



Conversations

Montclair State University
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Maryann Ficker



Steph, The Fairy Godmother (detail) 2014, fabric and paper

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“We see ourselves when other people see us.”

- Mickalene Thomas

“If you could say it in words, there would be no reason to paint.”

- Edward Hopper



Ruminations

Sitting for a painted portrait is an unusual and intimate experience. It involves taking time out of normal life, of sitting still, being looked at and listened to, listening and sharing. In the age of the digital, online selfie, including staged and shallow self representations along with mass exposure and over sharing, this process contrasts with its slowness, intensity and physical presence. It is a reminder that we are not pixels, that personal relations are important and require time, presence and reflection.

By nature I am an observer. I am interested in how people come to be who they are, what they believe, what is important to them, how their relationships work, what occupies their time, their hands and their minds, as well as how their emotions are wrapped up in all of it.

I make portraits in paint and other media. Personal interaction between the subjects and me is essential to allowing issues of concern (to all present) to come forward. I find it important to work from life, at least, as the work begins, to experience and capture the animating quality of color & light and connect with the sitters. Later, working alone in the studio, I have time to reflect on the interaction and look for meanings in the issues that arose during the sitting. I might then revise or add to the work, based on these ruminations.

Observing how form is described by light and color and rendering from life is, for me, a consuming meditative experience. It is a time when I feel fully present and engaged with my subject and my work.

Barb (detail), 2016, oil on linen

A Likeness

Traditionally, portraiture refers to capturing an individual's likeness. Who has their likeness rendered, the reasons for capturing a likeness, and the components that make up what a 'likeness' is have shifted and generally expanded, historically, over time. In ancient Egypt images of specific individuals were almost exclusively the powerful elite and usually deceased. Portraits of living individuals, not necessarily the elite, were painted and sculpted in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. Medieval portraits were mostly of donors, depicting their piety. These became more representational in the fifteenth century. During the Renaissance representations of individual identity were mostly commissioned portraits that adhered to a set of formal conventions and were somewhat idealized. Baroque portraiture expanded into more natural poses & settings and introduced portraits of common people. Dress, pose, expression and surroundings were used in the service of depicting status, occupations, attributes, spiritual status, personality, emotional/psychological state and life story. Social realists used portraiture in the service of political statements. Since the invention of photography, in the 19th century, painters have continuously been responding to the question: "why paint now?" They expanded the use of their medium beyond representational rendering; representations of the 'inner' life became more important. Post impressionist, fauvist, and expressionist portraits captured likeness through interpretive use of color, line, brush stroke, texture, and spatial and anatomical distortion. Surrealism explored inner psychic states. Film and mass media in the 20th century introduced questions about whose identity is being represented: the media promoted version or the private self or perhaps there is no difference. This was explored in Pop, then hyperrealism. Identity politics has expanded areas of exploration in what constitutes the likeness of an individual. The digital revolution, internet and social media have brought us to the place where we share a global visual, digital language as well as vast quantities of information and this has had a profound impact on what it means to capture a likeness.

Gone forever are the days when rendered likenesses are reserved for individuals of special status. Ironically, the ubiquity of images and selfies, in particular, has diminished the value of these likenesses. The voluminous quantities of digital images that we all take and share and have to sort through in our daily lives, the speed at which we live, and our extensive digital social connections mean that we often don't have time for more than a passing glance at the images of our ever growing numbers of 'friends'. We curate the selves we present on social media and assume that others curate theirs. While at the same time, a digital record of our lives is generated and available to those who wish to look for it, without our knowledge. This includes a trail of our own past posts (even the digital selves we might wish to leave behind) and personal information that we might not choose to share, that has found its way into the immense database of the internet. We

carry this digital world with us, in our pockets and pocketbooks. It allows us to make valuable connections, which would otherwise be unavailable, while it mediates our personal relationships. It allows us to enter into and generate virtual communities of the like-minded, while it takes our energy and patience away from the hard work of building communities among the people that we live and work with. It is both an immensely valuable source of information and a draw on our attention away from inhabiting our physical world and experiencing the present moment.

My process is in support of prioritizing meaningful, real world relationships that take time, build slowly and require physical presence, conversation and also, time alone to reflect. I make portraits that bear a resemblance to the sitter. Our conversation, what I learn about the sitter, the matters of concern to them and the issues that we share determine the outcome of the work. The sitter's likeness, what is more than just a physical resemblance, is evident in the totality of the work. The work itself took various forms as I traversed different pathways with my subjects.

Initially, my ideas developed while painting with a group of painters from a live model. We would converse during the sessions. The painters became friends and we would use the opportunity to get to know the model. In my work, from this time, the figure was painted from life. I would complete the work in the studio, creating an environment for the figure, based upon the issues that arose in our conversations during the sittings. These paintings were iconic, in a way, with the central figure surrounded by a symbolic environment that reflected both their concerns and my ideas about it. Often, the result had a flavor of magical realism.

I did a portrait of a Tarot reader. This generated the idea of using divination cards as a way to interact with my subject and quickly tap into issues that are meaningful. Divination and tarot cards, for me, represent archetypes. I did a series of portraits which began with the subject blindly selecting a blank card, which had the name of an archetype written on it. As they read about the meaning of the card, I did a quick sketch of the sitter on the card. The subject then sat for a small portrait while we talked about how the archetype showed up in themselves and their lives. After some time, I asked for feedback on the experience of the process. I then responded with another small work – some of these were paintings and some took other forms. This group of works reflects the interactivity between the artist and sitter.

