Painting Our Portraits

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The people that surround me have inspired the majority of my artwork. During high school, much of my work consisted of family and self-portraits. My family portraits were often set in a domestic environment; fitting, because it was the space that I constantly saw them in. How I portrayed my family members, whether by their physical activity, spatial relationship to one another, or even their facial expression, was symbolic of my personal perception of them. Though they often asked me to make them look thinner, younger, or beautiful, I always prided myself on my response: “I paint what I see.”

Yet when I came to college I began to question the mentality of painting what I saw. How important was an achievement of likeness? How important were the requests and opinions of my models? These are people that I love and I care about their opinions, but in my artwork, how mindful should I be of their feelings? In my self portraits, I aimed to be visually honest; I never tried to depict myself as more or less than what I saw. Should my mentality about making portraits of others be different than my self-portraits?

These questions became particularly important when I was asked during my sophomore year of college to paint a commissioned portrait. My patron requested a portrait of his wife as a surprise for her and I was given photographs of my subject taken in gardens on sunny days to use as reference.
No longer was I able to be entirely selfish about my portrait painting. Here I was being asked to depict someone else’s loved one and I became confused about how to do it. Should I continue to “paint what I see,” or should I assume that his vision of my creation would be a slightly idealized version of his wife? I felt not only pressure to make a “pretty painting” but pressure to make a “pretty person.” If I did not depict her in all her beauty and glory, would my portrait be shunned?

These experiences as a painter were some of the inspiration for my Honors Capstone Project. My project focuses on portrait painting: specifically the difference in the emotional and the stylistic approach between a self-portrait and a portrait of another person. I will be researching the historical aspect of this genre of painting; how it has developed from the Renaissance to the modern age as an art form. I will also be creating my own body of work: a series of both self-portraits and portraits of friends. Through these paintings and drawings I will be investigating how an artist approaches the portrait and the importance of the relationship between the sitter and the artist.

Portraits are traditionally a historically based art form. Portrait popularity rose during the 15th century because of an interest from the patrons. At first it was common for patrons to be depicted as characters within large scale religious narratives. By placing themselves among holy figures, they were assumed by the viewer to be wealthy and important citizens. Eventually, singular portraits became popular. Patrons commissioned portraits of
themselves, their wives, even their children, always with the goal to capture 
the subject in his ideal state of being. Many aspects of these portraits are 
significant; style; settings; wardrobe, and dimensions of the canvas. These 
aspects allude to the time period it was created, the importance of the sitter, 
the reason for the commission, and even the attitude of the artist.

By the 18th century, portraiture was perhaps at the height of its 
popularity. More and more European families were gaining wealth and 
commissioning portraits of family members as a way to exhibit their stature. 
For those patrons who could not afford large canvases, miniature portraits 
became popular. During Regency England, these tiny paintings, some small 
enough to be worn as jewelry, were either hung in homes for visitors to 
admire, or used as private keepsakes.

With the invention of photography in the 19th century, portraiture 
faced its greatest test of endurance. Critics had for a while considered the 
popularity of portraits to be detrimental to art; they saw artists as merely 
serving their patrons rather than making creative works of art. And when 
photography was introduced, it threatened portraiture as a means of creating a likeness.

Yet instead of portraiture as an art form dying out, it was freed from 
the constraints of factual representation. Artists were now able to experiment 
with color and style. They could emotionally distance themselves from the 
sitter, using their subject almost as an object. Portraits left behind the 
necessity of a physical likeness, and focused on emotional and psychological
concepts about humanity. They no longer worried about depicting wealth and stature, but strived to show the essence of their subjects.

It is the modern view of portraiture that interests me most. Because I am an observational artist I do consider physical likeness as mildly important (within my own work). However, I believe that personality and human relationships are far more important. It is this that I wish to focus on within my own work.

When I began working on the studio component of this project I was studying abroad in Italy. I was surrounded by beautiful landscapes, architecture, and artwork, but was struggling with adjusting to another culture. My relationships with my roommates and closest friends in Italy were hugely important during my experience abroad. They served as a reassuring constant through all of the cultural changes I was experiencing. In a sense, they became my family while abroad and I wanted to show that level of closeness through a series of portraits depicting each of them.

Unlike my family portraits, it would not be appropriate to be portraying my subjects in domestic settings to show the concept of family ties. Yet I wanted to portray an intense intimacy that reflected my relationship with them. Perhaps the perfect way to achieve this was to refer to my knowledge of miniature portraits. In contrast to Regency era miniatures, mine would show intimacy between the sitter and the artist rather than the sitter and the work’s recipient. The smallest size applied to the person I was closest with. Not only did I strive to express intimacy by the size of the work, but also by
giving my subjects a sentimental pose.

My most successful miniature portrait was *Dave* (Fig. 1), a portrait of David Hannon. I achieved my goal but also, through his pose and facial expression, reflected Dave’s personality. My two portraits of Gwendolyn Leggett, *Gwen III* (Fig. 2) and *Gwen IV* (Cat. 1), had perhaps the most interesting results. Both miniatures look like a combination of the two of us. I like to think that this was a subconscious effort to express my feeling closest to her while abroad.

