Beauty: Which One Of Us Is We?

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Artist Statement

"And that is just the point... how the world, moist and beautiful, calls to each of us to make a new and serious response. That's the big question, the one the world throws at you every morning. "Here you are, alive. Would you like to make a comment?"

-Mary Oliver ¹

To say that someone or something is beautiful is to admit to yourself and others that the object of your gaze has the ability to give intense pleasure and deep satisfaction to the mind and body. It is my goal to change the social idea that beauty is a physical manifestation of perfection. My portraits challenge this sense of beauty and cause the viewer to question his or her own ideas of what can and cannot be called beautiful.

The portraits in my newest body of work are renditions of real people. My paintings begin as blind contour drawings, a process in which I look only at my subject and not at the drawing surface, in order to carefully capture each curve, line and wrinkle of the individuals. By using this technique I am better able to accurately, and with greater sincerity, portray the unique characteristics of each person. In my work, I try to balance truthfulness with the visual pleasure found in exploring intricate line and intense color. It is because of this balance that my portraits can be seen as having beauty.
Pleasure is also derived from the simple fact that some of these portraits are humorous. To an even greater extent than the paintings, the engraved portraits are meant to inspire thoughts of playfulness, ridiculousness, awkwardness, absurdity and frailty. The hand bound book consists of a collection of these engravings printed alongside statements that are playful and absurd. Laughter, like beauty can also be intensely pleasurable both intellectually and emotionally.

Bibliography

Beauty: Which One Of Us Is We?

Beauty is a loaded word. One person's beautiful is another's grotesque. Beauty is not simply an aesthetic quality; it is a value that we as a society hold with reverence next to truth, goodness and justice.¹ During the 17th and 18th centuries, the attainment of beauty was seen as the only reason for the existence of art.² Harmony, balance and perfection were synonymous with beauty and artistic excellence. The desire for perfection and beauty in art reflected humanity's desire for perfection within itself.

Eric Kandel, author of the book *The Age of Insight*, sought to discover exactly how human brains respond to beauty and ugliness in art. Kandel notes that by nature, we are instinctively drawn to the human face, especially the eyes.³ Infants and adults are hard wired to be able to recognize and respond to a person's gaze and facial expressions. A direct gaze stimulates the dopaminergic reward system, which makes you feel pleasure. In contrast, an averted, sad or angry gaze stimulates the avoidance emotions, such as fear or disgust.⁴ During a biological study of the mechanisms in our brain that are known to account for our sense of beauty, scientist John O'Doherty and his colleagues studied the brains of several groups of people and found that when confronted with a smiling, attractive image of a face, a lovely landscape or an enticing still life, the pleasure center of the brain was activated, which caused the participant to feel attracted to the image. When confronted with an emotionally charged or unattractive image of a face, landscape or still life, the *motor* region of the brain was

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² Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
activated, which created a desire in the participants to avoid or distance themselves from the image. ⁵ Through Kandel’s research, we can ascertain that the perception of beauty begins as an unconscious, neurological reaction to particular stimuli that, through generations of evolution, exposure and reinforcement, have become the standard way of interpreting beauty. Because this neurological process stimulates the dopaminergic reward system, humans, being the pleasure seekers that they are, will continue to obsess over and become infatuated with the sensation of beauty. My portraits break with society’s notion of ideal beauty and instead offer the beholder another way of experiencing visual pleasure; through humor and the observation of human frailty (See Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Michelle Adler, "Shartung", oil on canvas, detail, 2013

⁵ Ibid.
The questions that beg to be asked are these: Why do we see beauty in some things, and not others? Is beauty in art merely subjective to each individual or is there room for objective beauty? Can we learn to see beauty in those things that society and our own biology have determined are ugly? The philosopher David Hume offered one possible answer to these questions in his writings from “Of the Standard of Taste,”

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others.\(^6\)

Although Hume makes a plausible argument, he is not entirely correct. If everything that everyone experiences as beautiful is beautiful, then the word itself loses its meaning.\(^7\) On the other hand, if the experience of beauty is merely objective, with no chance for a subjective interpretation, then its value becomes brittle, residing only on its surface. The solution to this problem lies in the viewer’s ability to combine a subjective response and an objective observation. This effort, along with an understanding of the underlying meaning of the subject makes for a deeper and more satisfying experience.

As I stated earlier, my goal is to challenge the social idea that beauty resides in physical perfection. Those things that are seen by society as ugly, grotesque and deformed are discarded when they should be understood and appreciated. The portraits that I have painted and the engravings that I have carved represent a body of


\(^7\) Ibid.
work that brings into question the ways in which beauty and ugliness are perceived. With my portraits, I am asking the viewer to accept their initial reaction, regardless of whether or not it is attraction or revulsion, and to contemplate the reasons why they have made their judgments. The experience of beauty can be triggered by many different things; humor, absurdity, and playfulness are just a few. This body of work relies on the idea that pleasure can be experienced through the perception and contemplation of the ridiculous and the awkward (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Michelle Adler, "Vanessa (arranging her face)", oil on canvas, 2013
Inspiration for this body of work came about during a lesson on blind contour that I was teaching. I had not attempted blind contour drawing since my years as an undergraduate and found that I enjoyed the process much more than my students did. I began using this technique during my personal studies and discovered that I had the ability to create portraits that were both true to the model’s form, and awkwardly grotesque. With my ink portraits, features would begin to distort, hands would become large and deformed; legs became twisted and elephantine. Although these drawings were distorted, in many ways they were more true to the individual than if I had used a traditional portraiture drawing technique. They began to develop a style of their own that transcended the strict realism for which I had previously strived (See Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Michelle Adler, "Figure Study", ink on paper, 2013
A major source of inspiration for my blind contour style has been the drawings of Heinrich Kley. Although Kley began his career as a capable academic artist in Munich, he found his true calling as a cartoonist for the German humor periodical *Simplizissimus.* His ink on paper drawings are urgent and gestural. His lines are feverish and yet there is elegance to his style and an aptitude for visual storytelling that is almost magical in its beauty (See Fig. 4). Kley used humor, satire, eroticism, and fantasy in his cartoons. Some of his images are grotesque, and many are wonderfully, beautifully absurd (See Fig. 5).