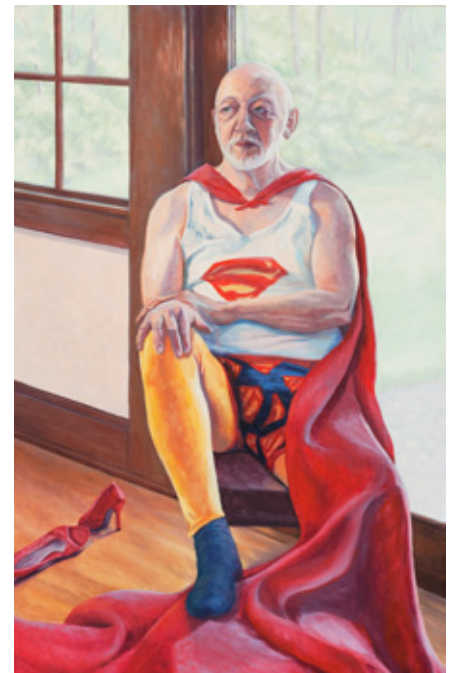
From this, I came to see how archetypal forms were expressed in the personal qualities and the events or energies surrounding my subjects. A similarity to icons became apparent. In the next body of work I began each portrait with a card reading. This gave us a framework for our interaction during the sittings. In these works I was looking for a way to frame my subject and their issues into an iconic and archetypal form.

I then decided to focus more overtly on the relationship aspect of the interaction between the artist and sitters. In this current work there are at least two subjects in each work and I am focusing on their relationship. I am also indicating the involvement of the artist in that interaction, as both a viewer and a participant. These works depict liminal moments in a domestic setting. In some of the works, although the subjects are engaged in the process, there is evidence that the digital world is not far away. In exploring connections between people, there is also an exploration of the ways that we are not able to connect.

While working from life, in addition to having a verbal conversation with the sitter,



Joanne (Cushing Road), 2013, oil on linen, 52 x 40 in.



Bob (Superman), 2012, oil on linen, 48 x 30 in



Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, 1660-1662, 18 x 16 in, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Alice Neel, *Geoffrey Hendricks and Brian*, 1978, oil on canvas, 46 3/4 in. x 36 3/4 in.

we are having a visual conversation. The engagement between the sitters and myself is reflected in their pose, and expression. The light plays upon them and changes as they move, as I move and as time goes by. Distortions happen as a result of motion and changing light. These are recorded for the viewer.

Artists, undoubtedly have been in conversation with the subjects of their portraits since the practice began. Artists, painters, in particular, converse with other artists through the language of visual imagery and paint. These conversations happen in the present, but they can also take place across time.

For example: when I decided to paint Eileen and Barb with a pile of luscious fruit in front of Eileen, I thought of the Dutch Golden Age. The mood that I wanted, and the quiet domestic setting made me think of Vermeer. In attempting to capture a sense of intimacy, I decided to scale the works to a size similar to a Vermeer. Continuing this thread, I made an approximate attempt to use the colors that he used. I went so far as to choose a palette that consisted of the colors that would have been available in the Dutch Golden Age. As Doron Langberg said, "I don't expect anyone to notice." Yet, this illustrates the kind of conversation that can happen across time.

In Belmira, Sonia and Sofia, the bright light pouring into the room, with a windowed backdrop, initially brought to mind Bonnard. This influenced my initial handling of the adults faces and choice of colors. As the painting and sittings proceeded, the distortions in the women's faces and the pink skin-like sweater brought to mind Pontormo's Deposition from the Cross. As I intended the baby to reflect a disruption in their relationship (though loved by both women), having the baby's head pop out of her mother's arm seemed a mannerist thing to do, but also related to Bonnard's conflation of space.

I thought of works by Edward Hopper and Gregory Crewdson when painting the view out the window in Howie and Me. I wanted to capture a dreamy feeling of loneliness and longing that I think is particularly American. The view through a window is typical of Hopper. Crewdson focuses on otherworldly suburban scenes. In looking for something that would symbolize a choice between the material world and the spiritual, Vermeer's *Woman with Scales*, came to mind. This is the reference for the tiny, nearly unrecognizable painting in the illuminated house.

My influences, when I am working, come from the long history and language of painting. I am particularly interested in artists who make portraits that are concerned with the relationship between the artist and the sitter. There are many recent and contemporary portrait and figure painters whose work focuses on the relationship between artist and model, and investigates the psychological spaces between them.

Lucien Freud and Alice Neel are recently deceased painters who were both unstinting in their rendering of personalities. Both artists painted expressively, from life and employed distortion, which is a natural occurrence when working from life, unless the artist works to control it, or the model is extremely still. When I look at Neel's work, I see the personality of the sitter, but even more, I see the artist's, feeling about the sitter, reflected back. These feelings are usually warm and empathic, but not always. She used high keyed colors, a strong linear quality and worked relatively quickly, completing paintings in no more than a few sittings. Her sitters appear comfortable, interested and engaged with the artist, more often than not, gazing directly out from the canvas. Although he is reputed to have been kind to his sitters, Freud's work feels, to

me, about his domination of the sitter. He is notorious for the number and length of sittings he required. His figures look unnaturally exposed, with their legs splayed, lying on the floor, a torn couch, or a bare mattress, sometimes composed so that their heads are below their bodies. In Freud's portraits, more often than not, the subject's eyes are downcast. His paint is thick, low key, gloomy, neutral tones.

I am working towards reflecting an interaction, where my feelings are present, but the sitter's voice is also heard. When I sit facing someone, listening to them, I become empathic. I wish my feelings of empathy to come through. As I paint from life distortions often occur. Sometimes they convey the energy of the interaction, but I sometimes correct these if I feel that the mood of the painting requires more of a sense of stillness or more intensity. I tend to paint thinly, more towards controlled than wildly expressive. I am listening and not just emoting. I often use, not just the figure, but the environment to communicate information about the relationship and interactions - the psychological space.

