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# Zeitgeist: An Artist's Present Perspective

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Danielle Leventhal

**Zeitgeist: An Artist's Present Perspective**

May 6, 2016

BFA in Studio Art, Concentration in Painting

Washington University in St. Louis

**Abstract:**

This statement is an analysis of my process in creating a zeitgeist collection of painted portraits. The pieces in this collection began with a live, in-person session with each of my subjects, all of whom are my friends: females ages 18-22 at Wash.U. An interest in the brain and mirror neurons, as well as Susan Stewart's idea that the face is a "text" that must be read in order to exist, is what enabled these portraits to become a psychological examination of the spirit of our time. The material process of collapsing layers of time, emotions, and thoughts on the canvas was influenced by contemporary and modern portraitists like Alice Neel. The effects of technology on these identities, and the value of a physical, face-to-face presence is examined through my interpretation of the painted zeitgeist figures.

Danielle Leventhal  
BFA Thesis Statement

### **Zeitgeist: An Artist's Present Perspective**

“**Zeitgeist** [tsahyt-gahyst] noun, *German*. 1. The spirit of the time; general trend of thought or feeling characteristic of a particular period of time” (“zeitgeist”).

I began this project by raising the question: How does the artist depict the human being, in all their mystery and depth, in a single frame? What grew naturally out of this prompt is a zeitgeist collection; what could be considered a catalogue or database of identities. Exploring color theory through the application of paint and layers of mark-making, I portray my friends: females aged 18-22 who are students at Wash.U. Inviting these subjects to sit in my studio for this practice has allowed me to experience first-hand the ability of oil paint as a medium to collapse the layered emotions, thoughts and time that the subjects hold in their visual appearance. The result is my in-the-moment, contemporary understanding of the person at hand. In a fight to build these layers during the time that I have with the live models, I'm also fighting against a stereotype of similarities in these sitters—by expressing my own interpretation of their presence, and reading their faces like a text, I am proving the diversity in their character (Fig. 1). This cycle of working with live subjects and then editing the painting with a photographic reference, from person to image, has grown into a collection.

For as long as I can remember, I've latched onto the expressions of others as a source of comfort. Carefully and consistently observing those around me, the faces that I study have been a reliable resolution to the sensory overload that I experienced at a young age. Noise, technology, bright colors and an explosive amount of environmental subjects to be stimulated by have never fared well with my compulsion to examine everything in sight. I selfishly, perhaps as a survival mechanism, secure my focus on the faces around me to serve as visual cues for my own

emotions and reactions. Of course, this is a natural human phenomenon that happens to everyone because of their brain neurons: picking up on expressions to understand others' feelings. I think my obsession with others' faces comes from the ability to recognize the meaning behind them quickly and to practically mind-read based on a furrowed brow, a slight smile or a flicker of the eye.

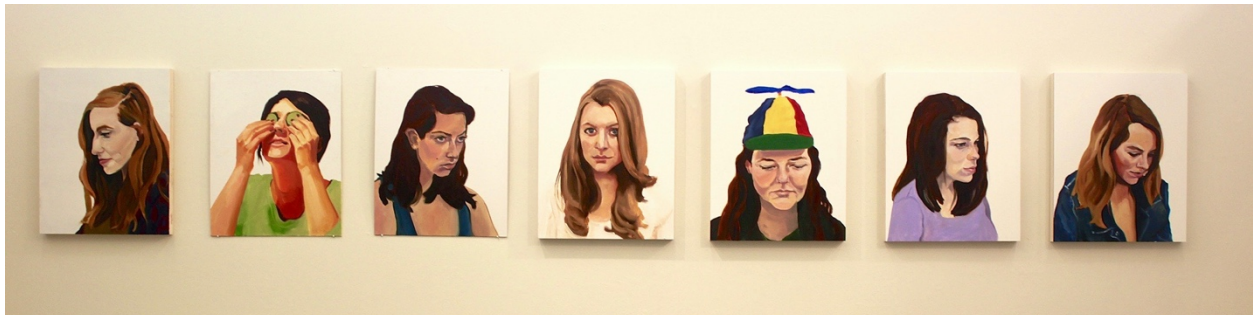


Fig. 1. *Portrait Installation*, 2015. Oil on canvas. Each 16x20 in.

Joan Didion wrote in her essay, *On Keeping a Notebook*, that “however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable ‘I.’” I, too, confess that while portraying the subject in her most comfortable position and capturing her personality in the moment are both imperative to my process, in the end the works have a “common denominator” of the self—they’re *my* interpretation. I also could not agree more with Didion’s creative process of relying heavily on “bits of the mind’s string too short to use, an indiscriminate and erratic assemblage with meaning only for its maker...and sometimes even the maker has difficulty with the meaning.” While Didion jots down snippets of dialogue and compelling observations everywhere in order to make more sense of her experiences, my observations are produced with paint and ink—perhaps just as hastily at first, but then over time a complete identity takes shape on the canvas.

