

The Anxious Subject: Janet Werner and the Disfigured Female Portrait

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Abstract

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This thesis investigates the notion of an anxiously engaged viewer in relation to the paintings of women produced by Janet Werner (b.1959) over a ten-year period, from 2006 to 2016. Werner's portraits are made up of re-purposed photographic imagery of the hyper-feminine originating in our commercialized visual pop culture, transformed through Werner's act of repainting. While Werner's work has been discussed in relation to pop culture and kitsch, as an aspect of appropriation and re-presentation, and as triggers for empathy, my approach engages with the mutability of her painted women as a performative space of fragmentation and deformation, and as a trigger for anxiety. The thesis begins by interrogating the genre of portraiture, drawing on Gadamer's idea that the portrait is different from the copy because it proposes an "increase in being." These ideas are joined to affect theory, to approach the artist's work as a performative space, involving the artist's body, the viewer's body, and the body in the artwork. If Werner's female subjects are represented in a state of flux, this can also be understood as a state of feminine existential negotiation. Werner's process of formal distortion in portraiture is thus regarded as a performative act that brings the viewer into an encounter with the emotive state of anxiety.

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I dedicate this to my mother, Vasiliki Michopoulos, who left too soon, thank you for the stars and the moon...

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Introduction



Fig.1 Janet Werner, *4 Eyes*, 2013, oil on canvas, 40.6 x 50.8 cm.

In Janet Werner's *4 Eyes* (fig.1), we are met with the half-turned bust of a woman. In a shallow pictorial space, the distinction between figure and ground is rendered ambivalent; a similarity in tonality makes the figure seem to be both emerging and dissolving into space. Ethereal blonde hair envelops the figure's neck and falls onto her shoulder, but there is something terribly amiss with the rest of the figure, in that she has been practically defaced through the painter's smears, smudges, and surface manipulations. The woman's mouth has been gashed by mauve paint, the slash going all the way down to her left jawbone. Similarly, mauve-colored paint outlines her hairline and appears to stain parts of her face. The remaining legible fragments of her face underneath these marks reveal a beautiful face painted in soft flesh tones,

suggestive of smoothly luminous skin. But then, a series of four circular shapes, presumably the four eyes stated in the title, descend from the woman's forehead. Werner's distortion of the woman's face is a rupture with naturalistic representation, resulting in a situation where the viewer is likely to be both attracted and repelled by a fragmented body, abstraction, and remnants of beauty.



Fig. 2 Janet Werner, (*dogface*), 1996, oil on canvas, 142.2 x 160 cm.

To understand Montreal based artist Janet Werner (b.1959) through the genre of portraiture, it is instructive to begin with her 1997 exhibition, *Janet Werner: Lucky* at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery. In contrast to her earlier work, which was more evidently grounded in abstract painting, a determined figurative force emerged in this exhibition. In works such as (*dogface*) (1996) (fig.2), we encounter the beginnings of a brunette with a fashionable

bob and smoky brown eye shadow, who surfaces from behind the mask-like treatment of her dog-like face. The uncertain status of Werner's subjects is alluded to by titles such as (*black head*) (1996) and (*yellow head*) (1996); it can be noted that parentheses are grammatical elements that denote interruption and addition. Pictorially, there is ambivalence, in that the edges of figures are indeterminate, parts of them simultaneously appearing and disappearing according to the artist's gestures of erasure or overpainting. Elements of their faces and bodies are erased, changed and repainted. As portraits, these people therefore appear as insecure subjects, whose subjectivity is being shaped and misshaped by absence and excess, figuration and formlessness.

In the essay accompanying this exhibition, writer and critic, Carol Laing notes that there is an intimacy being proposed by these paintings and drawings of mostly "tiny" bodies that seem to "hover" and "float" in the empty space they inhabit. Laing writes: "To see them at all, it is necessary to move in and then they immediately radiate distress."¹ The affective dimension of Werner's work is being asserted in this essay and it is one that seems to be shaped by uncertainty and a sort of loss. In subsequent years, as Werner's paintings have become more figurative and more beautiful, the sense of uncertainty and the loss of the subject is made even more manifest.

In the exhibition *Since first I cast eyes on you* (2002), assertively attractive female figures (fig.9) radiate with seductive authority yet there is also a generic aspect to them that is unsettling and distancing. In the body of work presented in the exhibition *Too Much Happiness* (2008), figures seem to assuredly stare back at the viewer yet they also seem displaced and kind of lost (fig.5/fig.6/fig.7). More recently, for the exhibition *Another Perfect Day* (2013-2015), Werner

¹ Carol Laing, "The Silence of the World," in *Janet Werner: Lucky* (Lethbridge, Alberta: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1997), 15.

disfigures and renders grotesque what were once beautiful figures (fig.11/fig.12), illustrating a collapsed pose of femininity and showing a subject that exhibits an almost complete loss of self.²

