

## Bowdoin College Museum of Art Organizes First Exhibition to Examine Symbolic and Conceptual Portraiture in American Art

*Opening June 25, the exhibition investigates abstract portraiture from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to today, featuring works by Gertrude Stein, Marsden Hartley, Alfred Stieglitz, Robert Rauschenberg, Yoko Ono, Eleanor Antin, Janine Antoni, Glenn Ligon, Byron Kim, and more*



*From right to left: Marsden Hartley, *One Portrait of One Woman*, 1916, oil on composition board. Collection of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, bequest of Hudson D. Walker from the Lone and Hudson D. Walker Collection; Eleanor Antin, *Yvonne Rainer*, from *Portraits of Eight New York Women*, 1970, exercise bike, basket, flowers, horn, rear-view mirror, sweatshirt, text panel, collection of the artist, San Diego, California. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, New York; Byron Kim (born 1961), *Emmett at Twelve Months #3*, 1994, egg tempera on panel. Collection of the artist. © The artist / Image courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai.*

**Brunswick, Maine, June 24, 2016**—On June 25, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA) will present *This Is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today*, the first exhibition to examine the emergence and evolution of symbolic, abstract, and conceptual portraiture in modern and contemporary American art. The show will feature more than 60 non-figurative portraits that explore the evolving understanding of personal identity over the last century and that reflect a revolution in the very nature of portraiture itself. *This Is a Portrait If I Say So* will be on view at BCMA through October 23.

“The exhibition takes its name from one of the show’s highlights—Robert Rauschenberg’s renowned 1961 portrait of Iris Clert—a telegram that simply states, “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so,” explained Anne Collins Goodyear, co-director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. “Rauschenberg’s interpretation of portraiture as a concept was radical in its day, and continues to pose provocative questions: who has the authority to represent someone else? How is identity established? What is the relationship between artist and subject? What do we mean by ‘likeness’? As the show demonstrates, Rauschenberg’s gesture built on groundbreaking work by Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp, and others, and helped to set the ground for further radical reconsiderations of the portrayal of self and others by artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Roni Horn, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. This exhibition will illuminate major shifts in portraiture in the United States during the past century, and will explore the deeper aesthetic, intellectual, social, political, and technological undercurrents that have helped bring about these transformations.”

Covering more than a century of artistic development in the U.S., the exhibition features a broad range of media including drawings, new media works, paintings, photographs, prints, sculptures, and text-based conceptual portraiture, loosely divided into three chronological sections:

- The first focuses on works from the 1910s and 1920s, assembled by Jonathan Frederick Walz, director of curatorial affairs & curator of American art at the Columbus Museum, Columbus, Georgia. This section highlights artists such as Charles Demuth, Marcel Duchamp, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Marsden Hartley, Francis Picabia, Alfred Stieglitz, Gertrude Stein, and their contemporaries.
- The second is dedicated to works from the early 1960s to 1970, selected by independent curator Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, and featuring works by artists such as Eleanor Antin, Walter De Maria, Jim Dine, Dan Flavin, Jasper Johns, Joseph Kosuth, Yoko Ono, and Robert Rauschenberg, among others.
- The final section centers on works from the early 1990s through today, curated by Anne Collins Goodyear, co-director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. This concluding section includes works by artists such as Janine Antoni, Ross Bleckner, Mel Bochner, Tom Friedman, Roni Horn, Byron Kim, Glenn Ligon, Sarah Sze, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and more.

By focusing on specific periods, the curators are able to delve into the political and social realities that shaped American identity across these decades, and to unearth the distinct relationships, imagery, and themes that characterized the work of many major artists engaged with creating new modes of portrayal. The exhibition's chronological installation brings to light intriguing parallels between these three time periods, revealing dynamic through-threads within the artistic depiction of identity from 1912 to the present, such as the turn to language, symbolic attributes, and the metaphorical significance of color and form.