Doron Langberg and Mark Greenwold are two very different, contemporary artists who make portraits, incorporating interior domestic environments, to create psychological spaces. Langberg, (interviewed in this monograph) makes large paintings of figures embedded in interior spaces using strong colors and highly textured (and sometimes patterned) surfaces. His inspiration for the work, and the mood he creates originates from his close personal relationship with the subjects. Greenwold creates small, highly detailed, paintings of highly expressive, big-headed renderings of himself, family and friends, in elaborate domestic spaces. The figures interact, in a way, but are also in their own psychological spaces. In a 2014 interview in *Hyperallergic* he says: "My work is about the excitement and the intensity of the familial, relationships, and friendships. The enclosure, the scale, the compression, and the complexity of how I make the paintings, which is sort of endless." Both artists work slowly and make work that invites slow looking. Langberg takes his time with the painting, waiting for each step to reveal itself. For the viewer, the looking is slowed down because elements of the painting emerge and recede as you spend time with it. Greenwold labors at the details of a work for up to a year. The viewer is pulled into the details of the rendering. Facial expressions and relationships between the characters morph as time is spent looking. Slowed time is partly the subject of his paintings.

After I have worked with my sitters, I need to spend time in reflection, processing our time together, while looking at the painting, asking it what it wants to become, and what it needs from me. Most of my paintings require patience and time from me, in their demand for rendered details, multiple revisions, or time to ruminate.



Edward Hopper, *Summer Evening*, 1947, oil on canvas, 30 x 42 inches



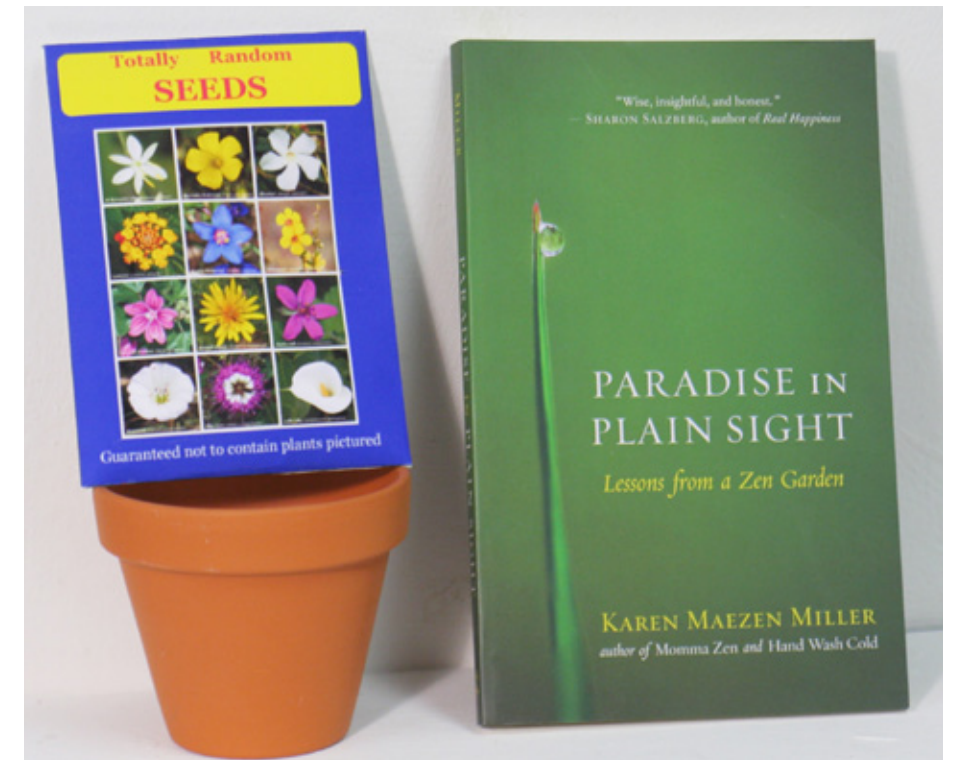
Mark Greenwold, *Human Kindness*, 2015–2016, oil on canvas mounted to board, 22 1/2 x 34 1/2 inches, Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, NY



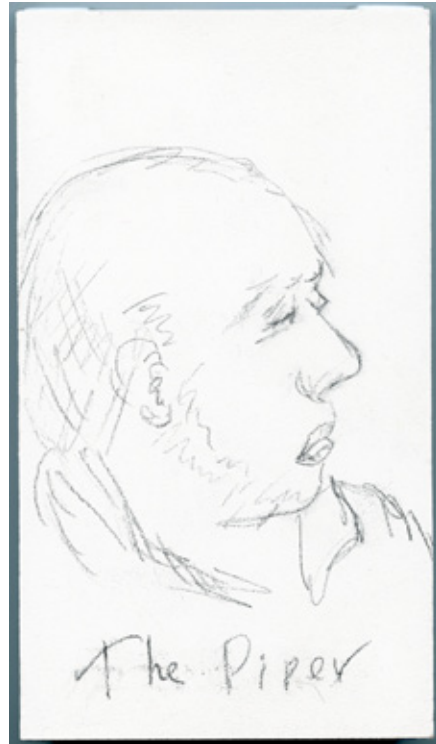
The Bright Mother:

Anne:

I often feel protective of my fellow students, as a mother, if you will, in that I wish they could avoid the pitfalls of life I see them jumping into, but also knowing they have to find out for themselves. Nurturing has not been my strong suit. I try to listen to my sister students and understand them in a Socratic way, looking at their answers. I try not to give my opinion until I have attempted to grasp theirs. Sometimes I just have to say, "Fuck it, why don't you pick up a book?"



