



Undergraduate Review

Volume 3

Article 12

2007

Forging My Relationship with the Figure: A Personal Exploration of Art Employing the Human Form

Elizabeth Davenport

Follow this and additional works at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev

 Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davenport, Elizabeth (2007). Forging My Relationship with the Figure: A Personal Exploration of Art Employing the Human Form. *Undergraduate Review*, 3, 71-76.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol3/iss1/12

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Copyright © 2007 Elizabeth Davenport

Forging My Relationship with the Figure: A Personal Exploration of Art Employing the Human Form

ELIZABETH DAVENPORT

Elizabeth Davenport, from Stoughton, is a senior majoring in Art Education. This research was conducted in the summer of 2006 as an Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant Project under the direction of Prof. Collin Asmus. Elizabeth plans to pursue a career in the Visual Arts field.

This study provided insight into the technical complexities, social implications, and history of figurative artwork and portraiture. As a result of this research, I have realized that art employing the human figure has changed throughout time. What it is today is different from what it was in the past. In the Middle Ages up until the late 19th century, portraiture was used as a tool for aristocrats to preserve or commemorate themselves and draw attention to their wealth. Today it has a more expansive definition. Contemporary artists, like Lucian Freud, Paula Rego, Alice Neel, and Jenny Saville have taken traditional figurative work to a new level. Through carefully placed elements and abstractions these artists often create a personal mythology surrounding a figure that sometimes even a face to face meeting cannot do. My goal with this research is to convey a similar effect with my own artwork.

Many different artists and artistic styles were explored in order to create a series of two-dimensional pieces employing the human form. Each piece deals with the elements of composition, gesture, proportion, and identity, as well as tapping into the expressive qualities of the body. With this project I have become a more competent draftsman and begun to develop my own artistic language. Hopefully, through the exhibition of my work, I can prompt others to recognize the relevance of this form of art.

The ability to draw the human form or face is a skill that is complex and should be practiced and cultivated. It involves composition, gesture, proportion, perspective, light, and expression – All of which are essential, and should be studied and practiced, if one wants to be a competent figurative artist. I practiced these techniques extensively throughout the past few months and have found that, while I do not have the innate abilities that some artists have, I have made substantial progress when it comes to rendering a believable human form.

All of this practice has resulted in a series of finished art pieces. With each piece I constructed a visual and written sketchbook/journal that provides a map of my process while preparing each one. In the following pages I have included a written summation of each of my sketchbook/journals as well as pictures of each of my finished pieces. They are in chronological order (beginning with Piece #1; ending with Piece #5) and my hope is that each piece displays some sort of progression or growth in my artistic abilities and influences. A bit of my

“chatter” is redundant or hard to follow but I believe that each “entry” is a true representation of my thoughts on each piece.

Sketchbook/Journal Entries

Pieces 1-5



Piece #1

“A Portrait is a model complicated by an artist.”
Charles Baudelaire

This is my first large-scale finished piece; a self portrait. I plan to start and finish with a self portrait in order to highlight my progression through this project’s process. I hope to enhance my perception of my own artwork and ultimately of myself.

I am having a difficult time feeling satisfied with this portrait. I can see parts of the body that are out of proportion, could have been drafted more accurately, and are simply awkward. But after pointing out all these flaws in my work, I usually ask myself, “Aren’t these flaws and exaggerations the things that that make an art piece unique to a particular artist? Distinguishable? Expressive? If the artist’s depiction of themselves or their sitter is an exact

representation, wouldn’t it be easier to just take a photograph instead?”

Yes, perhaps . . .

But I think that before you can become a master of abstraction/ expressionism and the figure, you need to be able to depict the human form accurately. I have had the opportunity to see the artwork of many artists throughout the past few weeks. I have noticed that “giants” in the field, Picasso, Matisse etc., create beautifully abstracted pieces. I’ve have also seen very realistically prepared pieces created by them as well. These artists really had a firm grasp on how to depict the human form and I feel that this made their abstractions all the more powerful.

