Matisse writes, “Expression, for me, does not reside in passion bursting from a human face or manifested by violent movement...Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter’s command to express his feelings” (38). The face, as Matisse explains, is not the only way to convey expression.
Other subjects as well as other elements like composition and color are equally valid and important as an artist attempts to express something. The face does, however, remain a vital, day-to-day, instrument of expression, and it is worth exploring. Matisse continues, “A work of art must carry within itself its complete significance and impose that upon the beholder even before he recognizes the subject matter” (41). In this thesis, I thought it was interesting to focus my energy on trying to convey a significance and expression only through the most basic type of portrait: the face and only the face.

Additional to this discussion of what to physically include in my paintings is how I actually set about painting. Instead of drawing freehand I chose to grid each image. To do this I printed out each image on a regular sized sheet of printer paper and drew a grid onto it. Then I drew a slightly larger grid, so that each square corresponded to the smaller one, onto the canvas. I primarily used the grid to mark where major points of the face were. I found afterwards, however, that while I was painting, it often became necessary to re-evaluate the positioning of neck and shoulders and certain shadows that the grid was unable to show me or which had simply become obscured while I was painting. Generally I draw portraits freehand, but for this project I used gridding because it can save time, in that I know I can produce a decent drawing quickly. Creating a likeness is not always my primary concern, but its importance often feels amplified when scrutinized by an audience other than myself and frequently the question of how true to the subject a painting is will arise. Even when I paint self portraits and my aims are often anything but trying to make it look exactly like me, I almost without fail get comments such as, “That’s not you.” As if that should be my only goal, it is not, but for this project I
felt a certain precision in likeness was integral to re-creating each facial expression as it actually appeared, rather than only my impression of it. Using the grid then, secured a certain level of exactitude.

The term expression has several definitions. First, it is the process by which people articulate their thoughts or feelings. Second, it is the actual look of emotion on a person’s face. In this thesis I am involved with exploring both of these definitions of expression by way of the portrait. With the choice of the face as subject, it is tempting to rely too heavily on it as an obviously recognizable thing. Alberto Giacometti, in discussing the head, concentrates on the eyes and the gaze as the leading features, which are integral to finding facial expression as opposed to simply representing the face. He said, “The eye is something special insofar as it’s almost as though made of a different material from the rest of the face. You could say that all the forms of the face are more or less unclear, are even very unclear; the point of the nose can hardly be defined at all in terms of its structure” (189). The face does have certain recognizable features, but it is not a building; it does not have a set pattern or set of lines to which it always adheres. Giacometti continues, “Now the strange thing is, when you represent the eye precisely, you risk destroying exactly what you are after, namely the gaze” (189). The fluidity Giacometti is suggesting is extremely hard to represent. But it is vital to attempt in order to imbue a painted portrait with life or expression. Though I specifically used gridding to gain a level of exactness, to allow the face to speak for itself, I am not a photo realist. I chose to give myself some artistic license in using
color and in representing the gaze so that I could try to show my own feelings regarding 
my subject’s expressions. My paintings then are a fine balance of reality and 
impression.

Beyond the practice of trying to capture artistically the gaze on a person’s face 
and create an overall impression of a subject, is the actual science behind facial 
expression. Psychologist Paul Ekman built his career on measuring emotion on the 
face. While testing an extremely isolated group of subjects from Papua New Guinea in 
1965, Ekman found that facial expressions are determined by biology and are universal. 
In the 1970s, this led him to create the FACS atlas, or the Facial Action Coding System, 
with Wallace Friesen. Richard Conniff, in his 2004 article on Ekman, wrote that the 
FACS atlas, “describes all 43 movements, or ‘action units,’ facial muscles can perform, 
plus all the combinations of action units that we use to produce every imaginable 
expression--more than 10,000 in all” (46). In his psychology classes, Ekman uses this 
information to teach students how to more accurately read facial expression. As a 
beginning exercise, he shows his students images of different faces for one second 
each, asking them to identify the emotions on the faces. Ekman shows each image for 
only one second because, “Full facial expressions typically last just one-half to two and 
a half seconds” (Conniff 44). Yet, despite the real to life quick flashing of different 
expression, the students often get half of them wrong. It’s all about detail, the lift of the 
eyebrows, or the tight press of lips. Anger can easily be misinterpreted as disgust, or 
surprise can be interchangeable with fear. For my project, it is fascinating the way I 
have had trouble discerning the expressions on my subjects’ faces. I find myself relying
heavily on my personal knowledge of their character and quirks. According to Ekman, people tend to ‘read’ familiar faces better. However, we live in a society totally different from the one in which our facial expressions evolved. Now it is no longer the familiarity of a small tribe, but hundreds of new faces each day with which we must deal: “[W]e have learned to cope with overcrowding by not looking into the faces of strangers” (Coniff 47). Though Ekman has managed to categorize expressions, he has found that people’s ‘base line’ expressions vary considerably and that engaging people in conversation and being more attuned to the details in a situation over all are also important factors in ‘reading’ a person. Facial expressions are one of the most accessible ways one can discover a person’s emotions or feelings and yet as Paul Ekman’s work shows, it is a skill most struggle with.