Anne / The Bright Mother, 2015, pencil on panel, 8 x 4 in, pastel on panel, 8 x 8 in, inkjet print, 3 x 5 in, purchased book



The Piper

Ben:

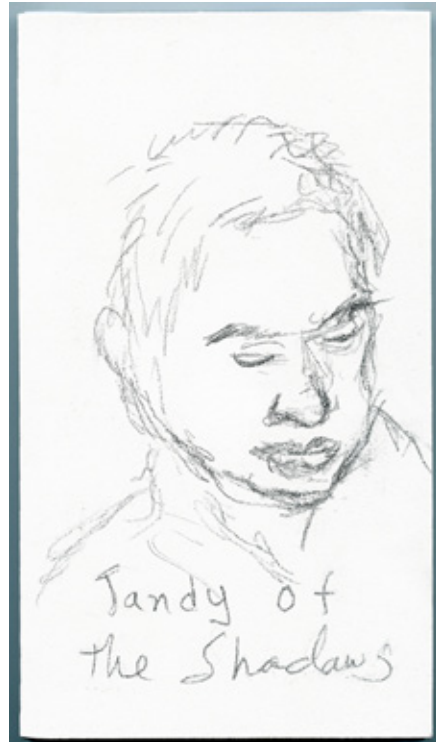
I like the idea of the quest for harmony- the quest to bring pleasing order to a chaotic life - that very much resonates with me!

The painting made me think about my “angry face.” Because it came out, looking kind of stern, (I think it was because I was uncomfortable) the painting made me feel like more of a serious dude than I do normally, which is a good thing. I always feel the need to soften conflict, to put on a “happy face,” so it’s nice to see how attracted I am to my more serious face.

The process made me think about the idea of painting as a performance, of the act of getting ones portrait taken, the relationship between the painter and the sitter, as an important part of painting. I’d never thought about that. It actually is very similar to how I feel about fortune telling: It’s like getting a little massage, because it’s this experience that is very focused on YOU as a person, and there is something very pleasurable about that.



Ben (The Piper), 2015, pencil on panel, 8 x 4 in, oil on panel, 8 x 8 in, framed digital inkjet print, 7 x 5 in



Jandy of the Shadows

Joseph:

The title of the card (Lady of the Shadows) was intriguing and mysterious. Perhaps that's how others see me too, keeping to myself most of the time. I'm an introvert.

After reading the write-up, realizing that she helps people out of the dark, I thought, yes, maybe I'm like that too, by listening and talking to people, and being with them when they're feeling down. I try to empathize because I know in some way I have had gloomy moments too.

Also, I learned that I can carry on a conversation while writing a paper.



Joseph (Jandy of the Shadows), 2015, pencil on panel, 8 x 4 in, oil on panel, 8 x 8 in, aluminum, 7 x 5 in



The Fairy Godmother

Steph:

I thought of the fairy godmother in terms of the other students here, especially Kasia. That it's comforting to know that on some level someone has your back and that I could do the same for people. I was reminded of the potential communal nature of our program.



Steph (The Fairy Godmother), 2015, pencil on panel, 8 x 4 in, oil and glitter on panel, 8 x 8 in, fabric, paper, 36 x 18 in



Solus

Teresa:

This card is about strength and transitioning between worlds. I think it's a pretty accurate description of aspects of my life right now. In looking at it, half my face looks calm and the other half scared. It made me think more about how other people see me, since the act of making it was filtered through the artist. In the portrait I look like a split person, caught between worlds. But, to be honest, I think talking with you about it had more of an impact on me than the portrait itself.



Teresa (Solus), 2015, pencil on panel, 8 x 4 in, colored tissue paper on panel, 8 x 8 in, oil on framed mirror, 7 x 5 in



A Hubristic Self Portrait (The Alchemist), 2015,
oil on panel, 11 x 14 in

Maryann:

After making a dozen of the 'divination' portraits, I decided to choose a card for myself. The card I blindly drew was 'The Alchemist', whose role is to foster an awareness of the connection between the material world and the spiritual world. This is a great metaphor for what a painting, or any art, does. It shines a light on certain aspects of our lives and world. It seems that the ideas for the images in my best work come from 'somewhere else' and it is my job, as a painter, to paint them into the material world.



Kasia:

I was in a pretty bad state of mind. I remember being sad, upset, overwhelmed, and just not good overall. But I do remember that it was nice to sit with someone while in my misery. The tarot reading was significant to me. I remember the cards that I pulled that day and they resonated with me. And even now looking back at that moment, I realize those tarot cards were dead on.

Every time I see my portrait, it brings me back to that moment. And when I look at it, I think I look so sad. It looks like a true depiction of where I was that day. I now know that I was clinically depressed and it pulls at my heart because I was going through so much, but didn't know yet. And maybe, in some way, that moment was eye opening.

Kasia (Madonna), 2015, glass mosaic, 18 x 15 in



Amy:
I was never the model before (always the painter) and I wanted to see if I could sit still. I felt special, getting my portrait done.

Amy (Compassion), 2015, oil, glitter, pearls, glass beads on panel, 8 x 8 x3 in



Peg (The Emperor), 2015, oil on linen, gold leaf,
40x30 in

Peg:

I have to say that the first thing that comes to mind is that just yesterday, before receiving your email I was looking at pictures of Venice, preparing for the trip. There was a picture of the clock tower which reminded me of the painting, the colors and the gold arcs on four sides. So of course I thought about how the painting spoke to me about the passage of time. For me, sitting was a pretty relaxing thing to do. I found it mostly pleasant, chatting and listening to "This American Life". It had not occurred to me before, but my position in the painting could reflect the hands of a clock. I enjoyed spending time with you and seeing the progress in the painting. As above the process goes on.



Mickey (The Puppet Maker.) 2015, oil
on linen and mixed media, 40 x 40 in

Mickey:

Sitting for the painting felt like someone who cared about me was paying really good attention to me.

When I saw the portrait, I realized how very important my hands are to me in my work and play. It captured the idea of the “Caretaker of Wonder”, which was a name I took in a workshop that was about finding my purpose in life. This is a visual to that title.

The mask and trees look ominous, but they are also looking out for me.

Connections

An Interview with Doron Langberg - April 14, 2016



Doron Langberg in his studio, seated in front of: *Nisan and Idan in the Studio*

Maryann Ficker: Tell me how you begin a painting.

