

SOAR Proposal: Summer 2013: An exploration of social class in the context of historic and contemporary American portraiture

Faculty: Aron G. Johnston Jr., MFA, Adjunct Professor, Department of Art and Art History
Students: Aisling Housel, 2014 - Studio Art
Tanner Apple, 2014 - Studio Art
Start Date: May 28, 2013 (for 10 weeks)

Project description

Portraiture involves more than just capturing the observational likeness of an individual. Rather, portraits, when done well, convey a sense of a person's social narrative.

Portraiture plays a crucial role in American history. In Gilbert Stuart's presidential portrait of George Washington, known as *The Lansdowne Portrait*, for example, our first president is not depicted as a general, king, or even an aristocrat. Rather, he is portrayed in plain dress in a welcoming, relaxed position. It is only the objects in the room surrounding him that allude to his status as either the president or an upper class gentleman. Dressing Washington down was done purposely by Stuart to highlight the new Enlightenment ideals, which privileged government and the people over any one leader. This tradition has been the standard of every president since. The ideal of depicting "common" or earthly qualities in American portraiture has been the standard, at least until the 1960s, with the introduction of Andy Warhol's "superstar" or "celebrity" model. Now the depiction of class and status is blurred and often tied to formal issues or political, cultural, and social ideals.

Tanner Apple and Aisling Housel have proposed an intensive investigation into the history and practice of American portraiture in an effort to better understand the relationship between class and the portrait. Their proposal grew out of a discussion we had in the advanced drawing class I taught in the fall 2012 semester. During that year's presidential campaign, we discussed the debate on class and income, a debate that revolved primarily around conflicting representations of the "47%." In an effort to apply this discussion to the history and practice of art, I asked my students to explore how is class represented in portraiture. What means and methods do artists use to convey social status (as opposed to just psychology or emotion) in pictorial representation? How and why might an artist choose to distort, inflate, or manipulate a sitter's social status? To what degree can we trust a portrait's accuracy at all? How are portraits influenced by external factors?

Ms. Housel and Mr. Apple showed particular interest in researching these questions. I propose that to better understand how to express social status in the portraits they make, they must first understand the history of portraits and the techniques they use to express class. In order to meet these goals, I have developed the following itinerary/project:

1. I have arranged a meeting with the Curator of American Art at the Princeton University Art Museum to discuss class, status, and power in portraiture. I will also take my students to the National Portrait Gallery to view historic and contemporary examples American portraiture and to meet with one of their curators. In addition, I plan an extended viewing of the portraits of Thomas Eakins at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.
2. In order to better understand their sitters, I will ask the students to develop a visual survey and engage in social interaction to find subjects for their visual investigations. I have suggested that they use the questionable concept of "the 47%" as a starting point for their research, because the notion of social class was hotly contested and never fully defined in the election debate.
3. The last part of this exercise involves the practical application of what the students discover through points one and two. I will ask them to develop a series of fully realized drawings—portraits of individuals in the Bethlehem area—that visually express what they have discovered

through their research. I will also ask them to create a catalogue and an exhibition proposal that document and summarize all of their efforts over the summer.

Roles and Responsibilities

I plan to mentor as well as work collaboratively with Aisling Housel and Tanner Apple in their proposed SOAR project. I have had the pleasure of instructing both Tanner and Aisling in advanced drawing and painting. Both students demonstrate great promise in terms of their developing formal skills, and they have begun to show a comprehensive understanding of how to establish a conceptual armature for their work. As their mentor, I intend to share with both Aisling and Tanner what I have learned through my own practice as a studio artist and my experience as a Fulbright researcher. My role is to guide them through the project; to make important professional connections for them; to keep them on schedule; and to review their progress. Their role involves meeting each of the project's milestones, attending all of the field trips, and engaging actively as thinkers and artists.