I do not have special training in reading faces, so an important facet of my project is to discover what the subjects of each of my portraits perceives their own expression to be in their painting. A recent exhibit shown by the New York based gallery, Freight +Volume, entitled “MIE: a portrait by 35 artists,” investigated this perfectly. This exhibit explored how the subject, in this case, Mie Iwatsuki, felt about the portraits of her and explored the portrait as a mirror through which viewers’ may see themselves:

As a medium, the portrait has always been a revelation—both a dissection of its subject as well as an abstraction. We are not just looking into the soul of another person as much as looking into our own souls when we view a portrait: indeed, the art form is similar to a mirror. The moment in time in the life of one person is not only frozen by the artist and his or her subject, but also by the viewer when
engaged by the work of art in front of them. When we encounter such great works either in gallery, museum or private settings, we become a part of the painting; a triangular relationship is created between the subject, the artist, and the viewer (Freight+Volume).

Each artwork in this show featured model Mie Iwatsuki, who in turn co-curated the exhibit and added her own voice through writing to the art-making process. It is easy and a natural inclination to project something of oneself onto a portrait, to use it as a mirror or a platform to dive into one’s own soul. That, however, is not always a pleasant experience and I have noticed that generally people are not comfortable around portraits, possibly for this reason. As an illustration of this discomfort, I have heard people wonder why anyone would want to place in their home a portrait of someone other than themselves or a person they know. Also, as an image collector, I have always had pictures and artwork all over my room, many of which are faces or portraits. Several visitors to my home have asked, “Don’t all those eyes creep you out? I wouldn’t be able to sleep.” It is as if they think these images are watching them. I wonder if this imagined scrutiny plays into the “portrait as mirror.” As in, if one does see a part of him or herself in the portrait, they become exposed to themselves as well as to the eyes of the portrait and by extension, to the eyes of “outsiders.” In interviewing each of my subjects, I found that all four of them felt a degree of discomfort in being photographed, painted, and simply looked at: I was the outsider in this case. Endeavoring to more fully explore facial expression, I wanted to know how the people I chose to paint felt about the experience and what they considered their own expression to be. Because I
photographed my subjects instead of having them sit live for me, I found that there are different tensions which contribute to their expression. The tension of being viewed is still present, but, at least for my project, the amount of time the subject had to be viewed by the artist was relatively short. This is only one variable at play. It is perhaps impossible for anyone to have a fixed reaction or memory of their feelings at the exact moment their image was captured. One may remember an experience a particular way, with a certain nostalgia or a certain distaste, but one’s opinion about their appearance is ever changing. What follows is a mix of the thoughts and opinions of my subjects, myself, and third party viewers.