Doron Langberg: Here's an example: I knew that I wanted to make a painting of my three very good friends. I thought about colors I would use or ways of moving around paint that would encapsulate our relationship or what things are unique to them. These decisions are motivated by my relationship with them or how I perceive them in my mind. That points to the first few steps, not enough to complete a painting. Then I have to sit and look at it for a while. Now that the situation has been created I need to resolve it. That's why my process is so slow; I wait around until I get an idea for the next step.

MF: Can you talk about your experience of the differences in working from life vs. photos vs. painting from drawings that were done from life?

DL: They're all so different for me. It makes a huge difference in my process working from one material vs. the other. When I first started this body of work, this way of thinking, I was working from a photograph. I would set up a camera on a tripod and perform my idea for an image. The very earliest ones were very close up pictures, say of me and another guy having sex or something. There was a voyeuristic element to the photography. When I started working from drawings, made from observation, I was suddenly not the subject anymore, I couldn't be. It was a kind of reversal of roles, although I was always the one making decisions and depicting a certain view point. With drawing, literally, the thing you're looking at is the thing you're drawing. You become the lens through which you look at the world. With photography, the camera is a different lens than your eye.

MF: Did you think of those early images as self portraits?

DL: A lot of them were self portraits, but then when I started working from drawings, I stopped making self portraits. That was a really big change in terms of how my source affected the subject matter and it was an important development. I feel like the photograph had become almost tyrannical. You could tell that underneath all the texture of the paint, there was a photographic structure, which gave the feeling of documenting reality, and that went against other more expressive, imaginative elements in the painting. I switched to drawing to get rid of that structure, but the unexpected benefit was having all this other subject matter open up because of it.

The stuff I'm doing now is different from my older work. For example, with the painting of my mom; she was just sitting there and I painted her and then I kept working on it afterward. When you have a photograph or a drawing that's separate from the thing you're working on, you can go back and forth, add information or take it away, but when the painting itself is also your source of information, if you take something out, it's gone.

MF: Do you take photos when you work from life?

DL: I do. I don't really use them but they're there if I need them. I don't want to take something out of a painting and then permanently lose that information if I decide I need it back. As long as a painting works, I don't care how I got there. I don't have any ideology about not using a photograph.

MF: All of your paintings are of people you know, how much does your relationship to the person portrayed influence your work?

DL: A lot. I don't want to say that they're "about the relationship", but if I didn't know the person, I wouldn't even know how to start the painting. It's somehow necessary for my decision making process about what to do in the painting. I can't break down what each element in my painting has to do with my subject, like why a painting of my sister would be red. But once I'm done, I can see an overall relationship. Part of my process is figuring out what the painting is trying to be about. It's kind of like walking in the dark, trying to follow something. When you get there, you understand what you were trying to do all along.

MF: So the relationship is the inspiration, it's where the painting starts, but it doesn't end there. Do you see your relationship to the subject reflected in the final product?

DL: I see them (the subject) reflected in the final product, like when I look at the painting of my brother and his kid, it feels like them. When a painting takes on a similar life to the person, I know it's going in the right direction.

MF: When you work from a live model, does the interaction that happens during the sitting, influence the content?

DL: Not really, I have a pretty clear idea of what I want from the painting before I start. When I'm literally in front of the model trying to paint them, I'm mostly thinking about making it look like them or getting them in the right place on the canvas, it's very formal. When I'm painting without the model, I have time to think and try things out, but while they are there in front of me, it's much more target oriented.

MF: You already know these people well; you're not getting to know them.

DL: I've never really worked with people that I don't know. There's no gauge of what the paintings are supposed to be if I have no idea who the person is. The better I know the person, the easier it is to paint them. My mom only took twenty minutes, because I know her so well. It was clear to me how things needed to be, down to the brush stroke.

MF: It's very loving, the way you render all of the figures and faces is. You wouldn't paint someone you don't like, would you?

DL: No. Obviously I paint people that I care about a lot, but I am trying to get to a broader emotional range. I wanted the one of my mom to be pretty intense, because that's my relationship with her. The love and the care are there through my investment.

MF: Doesn't that speak about you? You were saying you want the paintings to reflect the people in them, but I think that love and caring is you coming through, in things like the sensitive way you render your mother. It reminds me of Alice Neil. When I look at her paintings, I can tell how she felt about all of those people.

DL: Conceptually, yes. She's definitely an admirable model, she's amazing. That is important to me. I think it comes up in different ways though. Take the painting of my brother, where he's sitting with his son. They were wearing the same jeans so their limbs kind of blended and it reminded me of the Bronzino painting *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time* where there are all these figures crammed into the space so you can't tell whose limbs belong to who. That's a really beautiful metaphor for relationships.

MF: Father and son are melded together.

DL: I actually made my painting the same size as the Bronzino, which is really nerdy so I don't expect anyone to notice.

MF: A painter's secret. Can you describe how you developed your ways of handling paint, as well as how you developed your ways of handling the relationship of the imagery to the materiality of the painting?

DL: I've always been interested in how the physicality of material changes the image. It can be an expressive tool independent of the image that you can use in relation to the image. Even when this body of work started and I was making really small drawings, they were pretty gestural. The energy of the mark related to the subject matter, which was quite sexual. The idea of sensuality of material, as it relates to sensuality of image was the first obvious connection in my mind, between how materiality and image together could produce content. From there it developed. Now the subject has changed; I have family and friends in addition to things that are more sexual, as over time I figured out how to articulate different emotions.

There are a lot of repeating ways of moving around paint in my work; there's sanding, a lot of scraping, that chunky texture, a lot of thin glazes, and pallet knife marks. There is a visual language I repeat, but it's hard to pinpoint; things play different roles in different paintings.

MF: The combination of the imagery and the way you use materials creates a back and forth obscuring and revealing in a lot of your paintings.

