

WHAT CAN A FACE DO?

NOTES ON THE WORK OF THE PORTRAITIST
ELIZABETH PEYTON

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ABSTRACT

This article acts as a commentary on the portraits created by the American artist Elizabeth Peyton since the early 1990s. It focuses on Peyton's numerous disclosures on her own work and correlates these introspections with an analysis of the paintings themselves, insisting on the inherent dynamics of this specific genre. It transpires that Peyton's belief in the supposed legibility of the face, her faith in physiognomics is foiled by the resulting work itself. Rather than exposing their subjects, her portraits rather seem to protect them and the act of making art appears to succeed in its claim to allow pure painting to emerge.

KEYWORDS

Portraiture; contemporary painting; figurative painting; faces; physiognomy; Elizabeth Peyton.

Clement Greenberg: "In today's world, it's impossible to paint a face."

Willem de Kooning: "That's right. And it's impossible not to."

At the beginning of the 1990s – in the summer of 1990, to be precise – Elizabeth Peyton resolved to confine herself in future to making pictures of people – a decision certainly not taken with an eye to mainstream approval.¹ Painting, especially figurative painting, was still regarded as dead, especially in New York, the city that set the tone of contemporary art and where Peyton had studied, a few years previously, at the School of Visual Arts. And although *Pop Art* had dealt with the human face, Peyton's attitude differs from it in so far as she deliberately referred to the academic tradition of portraiture. She herself connected the decision to the moment, which seemed almost outside time, when she read a biography of Napoleon by the British writer Vincent Cronin, published in 1971 with a cover illustration that featured a portrait of Napoleon by the French painter Félix Philippoteaux from 1835. This impelled her to translate the painting into a charcoal drawing, which she subsequently chose to list as the first item in her hypothetical catalogue raisonné.²

Cronin's biography, though historically accurate and based on reliable sources, is an uninhibitedly subjective account of Napoleon's life, depicting him not as the notoriously reckless and ruthless general, but rather as a man of character, a true *citoyen*, emphasizing his role as a progressive reformer and creator of the *Code civil*, and highlighting his personal qualities as an ardent lover who also showed great affection and concern for his family. The overall intention is to portray Napoleon as what the author called "a living, breathing man". Peyton was doubtless impressed not only by the cover portrait, showing Bonaparte in 1792 in the uniform of a lieutenant-colonel of the Corsican national guard, but also by her experience of reading the biography, which is brilliantly written and unashamedly biased in its subject's favor.

Personal sympathy was to remain the driving force of Peyton's subsequent work in making pictures of people. Ronald Jones accordingly identified reverence and unbridled hero-worship as Peyton's reasons for choosing her models, recalling her statement, during a studio visit, that she never painted anyone she didn't admire. To his question "Is that all?" she replied, "That's all."³ She also said that, while reading Cronin's six-hundred-page paean to the self-styled Emperor of Peace, she began for the first time to think about how people make

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Editorial note: The author has made the decision to publish this essay without illustrations. He understands it as a written commentary on the many widely available and, moreover, digitally accessible works by Elizabeth Peyton.

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See *Elizabeth Peyton*. Hans Ulrich Obrist in *Conversation with Elizabeth Peyton* (exh. cat. Paris, Gagosian Gallery), Paris 2012, 22 et seq. Elizabeth Peyton actually thought that her template was a work by Antoine-Jean Gros, but in fact it is a painting by Félix Philippoteaux, conserved in the Château de Versailles.

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Ronald Jones, *Revolt from Reason*, in: *Elizabeth Peyton* (exh. cat. Hamburg, Deichtorhallen), ed. by Felix Zdenek, Ostfildern 2001, 11–22, here 15.

history, how they literally embody their time, and in particular how it shows in their faces.⁴

It is essential to remain aware of this inaugural moment in Peyton's work, of which she herself has repeatedly spoken. In all the portraits made over the following thirty years, the defining constants will be respect and veneration for her sitters, and the conviction that the faces of her protagonists permit the drawing of conclusions about their character, or, as she says, their "soul"⁵ And to her, there is no difference in kind, but only in degree, in working from a painting, a photograph, or from life, with a model posing directly in front of her. As a portraitist, Elizabeth Peyton has contributed, perhaps more effectively than others, to the rehabilitation of the genre, a process that has now reached its conclusion. Her portraits undeniably possess a great power of aesthetic suggestion and have a characteristic style that is instantly recognizable, even in her earliest works, challenging the viewer to think about the expressive potential of the human face. This is all the more necessary in a world that, even before the inflationary spread of the selfie, was fast becoming what the cultural historian Thomas Macho has called a "facial society", capable of translating every type of content, every message, into the formula of a human face; a society that is compelled, especially in its treatment of public personalities, to create an endless succession of new faces, since the face has become a model, a point of reference, at once a fantasy and an ideal distributed through the media.⁶ Among contemporary artists, moreover, one notices a newly intensified awareness of individuality, whose most genuine expression is assumed to be found in the face.

