

Review of the Exhibition *The Poetics of Portraiture: From the 16th to the 21st Century*,  
The William Benton Museum of Art

Features *Dark Sun #18*

An Exciting Exhibition At UConn Celebrates Five Centuries Of Portraiture



TWO PORTRAITS in the William Benton Museum of Art's exhibition are Stephen Marc's "Untitled," above, a digital montage print, and Barbara Jaffe's "Dark Sun #18," a photograph. The exhibition, "The Poetics of Portraiture," opens Sunday.

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Despite its solid academic grounding, the portrait exhibition at the William Benton Museum of Art is a visual riot, a big, rambling variety show packed with show-stopping images.

With its more than 80 paintings, drawings, sculptures and photographs, "The Poetics of Portraiture: From the 16th to the 21st Century" fills the Benton's walls with ample proof of Curator Thomas Bruhn's central claim for his show. "Portraiture," Bruhn says, "is never just skin deep."

And this is true, he adds, even when works in the show — such as Harriet Cassin-Silver's celebrated hologram study of the way of all flesh — seem to be all about skin and nothing but skin.

Packed with pieces by big-name artists — such as modern superstars as Andy Warhol, Chuck Close and Cindy Sherman and such golden oldies as Rembrandt, Peale and Mary Cassatt — the exhibition opens Sunday and runs through Aug. 12 at the Benton on the University of Connecticut campus at Storrs.

Two Show Stoppers

For showstoppers, the exhibition features two cultural and historical bookend pieces separated not just by centuries but also by light-years in artistic intent, attitude and execution.

One bookend is Cassin-Silver's two fleshy holograms, illuminated portraits with high-wattage impact. The other is a striking 16th-century oil portrait, "Noblewoman and Child," attributed to the Spanish court painter Alonso Sanchez Coello (1531-1588).

"Noblewoman and Child" is the embodiment of traditional portraiture, which reveals its subject's personality and status by depicting her luxurious worldly goods and fine surroundings. The noblewoman's morality and literacy are shown by her finger marking a place in her missal. The mother and child represent the family values of the Spanish ruling class in the mid-to-late 16th century. Even the dog in a classical portrait like this is a symbol of a virtue — in this case, fidelity.

One of the crown jewels in the Benton's permanent collection, the painting is the oldest and most beautiful work in the show.

Radically different in many ways are Cassin-Silver's holograms, light-powered portraits that all but make the image flesh.

"Venus of Willendorf 1961" is a powerful homage to the power and glory of obesity and the female body. It may even be, at least in some part, an ode to the aging process, a topic avoided like the Black Death by most artists.

More than anything, Cassin-Silver's hologram is a call for the acceptance of the dignity and

# More Than Skin Deep

beauty of all bodies, thin or obese. Her Venus is a protest against the tyrannical sexist standards of "beauty" and what the male gaze has decreed as the proper girth, contour and poundage for female flesh.

The Venus rising in this portrait seems about to shout out, "I am who I am and proud of it."

Cassin-Silver's portrait was inspired by the Venus of Willendorf, an 11-centimeter Stone Age icon that was discovered in 1908 in an archaeological dig near the Austrian town of Willendorf. The palm-sized figurine is in the collection of the Vienna Natural History Museum.



body as a vulnerable, even rather painful piece of work in a portrait more horrorgram than hologram.

Ghostly And Ghastly

As if he's shy or overly sensitive, Ian, despite his dire situation, doesn't look you in the eye. It's ghostly, ghastly. The deathlike ambience is morbidly accentuated by the hologram's lighting effect. All it lacks is the smell of formaldehyde to give it the final whiff of a bizarre, maybe even kinky autopsy in progress.

"It's not a novelty," insists Salvatore Scalora, director of the Benton. "It's in an art museum, done by an artist who's trying to create an artistic idea in this medium. That's the difference between this being art and a \$3 novelty you might get in 'Scientific American.'"

While the scholarly wall labels carefully place the evolutionary developments of portraiture into cultural and historical context, the show stoppers don't stop.

A Close Encounter

Among these is a striking silk-screen self-portrait of Chuck Close. Approach the work and it looks like thousands of abstract, squiggly lines. But as you step back, a powerful portrait emerges, looking directly at you.

Besides this Close encounter of a strange kind, there are Warhol's amusing portraits of Gertrude Stein and Chairman Mao. Less aesthetically pleasing is John Coplans' moon-shot portrait of his cracked, cheesy toenails and aging, hairy feet and ankles, an epidermal landscape of who he is as an old man.

Philippe Halsman, the great photographer of the rich and famous, has a suite of photo studies of Marilyn Monroe mounted on a "celebrity wall" devoted to demonstrating the power portraits have in fabricating the images of pop gods and goddesses. In the best of the Monroe portraits, Marilyn does a winsome imitation of Mao in drag. Marilyn's Mao as a drag queen makes the trip to Storrs worthwhile.

One of the exhibition's underlying motifs is that portraiture, once classically rigid in form as in the "Noblewoman and Child," is now an open-ended genre. Just about anything goes.

Bruhn's wall labels show that even with all this freedom and high-tech potential, portraits, no matter how far out, share some essential traits. Most of all, they are rooted in memory. They're about preserving something significant about somebody in a fleeting moment in history.

An opening reception for the portrait show and two concurrently running exhibitions will be held Sunday from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. at the Benton, 245 Glenbrook Road, UConn campus, Storrs. The show runs through Aug. 12. Regular hours: Tuesday-Friday 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Saturday and Sunday, 1-4:30 p.m. Admission is free. Call 860-486-4320. Website: [www.Benton.UConn.edu](http://www.Benton.UConn.edu).