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# Gesture as Revelation

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Washington University in St. Louis  
Graduate School of Art

**Gesture as Revelation**

by  
Laurel Panella

A thesis presented to the  
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Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

The two divergent paths of fine arts and psychological research come together to demonstrate how physical gesture and facial expression communicates significant meaning regarding human emotion and intention. The conceptual framework of these paintings arises from the artist's engagement with peer-reviewed psychological studies on Affective Science. The paintings balance qualities of both emotional and intellectual thinking, with the goal of calling them forth in equal strength during the viewing experience. The symbolic and representational language of gesture is examined through the painting titled *Precarious Extension*. Dynamics of compassion and affect theory are analyzed through the painting *Transmission of Affect*.

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Introduction

Un-cropped, full-length figures, in a constructed pose, are painted on supported 48 x 62 inch vertically hung panels. When multiple panels are viewed together in a series, a taxonomy of postures results, for *each* portrays a person of a specific ethnicity, body type and numerical age in the same pose. Showing the paintings as a series encourages the analytical process of comparing the gesture in one painting with the gesture of another.

The figures are painted with oils, using a monochromatic range of cool dark grey shading to white, using a matte finish, while the background is painted in a warmer solid shade of light beige. The strokes of the brush are rarely noticeable and are used in subservience to portraying a clear idea of what the person in the painting is doing and if applicable, feeling. This results in a direct, clear delivery of visual information.

The paintings possess a hermetic nature due to the figure's position on the picture plane; the body is never cropped or hidden by other objects and it never touches the edges. This placement isolates the body for close inspection by the viewer and encourages dissection of the form.

Through these paintings I explore how emotion and intention are read through gestures of the body and facial expressions. I am specifically interested in removing the precipitating cause of an action so that the gesture itself carries a feeling of ambiguity. This ambiguity creates various shades of meaning and an environment where multiple interpretations are encouraged.

Historically, figurative works of art rely on gestural aspects of the body to deliver emotional content in a direct one to one fashion: frowning tearful slumping figure = a sad individual. Often however, contemporary artists isolate and manipulate the body's communicative ability to engage more complex ideas. In this thesis, *gesture* is explored

through my work entitled *Precarious Extension* and *compassion*, as seen in my work *Transmission of Affect*.

My work is influenced by my interest in developing an art practice based on research. Traditionally in European culture, art developed as an imitation of nature. It later transformed into the idea that art reflects life. In my paintings, art follows research, more specifically the dynamics of psychological research studies. Weaving the highly verbal practice of research into the highly visual practice of painting allows both the left and right sides of the mind to have a role in making and interpreting art. By infusing my work with qualities found in the imagery and ideas of research articles, space for a dialogue between science and art is created.

## GESTURE & *PRECARIOUS EXTENTION*

Creative Involvement with the Symbolic Language of Gesture

*Precarious Extension* (Figure 1) presents a gesture concerned with ideas of

instability and action. One aspect of a painted figure that never touches the edges and has no ground is that it embodies a feeling of being suspended. The word *suspend* has an interesting array of meanings: to hang by attachment as a chandelier hangs from the ceiling, to attach in order to allow free movement as a door suspended on a hinge, to keep from falling, sinking or forming a deposit as in a solid suspended in particles of liquid, to refrain from forming or concluding indefinitely as in to suspend one's judgment, and to keep the mood or feeling of expectation or incompleteness as in keeping one in suspense or suspending anticipation by making one wait to open a present.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1

In *Precarious Extension*, the figure appears to be literally suspended as in the first definition- to hang by attachment as a chandelier hangs from the ceiling. The depiction of what the figure might have used to hang upon has been removed and the figure appears to hold onto something missing. In the original pose a rope served as the stabilizing force that allowed the individual to bend over and reach below their crouched body without falling. In the painting however, it is not present. This void allows the

posture of the body to absorb full attention from the viewer without distraction while creating a mystery to solve: “How is the body maintaining balance?”

Questioning the dynamics that influence figurative composition, I found information that expanded my thinking. Painting halted poses suggests that meaning has become protracted and that the figures are neither tethered to this world or to another. They are not on earth because their bodies do not conform wholly to the force of gravity.<sup>2</sup> They are not in another world because their clothing and hair, emotionality and physicality, conform too much to this world. The figures appear resigned to this state of being in between. They have things to do and plans to fulfill. Their emotions are available, yet they carry a melancholic detachment. Part of their soul has wandered far from the present like the figure itself is suspended in a lucid dream and cannot quite wake up.

The form of the body however, is in dialogue with issues regarding the inherent asymmetry of the human body. Consider a figure standing upright- the balancing center would be the navel or groin, yet the head is the main sense organ and the seat of reason.<sup>3</sup> The head’s importance therefore challenges the pelvic area’s balancing center. The result is an ambiguity that has over the ages been the inspiration and consternation for artists who represent the human figure. This sort of formal ambiguity represents the antagonism between the animal and spiritual nature of man.

“What is important to remember is that this contact with the unconscious provides a link to a spiritual center to their own past. The navel is not only the seat of divine light, but of illumination, of inspiration- the symbol of birth and reincarnation and the endless chain of



generations.”<sup>4</sup>

In *Precarious Extension*, the figure’s head is bent so low it is in close proximity to the navel and often directly in front of it. The problems of balance and asymmetry have been considered introducing yet another solution to the trajectory– the head and the pelvic/navel are now balanced. With these ideas in mind, a deeper concept begins to emerge. Symbolically this posture, when seen in relation to the gesture of reaching, tethers itself to ideas regarding the attempt to save oneself or another.

I continue to explore how the human body contains the ability to communicate non-verbally using a wide range of physical behaviors. Through posture, proxemics, facial expressions, gestures, eye movements and grooming or style traits we all consciously or unconsciously convey a wealth of information. Body language can be studied to increase one’s sensitivity to physical clues.

When our daily life follows predictable patterns, paying attention to our own body language or that of another, becomes a low priority. There are times however when our observational radars are on high alert. When we are in a state of fear, the exterior presence of another becomes very important. Matters pertaining to passion, money, or a loved one, all create a heightened desire to read the exterior cues of others. Inversely, if we are caught in a state of depression, all concern for behavior and appearance seems to fall away.

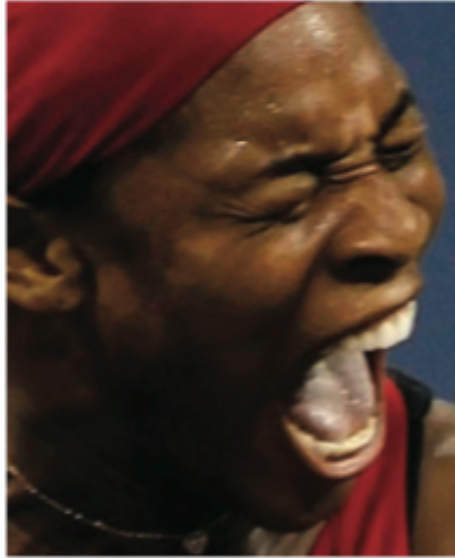


Figure 2

Notice the expression in Figure 2. Is she in agony, infuriated? If you had to guess, you might feel she is in pain. When seeing emotional information on a face, it can feel to the viewer as if they are reading words on a page. When the face is placed in context with the gesture and posture of the body, this metaphorical written description becomes more thorough and accurate. As you can see in Figure 3, the picture is actually one of ecstasy! Serena Williams has just beaten her sister in the 2008 U.S. Open tennis finals.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 3

The gesture in *Precarious Extension* represents a physical response to a circumstance unknown to the viewer. The figure responds through the action of reaching. What interests me here is considering or magnifying how individuals respond to challenges or stressors in their lives, while existing in a state of imbalance or precariousness. What often lies at the heart of these individual responses concerns the idea of risk and how we deal with and understand risk in our day-to-day lives.