Peyton's models are taken from the past and present alike, and from every realm of society, including politics, music, and the art world. In some cases, the artist finds her subjects in her private circle of friends, but she often paints celebrities, as embodiments of a type of person, the man – or woman – of action, that for her holds a positively magical fascination. In an interview with Marc Christoph Wagner, recorded in 2013 for the Louisiana Channel on YouTube, Peyton declares, with a slightly Nietzschean undertone: "I get excited by people who make things [...] I find people who make things very heroic."⁷ Her assumption is that this kind of drive and energy is reflected in the faces of those concerned, a notion for which Honoré de Balzac, the great exponent of French realism, is her stated source:

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See Calvin Tomkins, *The Artist of the Portrait. The Deliverance of Elizabeth Peyton*, in: *The New Yorker*, Profiles, September 29, 2008 (first printed October 6, 2008), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/10/06/the-artist-of-the-portrait> (20.05.2021).

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Elizabeth Peyton. Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation, 32.

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Thomas Macho, *Vorbilder*, Munich 2011. See also *Das Gesicht. Bilder, Medien, Formate* (exh. cat. Dresden, Hygiene-Museum), ed. by Sigrid Weigel, Göttingen 2017.

⁷
Elizabeth Peyton, *Faces Contain Their Time*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Hw1l1_j2vE (20.05.2021).

I was thinking a lot about how Balzac believed in Johann Caspar Lavater, who thought that you could see everything about a person from the lines on their face [...]. And I think that a person, what they look like, reveals a lot about them.⁸

This remark, casually made in an interview in 2012, went surprisingly unnoticed at the time, but deserves further scrutiny.

The Swiss Reformed theologian and writer Johann Caspar Lavater was the author of the treatise *Physiognomic Fragments for the Promotion of Human Understanding and Human Love*, published from 1775 to 1778 in Leipzig and Winterthur. This widely read work is associated with the attempt to grasp human individuality as a self-identical core of being that reproduces its immutable essence in the external, “solid” parts of the body and can therefore be read by other individuals as a kind of natural language. Lavater’s assumption of a fixed relationship between an interior and an exterior self, and the resultant practice of interpretation, deriving conclusions about human character from physical appearance, enjoyed great popularity, especially in art and literature. Which, it must be said, does not make the theory any more valid, but the question of Lavater’s impact on art would repay systematic investigation. His contemporaries already advised caution. The great experimental physicist and still greater aphorist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, for example, who spoke of the human face as “the most entertaining surface on earth”, also warned: “We hourly judge from the face and hourly err.”⁹ Physiognomics does indeed suggest, put simply, that a criminal can be identified by his unprepossessing facial features, whereas a woman with the face of an angel could commit cold-blooded murder without incurring the least suspicion. And a true creative genius would never have the mundane appearance of an office worker, like the German modernist writer Arno Schmidt. Lavater’s pseudo-science does indeed contain hidden dangers, which Lichtenberg succinctly expressed, declaring:

If physiognomics ever becomes what Lavater hopes it will be, then we will begin to hang children before they commit the crimes that deserve the gallows. [...] A physiognomic auto da fé.¹⁰

And indeed, Lavater’s characterological analysis of facial features continued, at least in part, to influence the Nazi theories of “racial hygiene” which belongs, as we know, to the nocturnal side of the Enlightenment.¹¹

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Elizabeth Peyton. Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation, 27.

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Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, hrsg. und komm. von Wolfgang Promies, Bd. 1: *Sudelbücher I*, München 1968, Sudelbuch F, Nr. 88.

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Ibid., Sudelbuch J, Nr. 532.

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Richard T. Gray, *About Face. German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*, Detroit 2004.

