SMITHSONIAN’s National Portrait Gallery Expands Notions of Drawing in “Portraiture Now: Drawing on the Edge”

When the word portrait is mentioned, many immediately think of oil paintings of faces. The National Portrait Gallery is committed to expanding visitors’ ideas of portraiture through its programs, including the ongoing series of “Portraiture Now” exhibitions. Through “Portraiture Now: Drawing on the Edge” the museum reconsiders the once-narrow boundaries that defined drawing. It will be open at the museum Nov. 16 through Aug. 18, 2013.

“Drawing has traditionally been a quick sketch, compositional study or memory aid,” said Wendy Wick Reaves, interim director of the Portrait Gallery. “Over the past two decades, contemporary artists have moved to embrace drawing with new enthusiasm and ambition. ‘Portraiture Now: Drawing on the Edge,’ reveals this trend with a variety of approaches.”

The six artists included in the show expand the definitions of drawing and portraiture. Probing the intersection between drawing and photography, painting, video, textual writing and computer technology, these artists show a commitment to direct, immediate, highly personal marks on materials. Each of them employs a painstaking technique; their meticulous, repetitive actions result in a contemplative, almost meditative, engagement with process that adds a psychological depth to their work.

The show features the works of these artists:

- Mequitta Ahuja casts herself as a character in a mythic drama in this series of drawings. In self-portraits she suggests that identity is not only fluid but represents a layering of different guises. She employs hand stamps, paints with brushes and draws directly onto the surface she has collaged.
Mary Borgman befriends the subjects of her large-scale portraits during an initial photo shoot, and then spends hours alone in her studio smudging, erasing and reworking her rich charcoal images. Attuned to the subtleties of self-presentation—including posture, clothing and ornaments—Borgman presents highly individualized portrayals of her ethnically diverse subjects.

Adam Chapman explores the role of memory and imagination with friends and family. His animated drawings consist of lines and patches of color that become portraits before once again separating. His images are projected against a sheet of archival paper inserted between the screen and LED illumination, tying the digital work to drawing.

Ben Durham uses mugshots of people from his hometown as inspiration for drawings. The drawings are created entirely from words layered to create shadows and are his recollection of everything he has been told about a subject.

Till Freiwald pushes the medium of watercolor to new limits with his highly detailed portraits. Starting with life sittings, he sketches and photographs his subjects and then puts these preliminary works aside to rely on his memory. Freiwald painstakingly crafts the final artwork on paper over many months, layering his medium to achieve a luminosity that captures the texture and glow of human skin. (Watercolor is traditionally categorized as drawing by art museums.)

Rob Matthews creates highly detailed graphite drawings that mingle faith and spirituality, personal identity and his southern roots. Matthews asks his subjects to think of nothing while he records them, and he then works from record photographs.

The exhibition curators are Reaves; Brandon Brame Fortune, chief curator; Anne Collins Goodyear associate curator of prints and drawings; Frank H. Goodyear III, associate curator of photographs; Lauren Johnson, curatorial assistant; Dorothy Moss, assistant curator of painting and sculpture; and David C. Ward, historian.


This exhibition has been made possible through the Rebecca Houser Westcott Fund for Portraiture Now; the Abraham and Virginia Weiss Charitable Trust, Amy and Marc Meadows; and the Paul M. and Christine G. Wick Fund.
Educational Programming

Visitors may meet the artists on select Saturdays during the exhibition. Gallery360 offers visitors and artists a chance to discuss the works in the gallery. These will take place at 2 p.m. on the dates listed below. Visitors gather in the F Street lobby, near the exhibition entrance.

Jan. 12, 2013 Matthews
March 9, 2013 Durham
May 11, 2013 Borgman
July 13, 2013 Chapman
July 20, 2013 Ahuja

The Portrait Gallery’s dynamic “Portraiture Now” series explores the art of portrayal. The series has considered topics such as Asian American identity, the power of community, photography featured in magazines, hip-hop and memory and how they have influenced or been influenced portraiture. This is the seventh exhibition.

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery tells the history of America through the individuals who have shaped its culture. Through the visual arts, performing arts and new media, the Portrait Gallery portrays poets and presidents, visionaries and villains, actors and activists whose lives tell the American story.

The National Portrait Gallery is part of the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture at Eighth and F streets N.W., Washington, D.C. Website: npg.si.edu. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000.

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