The concept of risk has been utilized and defined by many different fields. Financial institutions use the word in relation to the management of money and portfolios. Health practitioners use the word in connection with wellness. A certain patient, for example, may be a high risk for Alzheimer's. Insurance companies assess the risk potential of automobile owners. Risk has also been structured and turned into entertaining TV shows such as *Jack Ass* or *Fear Factor*. The type of risk that interests

me and influences the type of gestural poses I choose, is personal risk. This type of risk often precedes change in an individual's life.

Risk is defined as exposure to the chance of injury or loss, "a particular adverse event occurring during a stated period of time."<sup>6</sup> There are four broad areas, or domains, where risk is most likely to occur: physical, social, ethical and financial. People typically stay within a particular domain when it comes to taking chances. A mountain climber is more likely to also be a hand-glider, but probably not a social risk taker that engages in frequent public speaking.<sup>7</sup>

A test has been created, Domain-Specific Risk-Taking scale, (DOSPERT) that assesses risk taking in multiple domains. If one scores highly in the physical domain, he or she may have average scores in the other ones. The DOSPERT also assesses two other important motivators in risk taking, perceived risks and benefits of risk. In many cases it has been shown that the decision to take a risk is often more dependent on one's appraisal of the risks and benefits rather than on one's appetite for risk in general.<sup>8</sup>

This act of appraising risk is something people do everyday. We check the weather online or look at the sky and decide if we should bring an umbrella to work. We decide between the fast and slow lanes of the highway when heading to buy groceries. We may not be overtly aware that we are assessing risk, but it is occurring even so.<sup>9</sup>

By appraising the various layers of risk taking, a new understanding can be projected onto those who have demonstrated this behavior. In all of its many forms, the urge to expose oneself to an unknown result can become a pivotal life moment. Without such ventures predictability and sameness remain.

Comparing and contrasting Robert Longo's work entitled *Men in Cities* (Figure 4) with my work has helped me clarify aspects of both bodies of work. Longo depicts larger

then life-size drawings of individual men and women in frozen, physically contorted, states. This series is similar to my work in a number of visually formal ways yet differs from my work primarily in conceptual ideation. We both depict the full length, uncropped, figure on a blank background, in black and white, fully clothed and caught in the midst of movement. The overall gestural meaning of the body is ambiguous in both our approaches, allowing the viewer to question the artist's intent, but also to allow the viewer to project their own narrative onto the work.



Figure 4

Our works differ in three main ways: 1) Variety vs. uniformity. The clothing depicted in my work shows a range from casual to semi-formal, Longo's clothing is all semi-formal. The ethnicity in my works shows multiple races, Longo's depicts all Caucasian individuals. 2) Body adroit vs. body awkward. The pose depicted in my work is intentional and graceful while Longo's poses are twisted in a violent manner and convoluted. 3) Psychology source vs. pop culture source. One underlying conceptual

source of my images is psychological research studies whereas Longo embraces the punk rock avenue of pop culture.<sup>10</sup>

My work captures a gestural moment. The captured instant in *Precarious Extension* alludes to the act of reaching for something unknown from a place of awkwardness. It embodies the dynamics of suspension and balance while alluding to more indirect influences of risk. Bringing together all of these ideas and researching the history behind them creates one aspect of what my work represents.

## ART AS RESEARCH

### Influence of Psychological Research

In his book, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*, Graeme Sullivan explains how visual arts research has the capacity to create knowledge that can help us profoundly understand the world we live in. When art making is placed within the culture of research, imaginative practices have the capacity to uncover new truths. The concept “culture of research” is an important distinction due to the connection between the word, “research” and the idea of the scientific method, with its emphasis on empirical data and measurable results. Most artists do not engage in research intended to stand up to the rigors of the scientific method. While an artist *could* shape their practice and inquiry to meet those strident dictates, my interest lies in creating a visual metaphor of the scientific environment where the viewer is inclined to summon their own cognitive, analytic abilities.

Part of my studio practice involves reading peer reviewed psychological research articles. The titles are often quirky such as “Why rejection hurts: a common neural alarm system for physical and social pain,” or “Mood-Specific Effects on Appraisal and Emotion Judgements.” The experiments regularly use photographs of people to test for various dynamics. Figure 5, from in a psychological study, is a strong guiding reference for the underlying framework of my work. In this study the question raised is, “Who would you ask for directions?”<sup>11</sup> The research shows that not only the expression one carries on their face, but also how one holds their body, plays a role in how approachable they are to others. When asking for directions or looking for help, it is common to avoid people with an angry countenance paired with an angry stance. (first group of three) But it has also been shown that we will avoid people with a happy *body* expression when paired with a happy face. (as seen in the woman on the far right in the last group) These findings show the complexity behind our thought process when viewing a person’s facial

features along with their body's expression. This sort of exploration and interpretation of the body's movements and the expressions of the face are intriguing.



Figure 5

Another photograph from psychological research that has become a meaningful aide in how I construct imagery is Figure 6 from the article, “Angry, Disgusted or Afraid? Studies on the Malleability of Emotion Perception.”<sup>11</sup> Four images show an identical facial expression Photoshopped onto four bodies each posed in a different position. In one example a prop is included; another example shows a background. “Controlling for variables” is a common expression in research environments. When defined it refers to the attempt to reduce the effect of confounding variables on an observational study. In this example, the facial expression is the constant and the body's pose, the props used and the background are all variables. This study provides a potent arena for my imagination to form visual reproductions of the situation.