### **Section I: Emergence of Abstract Portraiture, 1910s–20s**

Some of the earliest examples of conceptual portraiture in the show reflect Americans' awareness of the political turmoil in Europe during World War I, and the fluidity between artistic and intellectual circles on both sides of the Atlantic. Exhibition highlights from this period include *One Portrait of One Woman*, a 1916 portrait of Paris-based American writer Gertrude Stein by Maine-born artist Marsden Hartley, who lived in Europe from 1912–1915. Replete with mystical symbols, the painting shows a blue teacup atop a checked tabletop, with the word "MOI" written boldly beneath, addressing the respective identities and complex friendship of the artist and sitter. Another American with strong ties to Parisian intellectual circles who features prominently in the exhibition is Charles Demuth. Demuth and Hartley knew each other well, as evidenced by another highlight from this section, *Study for Poster Portrait of Marsden Hartley* (c. 1923–24). The watercolor and graphite composition, which depicts a windowsill in front of a bright, snow-covered landscape, uses objects Demuth associated with his friend to capture Hartley's persona.

"In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the general public often linked portraiture to flattering transcription and middle-class values; the genre provided strict, longstanding conventions that some modernist artists chose to bend or break," said Walz. "Political and cultural shifts, including the development of an avant-garde and the breakdown of the traditional organization of sexuality, gave rise to themes that found continual expression in unconventional portraits throughout the century. For example, Gertrude Stein's 1909 prose poem portraits presage Mel Bochner's thesaurus-based likenesses of the 1960s, and Charles Demuth's poster portraits resonate with L. J. Roberts' recent embroidery *Portrait of Deb from 1988–199?*"

### **Section II: Unconventional Portraiture in a Decade of Radical Social, Cultural, and Political Changes, 1960s**

By the 1960s, the New York art scene was embracing neo-Dada, Fluxus, Pop, Minimal, and Conceptual art as alternatives to Abstract Expressionism. The eruption of new modes of expression coincided with a

surge in the production of unconventional portraits. “While portraiture may not typically be considered a dominant genre during this decade, which is often characterized by artworks that attempt to eliminate subjectivity and embrace systematic strategies for art-making, a strong undercurrent of interest in issues of identity can be seen in the work of a number of prominent artists of the period,” commented Campagnolo. “For the most part, the radical portraits of the 1960s feature subjects who were at the forefront of innovation in their chosen fields, be they art, dance, music, or writing, and offer surprising insights regarding the artist, subject, and historical moment.”

In addition to the exhibition’s namesake, highlights in the show from this period include Rauschenberg’s 1964 *Self-Portrait*, consisting of his thumbprint in ink and graphite on paper, created for a profile of the artist in *The New Yorker*. Several of Robert Morris’ conceptual portraits are featured, including a cabinet-like sculpture containing labeled bottles of bodily fluids from 1963, simply titled *Portrait*. Also present is Yoko Ono’s *Portrait of Mary*, a text-based call to action published in her groundbreaking book, *Grapefruit*, inviting viewers to examine and expand their assumptions about how identity is represented.

### **Section III: Non-mimetic Portraiture through the Rise of Identity Politics and Post 9/11 Globalization, 1990s to today**

Exhibition highlights from the 1990s through today reflect artistic responses to developments like the emergence of the AIDS crisis, the decoding of the human genome, the repercussions of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and the increasing prominence of human rights concerns raised by the LGBT community, all of which have profoundly affected the expectations, demands, and even the politics of the self and its representation. Glenn Ligon’s *Runaway* series from 1993 is a conceptual self-portrait consisting of contemporary descriptions of the artist juxtaposed with images garnered from advertisements designed to capture runaway slaves. Ligon turned to friends to provide the captions for this 10-work series, which vary so widely the notion of unified identity is called into question. Artist Byron Kim, whose work is also featured in the exhibition, contributed one of the captions, underscoring the evolution of non-figurative portraiture within influential artistic circles. A nonsymmetrical sculptural form that resists easy categorization, the work metaphorically represents the artist, who identifies with its emphatically unconventional nature.

“From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present day, we see the adoption of abstraction as a strategy for portrayal that resists the co-option of likeness for political or social purposes,” said Goodyear. “We can trace this theme throughout the exhibition—a testimony to the power of the use of nontraditional symbolic and conceptual portraiture as a means to reclaim the representation of self and other from inherited formulas that may threaten to suppress rather than express what it means to a unique individual.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue published by Yale University Press. Featuring essays from Campagnolo, Goodyear, and Walz that examine their respective time periods in-depth, the catalog also includes a contribution from Dr. Dorinda Evans, professor emerita at Emory University, discussing the evolution of non-figurative portraiture in American art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century up until The Armory Show.

