

# ANTIQUES

And The Arts Weekly \*\*\*\*\*



July 15, 2016

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

By Jessica Skwire 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 duplicative of everything that came 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 23.

It is an odd word. In old French, it is the past participle of the verb *portraire*, to portray. A portrayal, 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. In its 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.

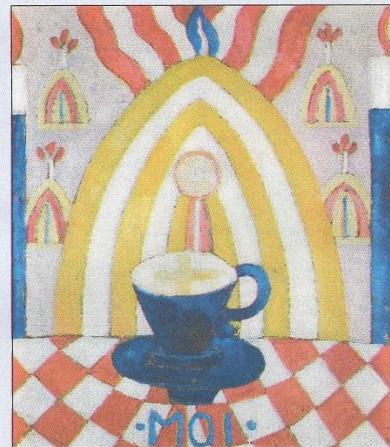
The paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures and installations in the Bowdoin show are not abstractions in the true

sense of the word, for they all represent something: each in some way is a portrayal of a real person or persons. Some, in fact, are not abstractions at all. Rather, the works on view find means other than facial likeness to reflect their sitters’ 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.

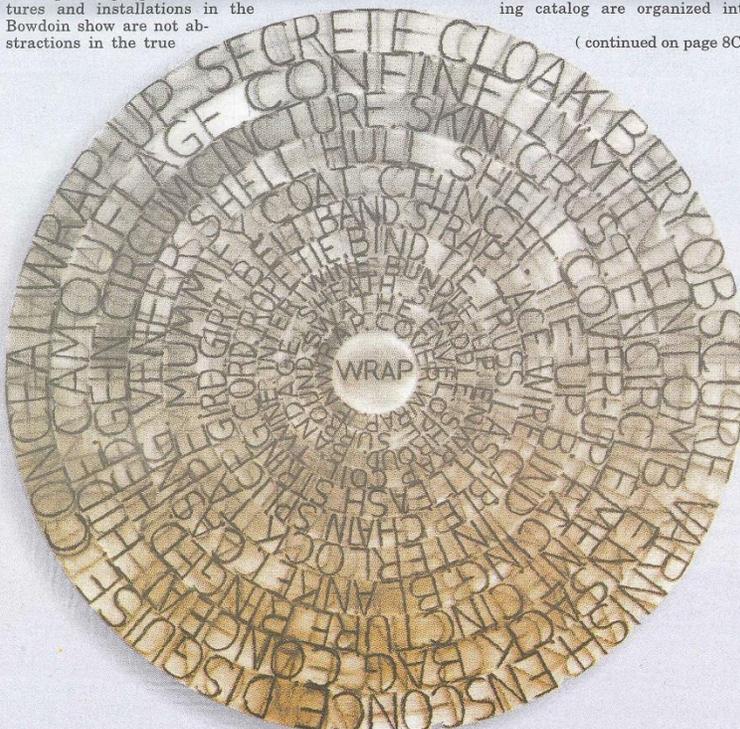
Anne Goodyear, co-director of the Bowdoin museum and one of the exhibition’s three co-curators, dates the genesis of the show to her time at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in Washington, D.C., part of the Smithsonian Institution. It was there that she first came to know Jonathan Walz, who later wrote his dissertation about Charles Demuth, a major presence in the Bowdoin show. After Walz 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

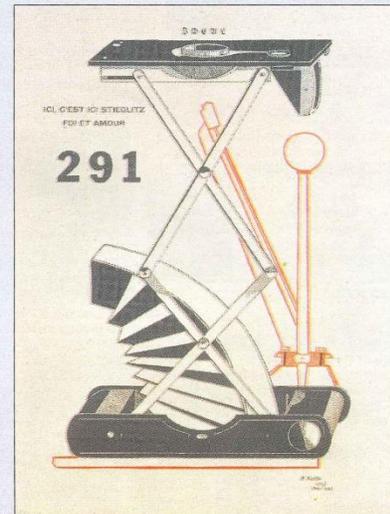
(continued on page 8C)



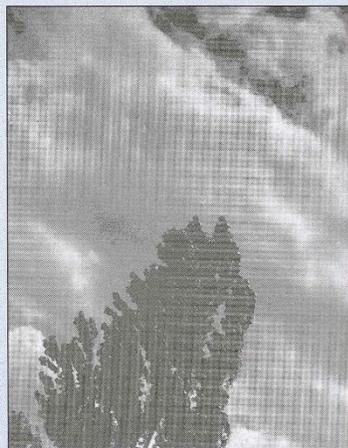
“One Portrait of One Woman” by Marsden Hartley, 1916. Oil on composition board, 30 by 24 inches. Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. An example of Hartley’s famous symbolic portraits, this painting incorporates a constellation of symbols to evoke the warm friendship that arose between Hartley and Gertrude Stein during Hartley’s time in Europe in the 1910s.