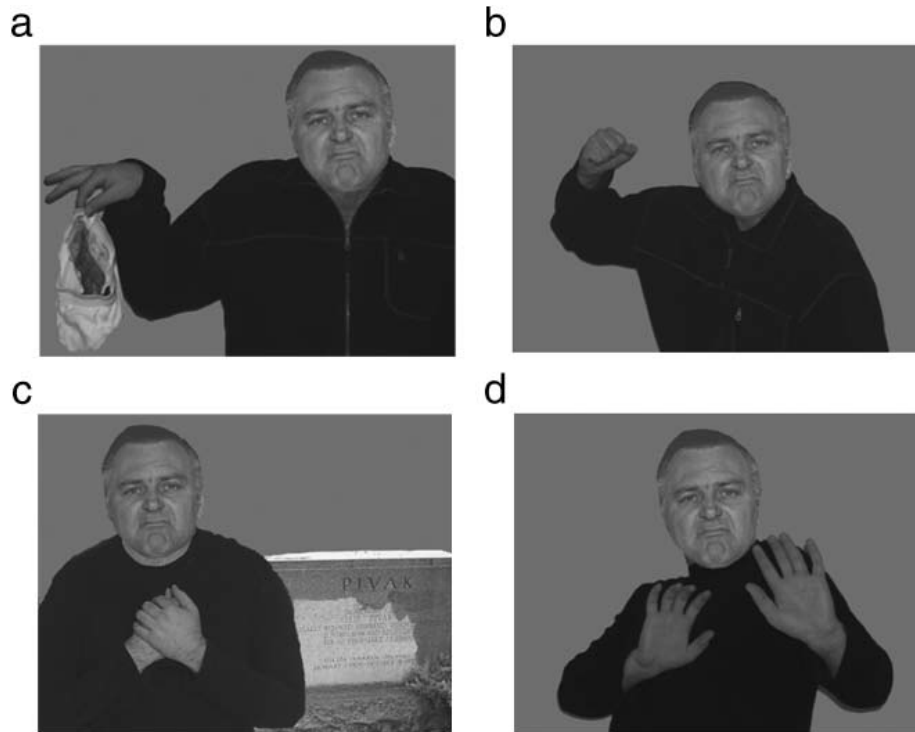


Figure 6

Mike Kelley's work entitled *Test Room* (Figure 7), features an approach opposite to mine in using props. Kelley greatly enlarged them and had people interact with the prominently displayed items. Based on Henry Harlow's experiments on primates conducted in the 1960's, Kelley created a large steel cage-like room with an overhead observation ramp filled with playroom objects enlarged to human scale.<sup>12</sup>

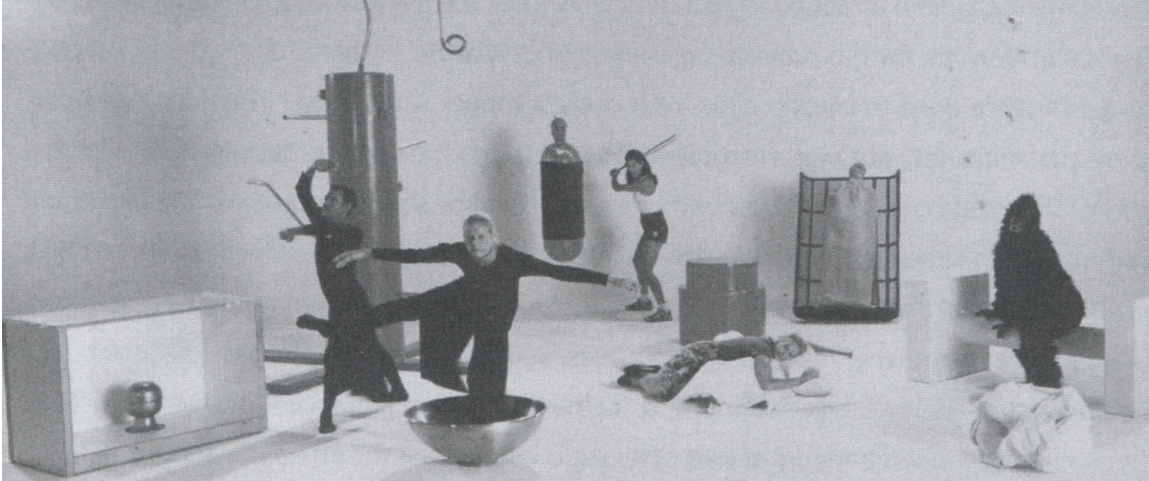


Figure 7

One dynamic which I will be exploring further is how employing the atmosphere of research within my paintings works against an emotionally saturated read from the viewer. To work figuratively, realistically, and with oil paint, my imagery is automatically connected to the history of how painting has been perceived through the centuries. Edvard Munch's iconic expressionist painting, *The Scream*, (Figure 8) is a good example of the heavy emotional power that an oil painting can easily carry. By infusing my work with qualities found in imagery from psychological research studies, space for a dialogue between science and art is created. One of my goals is to present interesting figurative images that encourage a contemplative, open-minded observation of the human body. I want to create a place of restraint, where figures are introduced that portray a particular physical or emotional response to an unknown circumstance where the posture or facial expression of the figures ultimately embody a state of transition, suspension and isolation.

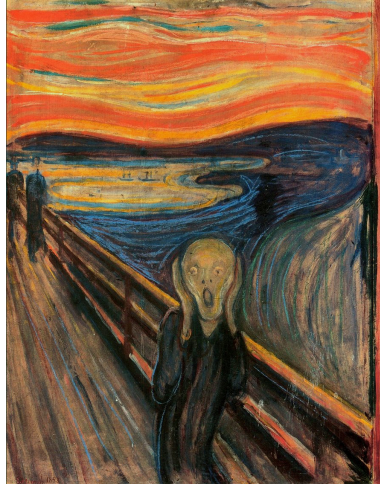


Figure 8

Showing people of different ethnic backgrounds is a meaningful part of the structure within each series of paintings. When considering the similarity and differences of body language between cultures, I became interested in finding the starting point for current research. Current research has grown from an interesting beginning. Charles Darwin's very popular book, *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, following after his text, *Origin of Species*, details how nonverbal expression is universal in its meaning regardless of species. Darwin had a strong interest in the emotional expression of animals because he felt it helped support his concept of "survival of the fittest."<sup>13</sup>

Darwin anthropomorphized heavily which was frowned upon more in his day than it is now and research went silent for about 100 years. In 1970 Ray Birdwhistell originally agreed with Darwin about the universality of nonverbal expression. He went on however, to study smiling and concluded that, "just as there are no universal words, no sound complexes, which carry the same meaning the world over, there are no body motions, facial expressions, or gestures which provoke *identical* responses the world

over”.<sup>14</sup> The anthropologist Edward Hall, who has studied the distinctive codes for how different cultures understand space and time, also holds this opinion. His work involves proxemics or, the distance people feel is necessary to set between themselves and others. American’s prefer a large amount of space surrounding their bodies and feel uncomfortable when someone stands too close. People from the Arab world however would see standing at a distance to be offensive.<sup>15</sup>

Cultures themselves can be considered neutral, high or low in their emotional level of affect. Members of neutral to low affect cultures do not broadcast their feelings but carefully control them. Those from high affect cultures readily show feelings through laughter, scowls, smiles and shouting. Research on emotional expression in work oriented meetings found that emotional reactions were least acceptable in Japan, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, Norway and the Netherlands and most accepted in the United States, Italy, France and Singapore.<sup>16</sup>

Currently I work to show the suggestion of research in three ways. I use no color and paint the figures in a gray scale because historically, images used in research studies were black and white. Color is often a wide pathway into the emotions of the viewer. Zhang Xiaogang, a Chinese artist living in Beijing, carefully controls his use of color by painting primarily in subdued shades of grey while adding a blotch or stain of color in one specific location (Figure 9). He typically paints children in hues containing reds and yellows.<sup>17</sup> The images are painted from old family photographs with no live models. Many photographs from this time period were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The expressionless face on both genders and also children alludes to the position of the individual in Chinese society.<sup>18</sup>