I plan to create 5-6 large scale portraits. Each one, except for this one (indirectly- naturally it was influenced by many factors), will be influenced by a specific artist. My ultimate goal when creating these portraits is to become a more competent draftsman while also developing my own artistic sensibility. This first self-portrait displays my abilities and influences at the beginning of this project. Hopefully, with the completion of each portrait I will add more to the collection of marks, influences, and ideas that are already present within my artistic repertoire.



“No single man can be taken as a model for the perfect figure, for no man lives on earth who is endowed with the whole of beauty.”

Albrecht Durer

Albrecht Durer lived from 1471-1528 and is often referred to as the best artist of the Northern Renaissance. He was an “innovator in the field of woodcuts and engravings, and in the theory of proportions and the human figure” (Strauss V).

This piece/artist’s book was influenced by Durer and his dedication to the human form. I decided to do it in the style of an artist book, which is art in a book form, because I felt like it suited the antiquated feeling of Durer’s work. I tried to vaguely mimic the opulent and detailed style of the illuminated manuscripts (a heavily decorated/illustrated text) which were prevalent during the 15th century and in Durer’s lifetime in order to establish some kind of connection between my work and his.

This piece does not portray an intimate moment between a model and an artist. I want my portraits to express some sort of intimacy, therefore I will not refer to this artwork as a portrait, but simply as a piece. The models I depicted in this piece posed only for a short time in a classroom environment. I did not get a sense of who they were from their poses. Despite this, most of the models were able to convey a sense of emotion and drama with their bodies.

The surroundings I drew around the models were fabricated. I felt that the nude models seemed to fit nicely into a Roman bath-like atmosphere so I tried to draw pots, goblets, and items that were reminiscent of that theme and also reflected a Renaissance style. Some of the images I used were borrowed (and modified) from Albrecht Durer’s Dresden Sketchbook.

Durer’s works, specifically his prints, are very detailed. He used a lot of line to build up volume and form. I tried to do this with my figures as well, although mine are not even close to being as proportionate as Durer’s and my work at times is overly stylized-these are definitely some things I will continue to work on.

facing page

Artist’s Book/Piece #2-

Inspired by Albrecht Durer



Piece #3-

Inspired by Lucian Freud

“My work is purely autobiographical. It is about myself and my surroundings. I work from people that interest me and that I care about, in rooms that I know.”

Lucian Freud

Lucian Freud’s Double Portrait -1985-86

-courtesy of artnetMagazine

My third piece was inspired by Lucian Freud, more specifically his piece titled “Double Portrait.” I chose to reference Freud because I really get a sense of depth and emotion from his work. Perhaps this is because he chooses to depict subjects that are intimate-friends, family, lovers. I see his work as being very intimate-the bond between artist and subject is really evident. I wanted to convey a similar experience with my own model in my piece.

I decided to draw a close friend. I chose her because her body language and style scream “drama” (in a good way). The day I drew her she appeared tired so I positioned her in a pose that reflected that. In Freud’s piece the girl appears to be comforted by a dog. In my piece my friend was comforted by her Mp3 player. Technology, something contemporary, replaced something living as a source of comfort-a sign of the times I suppose.

In Freud's piece he uses heavy shading and line-work to give the illusion of skin, softness, fur, and texture. I tried to do the same in my piece. I do not have the innate abilities that Freud has, but I do believe that this was a productive exercise and overall I like my piece.



Piece #4-
Inspired by Kathe Kollwitz

"I do not want to die... until I have faithfully made the most of my talent and cultivated the seed that was placed in me until the last small twig has grown."

Kathe Kollwitz

My original intent with this piece was for it to be inspired by Kathe Kollwitz. She is a German artist who uses heavy charcoal and various printmaking techniques to create work that explores the human condition. She touches upon poverty, death, greed, losing a child and tragedy in her work. Thankfully, I have little experience with these events so I found it difficult to explore them in my work. So, after some consideration, I decided to draw my mother. Kollwitz spends a great deal of time portraying woman, especially mothers, in her work. I wanted to do the same in a more lighthearted manner.

I used a heavy charcoal base to draw my mom sitting on the couch reading the newspaper. This is the quintessential image of my mom, at least in my eyes. It is a routine that she has had every night for what seems like forever. It is her way to decompress. Drawing her in this manner sort of helped me unwind too. Moving the charcoal around with my hands was very therapeutic. I'd like to do more work like this.