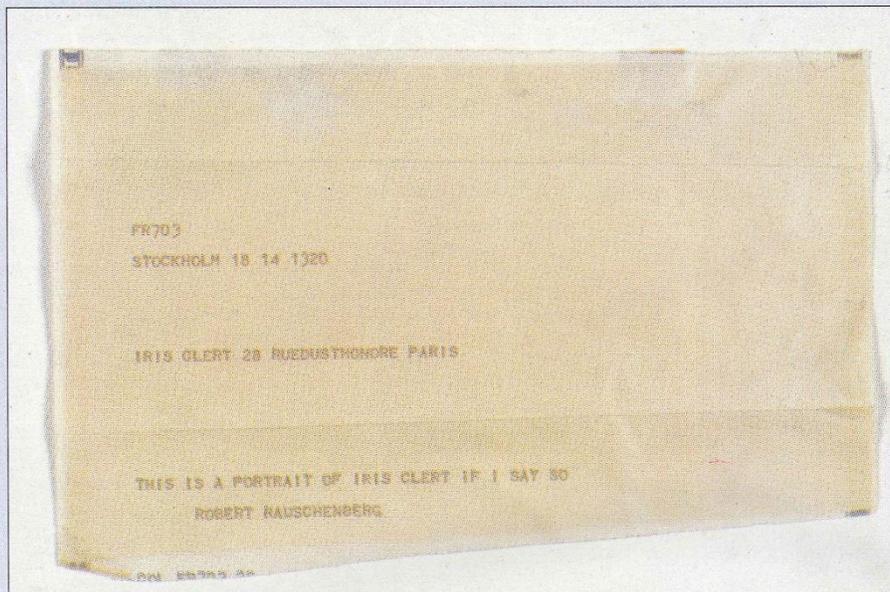
“Wrap: Portrait of Eva Hesse” by Mel Bochner, 2001. Charcoal and pencil on paper, 25½ inches diameter. Courtesy of Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York City, and Tokyo, Japan. ©Mel Bochner. The coiled shape of this portrait alludes to Hesse’s own artwork of the time.



“Ici, C’est Ici Stieglitz Foi et Amour” by Francis Picabia, 1915. Relief print, 17½ by 11½ inches. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. ©2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution / Art Resources, New York. The relationship between Picabia and his portrait subject here, Alfred Stieglitz, was somewhat fraught. Picabia’s depiction of Stieglitz as, in Jonathan Walz’s words, “a combined broken camera bellows and stationary vehicle” was probably not entirely positive.



"Portrait — K.N.R., No. 1" by Alfred Stieglitz, 1923. Gelatin silver print, 13½ by 10¾ inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. ©2015 Georgia O'Keeffe 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 Clert If I Say So" by Robert Rauschenberg, 1961. Telegram (envelope not shown), 17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> by 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches. Collection Ahrenberg, Vevey, Switzerland. Art ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York. Rauschenberg reportedly forgot that he had agreed to create a portrait of gallery owner Iris Clert for an exhibition in Paris. He sent this telegram as his official submission to the show.

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

(continued from page 1C)



"Yvonne Rainer" by Eleanor Antin, 1971, exercise bike, mirror, roses, sweatshirt, horn, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist, San Diego, Calif. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City. Antin's assemblage portraits are all accompanied by semi-absurd texts that relate to their subjects. The text here reads, in part, "She came from a family of Italian anarchists. Carlo Tresca was a relative. Another uncle attended a Bund rally in Yorkville and got so angry he had a heart attack and died."