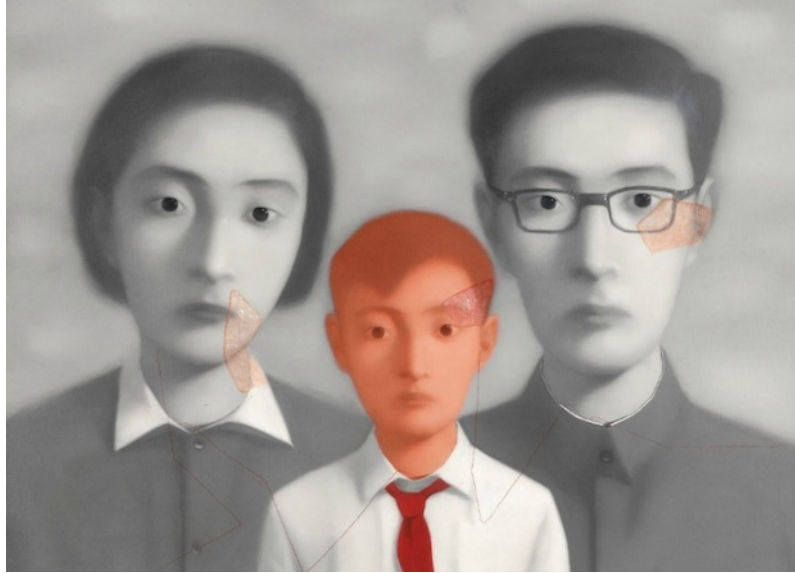


Figure 9

Another way I suggest the idea of research is by showing multiple depictions of the same posture or the same emotional countenance while employing a change of one or two elements or *variables*. For example, each figure will be of a different age and also a different ethnicity but may all be shown in a seated position with an expression of varying degrees of frustration. Yeondoo Jung's work explores more personal aspects of individuals in a similar way. Using the structure of a diptych (Figure 10) Jung juxtaposes images of the same teenager in the same posture. In one image she is mopping the floor of a Baskin Robbins in her day job. In another she is exploring Artic regions in her dream job. The quote says, "I can always go to Europe when I'm old and rich, I'm saving money to travel somewhere I can only go when I'm young, somewhere extreme. I get really upset when people treat me like a naïve normal girl. I'm working very hard so I can pay for my trip and show them I'm different."<sup>19</sup>



Figure 10

The final way I refer to research is by utilizing the practice of the constructed image. The constructed image depends on artifice and invention to create or manipulate the subject. This genre makes use of a vast range of techniques including lighting, staging, styling, directing, crafting, and scripting. My approach is a conventional studio-based process involving the intervention and manipulation of the subject. The overt fabrication of the figure, showing an un-cropped body with nothing overlapping to hide features, alludes to the structure of how images are presented in psychological tests where careful work is employed to control for extraneous variables that could mitigate results. The generation of source material for images is a process in which I am fully engaged. Currently there are two methods I use to create source material. In one way shown in Figure 11 as a finished painting, images are found by watching a muted DVD, pushing pause when an actor moves into a pose that is full length and unobstructed, and using an image capture application, I take a screen shot.



Figure 11

These screen shots, about thirty to forty per movie, are saved in files on my computer. When beginning a new series of paintings, I look through the images and notice patterns. The original narrative from the movie has fallen away and new ideas are starting to form. I consider current research articles I have read in psychology journals. Eventually a coming together of images and research themes occurs and the new concept for a series takes shape.

The second method I more recently use to create source material arises directly from my imagination visually and develops into a specific written concept. I have learned that it is representative of what can be called a hypnagogic state because I toss around ideas when I lay down to sleep or as I wake up. Here is the progression for three concepts:

1) a. Develop a figurative pose that embodies a feeling of precariousness. Create a pose where a person appears to be off balance while trying to perform a task.

b. Develop a figurative pose that shows the idea of suspension and rest at the same time. Possibly show a figure laying either on a plastic hammock, or a “hammock” that works by hooking under one’s shoulder and up through the under-arm on one end and clamping around the ankles on the other with nothing in between.

c. Develop a figurative pose that shows people with no volition. Possibly strap a person into a weight vest attached with a steel ring on the back. This vest would be covered by clothing and the individual could be hung from the ring on the back of the vest onto a hook on a wall. This could eventually show multiple people all holding hands. They are slumped and appear not to be dead, but sleeping.

2) Photograph posed individuals of various ages, ethnicities, sexes and body sizes.

3) Paint in grey scale while considering other areas of development within this structure.

The influence of psychological research in my artistic practice gives my work structure and content. It also brings a counterbalance mitigating an overly emotional approach to interpretation. The process of choosing the poses of figures for paintings has developed to incorporate both outer and inner sources of inspiration. I appreciate and hope to embody Graeme Sullivan’s idea that the imaginative research of artists can uncover new truths.

## COMPASSION & *TRANSMISSION OF AFFECT*

Studio Practice as a Tool to Explore Compassion and Affect Theory



In my series titled *Transmission of Affect* (Figure 12), each seated figure carries a specific facial expression and a specific bodily gesture. We may admire the emotional restraint of an Asian man wearing a suit, or wonder about the frustration in the eyes of an elderly woman with too many bags. We may be concerned for a man who has succumbed to tears or we may question what led him to be so distraught. We might then turn that inquiry back onto ourselves and recall a time when our own wellbeing was embattled.



Figure 12

Tests have been performed where an individual is put into a highly stressful situation in three different ways. In one scenario a person is placed with someone they love, in the second they are placed with a stranger, and in the third, they face the stress alone. Results show that we deal with stress most efficiently when we face it with someone we love. Oddly however, we face stress better with a total stranger than we do

facing the same stress alone.<sup>20</sup> Our independent goal-oriented American lifestyles make it easy to talk ourselves out of asking for help, as if this were a weakness. Yet considering an opposing view, it is imaginable that when facing certain issues, an audience might only create a false sense of security.

The feeling of suspension is more metaphorical in *Transmission of Affect* and resembles the third definition- to keep from falling, sinking or forming a deposit as in a solid suspended in particles of liquid. The figures are depicted in the seated position yet the chair or object used to sit upon has been removed. With few props, and no chairs or depicted environment to use in developing further meaning, the viewer is constrained and must attend to the solitary body making a singular physical gesture. This sealed, isolated presentation encourages the viewer to come face to face with the physicality and emotionality of the body. When coming face to face with specific ideas in another, we often come face to face with them in ourselves. Debra Messing was quoted as saying, 'We don't go to movies to see the actresses or actors, we watch movies to see ourselves.'<sup>21</sup>

In the title, *Transmission of Affect*, I am using the word "affect" not as a verb as in "cold weather affected the crops," but as it is used in the field of psychology defined as- the personal experience of a feeling or emotion. The title's concept is based on the idea that the emotions and energy of one person can be passed onto another. Discoveries of mirror neurons in the brain have been found to cause us to reflect back an action we observe in someone else, with no seeming internal motivation. Primal empathy in action was discovered when laser thin electrodes connected to a single neuron in a subject's

brain, fired both when this person anticipated pain, a pinprick, and ALSO when merely *seeing* someone else receive a pinprick.<sup>22</sup>

In order to protect oneself against the tendency to absorb the unwanted emotions of those around us, we benefit from learning to control and understand our own natural desire to mirror, by detaching when necessary. Detachment is encouraged in part when we are able to choose between the desire to analyze the experience of another versus sharing the feelings and taking part.

