This Is A Portrait If I Say So:
Identity In American Art, 1912 To Today

By Jessica Shuire Routhier

BRUNSWICK, MAINE — There is something about the word “portrait” that, for many art lovers, can trigger the yawn reflex. We think we know, just from that word, what we will encounter, and that we will have encountered it a thousand times before, and that we will find it mostly disappointing of everything that comes before or after. We would be wrong in any case, because the history of portraiture is in fact as richly diverse, intellectually challenging and legitimately fascinating as any genre in Western art. But we would be especially wrong in the case of the new exhibition at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, the first exhibition dedicated to “non-mimetic” portraiture in American art. This is portraiture like you have never seen it before, on view through October 22.

It is an old word. In Old French, it is the past participle of the verb portrire, to portray. A portrait, of course, might be literary or dramatic as well as visual, and yet in American English we tend to think of the word “portrait” almost exclusively in visual terms. It is evolution to a noun in both languages, it has retained that association with past action — a thing that has been undertaken and completed and whose significance is forever affixed to that moment of creation. But in the visual arts, at least, meaning is more fluid in non-mimetic portraiture — that is to say, portraiture in which the depiction looks nothing like the subject.

The paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures and installations in the Bowdoin show are not abstractions in the true sense of the word, for they all represent something: each in some way is a portrayal of a real person or personas. Some, in fact, are not abstractions at all. Rather, the works on view find meaning other than facial likeness to reflect their subjects’ identities. Through the use of meaningful objects, words, unconventional materials, color, gesture and even analytical data, the artists take a broad view of identity as a concept that may evolve over time and can be constructed, manipulated and deconstructed as well as faithfully transcribed.

Anne Goodyear, co-director of the Bowdoin museum and one of the exhibition’s three co-curators, dates the genesis of the show to her time at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in Washington, D.C., part of the Smithsonian Institution. It was there that she first came to know Jonathan Walsh, who later wrote his dissertation about Charles Demuth, a major presence in the Bowdoin museum after Walt returned to the Smithsonian for a fellowship, the two began to conceptualize the exhibition as a project for the NPG. Kathleen Campagnolo, another Smithsonian fellow and an expert in Walter De Maria, learned of the project and was quickly “welcomed into the fold,” in her words. When Goodyear, along with her husband, Frank, accepted the position of co-director at the Bowdoin museum, the project went with her, with the NPG’s support.

Both the exhibition and the accompanying catalog are organized into

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"Portrait — K.N.R. No. 1" by Alfred Stieglitz, 1903. Gelatin silver print. 13% by 10% inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. ©2015 Georgis O'Keefe Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Stieglitz became interested in clouds when he began to use smaller, handheld cameras that were more easily pointed up toward the sky. Only later did he conceive of his cloud pictures as portraits of individuals, in this case, an artist who exhibited at his gallery.

"This Is a Portrait of Iris Cleet If I Say So" by Robert Rauschenberg, 1961. Telegram (envelope not shown), 17% by 13% inches. Collection Ahrensen, Vevey, Switzerland. Art © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, Rauschenberg also reportedly forgot that he had agreed to create a portrait of gallery owner Iris Cleet for an exhibition in Paris. He sent this telegram as his official submission to the show.

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three main time periods that each represent, in Cam- pagnolo’s words, a “burly of activity” in non-mimetic portraiture: 1913-39, curated by Walz, the 1960s, curated by Campagnolo, and the 1980s, curated by Goodyear. Yet broader themes also unify the sections of the show, presenting such as less a break from than an evolution of what preceded it. Among those unifying themes is the idea of interconnected relationships. Just as show itself evolved out of “highly developed professional friendships,” to quote Walz, so did much of the work in the show. The very title of the show is taken from such a work: Robert Rauschenberg’s famous telegram, offered as an official submission to a 1961 exhibition honoring gallery artist Iris Cleet: “This Is a Portrait of Iris Cleet If I Say So.” Mel Bochner’s portrait of artist Eva Hesse, Eleanor Antin’s portraits of artist Carol Schneckman and dancer Yvonne Rainer and Walter De Maria’s portraits of musician John Cage further represent the interconnections among creative people involved in different kinds of portrayals in this era.

