

Explorations in Portraiture

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This summer, I spent nine weeks on Bowdoin's campus, pursuing an independent project in portraiture and abstract sculpture. During this time, I had 24-hour access to a studio space, in which I created drawings and paintings of myself and others and experimented with sculptural forms. This project gave me the opportunity to create portraits from life, which pushed me to develop a quicker and more confident eye and hand. Over the course of the summer, I explored different impulses and trajectories within my studio practice. I pushed myself to achieve sensitive but concise portraits, and I developed a distinct but related body of abstract sculptures.

I painted dozens of portraits of friends and acquaintances who came into my studio. Most of the pieces are modestly sized, between 14" x 11" and 24" x 18", which worked well for the pace of the portraits and the scale of my marks. I mainly used acrylic paint, which dries quickly to a matte, workable surface; later in the summer, I also used oil paint, which can be modeled and adjusted during its slow drying time. In the past, I've often used photographic references for portraits, but this summer, I found that working from life allows me to more subtly capture shades of demeanor and expression on the human face. I think of these portraits as artifacts of my extended interaction with the sitter.

Since each sitter spent no more than a few hours in the studio, I began to value concise mark making, weaning myself off of hesitations and second-guesses. Larger brushes and palette knives freed my hand to make bolder strokes, allowing me to capture more information in a single motion. I worked with bold colors, using direct observation as a starting point and then allowing the established color relationships to influence later color choices. The presence of another person in the studio, coupled with the knowledge of my limited time, compelled me to make quicker decisions about colors and mark-making, and many of my strongest paintings from the summer are those which bear the fewest marks. For this reason, I often created two or more paintings in a single session, so that I could build on the observations from the first painting in order to more effectively construct the next.

Although I found working from life to be exciting and fulfilling, it often presented challenges. At times, I needed to remind myself to slow down and observe carefully rather than falling into formulaic patterns of marks or color choices. Pushing through these moments of self-doubt was a humbling but ultimately rewarding part of my summer.

Self-portraiture provided a different challenge. At the beginning of the summer, I worked with charcoal to capture, in a series of drawings, certain facial expressions that I assumed. This process helped me to realize that self-portraiture is a highly selective, performative act. I found myself with a wealth of possibilities, able to emphasize or downplay aspects of myself through choices such as lighting, clothing and glasses, the angle of the mirror, and facial expressions. I continued to deal with these choices as I switched from charcoal to paint, which offered further expressive choices in the realm of color. This summer helped me to recognize the crucial differences between the solo performance of a self-portrait and the interaction inherent in a portrait of a model.

While I was working on the series of portraits, I also followed a new but insistent impulse to create sculptures. I am drawn to sculptures that encourage the viewer to think about materials or constituent parts in new ways, often through drawing unusual relationships between objects or putting materials through transformative processes. Having used brown paper shopping bags and adhesives to create maquettes for figurative sculptures in the past, I now turned to those materials in their own right. I explored forms made up of twisted strips of paper, following my intuition to create gentle arches and curves, forms which evoke nature without copying from it. The resulting pieces are small and humble, the product of careful making through a repetitive process. Like my self-portraits, these abstracted objects were produced through solitary practice and concentration, and their layered construction reveals the time spent making them.

Along with the small paper sculptures, I created one larger piece with similar forms. For this sculpture, I used nylon stockings filled with soft, foamy materials such as sponges and pool noodles, which I sewed together into a mass of repeated, curving forms. I tightly wrapped the tubes with string and twine, breaking them up into multicolored lumps and bulges. The sculpture is comical yet unnerving, organic in shape while clearly made from synthetic materials. The constituent materials of this sculpture demand a different response from the viewer than do the paper sculptures, but both speak to a series of learned actions repeated over time.

Together, my portraits and sculptures record the different ways that I spent my time this summer. Both aspects of the project prompted deep introspection about the conscious process of making art. I reached a new understanding of the complications of live portraiture and its relationship to other art forms. This summer's work will continue to inform my practice as I investigate future questions in portraiture and sculpture.

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Funded by the Robert and Blythe Edwards Fund for the Arts