An interesting dynamic often-called compassion fatigue has become a steady resident in the minds of most modern individuals. Susan Moeller author of the book *Compassion Fatigue* claims, “It’s the media that are at fault. How they typically cover crises helps us to feel over stimulated and bored all at once.”<sup>23</sup> I feel this is surely part of the problem, yet part of the problem also lies in the core nature of the world we live in: natural disasters happen, man is capable of horrific crime, and disease kills epic numbers of people. Technological advances now easily bring these painful events from around the world into our minds creating an avalanche of emotional data.

“A single child at risk commands our attention and prompts our action. But one child, and then another, and another, and another and on and on and on is too much. A crowd of people in danger is faceless. Numbers alone can numb.”<sup>24</sup>

We all have ways of dealing with this overwhelming dynamic. Some individuals are more intimately aware of how they deal with compassion fatigue and some deal with it in a more unexamined way. Approaching tragedy with too much emotion can overwhelm the intellect and potentially produce damaging results. Yet there are times

when the emotions, allowed to run unabated, seem to precipitate heroic behavior. These issues, and all their idiosyncrasies find their way into the fabric of my studio practice.

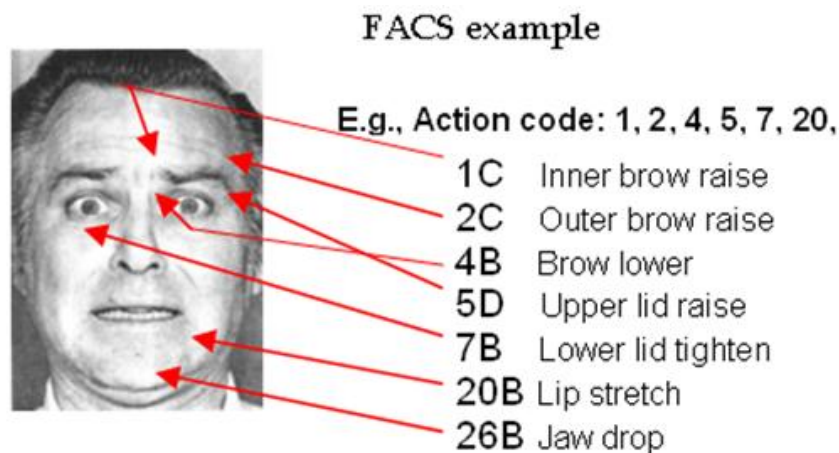
Affect Theory has become a deeper issue of great interest to me, specifically the *relativity* of affect: how two people can be presented with the same issue and each have a different emotional reaction. I find this interesting possibly because my heritage mixes a stoic Scotch with an expressive Italian, or due to my growing interest in studies that involve quantum theory as it metaphorically relates to psychology.

The multiple ways research is referenced within my work and studio practice, suggests that I am calling for an interpretive response where one's natural expression of emotion is restrained. If an image of starving children with distended stomachs surrounded by flies and a plea for money is seen as speaking directly to one's emotions, and a floor to ceiling glass board covered in mathematic equations surrounded by people wearing white coats and horn rimmed glasses is seen as speaking directly to one's intellect, in my imagery I am aiming for the spot in the middle of these two extremes. I am painting an image, representing a life, with an awareness of the harm that can come from both reckless emotional outpouring and also, over-intellectualizing the tragedies of life.

This reminds me of a story my father told me as an adolescent. He was a clinical psychologist and recounted a situation where a client blamed an unfortunate personal behavior on Satan— being tempted by an outer force beyond her control. He said that people who presented this dynamic always progressed slower. They first had to do the very basic work of understanding that “blaming the devil” causes the denial of personal responsibility, before they could move onto the client's deeper, more efficacious issues.

This story has stayed with me, influencing how I might choose to label and manage a roadblock or problem in my own life.

The field of psychology is developing a rich history of examining facial expression and the meanings they carry. Paul Ekman, a professor of psychology at the University of California, San Francisco Medical School, researched the connection between emotions and facial expressions. In 1978, Ekman developed a method of analyzing human micro-expressions where all conceivable human facial expressions were evaluated and categorized.<sup>25</sup> He called this categorization the Facial Action Coding system or FACS (Figure 13).



**Fear?**

Figure 13

The term micro-expression refers to a brief facial expression that occurs in a flash, less than a third of a second. They often take place involuntarily revealing emotions not purposefully or consciously expressed. Ekman feels that anyone can be taught to be visually aware of micro-expressions and has created an effective training method. American psychologist John Gottman began video recording living relationships to study

how couples interact. By studying micro-movements, Gottman is able to accurately predict which relationships would stay together and which would fall apart with 94% accuracy.<sup>26</sup> While not a micro-expression, one of the most telling facial indicators of a relationship's failure is when one partner rolls his eyes in disgust at another.<sup>27</sup>

Affect theory and affective neuroscience provide another layer of meaning when considering the wide range of facial expressions produced by humanity. A surface inquiry into affect theory attempts to organize emotions or affects into separate categories and align each one with its corresponding response. For example, the affect of joy is seen in the display of a smile. Affects can be identified through facial reactions, typically well before one produces a verbal response to the stimulus.

One of the early researchers in this field, Silvan Tomkins, in his 1962 book *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, divides affect into nine categories: joy, excitement, startle, anger disgust, dissmell (bad smell), distress, fear and humiliation. From this point, Tomkins looks at basic drives that interact with the nine affects such as hunger, the need for air, the sex drive etc. He also looks at the drive of pain, a negative drive when compared to hunger. Also unlike hunger, pain is a drive that can be lived with.<sup>28</sup> For Tomkins this theory could serve as a blueprint for maximum health. Over the years affect theory has branched into couples therapy, discussions regarding emotional intelligence, and affective neuroscience, to name a few.

A recent issue of debate within affect theorists is between *affective multiplicity* and *affective pastorality*. This refers to the act of mental travel versus the act of mental lingering. The debate explores the best state for a subject to be in, and also how to arrive at this chosen state. "There is a kind of self-awareness and a kind of empathy that comes from being ready always to fall into a new affect or to experience several affects at once.