In the earliest period of the show, the interpersonal connections between artist/photographer Alfred Stieglitz act like neural pathways from one artwork to another. Stieglitz himself portrayed painter Kather- ene Roues in a series of highly abstracted views of clouds; Francis Picabia captured Stieglitz as a com- plicated, camera-toting machine; Muriel de Zayes’s geometric depiction of artist/journalist educator Agnes Meyer appeared both in Stieglitz’s gallery and in his magazine; Stieglitz circle member Marlene Hartley created a symbolic portrait of Gertrude Stein, who in turn doubled in portraiture of the literary variety, and Hartley himself was the subject of portraiture, after a fashion — Edward Steichen’s affectionately tongue-in-check “Hisbition of the Nymph Poet and Aesthetician” of 1922.

Another example is Baronesse Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven’s found-object portrait of Marcel Duchamp. The original, exuberantly decadent work is now lost but is known to us through a photograph by Charles Sheeler, himself a trueblood artist and a member of the tight-knit Stieglitz circle. The work is espe- cially meaningful because Duchamp, a pioneer of the avant-garde art movement known as “Dada” and the acknowledged innovator of “ready-made” sculpture, is a touchstone for artists in each section of the exhibition. It may seem ironic that portraiture was such a fundamental concern for this artist who was utterly committed to toppling earlier traditions. But central to many of Duchamp’s interrogations was a reckoning with the concept of identity, both in the abstract and in terms of his carefully cultivated persona.

Duchamp’s own work is represented here by a metapho- nical self-portrait, one of his famous boxes, a box containing miniature sculptures of his most famous artworks. But the Dada master’s presence is just as palpable in the section of the show dedicated to the 1960s, when many artists identified themselves with a new “Dada” movement that was similarly concerned with absurdity, paroxysm and countless other definitions of the art-world establishment.

Duchamp’s influence can be seen in Rauschenberg’s telegram as well as his fingerprint self-portrait, a clear allusion to the earlier artist’s 1923 self-portrait in the form of a “Wanted” poster. Eleanor Antin’s use of found objects in her assemblage portraits also echoes Duchamp’s legacy of the ready-made as well as the baroque excesses of Baronesse Elsa’s portrait. And in the 1980s, Duchamp’s influence continues, for example, Glenn Ligon’s suite of lithographs likening himself to a runaway slave — a wanted fugitive.

In the cataloue introduction, the three curators write that “in a nation dedicated to reinvention, non-mimetic portraiture offers unique opportunity to critique and confront restrictive political and social conditions.” Jonathan Walz further observes that, throughout the 80 years covered by the exhibition, “people who are from the margins themselves are using this strategy that is itself sort of marginalized.”

This is true of artists like Ligon, Byron Kim, Hasan Elahi and others who deal directly with race; Hartley, Demuth, Robert Indiana and others who were or are gay; L.J. Roberts, who is transgender; and Eleanor Antin and Janine Antoni, among others, whose work grapples with the cultural expectations placed upon women and how this affects the identities they absorb and reflect, in the arts and beyond. This last point is particularly topical, as the Bowdoin show appears in Maine at the same time as "Women Modernists in New York" at the Portland Museum of Art (PMA) through September 18, which highlights the
"Cage II" by Walter De Maria, 1965. Stainless steel, 85% by 14% by 14% inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York. ©2016 Estate of Walter De Maria. This is one of a series of portraits by De Maria of the avant-garde musician and composer John Cage. In a 1972 interview, De Maria said, "When I made my statue of John Cage, I think it was partly a recognition of the fact that Cage may have been caging a lot of people."

"Baroness Elsa’s Portrait of Duchamp" by Charles Sheeler, circa 1920. Gelatin silver print, 10 by 8 inches. Bluff Collection, Houston. The Lane Collection. The Baroness, herself an avant-guard artist and Dadaist of some renown, created this wineglass overflowing with fishing lures and other sparkly, feathery things as a kind of trophy cup for Marcel Duchamp, whom she identified as "Artist of the Year."

"Tracking Transience" by Hassan Elahi, 2003-present. Web-based work, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Elahi's work has been mistaken for a terrorist in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City, and he began this series to prove that his own activities and prove that they were benign. His exhaustive project of self-documentation continues to this day.

"Portrait of Deb from 1966-1987" by L.J. Roberts, 2013-14. Single-strand embroidery on cotton, 28 by 24 inches. The artist, Jonathan Waiz, writes that this work "speaks not only to the 'threads' of individual human lives but to the significant role that women played during the AIDS crisis, but also to the recent resurgent of craft activism and to the imagined kinship that stretches through time and space."

"Emmett at Twelve Months #3" by By- den Kim, 1964. Egg tempera on panel, 17 by 14% by 4% inches. Collection of the Artist, © the artist / courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai. Each painted square represents a different color observed on the body of the artist's young son. The diversity of hues challenges perception in terms of simple hues like "black" or "white."