## I. Face to Face

Susan Stewart's idea of the face as the only part of the female body that must be interpreted by others and read like "text" in order to exist has been the inspiration behind my process of interpreting the faces in front of me (Stewart 127). In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Stewart also claims that our reading of each other's expressions and our definitions of the emotions around us are our own mental corrections and editing based on what we see. This "editing" process is crucial to my work. Not only am I consistently editing and analyzing the faces that sit before me in-person, but also in the sense that I revisit the same face multiple times in my own studio practice. Each time I revisit the canvas, I am re-writing the original figure, bringing my fresh perspective in various moments after the immediate observation, and doing some curatorial work. By taking time off from the original face, I have the ability to excise what I found unimportant, and enhance the pieces of the face or expression in the hands that I remember being heightened and intensified by my own understanding of the person (Figs. 2, 3).



Fig. 2. *Profound Governess*, 2016.  
Oil on canvas panel. 16x20in.



Fig. 3. *Morning Circles*. 2015. Oil  
on canvas. 16x20in.

My time with and various personal experiences with the subject before she visits my studio; the small moment in time that I spend capturing their presence in-person; and the few snippets of studio sessions post-visit that I spend reflecting on this experience are all collapsed into the face that appears on each canvas. No amount of photographic references could trump my perceived notion of these people, my memories of the dialogue we shared and the information they felt comfortable sharing with me that day—both physically through her body language and mentally through verbalizing her thoughts. Therefore, it is inevitable that each portrait elicits a specific feeling in the viewer. The feelings across these people are not the same; the accessories that the subjects have chosen to present themselves with all hold a valuable story, their gaze may not have met mine and their hands may have never left the keyboards of their laptops.

Elizabeth Peyton similarly portrays many celebrities, although her intention is not to unveil them as ordinary human beings, but rather to glorify their talent; their ability to become heroic. Depicting friends as well, she relies heavily on photographic references and is a firm



Fig. 4. Elizabeth Peyton. *David Bowie*, 2012. Oil on aluminum veneered panel. 14 x 11 1/4 in

believer that the image of a person is enough—it holds the value and context needed, without manipulation or description. She was quoted in *The New Yorker*: “People make history. They are the way the world moves, and they contain their time. It shows in their faces” (“The Artist of the Portrait”). This idea of faces containing their time validates her use of the photographic image, flattened and condensed, yet enough to suffice for her monotypes and paintings. With a background in photography, Peyton catalogues the figures around her

with a camera, although her work has matured as she has started to use more live models. Both processes and modes of perspective—from life vs. from photography—produce works that adhere to her claim that “Art work expresses what it’s like to be human, and one of the things about being human is time passing” (“The Artist of the Portrait”). Although Peyton’s style of stoic gazes and pale skin with painterly outlines does not match my own exploration with the same materials, I am interested in her intense faith in the face to contain its time. This is a very contemporary, democratic way of perceiving people—as whether they are a celebrity or a close personal friend, Peyton represents all of her subjects with this idea in mind—and it speaks to my pursuit of capturing a zeitgeist database of my own niche.

## II. The White Expanse

The urgency to capture the young woman in front of me is evident in my choice to keep a blank, white canvas in the background. The subjects float freely in an expanse of negative space, allowing me to immediately draw attention to what I find most compelling—to hone in on and build up the pieces of the figure that are important to my understanding of their identity without



Fig. 5. *Hardy, Hearty Cocoon*. 2016. Oil on canvas, 32x44in.



Fig. 6. *Limbs on a Whim*. 2016. Oil on canvas, 32x44in.



Fig. 7. *Pinball Charisma*. 2016. Oil on canvas, 32x44in.



delay. This leeway of uninterrupted canvas allows the viewer to experience the permeability of the physical space that I share with the sitters (Figs. 5, 6, 7). The white background may be empty, but it is full of presence, allowing me to promote and exalt their personality, as well as invite the viewer into the undone areas of the figure. While the sitters are in a free space, most of their natural postures show their true feelings of constraint and awkwardness (Fig. 8). The relationship formed between sitter and artist is symbiotic; people are in need of face-to-face interactions, especially in the contemporary context where identity is so reliant on



Fig. 8. *Modest Hero*. 2016. Oil on canvas, 18x20in.

a ubiquitous technological presence. The technologic presence in these paintings is zeitgeist; it captures this obsession of our times in which we're accustomed to being engaged with devices rather than with each other. By painting my live sitters, I interrupt this cycle of indirect judgment based on a "posted" picture or text. My contemporary portraits of these people serves as a reminder of the value of their physical presence. This white expanse of the physical space I've placed the sitters in connects back to the emptiness of the online space; one may "post" a photo or blurb about about themselves in an effort to upkeep a relationship that is essentially absent of materiality. In contrast to this online void, my white canvas space is teeming with the potential for real interaction.