Yet there is also a form of intellectual and emotional humility, a humility that seems similarly very much like knowledge, to admitting that one's boundaries and experiences tend to return to the same simple core, that any happiness or satisfying self awareness one seeks to attain will have to keep returning to and lingering in the same small cluster of feelings."<sup>29</sup>

Amy Cuddy, a social psychologist at Harvard Business School claims, "at least half of communication is through nonverbal signals, and that includes - that includes vocal cues like your pitch and how quickly you're speaking and how much range you show. So the language, I think, is at least smaller than most of us believe it is." Cuddy studies nonverbal communication, not only how signals are interpreted by others, but also how we respond to our own body language. Cuddy began this research after noticing how females in classrooms of highly competitive programs like Harvard Business School tended to keep quiet allowing the males to dominate. She wanted to see if there was some way to change this dynamic. An experiment was developed where participants were asked to adopt either a high-power or a low-power pose for two minutes. Afterward a saliva sample was taken to determine the amount of cortisol versus the amount of testosterone present. Cortisol is a steroid produced by the adrenal cortex that is released in response to stress and low blood glucose.<sup>31</sup> Powerful people and animals, both men and women, male and female, tend to have high levels of the hormone testosterone and low levels of the hormone cortisol. What was found after two minutes says Cuddy, is that the research participants are "experiencing very, very big changes in those hormone levels. So in other words, for two minutes, standing like Wonder Woman in a tiny room can basically lead you to physiologically, in some ways, look like someone who has an enormous amount of power."

The presence of mirror neurons within the human brain hardwires us to reflect back an action or emotion we see in someone else. Considering this it is understandable that method of detachment will benefit an individual attempting to maintain a balanced emotional presence when possible. Compassion fatigue is the result of multiple demands for empathic response due in part to the immediate transmission of traumatic information via technology. My work touches in part on the idea that a sentimentalized unrestrained compassionate response is at times, as unhelpful and dangerous as an over intellectualized approach. It is in the coming together of one's emotions with one's intellect that the most advantageous perspectives can emerge.

## Conclusion

The gestural moments captured in my work embody the dynamics of suspension and balance while alluding to more indirect influences of risk. The promptings of psychological research within my artistic practice bring structure, content and a counterbalance to an overly emotional approach to interpretation.

Mirror neurons within the human brain hardwire us to reflect an action or emotion we see in someone else. Methods of detachment benefit an individual attempting to maintain a balanced emotional presence. Compassion fatigue is the result of multiple



demands for emphatic response due in part to the immediate transmission of traumatic information via technology.

My work promotes a balance between compassion and objectivity. It is in the coming together of one's emotions with one's intellect that the most advantageous perspectives emerge.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary.com*, s.v. "suspend," accessed February 22, 2015, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/suspend?s=t>

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center: a Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Knott, "Paul Klee and the Mystic Center," *Art Journal* 38, no. 2 (Winter, 1978): 115.

<sup>5</sup> L. F. Barrett, B. Mesquita, and M. Gendron, "Context in Emotion Perception." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20, no. 5 (October 1, 2011): 286.

<sup>6</sup> Glynis M. Breakwell, *The Psychology of Risk*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 2.

- <sup>7</sup> “Home, Psychometric Risk Tolerance Assessment, Personal Financial Risk Profile.” Accessed October 8, 2014. <http://www.myrisktolerance.com/home>.
- <sup>8</sup> B. Figner and E. U. Weber, “Who Takes Risks When and Why?: Determinants of Risk Taking.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20, no. 4 (August 1, 2011): 212.
- <sup>9</sup> Breakwell, 13.
- <sup>10</sup> Suzanne Muchnic, “Art Review: Constant Lure of Longo’s Men,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 2015. [http://articles.latimes.com/1986-03-31/entertainment/ca-2245\\_1\\_longo-men-art](http://articles.latimes.com/1986-03-31/entertainment/ca-2245_1_longo-men-art).
- <sup>11</sup> Hillel Aviezer, Ran R. Hassin, Jennifer Ryan, Cheryl Grady, Josh Susskind, Adam Anderson, Morris Moscovitch, and Shlomo Bentin. “Angry, Disgusted, or Afraid? Studies on the Malleability of Emotion Perception.” *Psychological Science* 19, no. Number 7 (2008): 726.
- <sup>12</sup> Mike Kelley, *Mike Kelley: Minor Histories--statements, Conversations, Proposals*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), 230.
- <sup>13</sup> Carol-Lynne Moore, *Beyond Words: Movement Observation and Analysis*. 2nd ed. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge), 70
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 72
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 72
- <sup>16</sup> Carol Kinsey Goman, *The Nonverbal Advantage: Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work*, (San Francisco, Calif: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc), 152.
- <sup>17</sup> Rita Valorinta, “Zhang Xiaogang.” Artist’s Website. *Zhang Xiaogang*. Accessed April 19, 2015. [http://www.zhangxiaogang.com.cn/enArtText\\_XQ.aspx?TblCollegeClnum=70](http://www.zhangxiaogang.com.cn/enArtText_XQ.aspx?TblCollegeClnum=70).
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> T. J. Demos, *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography*, (London: Phaidon), 125.
- <sup>20</sup> John Gottman, “Predicting Marital Happiness and Stability from Newlywed Interactions,” *University of Washington* 60 (February 1998), 9.
- <sup>21</sup> “A Public Dialogue Between Bell Hooks and Laverne Cox - YouTube.” Accessed November 5, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oMmZIJjgY>.
- <sup>22</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, (New York, NY: Bantam), 41.

<sup>23</sup> Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death* (New York: Routledge), 9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Goleman, 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>27</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, (New York: Back Bay Books), 24.

<sup>28</sup> Silvan Tompkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, Volume 1, Positive Effects. (New York: Springer Publishing Company), 56.

<sup>29</sup> Marta Figlerowicz, "Affect Theory Dossier: An Introduction." *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 20, no. 2 (Spring/Summer), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Amy Cuddy, *Interview with Amy Cuddy*. TED Radio Hour on NPR.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Kunz, "What Is Cortisol." *Snowshoe Magazine*, n.d. <http://www.snowshoemag.com/2006/01/24/what-is-cortisol/>.

## Illustrations



Figure 1: Laurel Panella, *Precarious Extension I, II, and III*, 2015, Oil on panel, 114 X 62 inches.

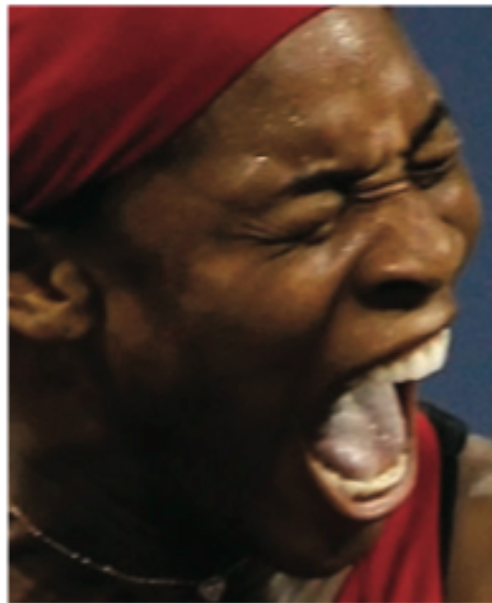


Figure 2: Barrett, L. F., B. Mesquita, and M. Gendron. "Context in Emotion Perception." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20, no. 5 (October 1, 2011): 286–90.