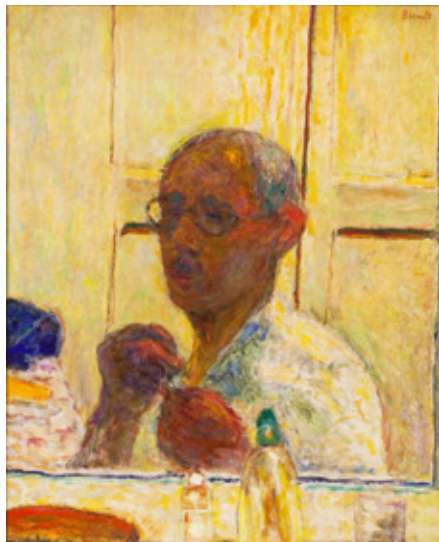
DL: I do think there's something about a painting opening up over time, that the thing you see first is not necessarily what's important. When you are confronted with the materiality, the colors and textures first, and then the imagery second, it's a way of connecting with the viewer through bodily sensations. I discovered this in other paintings. I was looking at a Bonnard and the thing that was overwhelming to me was how the shapes were attracting or how the color was working, and then I noticed all the things in the image. If you have a more physical experience of the materiality than you do of the imagery, that sets up a more intimate connection, which brings you into the image. Slowing down the image allows for a different relationship



Agnolo Bronzino, *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time*, 1545, 57 × 46 in , National Gallery London



R. B. Kitaj, *Melancholy after Durer*, 1989, Oil on canvas, 123.5 x 122.5 cm., British Council



Pierre Bonnard, *Self Portrait in Dressing Room Mirror*, 1938 – 1940, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 61cm, Art Gallery NSW



Doron Langberg, *Mom*, 2016, oil on linen, 60 x 40 in, courtesy the artist

with the viewer. Whereas with more explicit paintings that are super clear from the beginning, there's almost an antagonistic relationship to the image.

MF: The concealing and revealing effect reminds me of a conversation. You described how you orchestrate a conversation with the viewer but you're also having a conversation with other artists. I see a strong influence of Bonnard and Vuillard. Is there anyone else you think of? You brought up Bronzino, who I would not have thought of.

DL: That's a kind of vague reference, but even the milkiness of the skin, where wax medium scraped on top of a darker tone, in my painting, relates to that mannerist porcelain skin. The art that's around me, made by my friends, influences my work. And R. B. Kitaj, I reference him a lot; also Matisse, van Gogh, and Velasquez. There's a lot, almost every painting has some reference. It's not really a conscious decision, that's just how I think. I think through paintings I've seen. It's like I have an alternate reality of painting where the paintings that are there, that I love, dictate the range of possibilities. Of course I try to digest them through my own sensibilities, but there's a finite vocabulary, painting has been around for so long, it's very broad but so many things have already been done.

MF: Is the concealing and revealing related to the content of your work in any other way?

DL: Mostly it's about that back and forth, enabling an insight into a really personal and intimate experience. Van Gogh is the ultimate model of this, you're entering into his interiority, but it's still a much heightened emotional experience for me as the viewer, because he was able to articulate it in such an emotional way.

MF: Does your work hold meaning that is just for you or your subject, beyond what the viewer could possibly glean?

DL: Not really. The motivations to make certain things are something that perhaps only I, or people close to me, know. But I want the emotional aspects, at least, to be apparent. I'm not keeping secrets. Obviously there's no way for the viewer to know exactly why I painted this person, but I do want them to get a sense of that person's importance to me.

Sitting

Belmira Silva interviews Maryann Ficker
while sitting for a portrait - March 13, 2016

Belmira Silva: In your work there is an importance of slowing things down for the image maker. Why do you feel it is so important to take this time to have a connection with the person you sit with rather than just take a photograph?

Maryann Ficker: I don't think you capture very much about people in the instant snapshot. The whole thing about speed is that it creates an artificial world. My process is about an actual interaction and taking time to be with each other. To me, the instant selfie and over sharing of social media is just fake nonsense.

BS: When you sit and paint a portrait, you're talking to the person, actually communicating.

MF: Oh yes, a relationship begins.

BS: If you just take a snapshot of someone, the interaction is very brief. There is no time to interact in any profound way.

MF: It's an artificial relationship and an artificial world. Painting, for me, is about the opposite of that, a real interaction in the real world, outside of the digital one. It is a way for people to get to know each other. Taking the time to sit and know people is the most important thing and often it just doesn't happen.

BS: Is a prior relationship with the sitter necessary?

MF: It's a great way to get to know someone. To sit and look at each other and talk in a physical room together – it's a novel idea and it works! It's actually fun. A prior relationship is not necessary.

BS: What kinds of conversations do you have with someone you know very well, say, your sister vs. having someone like me sit for you?

MF: Sometimes you have more things to talk about with someone you don't know. I can't say that

we have ever completely run out of conversation, even with someone I know very well. But there are times that we've sat in silence and that's fine too. That's part of the process. To be able to sit in silence with someone is an even more intimate experience, when you don't have the need to fill up the room with sound. I actually started painting portraits from life in groups. It's a bonding experience. We really felt like we got to know each other and we all cared about each other. When something else is going on; when you are somewhat distracted by painting, you can be less self-conscious. You're not just sitting there across from each other, as when you invite a stranger to sit down and have a cup of coffee. Here we have a clear agenda, so it takes some of the pressure off and makes it easier to talk.

BS: Why the triangle; the recent development of having two people who know each other come to sit with you instead of just one, as before?

MF: I wanted to expand the relationship between the sitter and me and begin talking about relationships in general. It is a way to make the statement that relationships are important. There was a relationship between two people who know each other and now, with me; there are three of us connected. It is expanding. This is how communities are built.

BS: After sitting for you, my friend, Sonya, said she really enjoyed this experience and it would not have happened if it were not for this opportunity to sit with you

MF: We would not have met otherwise. It also gave you and her a chance to spend time together. How long has it been since you two spent that much time together?