Alice Neel's boldly authentic portraits, playful explorations and analyses of the figure in order to expose their inner truths have been an inspiration for my work. Neel used a fearless, selective process to exaggerate what she found telling and most expressive in her subjects, with

striking lines and colors against a stark white canvas. “Neel’s self-conscious mobilization of painterly devices—expressive brushstrokes, bold outlines, simplified compositions, and heightened color—was intended not only to mirror the world but to reveal her visceral and personal encounter with its social and political forces” (Garb 23). These visceral encounters are made clear in the way Neel concocts her subjects’ caricature—revealing a comedic and unclouded personality that is vibrant with flaws and bursting with the beauty of their nuances.

Neel’s support of the women’s movement influenced her to paint many powerful women of her time. The accounts of her sitters disclose the way Neel would have them pose for an uncomfortable amount of time while she scrutinized them (Newhall). As I have found in my work, the timid posture dies away in any model that has to sit still for longer than usual. Linda Nochlin, an art historian, was painted by Neel in 1973 as part of a collection of mother-daughter paintings. “In a way, all her portraits embodied the anxieties of their times. They’re portraits of a universal existential anxiety,” Nochlin said (Newhall). Nochlin noted the anxious feeling in all



Fig. 9. Alice Neel, *Andy Warhol*. 1970. Oil on canvas, 60x40in.

of Neel’s work—something that is exemplified by the way she manipulates negative space and leaves body parts unfinished or outlined, as well as their uncomfortably exposed postures. This idea of capturing the emotion of the times is what I hope to do with the series of zeitgeist portraits.

Perhaps one of the most shocking discoveries through Neel’s work is the portrait of *Andy Warhol* (Fig. 9). Sitting peacefully, with his eyes closed and his torso bared, Warhol unmasked his wounds from an attempted murder: trails of

white dashes mark the center of the canvas like a crosshair, representing his stitches and creating a crooked square where he was shot three times between his sagging pecks. Beneath the stitches lies a wanly yellow roll of fat, protected by a corset that he wears around his abdomen. It is hard to believe this is the Andy Warhol who is known in pop culture for the façade of coolness, dark shades and a blonde wig; Neel has successfully broken through that superficiality and self-branding to relentlessly depict his vulnerability and bare his soul, matching the rest of her portraits as a flawed human.

The “existential anxiety” that Alice Neel captures is evident in the niche of my subjects as well—a need to be doing something productive, a need to be seen in a positive light, or just a need to be seen at all (Fig. 10). Each and every one of my sitters couldn’t help but hold their phones throughout the process—hiding it between their thighs or under their chairs—and this



Fig. 10. *Poetic Architect*.  
2016. Oil on canvas. 36x24in.

need to feel connected is evident in all of their expressions. The truth of our age is that everyone has a sense that someone is always hovering over them, ready to swipe to the next story. The irony is that because we are always on these devices, we’re never here in real time. There is less integrity in identity because of the ability to have it vanish with the click of a button—our identity is not all in a concrete, material space, therefore there is a desire to be seen and heard tangibly. This is perhaps why it was so easy for me to find friends who were interested in having an image painted of themselves—an extra perspective on how

they are perceived by others in-person, and a validation that they are, indeed, existing physically at this time.

### III. Stereotypes & Snap Judgments

The contemporary group of women that I have chosen to portray certainly evokes a stereotype for many viewers, and that's because it *is* drawn from such a specific age and place—it is my group of friends. I did not go out and seek models who were racially diverse, but stuck with the characters I already knew. But the negative connotation that comes with portraying young collegiate women is that they all look, dress, and act the same. Studies of the brain show that these judgments are inherent in our being. “Snap judgments about faces arise in an ancient region of the brain that specializes in self-protection...I remind myself that these judgments are good for groups, but they don't have a lot of predictive power at the level of the individual. While we shouldn't judge a book by its cover, we can judge the library by its books” (Pincott). Jena Pincott's library metaphor is valid. If these faces are texts that must be read in order to exist, then the comprehensive collection of texts may be judged after careful deciphering of the individual I've translated. While my style of painting stays at an even keel throughout the project, a diverse set of characters are presented.

An artist who also depicts her very specific niche of friends is Nan Goldin. By photographing friends in their “hard-drugs subculture” in New York, including friends who are



Fig 11. Nan Goldin, *Cookie at Tin Pan Alley, NYC*. 1983. Cibachrome. 30x40in.

transgender, sex workers, and addicts in their everyday life, she reveals a world outside the viewers' that is visually arresting and exciting (Fig. 11). Although her work is much more engrained in exposing an intense, darker side of her personal life, I am fascinated with the category of “diaristic” photography, of which she is considered the pioneer

(“Nan Goldin”). Recording observations daily, much like a diary, becomes an art form when it is exposed to the outside viewer: a peek into this mysterious inner circle that has been captured authentically and in the moment.

