PLATO'S SHADOWS

By Jackie Tice

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Advisor: Nancy Nichols-Pethick

Committee Members: Fran Lattanzio

Alden Cavanaugh
Plato's Shadows

Plato described reality as akin to being chained facing a cave wall. Reality was behind you where you could not see and was related to you only by the shadows it cast before you. The question of what constitutes reality is a debate that has raged since Plato's time, and continues today. Bacon stated, "Those who aspire not to guess and divine, but to discover and know; who propose not to devise fabulous words of their own, but to examine and dissect the nature of this very world itself, must go to the facts themselves for everything." ¹

The essential question for any portrait artist is whether the painting simply records the outer, visible surface of a person—as in John Singer Sargent's view of a portrait being "a painting of someone where something has gone a little wrong around the mouth" or whether the work provides insight into the character of the sitter, some essence of being.² In Greek art the portrait had less to do with the sitter's appearance and more to do with conveying the person's title and position in society.³ Jacob Burckhardt describes this as a "balance between likeness and higher concept."⁴ The definitions of portrait are as wide and varied as are the styles, techniques, and mediums used to execute them. One such definition would be, "the representation—line for line—in profile, or in bust- or full-length, of the specific exterior physiognomy of a man, woman, or child."⁵ While quite verbose, it doesn't provide a fully encompassing picture of the genre of portraiture. For myself, I define the portrait as an image created by an

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¹ John Varriano, *Caravaggio the Art of Realism* (Pennsylvania State University, 2006), 13
² Sandy Nairne, *The Portrait Now* (Yale University Press, 2006), 7
³ Andreas Beyer, *Portraits a History*, trans. Steven Lindberg (Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2003), 18
⁴ IBID., 26
⁵ John Klein, *Matisse Portraits* (Yale University Press, 2001), 3
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artist, where the artist is engaged with the personality and characteristics of the
individual. While this definition is no more encompassing than any other, it serves as
the basis for my work.

While the genre of portrait painting is an ancient one, it remains a central theme
in contemporary art for artists like Chuck Close and Andrew Wyeth. I see the
similarities as well as differences between the Close's work and my own. Known for his
large-scale portraits of friends and fellow artist Close had this to say about the process of
painting a portrait: "I don't worry about likeness because the painting looks more like
the person than the photograph does. I have never quite figured out why that happens
but it must be that since I have so much time working on it I'm putting in a kind of
nuanced inflection rather than making an absolutely direct translation. They almost
always end up looking more like the person." 6 I identify with this statement; like Close
I begin with photographic references. At a certain point; however, I abandon the photo
in favor of sense memories. Close continues to use the photographic source throughout
his process. In his more recent works he has begun to abstract the individual grids of his
photo references. This creates a pixelization of the image, similar to a digital image
(Fig.24). The individual abstract squares merge into a recognizable image as the viewer
moves far enough from the work. As the viewer moves closer, the pixelization becomes
dominant and the "portrait" becomes lost to viewer. I, too, use a push pull but to a
different effect. My use of complementary colors, glazing, and now surface texture
creates a depth that is less reliant on abstraction and more on optical mixing of color.

6 Andreas Beyer, Portraits a History, trans. Steven Lindberg (Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2003), 381
Recently I have been incorporating abstract techniques into my work. In the painting *Jenna* (Fig. 3) I have added an unusual tool to my painting arsenal: a squeegee cake decorator. Using a technique similar to one used by Gerhardt Richter, I have textured the wall behind the figure in this painting (Fig. 6 and 7). My continuing research has led me to videos of Richter at work with this technique.

My recent study of one of my earliest painting influences - the Dutch master Johannes Vermeer – has shown me that many of his paintings has similarly textured surfaces. I use the technique to provide a spatial depth and realism to my sitter’s environment. However, it is the relationship with my sitter that I really want to impart to the viewers. The artist’s relationship to the model lead me to explore the works of Andrew Wyeth, specifically the *Helga Suite* (Fig 9). There is an intimacy in these paintings that no doubt developed through the 15 year collaboration between Wyeth and his model. Like Wyeth, I set up informal and casual spaces for my models. I compose by juxtaposing the organic curves of the figure with the geometric lines and planes created by walls, doors, and windows. I also tend to choose my models based on my personal relationship with them as opposed to more aesthetic considerations.

Milton Glaser stated “People will engage with an image more if they have a puzzle to unravel. If you just show them then they don’t absorb as much because they are not engaged with the piece.” A quick comparison of my current paintings to work completed only three years ago clearly illustrates this. In the painting *Afternoon Shift* (Fig. 1) the model is seated in a room in front of several large windows. The figure

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7 John Wilmerding, Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Suite (Abrams, 1987), 19
is surrounded by details of her environment, both interior and exterior. With her face turned away and expression hidden from us, it is the details that inform us about her. The recent work titled *Rebecca* (Fig. 2) stands in stark contrast to this earlier painting. Here the model is presented in an exterior setting, her facial expression is clearly visible, and her environment has essentially been reduced to a color-field. The emphasis has moved from the environment to the model. The environmental details no longer inform the viewer, so they must focus on the model's countenance. In both paintings the gaze of the model does not meet that of the viewer leaving it up to the viewer to determine whether the model is aware she is being observed.