I created six of these miniature paintings and drawings (Cat. 2-4), but upon my return to the United States, I lost interest in creating such small works. Perhaps it was because I no longer needed to rely on those relationships now that I was back in my own country. Though miniatures perfectly display intimacy, they only hold the viewer’s attention for a limited amount of time. Within larger works there literally is more to look at and a greater ability to have a complex work of art.
Still interested in the relationship between the artist and the sitter, I thought of my experiences painting my family and the commissioned portrait. I began to contemplate the difference between a commissioned portrait and one solely constructed by the artist. How does an artist’s depiction of someone else differ when they have all of the control in comparison to when the patron makes some of the decisions? How much of their artistic presence remains in the work? If a patron is involved, how much input does the artist allow from the patron? If no patron is involved, does the artist still have responsibilities in portraying some aspect of dignity, idealism, or even beauty in their subject?

To answer these questions, I decided to divide my portraits of others into two categories: those where I made all of the decisions and those where I allowed my sitters to act as artificial patrons. In these faux-commissioned portraits, I asked a series of questions of my sitter before the work was created. They were allowed to request the size of the work, amount of the body shown, the aspect of themselves depicted (personality, intelligence, emotion, physical appearance, etc.), setting, props, an ideal location for the work to be hung once completed (gallery, home, bedroom, etc.), and even some aspects of artistic style. With both types of portraits, I took note of my models’ reactions and comments on the work: how they felt as the sitter and how they reacted when they eventually viewed the work in its final state.

My first faux-patron would be Gwen. She had no preference for the size of the work but requested: her whole body to visible; the pose to be
sitting, perhaps reading a book; natural lighting; and the style to be more realistic, she specifically mentioned a style similar to that of Johannes Vermeer. At the same time, she requested her vibrant and energetic personality to be evident in the work. My first reaction to these requests was that they were contradictory. Vermeer’s work is very quiet and calm. The colors are subdued and his figures seem to be captured in a moment of solitude. If she wanted to be painted reading with natural lighting in the style of Vermeer, it would be almost impossible for me to depict her vibrancy and energy. After this was explained to her, Gwen made it clear that her personality was the most important thing that she wanted to be shown in the work.

Together we compromised; she would be sitting, but looking like she was in a conversation with her hands in motion (this would allow me to show her as energetic while still have her comfortable while posing). Also, I would use brighter, more vibrant colors, but have her be set in a large space. While I
attempted to achieve all of these aspects in my painting, I think as a work it is unimpressive (Fig. 3). I am pleased with how Gwen came out on the canvas. Her pose and the colors used to paint her successfully portray her personality. However, the interior space that surrounds her doesn’t work in conjunction with this. It is too differently painted from her figure, and is too large of a space, causing her to get lost within it. Not too surprisingly, Gwen agreed with this sentiment.

![Fig. 4](image)

My next attempt at a faux-commissioned portrait was a painting of Lindsey Smith (Fig. 4). She was very specific in her requests: she asked to be painted slightly larger than life; for just the upper body to be shown, including her arms; the specific type of chair she would be sitting in; and her unique and colorful character to be portrayed. She requested the painting be similar to the work of Lucian Freud, which wouldn’t be difficult because my style is similar enough to his already. The true challenge that she presented me with was to have herself be set in the landscape surrounding her home. Whenever
possible, I paint my subjects from life, and this last request would obligate me
to work from a photograph. Though I have often painted landscapes, I have
had little experience putting the figure out of an interior setting, so this would
be new territory for me. The painting of Lindsey was far more successful than
my larger portrait of Gwen. Here her requests better suited my own painting
sensibility. And though I struggled with the background in her portrait, both
Lindsey and I ended up liking the final outcome.

While making both of these faux-commissioned portraits, I continued
to struggle with my idea of likeness. Yes I wanted them to be recognizable,
but I was mainly concerned with portraying a likeness to their personality.
Because these were two people that I care very much about, I felt obligated to
depict how I saw them; I wanted it to be clear who these two people were both
physically and characteristically. Though I felt a personal pressure to achieve
this, it was not until my final faux-commissioned portrait of Mallory Rubin
(Fig. 5) that I felt external pressure to achieve likeness.

Unlike my previous two “patrons,” Mallory is not a visual artist. So
when I presented her with my list of questions, she was confused as to how to
respond. Rather than having her make very specific demands, we had a
discussion of the general way she would like to be portrayed: as an intelligent
woman, sitting and reading a book. This experience was quite different, not
only because I was painting a non-artist, but also our non-artist roommates
were constantly watching me. Every time someone would enter the room to
check our progress, Mallory would demand their opinion on the painting. The
several times that I showed it to her in-progress she responded with “bizarre.”

For my artist friends, acting as a fellow artist’s model is common practice.

For Mallory it was a totally new experience and the awkwardness that she felt,
I in turn felt while I was painting her.