When I photographed my mother, Tiffani, hoping to get a usable shot for my thesis, it was evening, in the midst of a family day which included spending time with my grandparents and great-grandparents. Though my mother had enjoyed herself with all of us, it was at a time when she was not feeling particularly glamorous or generous to anyone but her daughter who needed to get schoolwork done. My mother, like me, is also uncomfortable with being observed and with being photographed. Yet I took advantage and managed, in my opinion, to get a usable shot. My personal feelings toward the photo are incredibly mixed. I chose to paint people whom I share a close relationship with so that I could have supposedly richer information to base my own impressions of their expression on. In this instance, I know the photo was taken while my mother was tired, and yet the shot I chose seems to show her mother’s love in her relaxed eyes and easy smile. I was quite surprised to find this shot amongst the other more awkward and stiff photos. Her feelings and the feelings of the viewer who does or
does not know her are yet other layers. Whatever was truly going through her mind at the moment I took that photo is probably lost. Erika, my director, found the image of my mother to be both youthful and frank. While she did not know or pick up on the maternal aspect of the image which I so readily embraced, we both found it to be an open, engaging look. When I asked my mother for her comments on the painting, youthful, frank, and open were not words she used to describe it---though she did note the warm coloration and mentioned it was “mommy like.” She did specifically say several times that it was not a “thoughtful” portrait, or one in which she was in “deep thought.” The close up nature of the image made my mom aware of the “irregularity or shaping of [her] face.” She wondered what she would look like if she lost twenty pounds. I was a little sad but not totally surprised to hear her insecurities come out in this way. My mom also said, “You’re my daughter...makes sense you would get a close up pose.” I agree that being close up is very intimate and personal. All of my paintings in this thesis are of family and are close-ups, which perhaps is indicative of my closeness and familiarity with each of my subjects. Yet, I have always been interested in the close up, whether it be of a face or any other subject I use in my work. It is very interesting how my mom’s perception had nothing to do with my thought process when I composed the piece. In fact, in this project, though I am generally interested in the close up, I specifically used it here to focus on the face, so I could examine its expression. But my mom’s thought does work very well on this other level.
Eva is the model for my second portrait. She is my boyfriend Garrett’s sister and she is newly fourteen years old. Eva looks much older and acts much more worldly than her age. To me it seems as if Eva is constantly acting, trying to be the cutest, the smartest, or the funniest. It’s part bratty and part charming. While I was photographing her, she was constantly interested in seeing the pictures, wanting, needing to know what she looked like. This information is essential to my personal view of her because her personality inserts itself into the way I perceive her expressions. Her brother likewise couldn’t help but draw on her overall personality when viewing my portrait of her. He said her smile was the one she uses when she’s trying to get away with something. That insight dovetails with Erika’s feeling that the portrait looks a little evil. To me, Eva’s smile is intentionally coy, exactly what she would wear to get away with mischievous deeds. I think the lighting and the arch of her plucked thin eyebrows enhance this impression. I think, however, it is an impression I would get even if she were in a different setting. Because ultimately it is the half smile and the sideways gaze, that while hard to define, would, I think, retain its mischievous quality. Eva herself described her expression in the painting as “making a face” and as wearing a “careless smirk.” She said she was paying attention to the camera but trying to act as if it was not there. This was a comment all of my subjects shared. Eva also said she was acting goofy when I photographed her, but the painting looks more serious. She agreed she looks a little evil, or “pissed,” as if someone was mean to her and she was making a “defensive face.” Further, she considered the light side of her face to look happy, but the dark side seemed to be, in her words, “doubting my happiness, like it’s jealous.” Eva
was very interested in the two faced aspect of the painting. She thought it looked as if she was going through a weird transition, from youth on the light side, to aged on the dark. Of the light side she said, “It’s the good side of my face,” but overall Eva said it seemed “like I did not try to look beautiful that day.” As I found with my mother, it is hard to get people to analyze their own image without becoming overly critical of their looks. On the one hand, Eva loves to have her picture taken, and she mentioned several times the painting itself was well done, but on the other hand, she had a need to check every photo for imperfection, and she hid the painting from her new boyfriend while I was interviewing her.