Milestones

- Weeks 1-2: Research travel; establish standard data collection; identify collaborative subjects in the community; draft social survey/questionnaire
- Weeks 2-4: Identify possible sitters; conduct survey, collect data; establish a studio practice
- Week 4-6: Outline the series of portraits they plan to create (number, sitters, goals, schedule); follow up on any unfinished surveys and begin work on portraits
- Week 6-8: Work on portraits
- Week 8-10: Finalize portraits as well as the catalogue and exhibition proposal; submit to professor for periodic review

Nature of Research and Benefit to Student

1. Students will learn the practical logistics needed to facilitate their research.
2. They will have the opportunity to meet firsthand with experts in art and art history who specialize in the very questions they are asking in their project. In the process, they will make important contacts in the world of art, contacts that might help further their later careers.
3. They will have the opportunity to visit and engage with three distinctive and important collections of art.
4. They will learn how to develop and conduct a visual survey for the social aspects of their project.
5. They will learn how to transform their research into a finished series of portraits that express a sound conceptual basis.
6. They will hone their visual acuity and critical thinking skills, allowing them to better examine the representation of class, power, and status in both art and the mass media.
7. They will develop a disciplined studio practice.
8. They will learn how to engage the community in and with their work.

Contributions to Discipline

Research outside the studio plays an increasingly important role in contemporary art. Engagement with the community and with broader social and economic issues does as well. By exploring these issues simultaneously, in the specific context of Bethlehem and its diverse population, and by acting as artists as well as art historians and sociologists, Aisling and Tanner will be able to provide insight that others have not.

Opportunities to Share Work

This project's final assignment involves creating a catalogue and an exhibition proposal that I will ask Aisling and Tanner to submit to galleries and juried exhibitions for consideration. If that is not possible, we might be able to arrange a more informal exhibition of their work on campus to which we invite not only faculty and students but the sitters and their families.

Budget

Travel expenses & Museum admission fees:

Princeton University Art Museum:	\$40
Philadelphia Art Museum:	\$130
The National Portrait Gallery Washington DC:	\$320

Supplies:

Drawing Paper & Materials:	\$290
Digital Cameras Supplied by Instructor:	\$0

Documentation Catalog (10-20 copies for distribution)	\$220
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Estimated Total \$1000

In addition to the budget, I also request student housing at Moravian College and access to studio spaces from the Department of Art & Art History for both students from May 28th – Aug 9th

Student Statement of Purpose

SOAR Proposal: Summer 2013: An exploration of social class in the context of historic and contemporary American portraiture

Students: Aisling Housel, Studio Art, Spring 2014

Faculty: Aron G. Johnston Jr., MFA, Adjunct Professor, Department of Art & Art History

On-Campus Housing: Aisling Housel, Yes

Rationale

Portraiture is a recognized part of the American and global artistic community. Many significant people have been the subjects for portraits produced by notable artists. Throughout American history, portraits have been made of every President, of politicians and celebrities, down even to the anonymous and ordinary. But how has pop culture and modern art be affected by portraiture? Class is a considerable aspect addressed when both viewing and producing any portrait. Perhaps our understanding of people who seem unimportant can be subject to extravagant portraits; or portraits of government officials and celebrities can be treated to show humble human beings? How is portraiture of class shown in a contemporary format in modern society? The research and view on portraiture over time in America can change how one views the person.

In order to gain knowledge on this significant part of American and art culture, we plan on visiting to The National Portrait Gallery, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Metropolitan, and The Princeton Art Museum. However, we also intend to discuss portraiture with curators, artists, and art historians that focus on American Art and portraiture as well as view art exhibits specific to this discipline. After viewing and studying a variety of work that is influential to our focus we will create 8 to 10 related works each. Our goal is to explore the view on class in society through our study of portraiture in America, while also offering our own. This research will also impart extended knowledge of aesthetic art skills and give us more developed and introspective views on past and current art and artistic portraits.

Expected Outcomes

As we are researching this idea we will be working on our shared interest of art and the artistic portrait and it's change throughout time. This will challenge us to create work that would be considered finished gallery ready pieces instead of works for a classroom critique. Producing these 8 to 10 works will extend our artistic skills and rendering experience. We also will be completing these pieces directly related to the studies and observations we will have made while visiting museums and interviewing professionals. This project will be greatly beneficial to us as students because we will be able to talk to people who are educated in the specialized fields of American Art and Portraiture but also put ourselves in the professional world we

will be entering after college. We also will be learning more about the art community first hand and be able to open many doors for future research and endeavors.