I began to distinguish the diversity of character among my portraits by re-titling the works. Rather than titling them by the first name of the subject, I assign a thoughtful insight into my relationship with the sitter: a memory, a nickname, a connection to their passions and emotions in the moment that they visited my studio and beyond that time. I hope that in doing this, the viewer considers these images on a more personal level—a peek into the mind of the human who is portrayed, as well as an awareness of my own human perspective as the artist.

#### IV. Materiality

The materiality and enigmatic quality of oil paint plays a role in portraying these fleeting moments of one’s identity. The fluidity and ability to add and subtract layers on the canvas has become an indispensable tool in my building of the face, hands, and bodily forms that stand out as immediate. Using cold wax and gesso, I add thickness and subtract

unwanted objects in the environment surrounding

my sitters. This comes back to the idea of overstimulation, and depending on paint to focus in on these moments of consideration. The quickness of the live session (usually about an hour and half of sitting) also naturally pares down the shapes and forms that I see, both in-person and through photos. Alex Katz’s work has been a point of comparison because of his simplicity and similar interest in the face. Katz’s portraits are timeless in that they employ space like a collage,

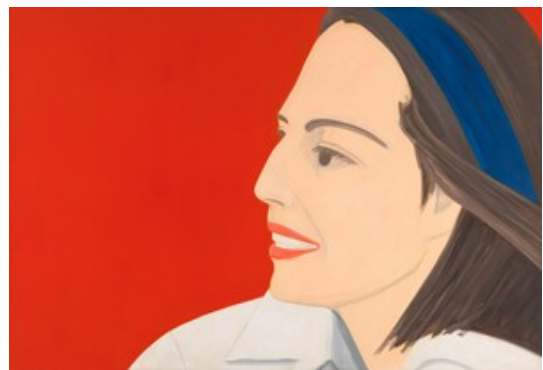


Fig. 12. Alex Katz, *The Red Smile*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 78 7/8 x 115 in.

using delineated, cut-out shapes, creating characters that have a “pictorial immediacy” (Ratcliff 19). They are so flattened that they become a “boundless realm that pushes a motif right up against the picture plane—a formal effect that becomes, for us, the experience of absolute awareness” the artist once described as the point of his art (19). Katz’s goal to unleash absolute awareness is aggressive and eye-catching (Fig. 12). His use of the infinite space is more horizontal than my work, as I tend to build upwards out of the canvas, rather than spreading from edge to edge. I hope to create the same sense of immediacy with my portraits of just the face, although the texture of the paint and its three-dimensionality plays a part in that desire. The zeitgeist collection becomes more personal as I include more negative space around the sitter, giving the viewer a better understanding of my relationship to the woman I am portraying in the space that this “reading” took place.

## **V. Post-Perspective**

During this process, many of my friends approached me about purchasing the work after the thesis project ends. This experience of getting to know these sitters as well as myself, has been gratifying enough that I would feel uncomfortable taking more from my subjects. This notion of gift-giving and sharing will be perpetuated with my decision to have these women make a donation of any amount to a charity of my choice in return for their portrait. I decided that City Faces, a Wash.U. owned program, is the most fitting organization to give back to. The program gives kids living in public housing in inner St. Louis a safe environment to go to every day, either in the architecture school on campus or at the Peabody, to make art, music, and to be tutored in all subjects as an alternative to selling drugs and becoming involved in gangs. This money is going towards school and art supplies, transportation, field trips, rent and the overall

running of this program. My subjects are extremely enthusiastic about this trade-off, as am I.

This reciprocity will maintain the idea that my portraits are more concrete developments of sharing than the images that are “shared” and “posted” online—there is a tangible, physical gift-giving created by this in-person collaboration.

Studying the goals of contemporary and historical artists who focused on portraiture, paired with my scientific exploration of the brain and human emotions, has enriched my experience with my live models. I have come to understand my own relationship to the sitter and how the materials play a part in my reading of their faces and positions. I hope to continue researching artists like Alice Neel who have a time-sensitive touch to their portraiture. I am influenced by the texts that they produce, as the thought process behind each artists’ portraiture seems to be the window to interpreting their work, as well as to understanding the representation of their model. For now, my process aims to focus on the individual’s layered emotions and the profound, abstract inner beings in order to accumulate a collection that is in the spirit of our time. This goal to produce a body of work that is zeitgeist depends on the duality between working alone and with a subject. The time spent away from the models to process and collapse what I’ve gleaned is just as important as being present with the sitter and practicing live- interpretations.

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Fig. 12. Alex Katz, *The Red Smile*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 78 7/8 x 115 in.

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