While Close, Vermeer, and Wyeth may seem quite diverse, the influence of each can be seen in much of my work. Close's portraits tend to decontextualize and isolate the subjects where as Wyeth uses composition and environment to reveal his subject. This accentuates the viewer's perception that the sitter is contemplating something that he/she (viewer) is not privy to. Darkened rooms and directed light suggest private introspection. My painting *Rebecca* (Fig. 2) shows the influences of all three. The large presence of Rebecca's face in the composition invokes an immediate comparison to some of Chuck Close's more famous works. The color palette and the model's diverted gaze owe no small nod to works like Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Fig. 8). Even though the setting is an exterior, the composition places the viewer in an intimate space much like the works of Wyeth from his *Helga Suite* (Fig. 9).

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My initial technical influences were the Flemish and Renaissance masters. I had no access to the originals, and therefore was forced to study their works through the analysis of color plates in art history books. This led to an incomplete picture of their work; it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully understand both the technique and the impact of this type of painting from the limited scale of photographic reproduction. However, intense study of Flemish masters like Vermeer led me to incorporate their basic glazing technique, adapting for modern materials.

Like the early Renaissance painters I create an underpainting, establishing color values using a neutral color and turpentine. Using a rag I wipe out areas of paint to create lighter but still toned areas. I establish the location of the darkest color by using black, and the lightest with white. Ultimately there should only be a few small spots of these last colors. This establishes the contrast of the painting, and when I paint the second layer using the local color this keeps me from losing the contrast. From there, I start adding glazes of color on top of the paint to increase the visual depth. By using colors mixed with their complements, I heighten each color's ability to visually push against another without becoming inharmonious in the overall painting. I paint in opposing colors, using purple and yellow, then orange and blue, and red and green. As I continue to glaze, I gradually use less blended colors in favor of pure pigments, while at the same time increasing the ratio of medium to paint. This process is inherently time-consuming and intense, but creates a work of great visual depth.

Recently I have had the opportunity to study the actual works of Oliver Dennet Grover (Fig. 10) and Ruth Pratt Bobbs (Fig.15). While not members of the Flemish
School, they were inspired by the same masters and had the opportunity to see some of those works in person. Grover actually had some training in the academic system which would have given him a direct lineage to some of the techniques of those very masters. The impact of experiencing work first hand can't be underestimated. I find myself dry brushing the colors together to create a more dynamic painting. The juxtaposition of sharp edged and dry brushed colors as well as the inherit softness of glazing has brought a new dimension to my work.

My painting Cynthia (Fig.22) shows the direct influence of Oliver Dennet Grover's painting Harem Girl (Fig. 10). Highlights in the hair as well as on the lips (Fig. 21) and chin use thicker brushwork, similar to the reflection in Harem Girl (Fig. 11 and 13). Also the paint on the skin is kept smooth in contrast to the texture in some of the details and highlights. In my painting Jenna (Fig.3) I have appropriated the basic composition of Ruth Pratt Bobbs Spanish Shawl (Fig. 15), to suit my own style. I have used natural lighting and slightly altered the stance of the subject. Jenna looks out from the picture, but not at the viewer. In this work I have begun to explore the paint thickness in the wall behind the figure as well as in the pattern in the shawl (Fig.4 and 5). Like the flowers in Bobbs' Spanish Shawl (Fig. 18 and 19), the pattern is only visible from a certain distance. When viewed up close they both appear as clumps of thick paint on the canvas.

What makes a picture more than just a static two-dimensional work is the function of composition. The Greeks employed the golden mean to establish harmonious compositions, and this method saw a resurgence during the Renaissance. By using an algorithm of arc, horizontal, diagonal and vertical lines on the canvas, I establish groups
of compositional fulcrums. On these points I arrange compositional elements to create a
dynamic flow to the work. By cropping the image at unusual points, the viewer is led
to the subject's face.

If there is one word that people would use to describe the personality of the sitter
for *Wanda* (Fig. 20) it would be gregarious. But having come to know her I have seen
beneath her outgoing personality, and have glimpsed moments of great sadness. It was
this quality of unguarded vulnerability that I wanted to capture in my painting. The warm
afternoon light illuminating half of her face gives a striking contrast to the cool bluish
color illuminating the back of her head. The placement of her face to the far right of the
painting, with the figure looking right, would normally leave a painting unbalanced.
However, leaving three-fourths of the painting to the “room” provides balance and
invites interpretation by the viewer.

While I have devised or incorporated a number of “systems” for my paintings,
that does not mean that I am restricted to a formulaic method of painting. These systems
serve only as a starting point to my work. By providing a firm foundation, they allow
me the freedom to observe and improvise. As the individual works evolve I remain
attentive to how the viewer’s eyes may move about the composition. I am conscious of
the figure, the negative space, the proportions of each, and their placement in the picture
plane. Everything plays a part and relates to every other part. Smaller canvases would
compress and distort the nature of the work and diminish its impact, so I prefer a larger
format.
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As I stated previously, one of my earliest influences were the paintings of Vermeer. His style and use of color to depict a certain light and create mood drew me to his work. This light not only illuminates, but informs the viewer about the sitter. I prefer the natural light of early morning or late afternoon to illuminate my subject. People have commented that my work seems melancholy. I prefer to think that I am painting these people between decisions. No matter what, the work must exert power over the imagination. My use of chiaroscuro heightens expression. With new explorations into texture, I am exploring different ways of depicting light.