The Exploration of Class in Context of Portraiture benefits the Moravian College Art Department by bringing more focus to the arts by having our work be shown either on Moravian College campus or in a public space within the next school year. Showing our work and purpose will not only benefit us but also will hopefully spark thought in the local community. We will be challenging the idea of class through our work created, which will benefit future students of any discipline to relate to their own research and interpretation. With our research we will be able to relate our idea into the larger artistic community and bring the knowledge and studies we find to people who are not able to.

For the past three years I have developed my passion and interest more deeply in the arts. More recently I have been able to focus on exactly what I want to do outside of school, which is work with the figure and to bring up important questions with my artwork. That being said, this chance to research more profoundly on portraiture and the subjective nature of social class by talking to professionals that work in recognized museums and viewing notable pieces would be exceptionally rewarding and allow me to achieve insight into how to make a difference through my artwork for my future endeavors.

SOAR Proposal: Summer 2013

Title: An Exploration of Portraiture in the Context of Social Class

Students: Tanner Apple - Studio Art

Faculty: Aron G. Johnston Jr., MFA, Adjunct Professor, Department of Art & Art History

Statement of Purpose:

Portraiture contributes significantly to the grand scope of Art, transcending time and cultures. It has captured historical figures such as heads of state and monarchs, but also the artists themselves and common people. It is both an instrument to convey emotion and a record of an instant in time. Portraiture has existed throughout every great era and movement in Art, been touched by every medium, and remains an influential discipline today. Today, Portraits carry a varied range of meaning and subjects in both Contemporary Art and Pop Culture, and this is what we intend to explore with our SOAR Project.

By researching the history of Portraiture and studying the discipline's place in Contemporary Art today, we intend to build a foundation for each of us to produce a body of work exploring the many artistic, cultural, and social aspects a Portrait touches upon. Who is the subject? What do they do? What do they stand for? How does class affect how we see them? And why does it all matter? Our intent is to cultivate ourselves as artists by contemplating the answers to these questions and by producing and displaying a body of work relative to them, contributing our small part to the esteemed disciplines that Art and Portraiture are.

I. Benefit to Student:

Our proposed Project would require us, through research and active engagement, to (1) study and contemplate our shared discipline, Art, and more specifically, the artistic portrait, and its variety over time. This would include visiting galleries and museums, as well as meeting with and discussing the work of established artists, curators, and art historians. Research achieved will grant each of us a better academic grasp of our discipline, necessary for our own development within it. Furthermore, upon completing the examination aspect, our Project will include (2) completing a body of work relative to our studies and observations. In addition to our research, this also will develop our understanding of the discipline and the skills relative to it. Our intent is to exhibit this work within a space provided by the college, though we will attempt to arrange exhibitions with independent, local galleries. This will (3) provide professional experience in the context of our discipline, as well contribute to the discipline, outlined in section two.

II. Contribution to the Discipline:

Upon completing our research and production of work, displaying our work publicly is (1) intended to provide another source of material for other students of the discipline to benefit from through their own studies and observations. Should our efforts grant exhibitions of the work completed in a non-academic setting, we would also (2) be adding to the broader artistic community and to the experience of those without an academic position in the discipline.

III. Engaging the Community:

Producing a body of work, specifically the artistic portrait, will be in large focused on the study of members of the community. These studies will include the student body as well as the local/regional community, and engage a variety of social aspects of these communities; race/ethnicity, gender, age, profession, socio-economic class, etcetera. This will provide further comprehension of our discipline in the context of the artistic portrait, as well as require active participation of the communities involved.

Expense/Resource Request:

1. We request a budget to cover the costs of travel to aforementioned research sources, including galleries, museums, and exhibitions. This would include public transportation and gas for our own vehicles.
2. We request a budget to cover the costs (if any) for admission to aforementioned galleries, museums, and exhibitions.
3. We request the reservation of on-campus housing to provide an easily and commonly accessible space for meeting and working.
4. We request access to a studio space on campus for the production of aforementioned artistic work.
5. We request a budget for the acquisition of materials/supplies for the aforementioned production of artistic work.