![Fig. 4: Heinrich Kley, "Smile Please", ink on paper](image)

![Fig. 5: Heinrich Kley, "Elephant", ink on paper](image)

The blind contour ink drawings that I had been working on inspired a new kind of creativity with my wood engravings. Before this moment, I had not yet attempted to

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9 Ibid.
I engrave portraits onto my blocks, but the idea of taking blind contour into printmaking intrigued me. With my engravings, I drew the portrait onto my block of wood using the same blind contour method as with my ink drawings. Once drawn, I then reinterpreted the image using traditional engraving techniques.

Fig. 6: Michelle Adler, "Lilith in Knit Cap", engraving, 2013
The printed images that developed contained a level of humor and awkwardness that I had never before been able to achieve (See Fig. 6 and 7).

Fig. 7: Michelle Adler, "Sierra in Great White Shark T", engraving, 2013

Taking inspiration from the humorous cartoons of Kley, I decided to print a series of thirteen engraved portraits and hand bound them in a hard cover book titled "Which One Of Us Is We?" In addition to the prints, I included text within the book; the theme of absurdity, playfulness and awkwardness came together harmoniously with this
collection. Each of the thirteen pages of text related to a specific engraved portrait. My two daughters participated in this project by inventing captions to go along with each image. I then took their words and combined them in new ways to create humorous, nonsensical phrases. My intention with this book was to combine the overall aesthetic beauty found in the book binding and printmaking processes with absurdity, humor, and awkwardness in such a way as to invoke a feeling of pleasure.

The creation of my wood engravings led me to change the style in which I painted portraits. With my paintings, I chose a model to sit for me and then, using the blind contour technique, drew my subject using silver point, which is a thin silver wire that makes light gray marks on primed canvas. Once my subject was drawn, I chose a small paintbrush to go over every mark that was made with silverpoint. Taking cues from the carved lines in my engravings, I then used that small brush to make thin, brightly colored lines that followed the contours of the model’s form. I focused on every wrinkle, blemish and crooked curve of each sitter’s face. Using my knowledge about how the human brain perceives beauty, I focused much of my attention on the areas around the eyes and mouth. Scrutinizing these areas, painting every fold and freckle and exaggerating some of the lines is a technique that is masterfully used by the painter Ivan Albright. I first saw an Albright painting in the Hirshhorn museum in Washington D.C. in 2009. The painting was “The Farmer’s Kitchen” and from the moment I encountered this painting, I was mesmerized by Albright’s unflinching ability to portray age and decay in a beautiful manner (See Fig.8).
Albright is known as the painter of beautiful decay.\textsuperscript{10} I take inspiration from his ability to truthfully portray the effects that a difficult, work-filled life have on the human body. Albright painstakingly recorded each line, wrinkle and imperfection in his models. The colors that he chose for each model added a sense of melancholy, and grotesqueness to each portrait, yet one cannot help but see how beautiful truth and pain can be. The reason that I am drawn to Albright’s portraits is because I can relate to the vulnerability, strength and determination of the individuals; a determination to carry on despite the erosion of age and hardship. The way in which Albright’s old woman in “The Farmer’s Kitchen” sits hunched in her chair, hands raw and bent from the hard life of

domestic labor, recalls within my memory an image of my own grandmother, blind and with heart failure, still kneading bread for the family dinner. In the painting "The Vermonter (If Life Were Life There Would Be No Death)" (See Fig. 9), Albright sought to make the painting more "real" than real so that "reality seems by comparison a misty dream, an untruth against a truth."  In my paintings, I strive for a similar form of truth and beauty. By using the blind contour technique, I am able to bring to each portrait a real, true sense of the person as an individual. Blind contour causes me to distort each figure in a way that is not unlike caricature. Although the figures are distorted and exaggerated, each portrait resembles the sitter in an honest and unapologetic way.

Fig. 9: Ivan Albright, "The Vermonter (If Life Were Life There Would Be No Death)," oil on hardboard, 1966-67

My paintings become beautiful because they are true to the individual. The beholder of these paintings can experience beauty in the unflinching ridiculousness of

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11 Ibid.
the portraits. They are meant to inspire contemplations about the relationship between what we think of as having beauty and what we actually experience (See Fig. 10).

Fig. 10: Michelle Adler, "Self-Portrait with Scarf", oil on canvas, 2013
In this body of work, humor plays a significant role in the experience of beauty. Humor is a mediating factor, a bridge between the artist and the beholder. When seen as a whole, this body of work is meant to inspire in the viewer contemplations on the dichotomy of strength and frailty of the subjects in the portraits, as well as the strength and frailty of their own existence. The subjects of my paintings are individuals, each having their own sense of beauty, and each experiencing their own struggle with age and decay.
Bibliography