"Boîte — Series D" by Marcel Duchamp (assembled by Jacqueline Matisse Monnier), 1961. Mixed media, 15¼ by 14<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> by 3<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches. Private collection. ©Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Duchamp's editioned boîtes, of which there are some 300, are all derived from an original autobiographical work he made in 1935–41. "You have invented a new kind of autobiography," his patron Walter Arensberg observed of that work. "You have become the puppeteer of your past."



three main time periods that each represent, in Campagnolo's words, a "flurry of activity" in non-mimetic portraiture: 1913–29, curated by Walz; the 1960s, curated by Campagnolo; and the 1990s, curated by Goodyear. Yet broader themes also unify the sections of the show, presenting each 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 gallerist Iris Clert: "This Is a Portrait of Iris Clert If I Say So." Mel Bochner's portrait of artist Eva Hesse, Eleanor Antin's portraits of artist Carolee Schneeman 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 around dealer/photographer Alfred Stieglitz act like neural pathways from one artwork to another. Stieglitz himself portrayed painter Katherine Rhoades in a series of highly abstracted views of clouds; Francis Picabia captured Stieglitz as a complicated, cameralike machine; Marius de Zayas's geometric depiction of activist / journalist / educator Agnes Meyer appeared both in Stieglitz's gallery and in his magazine; Stieglitz circle member Marsden Hartley created a symbolic portrait of Gertrude Stein, who in turn dabbled in portraiture of the literary variety;

and Hartley himself was the subject of portraiture, after a fashion — Edward Steichen's affectionately tongue-in-cheek "Mushton Shlushley, the Lyric Poet and Aestheticurean" of 1922.

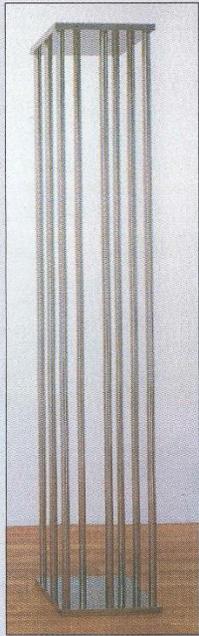
Another example is Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's found-object portrait of Marcel Duchamp. The original, exuberantly decadent work is now lost but is known to us through a photograph by Charles Sheeler, himself a trailblazing artist and a member of the tight-knit Stieglitz circle. The work is especially meaningful because Duchamp, a pioneer of the avant-garde art movement known as "Dada" and the acknowledged innovator of "readymade" 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 metaphorical self-portrait, one of his famous boîtes, or boxes, containing miniatures 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 "Neo-Dada" movement that was similarly concerned with absurdity, puns and merciless deconstruction 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 readymade as well as the baroque excesses of Baroness Elsa's portrait. And in the 1990s, Duchamp's influence is strong in, for example, Glenn Ligon's suite of lithographs likening himself to a runaway slave — a wanted fugitive.

In the catalog introduction, the three curators write that "in a nation dedicated to reinvention," non-mimetic portraiture offers unique opportunities "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, 85¼ by 14¼ by 14¼ 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."



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

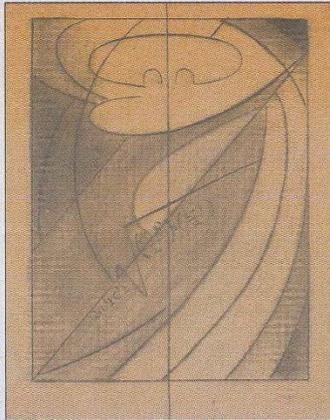
work of four members of the Stieglitz circle.

Goodyear sees the tandem exhibitions as a fortuitous continuation of the synergy among Maine's art museums. Visitors who see the two exhibitions in sequence, Goodyear says, will get a sense of the "degree to which artists ... from the early Twentieth Century to the present day are developing very progressive, even avant-garde approaches based on their exposure and the communities that they find here in Maine."

Maine's influence has long been recognized in the work of Modernists like O'Keeffe and Hartley, as well as Indiana; and in the later sections of the Bowdoin show the broad reach of Maine's Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture embraces fully one-third of the artists on view. (The PMA has also mounted a Skowhegan anniversary show, "Skowhegan at Seventy," on view through October 10.)

The work on view is deeply intellectual, and all three curators acknowledge that it may be difficult for some viewers to parse. Campagnolo points to another recurring theme, wit and wordplay, as an accessible point of entry for many. Walter De Maria's portraits of John Cage — which are literal cages, either drawn or constructed, with no obvious way in or out — are "pretty funny," she says. She also points to Eleanor Antin's stationary bicycle, rigged with a rear-view mirror and a horn "as if the rider is going to confront obstacles" while clearly going nowhere.