Piece #5
Inspired by David Hockney



“One of the things I’m doing in Yorkshire is finding out how difficult it is to learn not to see like cameras, which has had such an effect on us. The camera sees everything at once. We don’t. There’s a hierarchy. Why do I pick out that thing as opposed to that thing or that thing?”

David Hockney

I recently had the opportunity to attend the David Hockney Portraits exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. It was, truly, an eye-opening experience. His work varied from pencil and ink drawings (more traditional compositions) to portraits composed of a collage of Polaroids (which questioned the limited perspective that a camera provides). I was inspired by all of Hockney’s work, but chose to mimic the contour drawings that he did with pen ink. I was impressed with them because, although at first glance they looked simple, Hockney was really able to construct a believable and intimate portrait using only a few lines; which is not really a simple thing to do at all.

I chose to draw my brother. He has the relaxed, social attitude that many of Hockney’s sitters also appear to have. Unlike Hockney though, I chose to add color to my pieces- I cannot really say why I added it and I am not really sure that it was the right choice. Perhaps I was trying to make up for the fact that my figures are not as believable as Hockney’s by “spicing” the portraits up with some vibrancy. I also think that I was growing a bit sick of black and white and simply needed some color in my work.

Overall, I think that these pieces are “ok”. I think that they are images that a viewer might glance over for a couple of minutes then forget soon after. I’m not satisfied with that result and hope to change with future work and practice.

What I’ve learned from this research

The Adrian Tinsley Program has provided me with a wonderful opportunity this summer. This grant allowed me to create a focused body of studio work that has significantly helped develop my competence and understanding in portraiture and figure studies. My mentor, Prof. Collin Asmus, has also been an inspiration. He has led by example; showing me the amount of commitment, hard work, and passion it takes to become a successful working artist and educator. His guidance has been invaluable. My project is still ongoing but, in the end, it will result in a body of work that portrays my commitment to drawing and design and will help me become a more well-rounded artist and individual.

While participating in the Adrian Tinsley Program I had the opportunity to visit many museums and galleries and see the work of many artists. These experiences were truly inspiring. Seeing such a wide range of mark-making and interpretations



of the human form has helped enhance my own ideas about art and the creation of art. This research has also taught me that I still have a lot to learn. I have definitely not mastered drawing the human form and probably never will; few people possess the innate ability to look and draw what they see. Despite this, I have learned how to “look a little harder” and observe and draw details that make my artwork more “believable” and hopefully a little more interesting for the viewer.

Artist’s Statement

My goal as a visual artist is to never stop learning and experimenting with new materials and ideas. My goal in completing this project was to work in a genre that I had little familiarity with. I believe I achieved both of these goals to some extent this summer. I now recognize the human form’s role in the art world and I hope to incorporate it into many of my future artistic endeavors. Through the exhibition of my own work and by introducing the work of artists like Albrecht Durer, David Hockney, Kathe Kollwitz, and Lucian Freud, I hope to enhance many of my peers’ and colleagues’ interest in new ideas in art as well.

Resources

ArtQuotes-<http://www.artquotes.net/masters/freud-lucian-quotes.htm> 19, Jul. 2006

Barnett, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*. New York: Pearson Longman Tufts University), 2005.

Beyers, Andreas. *Portraits: A History*. Munich: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003.

Gibson, Robin. *Painting the Century: 1010 Partrait Masterpieces 1900-2000*. London:Watson-Guptill Publications, 2000.

Guide to the Boston Art World -<http://www.fine-arts-unlimited.com/ag.htm>
20, May 1006

Howgate, Sarah et al. *David Hockney Portraits*. London: National Portrait Gallery, 2006. (Published to accompany the exhibitions held at the National Portrait Gallery-London, and the Museum of Fine Arts-Boston, in collaboration with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

Kozloff, Max, ed. *Face Value: American Portraits*. New York: Parrish Art Museum, 1995.

Strauss, Walter L., ed. *The Human Figure by Albrecht Durer-The Complete Dresden Sketchbook*. New York: Dover Publications, 1972.

Simblet, Sarah. *Anatomy for the Artist*. New York: DK Publishing, 2001.

WebMuseum- www.webmuseum.com