

People Watching: Then and Now

September 24, 2017 - January 14, 2018

From ancient times to the present, portraiture has represented the people of its day and the complex social, political and cultural moments in which each subject and artist lived. Through an investigation of historical portraits, we can speculate on the intention of the artist, the identity of the sitter, and the narrative attached to the history of art and, more generally, history. These portraits remain relevant today not only as valuable vestiges of the past that offer insight into these historical periods, but also because the concepts and aesthetic conventions of these artworks are used by artists today as reference and source material to respond to the “now.”

Portraiture is adaptable. And the modification of the genre over time is evident in **People Watching**. While not comprehensive in its chronological or geographical scope, **People Watching** brings together paintings and sculpture from FAM's collection—principally ancient busts, Western paintings from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, and African sculptures—with artworks by thirteen contemporary artists from New England to explore the way that observation and representation of the human subject has shifted over time. For instance, the portrait's function as a symbol of imperial aspirations, status and remembrance for centuries shifted to a critical exploration of the genre itself that was ushered in with the rise of modern art in the late nineteenth century. By the years following World War II, Western portraiture had also become less widespread as abstraction rose and concern with the figure took precedence over the rendering of a specific likeness. Still, portraiture has persisted and the age-old genre and its concern with identity and memory has become intertwined with explorations of style, the gaze, and, in more recent years, a greater preoccupation with the way that looking has changed in response to technology and social media. The artworks of Philip Brou, Susan White Brown, Caleb Cole, Nayda Cuevas, Leslie Graff, Lavaughan Jenkins, Lucy Kim, Steve Locke, Ross Normandin, David Prifti, Kate Russo, Ann Strassman, and Tabitha Vevers reveal or obscure recognizable features of their subjects to varying degrees. Their works invite us to ponder how we, as watchers, come to identify a person.

People Watching thus explores three central themes: portable portraiture, degrees of likeness in found and cast objects of subjects, and looking itself as an integral part of how we represent ourselves and others. As contemporary viewers, we are predisposed to “people watch” to different ends. As contemporary creators of selfies or snapshots of others, and consumers of social media, we people watch; we scan individuals' appearances for visual cues, and depending on one's predilection for narrative, craft stories. The title of the exhibition is thus an observation and an invitation to “people watch” within FAM's galleries, as well as to ponder the changing considerations of the study of a subject and the representations of people then and now.

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