Werner is not alone in engaging with portraiture in an experimental manner, whereby the subjects to be visually represented are disfigured and distorted. For instance, it would be possible to compare her work to the British artist Francis Bacon, who beginning in the 1940s, began to disarrange the faces of his subjects in order to reflect human unhappiness and suffering. More recently, though, a number of women artists working with both photography and painting, have explored the limits of portraiture while often resorting to forms of defacement. As will be discussed, the staged photographs of Cindy Sherman are important models in terms of how such strategies can acquire a feminist dimension. In addition, Nancy Burson has created photographic composite portraits that morph a multitude of beautiful famous faces into one seamless portrait to underscore the absurdities of the image of female beauty; Marlene Dumas bases her paintings on photographic sources and leaves the faces of her subjects unfinished which has the effect of evoking emptiness and absence; Gillian Wearing's photographic work questions the role of self-disclosure in self-portraiture through the wearing of prosthetic masks of herself at various ages or of other family members; Lisa Yuskavage's painted female figures exaggerate the female body in an overwhelmingly sexualized and vulgar manner. While there are some commonalities between these artistic projects and the work of Janet Werner, this thesis sets out to investigate the particular qualities of anxiety that are attached to Werner's female portraits. By opening up the threshold between both the interior and the exterior space occupied by her female subjects, we

² *Janet Werner: Lucky* (1997) Southern Alberta Gallery, Lethbridge and (1998) Owens Art Gallery, Sackville; *Janet Werner: Since first I cast eyes on you* (2002) Robert Birch Gallery Toronto; *Janet Werner: Too Much Happiness* (2008) Parisian Laundry, Montreal; *Janet Werner Another Perfect Day* (2013-15) Kenderdine Art Gallery| College Art Galleries, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon; Esker Foundation, Calgary; Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal; McIntosh Gallery, Western University, London; Doris McCarty Gallery, Toronto.

as viewers are both included and excluded from these works. And if the entanglement between viewer and artworks is an affective one, what is produced is the affect of anxiety.

And objects do have eyes...and ultimately, objects all say one thing: 'Look at me.'

- James Elkins³

Is This a Portrait?

To position Janet Werner's work in contemporary art, it is critical to contextualize her paintings of female figures in relation to the discourse of portraiture. Werner's works problematize portraiture through the distortive and disrupted treatment of the faces and bodies of people that may be real women, or are perhaps composites, or perhaps a combination of people who may or may not have existed. As an artistic genre, portraiture is historically tied to notions of mimesis and likeness, and through its denotative nature, the portrait highlights the encounter between two subjectivities, that of the sitter and the artist/viewer. Once the positions of artist and viewer are conflated, though, then the situation becomes more complex. If the portrait is considered as a durational event, it could be said that the viewer is met with the representational image of a person whose subjectivity has been fixed in time and transformed into an object that now functions on the level of aesthetic contemplation.

In Richard Brilliant's *Portraiture* (1991), considered the first theoretical study devoted solely to portraiture, the author sets out to define the way a portrait functions in the world. He asserts that it is essentially informed by "the vital relationship between the portrait and its object of representation,"⁴ that it involves "the very fact of the portrait's allusion to an individual

³ James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1996), 72.

⁴ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 8.

human being, actually existing outside the work.”⁵ It is thus the denotative quality of the portrait that shapes Brilliant’s main arguments. As Brilliant states, “A real...person seems to exist somewhere within or behind the portrait.”⁶ For Brilliant, the difficulty lies in seeing a portrait as an art object rather than as the person represented. He posits that a documentary realism pervades the genre of portraiture and that the dialectic of portraiture centers on the viewer’s awareness of the relationship between the original and the representational image of that original.⁷ The reference to an existing element of reality implies that this same real element lingers or follows the portrait. Thus, the portrait seems to allow the actual person represented to transcend the durational event of a portrait, inhabiting its representational space as an autonomous entity.

Gadamer and the Concept of the Increase in Being: That Something or Someone New

Brilliant’s views are fundamentally shaped by philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer’s ontological analysis of the picture. In *Truth and Method*, originally published in German in 1960, Gadamer sets out to define the characteristics of the “mode of being of a picture.”⁸ Two questions frame his investigation; he first asks: in what manner is the picture different from a copy, and secondly: in what way does the picture’s relationship to its world shape its particular mode of being? It is within this framework of the ontological problem of the original and the copy that Gadamer argues, that because the picture has a crucial relation to its original, the discussion concerning theories of representation inevitably leads to theories of the copy. Defining representation as the mode of being of the work of art, he questions how the meaning of representation can be defined against the concept of the copy. The nature of the copy, he argues,

⁵ Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 8.

⁶ Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 46.

⁷ Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 45.