Peyton's faith in physiognomics must therefore appear disconcerting – given, especially, that her work speaks a quite different language and positively opposes this kind of applied physiognomic phenomenology. For one thing, where Peyton takes her models from photographs or existing paintings, she is no less distanced from their supposed “essence” than these models are from themselves. In her portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, for example, the British court photographer Cecil Beaton is interposed between the subject and the artist. In the first instance, therefore, the portrayal is concerned more with the rules of court protocol and decorum, and with Beaton's notorious fondness for glamour, than with the “soul”, however this is defined, of the person depicted. And in Peyton's further portrait of Napoleon, painted in 2005, the central concern is with the painterly appropriation of Jacques-Louis David's unfinished picture *Le Général Bonaparte* from 1798, an image made for propaganda purposes of the hero of the campaign in Italy; here, therefore, Peyton is confronted more with the practices of political iconography than with the subject's inward state, a topic that neither Napoleon himself nor David would have considered relevant in a painting intended to serve a political agenda. Strikingly, however, she transforms the soldier in David's picture, thrusting his chin forward in an expression of grim resolution, into a pensive, effeminate youth with his head tilted slightly to one side. One can only guess as to whether this is a leftover from Peyton's reading of Cronin, who maintains that Napoleon as a young cadet exhibited homosexual tendencies that he later rigorously suppressed.

At all events, it is the case that Peyton looks eagerly for traces of vulnerability in the faces of her heroes and heroines, or inscribes the traces herself in the portraits. In the above-mentioned interview for the Louisiana Channel, she also affirms: “The better the artist, the more vulnerable they are making themselves.”¹² There is no suggestion of this in David's portrait, but in Peyton's interpretation it becomes the picture's central theme. This is a form of vulnerability that resists its iconically prescribed role and claims the right to individuality, which also, ultimately, involves a right to solitude. Thus the other protagonists of Peyton's portraits fail to match the ideal of the maker and doer, the person defined by action. No one is “acting” here, and only rarely does the subject so much as glance at the beholder. The youthfulness of most of the figures reinforces the impression that the phase of their life when their endeavors or accomplishments are the subject of public attention has yet to begin – and that Peyton regards the picture surface as the incubator of a promise, an anticipation of things to come.

Commentators have noticed, furthermore, that her sitters appear markedly androgynous. They often have a lascivious air or seem withdrawn, as in the case of the portraits of *Sid Vicious* (1998), *Piotr on the Couch* (1996) or *Kurt Cobain* (1995). Peyton's pictures of people

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Peyton, Faces Contain Their Time.

therefore appear as classic figurations of “absorption”, as described by the art historian Michael Fried: a state of rapt attention, of being completely occupied and engrossed, that deliberately excludes the beholder and thereby establishes the enduring and timeless presence of the picture which, in Fried’s account, is the defining condition of artistic achievement.¹³

In Peyton’s technique, too, the figure tends to be paraphrased or hinted at, rather than dramatized, but without impairment of its charismatic presence. Boris Pofalla has appropriately emphasized Peyton’s “unmistakable flatness”, the “tentative, tactile element” in her painting: her colors seem to caress the canvas, never obscuring it completely, so that they always appear “fresh, as if allowing scope for the subjects to breathe underneath them”.¹⁴ Only rarely does she create smooth, closed surfaces, and the depiction of the skin is often left to the canvas itself.¹⁵ But in the absence of flesh tones and facial color, the flesh itself disappears – as if Peyton were denying incarnation to her models in the picture, or as if they themselves were refusing it. And her approach to resemblance, a central, or even essential, category of any portrait, is unusual. The faces of her personalities correspond only very approximately to our own visual memories of the person depicted. However, the models all seem to resemble one another, transcending the boundaries of gender. The filigree features, the generally high cheekbones, the often similar treatment of the eyes: Peyton uses facial ciphers to place her models in the same family tree, in which she also locates herself. “I’m part of their lineage”,¹⁶ she says. Instead of recreating their empirical appearance, which has been canonized to the point of personal unrecognizability by endless public reproduction, she deliberately obscures them with a kind of abstract mask – in an operation similar to what Thomas Macho calls “defacing”, overpainting or defamiliarizing facial images whose omnipresence has left them worn and frayed, with the aim of preserving or restoring their individuality.¹⁷ This “masking” is given a new twist when Peyton portrays opera singers: for example, Jonas Kaufmann in *Werther*, from 2014. Here she is confronted with a role, from the powerhouse of operatic emotions, behind which the singer, disguised by costume and makeup, retreats as an individual

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Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago 1990.