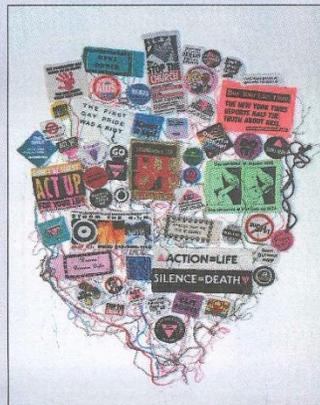
Goodyear agrees that humor, as well as the larger idea that identity that is fluctuating rather than fixed, is a way into the work. Visitors, she says, will be invited to ask themselves, "Is this a portrait if I say so?" "The title suggests that there is an active role to be played by every creative, interpretive spirit who comes to the



"Agnes Meyer" by Marius de Zayas, circa 1912–13, charcoal over graphite, 24 7/16 by 18 3/4 inches. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. / Art Resource, New York. This work is one of a series of "caricatures" by de Zayas — all featuring mathematical equations — that Alfred Stieglitz exhibited in his gallery 291 and published in his magazine *Camera Work*.



"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-garde 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."



"Portrait of Deb from 1988–1999?" by L.J. Roberts, 2012–13. Single-strand embroidery on cotton, 28 by 24 inches. Collection of the artist. Jonathan Walz writes that this work "speaks not only to the 'threads' of individual human lives and the significant role that women played during the AIDS crisis, but also to the recent resurgence of 'craft activism' and to an imagined kinship that stretches through time and space."

exhibition," Goodyear says. "Which is to say, everyone."

With the readers of *Antiques and The Arts Weekly* particularly in mind, I asked all three curators to consider ways to look at non-mimetic portraiture in the context of earlier American artistic traditions. The responses were enthusiastic and varied, but all three mentioned the work of L.J. Roberts (who prefers the gender-neutral pronouns they and their) in this context.

In "Portrait of Deb from 1988–1999?" Roberts used traditional embroidery techniques, learned from their mother and grandmother, to stitch together a collection of objects — mostly political buttons related to LGBT issues — and thus create an object-history of the person who owned them. "The work wouldn't exist," says Goodyear, "without a very profound respect on L.J.'s part for antiques, preservation and the way these intimate objects connect back to people we love from generation to generation."

The exhibition at Bowdoin is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated, 250-page catalog from Yale University Press, featuring substantial scholarly essays by Walz, Campagnolo and Goodyear, along with a historical introduction by Dorinda Evans, professor emerita at Emory University, and full catalog entries.

The Bowdoin College Museum of Art is at 245 Maine Street. For information, 207-725-3275 or [www.bowdoin.edu/art-museum](http://www.bowdoin.edu/art-museum).

Jessica Skwire Routhier is a writer, editor and independent art historian based in South Portland, Maine. She has held previous positions at the Saco Museum, the Portland Museum of Art in Maine and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Her current research is focused on Hudson River School painter Jesse Talbot.

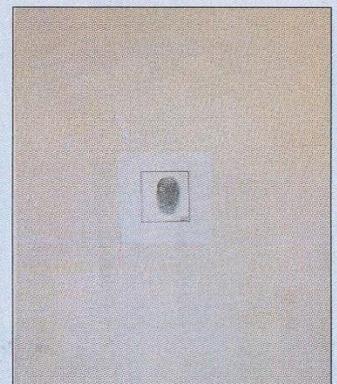


**R**AN AWAY, a man named Gifem, he has almost no hair. He has one-eye glasses, medium-dark skin, cute eyebrows. He's wearing black shorts, black shoes and a short sleeve plaid shirt. He has a roddy cool Thoms silver watch with a silver band. He's sort of short, a little hunky, though you might not notice it with his shirt unbuttoned. He talks sort of out of the side of his mouth and looks at you sideways. Sometimes he has a loud laugh, and lately I've noticed he refers to himself as "mother."

Untitled from "Runaways" by Glenn Ligon, 1993. Lithograph, 16 by 12 inches. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine. ©Glenn Ligon; courtesy of the artist, Luhning Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London. To create this work, Ligon asked friends to describe him as if he were missing, and then he paired the words with images from historical broadsides and newspaper advertisements seeking to locate escaped slaves.



"Emmett at Twelve Months #3" by Byron Kim, 1994. Egg tempera on panel, 17 by 14½ by ¾ 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 pat categorization of race in terms of simple hues like "black" or "white."



"Self Portrait [for *The New Yorker* profile]" by Robert Rauschenberg, 1964. Ink and graphite 11 7/8 by 8 7/8 inches. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York. ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York City. Rauschenberg submitted this work as his official portrait to accompany a profile on him written by Calvin Tomkins in the February 1964 issue of *The New Yorker*.