

Exhibit of the week**This Is a Portrait if I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today**

Bowdoin College Museum of Art,
Brunswick, Maine, through Oct. 23

“You might not recognize the subjects in *This Is a Portrait if I Say So*, but they’re there,” said Taylor Dafoe in *BlouinArtinfo.com*. The focus of Bowdoin College’s impressive new exhibition is American portraiture, but the show doesn’t include a single face or human figure. Instead, the more than 60 works—paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations—convey their subjects’ identities through more abstract or symbolic means. Asked in 1915 to make a portrait of American photographer Alfred Stieglitz, the French avant-garde painter Francis Picabia produced an image of a playfully deconstructed camera. And when Paris gallery owner Iris Clert invited artists to contribute portraits of her for a 1961 show, Robert Rauschenberg submitted a last-minute telegram reading, “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.” The show’s scope is vast—encompassing both early dadaism and one contemporary artist’s Google searches—but its message couldn’t be simpler: “No matter how exactly lifelike or puzzlingly abstract” the art we create, we create art “to understand each other, and ourselves.”



Marsden Hartley's portrait of Gertrude Stein

Gertrude Stein “got the ball rolling,” said Judith Dobrynski in *The Wall Street Journal*. Her 1909 experimental text portrait, *Pablo Picasso*, begins “One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming” and carries on in that convoluted fashion for two pages. The work is devoid of physical description “but, it must be admitted, is not a bad characterization of Picasso.” Stein was in turn depicted by Marsden Hartley’s *One*

Portrait, One Woman (1916). A teacup suggests the hospitality she offered at her famous Paris salon, and a red, white, and blue palette evokes the U.S. and French flags. Edward Steichen then captured Hartley in a 1922 tempera-and-ink image that he called *Mushton Shlushley, the Lyric Poet and Aestheticurean*. The difficulty with such works is that a viewer can’t judge whether they truly capture a person’s essence. Many pieces in the show are products of close relationships between artist and subject. Is Eleanor Antin’s 1970 sculptural tribute to dancer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer—a stationary exercise bike fitted with a basket, flowers, and a horn—perceptive or trite? “Without a key provided by the artists, we are locked out of this in-world.”

Perhaps we’re meant to feel destabilized, said Sebastian Smee in *The Boston Globe*. For 1999’s *Butterfly Kisses*, Janine Antoni applied thick black mascara to her eyelashes and brushed them 2,248 times against a sheet of paper. The work suggests intimacy, but it also generates such a powerful awareness that the artist is elsewhere that the feeling almost hurts. The experience reflects a truth that runs throughout the exhibition: “When you depict someone with an image of things that are connected with a person but not actually that person, you are really evoking his or her absence.”