Figure 3: Barrett, L. F., B. Mesquita, and M. Gendron. "Context in Emotion Perception." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20, no. 5 (October 1, 2011): 286–90.



Figure 4: Robert Longo, *Men in the Cities* – Installation View, 1981, Charcoal on Paper, 96 x 60 inches, Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York.



Figure 5: Willis, Megan L., Romina Palermo, and Darren Burke. "Judging Approachability on the Face of It: The Influence of Face and Body Expressions on the Perception of Approachability." *Emotion* 11, no. 3 (2011): 514–23.

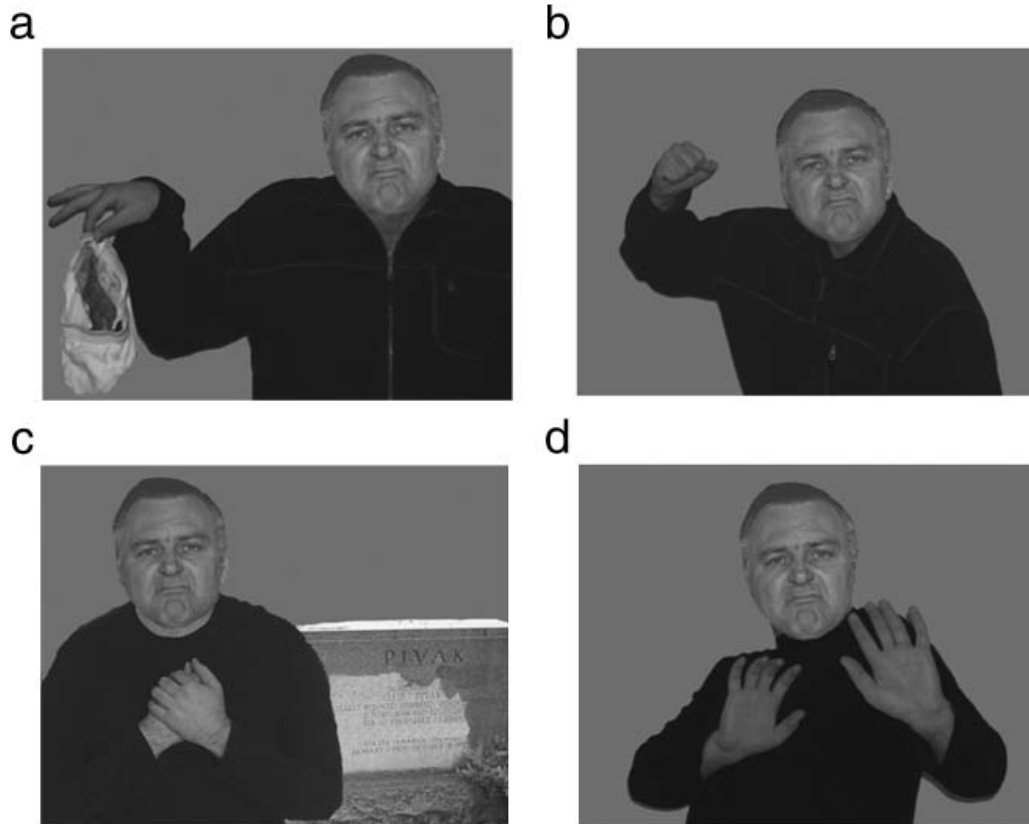


Figure 6: Aviezer, Hillel, Ran R. Hassin, Jennifer Ryan, Cheryl Grady, Josh Susskind, Adam Anderson, Morris Moscovitch, and Shlomo Bentin. "Angry, Disgusted, or Afraid? Studies on the Malleability of Emotion Perception." *Psychological Science* 19, no. Number 7 (2008): 724–32.

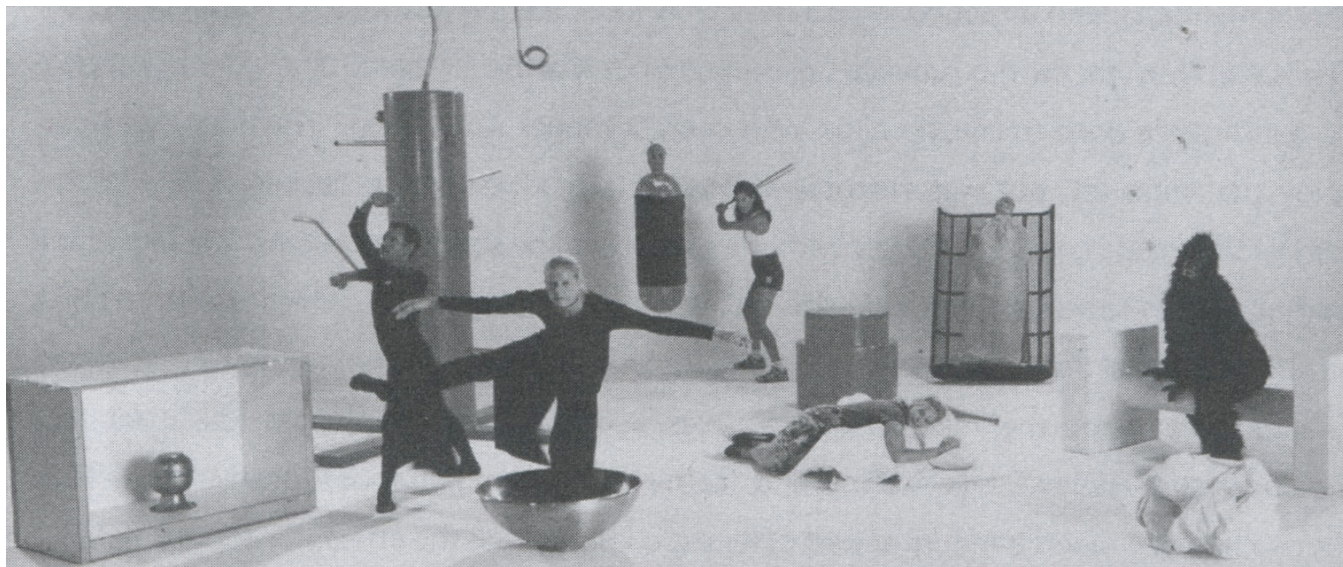


Figure 7: Mike Kelly, *Test Room Containing Multiple Stimuli Known to Elicit Curiosity and Manipulatory Responses (Full Cast) [1]* (2001). Color photograph. 28 X 49" P. 232 *Minor Histories—Statements, Conversations, Proposals*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2004. 232. Print.