I like the idea of working with people who are around me. I like the subjects of my paintings to be themselves, not posing. These everyday people have lives that interest me. The anonymity of the crowd, one of the pitfalls of modern life, creates an intriguing genre: the unknown, but very particular, individual. These individuals inspire me to consider them as subjects. Most models, upon seeing the work, exclaim about how beautiful I make them. I tell them I did not make them beautiful, they were already beautiful. I do not seek outward beauty, but rather I look for the inner workings of a person that allow for moments of beauty. I believe Oskar Kokoschka said it best: “I paint whatever lingers in my memory, whether that is the flash of the eye in someone's face, a small change in expression that betrays an inner movement. For that reason I can only paint portraits of people in whom I was struck by something worth seeing-no men covered with medals, or female clothes, horses decorated with strings of pearls.” 10 I do not seek the classical ideal of beauty. I seek to elevate the individual as paramount.

10 Andreas Beyer, Portraits a History, trans. Steven Lindberg (Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2003), 360
This emphasis on the individual can be seen in my, Pam (Fig. 23). The subject is a young woman dealing with the loss of her best friend as well as serious health issues of her own. She has a facade of levity, but as I watch Pam work through her grief and struggles, I have seen these defenses fall away and have seen glimpses of her spirituality and her unwavering hope for a better tomorrow.

In today’s world, art that is aesthetically pleasing is often deemed inferior. These works are decried as decorative and somehow of lesser value in the modern world. I recently discovered this quote from Matisse, and I find it to be as relevant today as it was then: “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter—a soothing calming influence on the mind, rather like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue”. Matisse, who was painting between two world wars and major cultural and social changes, was dealing with tragedies and upheaval. Living through tragedy and upheaval left him with a need for balance and a desire to obtain a certain serenity in life through his work. The world today has many parallels to Matisse’s. For example, I recently had a conversation with the owners of Xanadu gallery in Phoenix, Arizona, which opened on September 11, 2001. The attacks on the Twin Towers had been unfolding on the news all morning long, and they debated whether to close or not. Around noon, a woman came in and bought a painting. She told them that with all of the darkness and despair that day, she needed beauty to balance her soul.

11 Herschel B Chipp, Theories of Modern Art (University of California, 1971), 135
Walter Benjamin remarked that, "the portrait becomes after a few generations no more than a testimony to the art of the person who painted it." 12 Whether I have captured a likeness in my painting will quickly become irrelevant, for these pieces to have meaning they must connect to future viewers. The viewer must have a moment of shared experience in order to ensure the works relevance in time. Gottfried Boehm said, "The gaze at the face and body of the other is among the most important human experiences, and for that reason it seems well suited to serve as the enduring source and iconic inspirations. In physiognomy and the body we encounter an energy that answers us, that confirms us, that reinforces us, or that questions us." 13

12 John Varriano, Caravaggio the Art of Realism (Pennsylvania State University, 2006), 94
13 Andreas Beyer, Portraits a History, trans. Steven Lindberg (Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2003), 373
Fig 1. *Afternoon Shift*. Jackie Tice ©2004
Fig. 2 *Rebecca*. Jackie Tice ©2011
Fig. 4. Detail shot of *Jenna*

Fig. 5. Detail shot of *Jenna*

Fig. 6. Detail shot of *Jenna*

Fig. 7. Detail shot of *Jenna*
Fig. 8 *Girl With the Pearl Earring*. Johannes Vermeer. 1667 oil on canvas

44.5cmx39cm Located Mauritshuis, The Hague
Fig. 9 Andrew Wyeth, *Braids*, 1979. Portrait of Helga Testorf
Fig. 10 Oliver Dennett Grover. *Harem Girl* (c.1890s) Swope Art Museum
Fig. 11 Detail of *Harem Girl*

Fig. 12 Detail of *Harem Girl*

Fig. 13 Detail of *Harem Girl*

Fig. 14 Detail of *Harem Girl*
Fig. 15 Ruth Pratt Bobbs. *The Spanish Shawl*. 1911 Swope Art Museum Terre Haute
Fig. 16 Detail of *Spanish Shawl*

Fig. 17 Detail of *Spanish Shawl*

Fig. 18 Detail of *Spanish Shawl*

Fig. 19 Detail of *Spanish Shawl*
Fig. 20 *Wanda*. Jackie Tice. ©2010

Fig. 21 Detail Shot of *Cynthia*
Fig. 22 *Cynthia*. Jackie Tice ©2012
Fig. 23 Pam. Jackie Tice ©2012
Fig. 24 *Maggie*, 1996, Oil on canvas, 30 x 24" (76.2 x 61 cm), Photograph by Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy of PaceWildenstein, New York, © Chuck Close
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