Garrett’s portrait was third. Like his sister, he was very interested in the intense contrast in the painting. He said, “I like to see the light and the dark in myself...I’m lit up in the darkness.” I think Garrett perceives himself as a being of the dark, as pensive and even depressive but also as having an inner light, a kindness and a gentleness, that he wants to share with the world. Maybe I’m twisting his words. I am certainly adding in my own seven years worth of impressions of him. However, without Paul Ekman’s FACS atlas, that’s almost all I have to go on. Garrett did say that the darkness of his portrait is indicative of his personality; whereas my mother’s portrait, for example, is lighter and is indicative of her personality. I wonder if my mom would agree. In further exploring how his portrait might be exhibiting his inner personality, Garrett also said the portrait is like a character, a version of himself that would look more comical and less real if the dark shadows were not present. He emphasized his feelings of awkwardness when recalling his photo being taken, he said, “I'm not photogenic” and “I have a very down attitude
towards myself.” He said he was posing a little, trying to look natural. Unlike his sister, Eva, who was obviously pulling faces while I photographed her, I did not feel like Garrett was doing that. In my painting of him, I felt especially proud of the adroitness with which I reproduced his likeness. Garrett himself said seeing it was like “looking into a mirror.” He noted the eyes and forehead as being particularly life like, while I noted the texture of the skin and the lips. He felt that because of my very personal familiarity with him I was able to bring to the outside what he carries within, that it made him more confident in himself when he looked at the painting. “That’s me,” he remarked. It is fascinating how all of that information was gained through a portrait. Granted we are both also working from a shared personal history. Erika’s comment on the painting was to note its “spooky” light. In my own head, I connect that to my aesthetic inclination toward chiaroscuro as well as the way the light pulls at Garrett’s contrasting vision of his personality as discussed above. However, Erika’s comment also speaks to the way each person involved in looking at a portrait can see the image and expression in a different way. That is exactly what I’m investigating in this thesis. Erika and I may both agree the lighting in the painting is dark, lending the subject’s expression an eerie quality. However, the ways each of us might find those qualities important to the subject and the portrait are necessarily different because Erika is lacking information about the subject that I have. That information, while I extrapolated some of it on my own, really had to first be put into words by the subject himself. That confusing, organic interplay between artist, subject, and viewer on top of the idea of ‘portrait as mirror’ is one of the reasons portraits are so compelling and mysterious.
My grammie Kandy, was my final portrait. Her reaction was one of the most self-disparaging of all my subjects. Her first and foremost thought was, “Boy am I old and jowly looking.” Recalling the day I photographed her, she described it as me pulling her into the sun, “I was thinking, what are you doing, you make me look good or else.” She was only succumbing to having her portrait painted because I requested it of her. My grandma is one of the most dearest people in my life. I chose to paint her because in high school I produced a monotype of a fellow classmate’s grandma, and I never got over the feeling that Grammie Kandy felt left out or less than. Drawing and painting older people is challenging. Their faces are softer, more lined, and therefore more difficult to capture just right. A young, smooth face is easier simply because the basic lines of it are more regular. That is why it has taken me until now to commit to painting my grandma. In her portrait, she and I both describe her smile as more of a smirk. It is a very different smirk from Eva’s, though. To me, Grammie’s is a tight quirk of lips that indicates discomfort as well as humor. As if she is both puzzled and amused by her situation. Grammie, noticing her whitest lock of hair, also told me she had once read an interview of Bonnie Raitt, where the musician spoke about the grey steak at the fore of her hair and how her mother called it a place an angel had touched. Grammie’s final comment on her portrait was to speak about the way she could see her German ancestry and could see within herself the faces of relatives, her Uncle Paul and even me, her granddaughter.

When I began this thesis, I suspected my subjects would feel discomfort at being viewed in such a close manner. I also suspected the dynamics of the triad of artist,
subject, and viewer would be convoluted and highly subjective. All of this I found to be true. What did surprise me to a certain extent was the high level of anxiety all of my subjects felt at being observed. I was also surprised to learn that, as in Paul Ekman’s work, facial expressions can be universally categorized. In my project I did not simply take photographs of faces and try to determine what exactly their expression was. Instead I used painting to attempt to meld exact likeness with artistic impression in order to explore the nuances presented by the triad of perspectives mentioned above. I narrowed my subject down to the face in order to focus my energy and avoid over-complicating my topic. It was also very important that I chose subjects whom I knew well. I wanted to be sure I had a wealth of information from which to pull that would be different from the perspectives of the subject and of other viewers. Had I used images of people that I do not know personally, this project would have been very different. In that it would have put me closer to the position of just another viewer, each painting offered confirmations and surprises to me. In some ways they re-established what I knew about each person, but in other ways, they brought to light new aspects of their personalities.

In terms of the portrait as a mirror of one’s own life or soul, I do project myself onto each of my portraits. I have imposed my own style and choices onto each of them, definitely influenced by how I perceive each of my subjects, but they remain my own choices nevertheless. I have also imposed my own attitudes towards the relationships I have with my subjects. These, came out as I tried to determine facial expression, and as I discussed each painting in this paper. My attitudes will surely be modified or altogether changed as time passes and that is part of the process. In the end, what remains is for
more people to view the portraits and come to their own conclusions, to create brand new or deepen old relationships between the portraits and themselves.
Works Cited