Fig. 5

After the work was finished, Mallory, though adamant that she liked
the work, commented that she looked “so serious” and she felt that it didn’t
really look like her. I however, felt very pleased with the work. I was
successful in making her look intelligent (which was important to her) and the
painting gives the impression of a quiet, intimate moment (a reflection of my
relationship with her). During the painting process I made several
adjustments to the work based on her requests, but after a certain point, I
realized that the work was complete. I used my artistic intuition to determine
the completion rather than worry about a perfect likeness which was
Mallory’s prerogative.
I think that these faux-commissioned works were a good exploration of portraiture. Artists sometimes have to cater to a patron’s desires and aesthetic sensibilities, but they never allow total loss of control. Concern for my sitter’s needs was certainly heightened and I was very conscious of their reactions to my paintings. However, after completing three of these works I wanted to limit the amount of external decision-making.

The next series of portraits that I embarked on allowed no input from my subjects. I would serve as the sole creative source behind the work. My goal would be to try to depict how I personally saw each person. I would not attempt severe experimentation with style, paint application, or dramatic lighting. Nor would I be putting my subjects in specific settings like I had for my family portraits. All I wanted to do was to show how I saw and felt about each person.

I created three works that were purely selfish in motivation: a painting again of Gwen; one of Allison Kostka; and a drawing of Eleanor Brown. For
each person I aimed to depict a specific part of their personality that I thought important. In all of them I cropped the majority of the background out, putting all of the focus on the figure. I did not want these works to be misinterpreted as narratives; I wanted them to be focused. _Gwen VI_ (Cat. 5) uses bright colors to show a vivacity and energy I wanted to describe in Gwen. My portrait of Allison (Fig. 6) I wanted to be mellower. Using warmer hues and a somber expression I was able to depict her maturity and quietness. For Eleanor’s portrait (Fig. 7), I had her wearing a retro dress and sitting with her hands in her lap, depicting her quirky yet relaxed character. With these portraits I didn’t care for props or symbols or settings, I cared only for an expression of character.

Self-portraits are fundamentally different than portraits not of the artist. Self-portraits were rarely commissioned and therefore often more important within a painter’s body of work. Historically, they have been used as an object, as symbols of mortality, as a way of demonstrating skill, as an expression of mental state, and as a way of making the artist immortal. Artists like Rembrandt and Louis Corinth are known for creating many self-portraits as a way to show progression of time and change.

To begin my studio exploration of self-portraiture I used the concept of using myself as an object. I used my reflected image strictly as a subject that essentially only changed through the style with which I depicted it. I created a series of self-portraits (Cat. 6-10) that used the repetition of an image as a means of experimenting with painting as a visual language. I was
able to explore how I used the paint through texture and color, at the same time paying little attention to the idea of the “self.” I liked the idea that my image was going through a visual identity crisis just as I was going through an artistic crisis.

After I became more confident in the direction I wished to go as a painter, my self-portraits changed. They still experimented with the ideas behind a portrait, but became more concerned with the psychological and emotional aspect of the work. My techniques changed little, but I played more with positioning, composition, and lighting to achieve a more intriguing work of art.

![Fig. 8](image)

I decided to make a drastic change. Before, my image had little changed in size, position, or viewpoint. With *From Behind* (Fig. 8) I created a self-portrait where my face was completely hidden; my back was facing the viewer. What is so successful about this painting is that it has a level of
intrigue that was lacking from my other self-portraits. I was able to make a recognizable portrait with no face at all. And with this dramatic pose, more questions are asked by the viewer about why this figure is turned away. I enjoy that ambiguity.

Though this painting was an artistic breakthrough, I could not continue to paint the remainder of my self-portraits from the same viewpoint. I would have to find a way to achieve the same degree of intrigue using the face. One solution was *Turning Green* (Fig. 9), where I kept the figure turned away from the viewer, but allowed a sliver of the face to be seen. Two others were *Self in the Dark I* (Fig. 10), and *Self in the Dark II* (Cat. 11). With these works I again had a face-front pose but used harsh artificial lighting as a means of creating mystery.

In each of my self-portraits one thing was absolutely true. I approached all of them in a completely different manner from the way I approached my portraits of others. The self-portraits were unconcerned with
capturing a likeness of physical appearance or of my personal character. I felt no obligation to “do myself justice.” I treated my reflection as an artistic object, one that I could represent with no hesitation and no worries about anything other than my goal as an artist. I did not need to worry about my subject’s desired outcome because we had the same goal. In this instance there was total trust between the artist and the sitter.

Through these painting experiences I learned a great deal about expectations and possibilities within portrait painting. Atmosphere, personality, and expectations of both the sitter and the artist are all important to the outcome of the work. With each painting there can be a different goal to achieve: physical likeness, depiction of a person’s character, and development of the painter’s artwork. It is perfectly acceptable to approach each painting differently. Within my own body of work I still find portraits to be compelling and I see myself continuing to create them.

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1 Rubin, Mallory. Personal Interview. 6 Nov. 2007
2 Rubin, Mallory. Personal Interview. 6 Nov. 2007