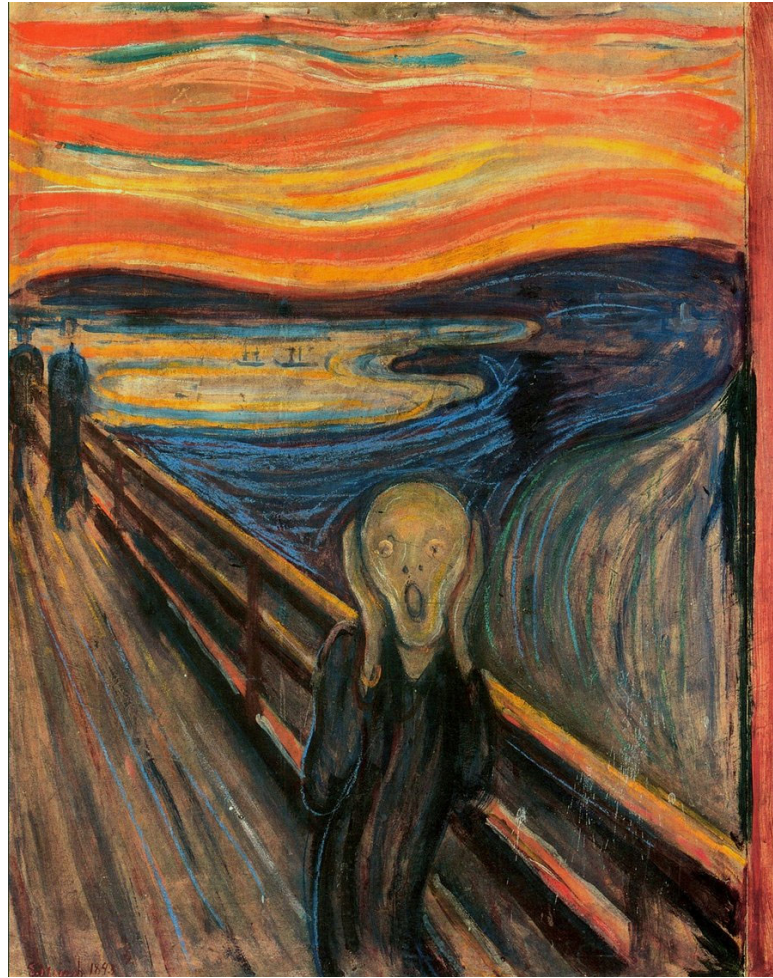


Figure 8: Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1910, Tempera on Board, 36 X 29 inches, The Munch Museum, Oslo.

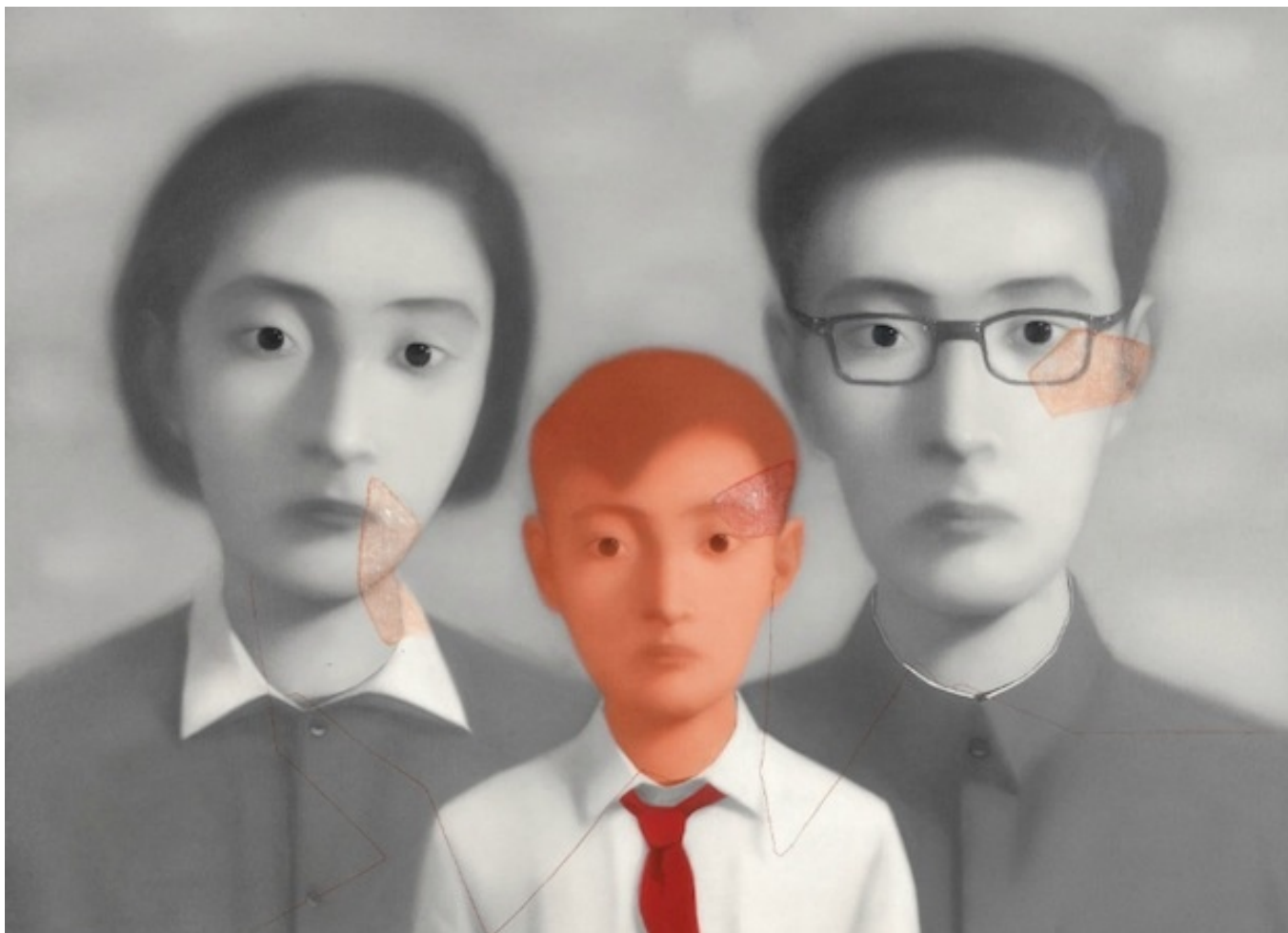


Figure 9: Zhang Xiogang, *Big Family*, 2003, Oil on Canvas, 180 x 230 cm.  
Tanya Baxter Contemporary, London.



"I can always go to Europe when I'm old and rich. I am saving money to travel somewhere I can only go while I'm young, somewhere extreme. I get really upset when people treat me like a naive, normal girl. I am working really hard so I can pay for my trip and show them I'm different."

Figure 10: Yeondoo Jung, *#1*, from the series *Bewitched*, 2001, C-print, multi-slide projection, dimensions variable.



Figure 11: Laurel Panella, *Affect Study I*, 2014, Oil on Panel, 48 X 62 inches.



Figure 12: Laurel Panella, *Transmission of Affect*, 2014, Oil on Panel, 48 X 186 inches.

## FACS example



E.g., Action code: 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 20,

- 1C Inner brow raise
- 2C Outer brow raise
- 4B Brow lower
- 5D Upper lid raise
- 7B Lower lid tighten
- 20B Lip stretch
- 26B Jaw drop

## Fear?

Figure 13. Goleman, Daniel. *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*. New York, NY: Bantam, 2007.

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