BS: It has been a long time! Me, with grad school and her, with the baby; we became so preoccupied with our own lives that our contact became mostly digital and we rarely get to spend a day together.

MF: I hope this reminded you to do it more often. As the pace of life has become more sped up people don't take the time to connect. It used to be a priority—and in other places in the world it still is. Maintaining community was more important than getting things done or personal accomplishments, but the maintenance of community is itself an accomplishment and our culture often doesn't see it that way.

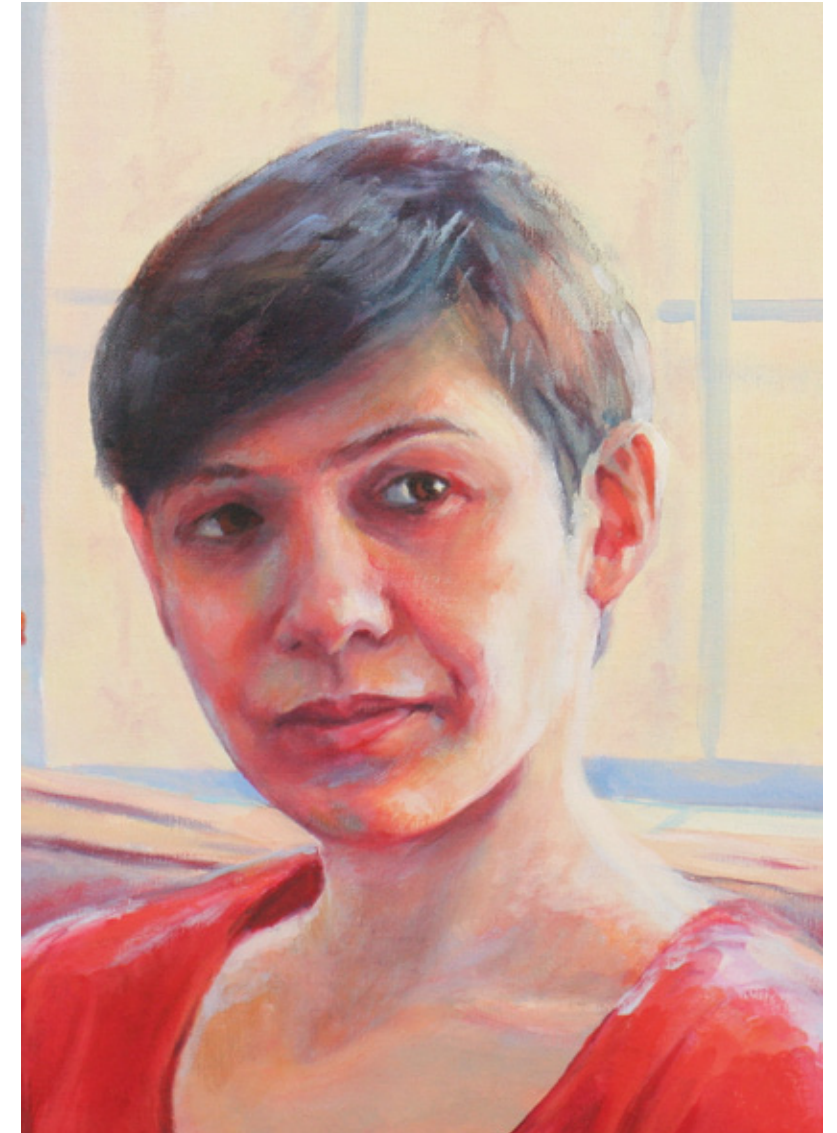
BS: The painting process is a foil to the speedy “internet-get-to-know-you” format; the slowness of creating the portrait acts as a metaphor for the slowness of creating relationships and maintaining them.

MF: It's something we're losing as a priority that shouldn't be lost.

BS: Elaborate more on why you chose to paint from life.

MF: Some neuroscientists say that paintings are processed more slowly than photos. Paintings are also more animated, the light changes throughout the day, the sitter moves. There are distortions

that get painted when you paint from life. It puts the viewer in the same perspective as the artist looking at the sitter. It also makes you look more carefully. Paintings are more interesting to look at when things are not quite as you expect them to be in a photograph. Things are a little more engaging. The anomalies you get from painting, the distortion, allows the viewer to perceive what the artist experienced. It engages the viewer and lets them participate in the interaction that occurred during the creation of the work.



Belmira, Sonya and Sophia, 2016, oil on linen, (detail)



Eileen, 2016, oil on linen, 11 x 10 in

Eileen:

I was contemplating how it feels to turn 70 - and become an official crone! I think I realized during our visit that, for me, those “ordinary” moments (like drinking coffee or spontaneously jitterbugging with girl friends) are the most fun and especially meaningful experiences of our lives. They only grow in importance as we age. I particularly enjoyed the creative process with you because it slowed time down for a few days and captured a special birthday memory for me. Your portrait captured the relaxing comfort I felt with my breakfast, Kindle and special friends. It feels like we don’t take (or make) many opportunities for reflection, chances to savor life - past, present or future. But my visit with you and Barb was just such a time, and such a hoot that I’m looking forward to turning 80.

Barb:

Lord, I am fugly! Always glad I had a personality to compensate. Anyhoo, loved our time together. Glad to be away from the Parkinson patient.



Barb, 2016, oil on linen, 11 x 10 in



Howie and Glen, 2016, pastel on sanded paper,
27 x 18 in

Howie:

I remember that we both had a hard time sitting still. So, we each looked for something to do while we sat.

Looking at the portrait, I am surprised to see that we both chose to read the New Yorker and that we sat in the same position.

Glen:

You asked me and dad to sit for you. You had us sit at the old dinner table. At first you couldn't find a good angle. You decided that the best angle was from the door way, so you set up the easel in the door way. Dad couldn't sit still.



Dan:

Despite the minor constraint of having to remain still, I found it very relaxing. The process carved a unique experience out of our ordinary day-to-day life. Also, we got some great conversation in, about lots of different topics.