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Boris Pofalla, *Porträt als Prozess – Elizabeth Peyton und die Kunst, Menschen zu malen*, in: *Elizabeth Peyton* (exh. cat. Berlin, Boros Collection), Berlin 2016, 34.

15

Ibid., 37.

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Elizabeth Peyton. Hans Ulrich Obrist in *Conversation*, 27.

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Macho, *Vorbilder*, 291–316. On the public exposure through the media of Peyton’s models, and their retranslation into intimate small formats, see also the afterword by Theodora Vischer in *Elizabeth Peyton* (exh. cat. Basel, Museum für Gegenwartskunst and Wolfsburg, Kunstmuseum), Basel 1998, n. p.

to immerse himself completely in acting out, literally, the range of dramatic possibilities at his disposal.¹⁸

Peyton also emphasizes the uniqueness of the human face in her use of the technique of monotype, for example in her self-portrait *Live to Ride (Two)*, from 2003. Monotype, a process that came back into fashion in the late nineteenth century, involves applying paint to a glass or metal surface that is then pressed, while the color is still damp, onto the paper support. The resultant work is neither a painting nor a print in the conventional sense, but a hybrid that can never be exactly replicated.¹⁹

An accentuation of individuality is also to be found in works such as *Actaeon, Justin Bieber and Grey Roses* from 2010/11 where Peyton supplements the portrait with props and still-life elements, thereby replacing physiognomics with “pathognomics”, a term employed by Lichtenberg to denote the characterization of a person not only through their bone structure but also in terms of their *habitus* or general manner of life, down to the details of clothing and interior furnishings.²⁰ In *The Solemn Entry of Louis XIV 1667*, painted in 2016 after the picture by Adam Frans van der Meulen, the faces of the king and his entourage riding into the town of Arras are subordinated, in fact, to the general paraphernalia of uniforms and horses, and to sheer *peinture*.

The famous exchange between Clement Greenberg and Willem de Kooning quoted at the beginning of this essay revolves around the justification for figurative art and the possibility of portraiture. Greenberg calls on the artist to abandon the representation of the human face and throw off the constraints of literary narrative in order to achieve true autonomy. De Kooning agrees with the critic in principle, but in denying the possibility of not painting the face, acknowledges a fundamental need to continue to reflect, as an artist, on the most communicative part of the human body. Elizabeth Peyton’s portraits appear like the synthesis of this paradox, a synthesis that preserves from betrayal the narrative element of individuality found in every face, and shows how pure painting can thereby emerge.

Even though Peyton’s work today goes far beyond the genre of portraiture, she still operates in this field – in 2019 she was honored with a solo show in London’s National Portrait Gallery, her works being interspersed throughout the Museum’s historical collections.²¹ On this occasion her virtuosic resort to the pictorial tradition

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See, on this aspect of Peyton’s work, Kirsty Bell, Peyton after Peyton. On Reality and Archetype, in: *Elizabeth Peyton. Dark Incandescence*, New York 2017, 9–19, especially 15–17.

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Jonas Beyer, *Zwischen Zeichnung und Druck. Edgar Degas und die Wiederentdeckung der Monotypie im 19. Jahrhundert*, Munich/Paderborn 2014.

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Wolfram Groddeck and Ulrich Stadler (eds.), *Physiognomie und Pathognomie. Zur literarischen Darstellung von Individualität*, Berlin/New York 1994.

21

Elizabeth Peyton. Aire and Angels (exh. cat. London, National Portrait Gallery), ed. by Lucy Dahlsen, London 2019.

of this specific genre, her sovereign appropriation and variation of its inherent rules – be it the Tudor paintings or those of the Victorian era – became evident. What is more, her pictures introduced a very contemporary dimension of the face into the historical context. The presumptuousness, the assuredness, the self-certitude that for centuries seemed to dominate this particular form of appearance of human beings was oddly shattered, it became transmuted. As in the Renaissance, when the increasing number of portraits, the pictorial insistence on individuality – which for too long had been judged, according to Jacob Burckhardt, as the awakening of the modern self – was in fact nothing but a reflex responding to its own imperilment, the inflationary presence of the face in social media and elsewhere today is at once self-assertion, self-assurance and the expression of a fear of loss.

In her tendency to portray “people of action”, Peyton may not even be fully aware that, while she is engaged in the act of making art, the latter also does something to her. And so, what one learns by looking at her portraits is that painting, precisely in the genre in which it exposes and reveals the most, can protect and conceal at the same time.

Translation from German: John Ormrod

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