### **Support for *This Is a Portrait If I Say So***

*This Is a Portrait If I Say So* is made possible by a major grant from the Henry Luce Foundation; a Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Studies Grant; and critical contributions by Eric S. and Svetlana G. Silverman, Edward S. and Caroline H. Hyman, the Devonwood Foundation, halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, Mary K. McGuigan and John F. McGuigan Jr., Thomas A. and Hannah Weil McKinley, an anonymous donor, and the Roy A. Hunt Foundation.

### **Programming Highlights for *This Is a Portrait If I Say So***

The BCMA is mounting a robust series of public programs in coordination with the exhibition, including lectures by leading artists and scholars for both the summer and fall. In addition, the BCMA will organize gallery conversations, musical performances, and family day events related to the show; and Bowdoin College students will give tours of the exhibition Tuesday through Sunday at 2 p.m. throughout the summer.

*Keynote Program by Artist Byron Kim*

June 25, 2016 | 4:00 p.m. | Kresge Auditorium, Visual Arts Center

Artist Byron Kim, whose work is featured in *This Is a Portrait If I Say So*—including a new piece created especially for the exhibition—will present a keynote lecture on his artistic practice. The lecture will be followed by a discussion between the artist and the exhibition’s co-curators, Anne Collins Goodyear, Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, and Jonathan Frederick Walz.

*Reception and Family Activities*

June 25, 2016 | 5:00 – 6:30 p.m. | Bowdoin College Museum of Art

Following the keynote program, the BCMA will host a celebratory reception and family activities to mark the opening of *This Is a Portrait If I Say So*. The event will be free and open to the public.

*Bowdoin International Music Festival Performances and Programs*

June 30, 2016 and July 21, 2016 | 11:00 a.m. | Bowdoin College Museum of Art

Bowdoin International Music Festival faculty will perform in conjunction with the exhibition *This Is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today*. Limited seating. Free tickets are required. To reserve please call the BCMA at (207) 725-3276.

July 2, 2016 | 10:00 – 11:00 a.m. | Bowdoin College Museum of Art

Join David Ying and Phillip Ying, the artistic directors for the Bowdoin International Music Festival, for a family program about the intersections between music and the fine arts.

*Gallery Conversations*

July 7, 2016 | 7:00 p.m. | Bowdoin College Museum of Art

Anne Collin Goodyear, co-curator and catalogue essayist for *This Is a Portrait If I Say So* and co-director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, leads a discussion of contemporary art and identity as explored in the exhibition.

July 12, 2016 | 12:00 p.m. | Bowdoin College Museum of Art

Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, independent scholar and co-curator and catalogue essayist for *This Is a Portrait If I Say So*, leads a discussion of unconventional portraiture in the 1960s as explored in the exhibition.

August 16, 2016 | 12:00 p.m. | Bowdoin College Museum of Art

Jonathan Frederick Walz, independent curator and co-curator and catalogue essayist for *This Is a Portrait If I Say So*, leads a discussion of portraiture abstraction in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century tied to the exhibition.

*Night at the Museum*

August 12, 2016 | 5:00 – 8:00 p.m. | Bowdoin College Museum of Art

The three co-curators, Anne Collins Goodyear, Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo and Jonathan Frederick Walz, describe the making of *This Is a Portrait If I Say So*, with refreshments al fresco.

**About the Bowdoin College Museum of Art**

The collections of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art are among the most comprehensive of any college museum in the United States. Collecting commenced over 200 years ago with a major gift from

the College's founder James Bowdoin III and his family that included Gilbert Stuart's magnificent portraits of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

The Museum is housed in the landmark Walker Art Building, designed in 1894 by Charles Follen McKim. Located on the historic quadrangle of Bowdoin College, the building is graced by murals by John La Farge, Kenyon Cox, Elihu Vedder, and Abbott Thayer. A \$20.8-million renovation and expansion in 2007 provided a stunning setting for objects as diverse as monumental Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud, Iraq; European old master paintings; and works by American modernists. The Museum is the centerpiece of Bowdoin's vibrant arts and culture community and offers a wealth of academic and educational programs. The Museum is also a prominent summer venue for major exhibitions such as *Edward Hopper's Maine* (2011), *William Wegman: Hello Nature* (2012), *Maurice Prendergast: By the Sea* (2013), *Richard Tuttle: A Print Retrospective* (2014); and *Night Vision: Nocturnes in American Art, 1860-1960* (2015).

Fully accessible, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art is open to the public free of charge from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday through Saturday; 10:00 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. on Thursday, and from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sunday.

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