Erica:

It was nice to be forced to sit still and just chat. I especially recall your surprise when I told you about throwing things when I get mad! You seemed surprised that I would ever get that mad, since I seem to the outside world to be such a calm person. That's an observation that other people have said about me also: that I seem so calm. I guess I am mostly non-confrontational and not easily agitated. Sitting for the portrait made me think about this and now, I also realize that it has been a long time since I have felt the need to throw anything! So, either I have gotten more mature, or else I have learned to deal with stress and anger in a better way. I think, as I have aged, certain things don't bother me anymore, or there are just different life stresses. Anyhow, this has nothing much to do with your portrait, but I am just reflecting!

Dan and Erica, 2016, oil on linen, 32 x 40 in



Natalia:

It seems difficult for me to sit still. But at the same time, I felt relaxed, because I knew that for the next couple of hours I will sit and do nothing else. It was a reason to stop, relax for a bit, sit down and be present for some time. Otherwise, I would be all around the place - cooking, cleaning, doing homework. It felt like I needed this downtime for myself, as well, to have some rest.

I knew, before you came to paint us, that if Victor sits still he will start falling asleep.

Victor:

I learned that Natalia is quite good at posing for paintings!

It was interesting for me to observe that, while Natalia and I were posing, we were still able to carry out our work without much problem.

Natalia and Victor, 2016, oil on linen, 30 x 47 in



Belmira, Sonya and Sophia, 2016, oil on linen, 26 x 32 in

Belmira:

Sophia can walk and run now! She is growing up so fast. She reminded me how amazing mammalian development is. So much growth in so little time! She is such a happy little girl. I always had a feeling that Sonya would be a great mom. I don't think I have ever met a 1 year old as happy as Sophia.

I didn't know all the details that led to Sonya's emergency c-section. I had no idea that a baby's face position was so important to the ease or difficulty for giving birth. I thought that head down was enough! There seems to be so many specific things that need to be in place for a smooth delivery. I have learned a lot about pregnancy and childbirth from Sonya and Maryann. Experiences vary, of course, and things don't always go as planned. I was always rather afraid of pregnancy and childbirth--especially with the recent surfacing of the concept of "birth rape". I don't think "rape" is the right word, but from what I have read it seems that the trauma of both experiences is pretty similar in how women feel afterward. I just wonder what is up with all these abusive doctors. Why are they doing things without the informed consent of their patients? Don't they fear a lawsuit for their poor treatment of these women? I guess my anxiety is lessened when I hear positive stories, but the traumatic stories ring the loudest.

I never thought that Sonya felt traumatized enough to not want another child soon after Sophia. If she decides to have a second child, I do very much hope that her second experience comes much closer to what she hopes to experience. I really don't like the thought of one of my closest friends going through that trauma again.

I did enjoy the process. It was great to see Sonya again. She is a mom now. The kind of fun we used to have together is now different with the addition of Sophia--but just as much fun as before. I think Sonya and I are flexible enough that we will be able to make plans to meet regardless of what is going on in our lives.

Being together with women in a room reminded me of the kind of community that I was a part of when I was in an all-girls high school. I do believe having a supportive community of women is important to all women. Sometimes it is just nice to reconnect with a sisterhood. It feels really good - and I think there is no other way to explain it but it feels like a recharging of feminine energy.

Sonya:

It was very comfortable; when I had no idea what to expect for sitting during a portrait. I received a lot of information that helped me feel a little better about my own work. It was good to know other artists felt essentially the same about their work. It is also funny, how it takes another artist to push you out of your own slump.

It was good to be all ladies all sharing about life and experiences. It was refreshing.



Debra:

The sitting was tedious at times, but bringing wine made it fun. That pose and expression is what I remember. Looking back, I enjoyed the process. I loved spending time with you guys.

Lori:

I remember how Debra's phone kept ringing and how difficult it was to sit completely still and hold the wine glass just right, and how I thought I would never hold a wine glass the way you posed it. I remember sneaking drinks of the wine and refilling it so it would look the same in the glass. You read my cards and I was struck by how it resonated with my actual issues. It struck me also how willing each of us was to talk about all aspects of our lives, not holding back even the most difficult or unflattering parts, and not doubting the acceptance would be unconditional. The conversation between the three of us always flows easily. It moved from our most serious fears to the American Idol finale.

Debra and Lori, 2016, oil on linen, 16 x 14 in



Howie:
What I remember most is that I had the flu
and slept on the couch for two days.

Maryann:
I felt sorry for Howie, being sick, but I also
saw it as an opportunity. I was enchanted
by the reflections in the windows and was
wondering what kind of dreams Howie might
be having. I am not sure what the neighbors
thought about me staring out the window
towards their house, night after night.

Howie and Me, 2016, oil on linen, 35 x 33 in

Reflections

I am encouraged by the potentials of this project and the feedback from the participants. Although it was sometimes difficult to sit, nearly everyone was glad that they did and took meaning from the process. I am interested in applying the concept of sitting together, while I make a portrait, to populations other than just my family and friends. I have a few ideas about how I might implement this.

One possibility is to use it to map of a network of relationships. In this scenario, I would make double portraits. After each portrait, I would ask one of the sitters to sit again with someone else they know. I would be following a meandering trail of relationships, similar to the way, in Facebook, people friend each other's friends. But this would require more sustained contact than online. Perhaps it would reinforce community ties.

Another avenue to look at is the possibility of using this process to create intentional relationships, which might be mutually beneficial. The participants could be people who have not met, but wish to. Perhaps the project could focus on people who have a particular concern or agenda. Or it could focus on people who stand on different sides of an issue who are willing to listen to an opposing point of view. In exploring relationships, there are many, many possibilities and potentials.



Natalia and Victor, 2016, oil on linen, (detail)



Howie and Me, 2016, oil on linen, (detail)

Maryann Ficker is an artist who lives and works in New Jersey.