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 121.

is to resemble the original, so much so that its nature is to self-cancel itself in subservience to the communication of what it is copying. The ideal copy is the mirror image whose intention is original unity and the non-differentiation of representation and the represented. In contrast, the nature of the picture is self-affirmation, and it is through the assertion of its own being that it allows what it depicts to exist. The relation of the picture to its original is not one-sided as it is in the copy-original model whose nature is reflection and that lacks an independent existence separate from that reflection. The picture possesses its own autonomous reality, its own being, which as representation is differentiated from that which is represented. On the independence of the picture, Gadamer states,

Every such representation is an ontological event and belongs to the ontological level of what is represented. Through being represented it experiences, as it were, an increase in being. The particular import of the picture is determined ontologically as an emanation of the original.⁹

Gadamer suggests there is an excess in this relationship, an increase that speaks as much about the original as it does about the picture. Even when representation depends on an original, the picture resists the slavish function of the copy, and possesses an independence that then affects the original. Gadamer is describing an interdependence within the original-picture model; he states, “For strictly speaking, it is only through the picture that the original becomes the original picture, i.e. it is the picture that makes what is represented into a picture.”¹⁰ Gadamer is ascribing a generative force to the picture, suggesting that the picture’s main function is to increase the being of the original through representation. To characterize this surplus, this increase-in-being,

⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 124.

¹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 125.

Gadamer employs the concept of “occasionality”¹¹ to characterize the production of works such as portraits, which are defined by Gadamer as an intensified form of a picture because this pictorial genre has historically been closely bound to its original. He defines occasionality as that which “means that their meaning is partly determined by the occasion for which they are intended, so that it contains more than it would without this occasion.”¹² In its relational role towards the person it is representing, the portrait’s intended function, as representation, according to Gadamer, is to specifically enrich the being that is “coming-to-presentation”¹³ through the portrait. This enrichment is described as an event that is produced rather than portrayed. As Gadamer states, “A work of art belongs so closely to that to which it is related that it enriches its being as if through a new event of being.”¹⁴

In regards to specific works of portraiture, how can we define this increase in being, this enrichment, and this surplus? It could be said that Werner addresses this notion of an increase in being or as a new event of being in works such as *After Goya*, (2009) (fig.4) which is modeled after Francisco de Goya’s 1796 painting of the Duchess of Alba titled *The White Duchess* (fig.3). In Goya’s life-sized painting, the duchess is depicted standing in a landscape of mountainous formations and sandy ground, wearing typically fashionable dress of the 1790s: a sheer polka-dot dress which is accentuated by a red necklace around her neck, a red bow on her chest, and a red sash wrapped around her waist. Her dark cascading hair is naturalistic and provides a contrast to her white and red outfit. Making an appearance next to her is her *animal d’accompagnement*, the Duchess’ lap dog, coordinated both in color and accessory with a matching red bow. The Duchess is gesturing to the sand, and to Goya’s signature, in a body language that is self-assured

¹¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 127.

¹² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 127.

¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 131.

¹⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 130.

and alluring, and a gaze that directly engages the viewer. What might the surplus or increase in being refer to in relation to Goya's portrait? It has been suggested that in Goya's portrait the Duchess is negotiating both national identity and sexuality through her sartorial individualism in the wearing of the red sash or *faja*, an important part of Spanish peasant dress. And that the manner in which she has fashioned herself reflects a sort of "flirtatious role-play"¹⁵ in the vicarious experience of the presumed libertine lifestyle of the lower classes.



Fig.3 Francisco De Goya, *The White Duchess*, 1795, oil on canvas, 194 x 130cm.

¹⁵ Tara Zanardi, "Fashioning the Duchess of Alba: Vicarious Thrills and Sartorial Flirtations during the Spanish Enlightenment," *Fashion Theory* 14:1 (2010): 9.



Fig.4 Janet Werner, *After Goya*, 2009, oil on canvas, 152 x 122 cm.

In Janet Werner's work, we are apparently encountering the same woman except in this instance there would not have been any actual contact with the subject. Indeed, across the entirety of Werner's work it would be impossible to find a painting that has been obviously and persuasively based on the direct encounter with another person, even when the figures are given the names of real people, as in her painting of Monica Lewinsky. Nonetheless, I want to argue that Werner uses this opportunity to explore the subject and the notion of an increase in being despite the fact that an overt level of mediation is there right from the start.

In *After Goya* (fig.4), the Duchess is now closer to the viewer, more confrontational than inviting; the figure is not environmentally situated; gone is Goya's landscape, while the space behind her is ambiguous although perhaps depicting the sky of the original. Her once somewhat impassive face now possesses a sexual magnetism; her lips are parted, her cheeks are intensely

flushed, her lids are seductively heavy from thick lines of black velvety eyeliner. Her polka-dot gown is now fleshier in tone asserting a corporeality that was absent in Goya's depiction of ethereal white skin. Her red beaded necklace has melded with the red bow, and the red *faja* is echoed in the bodice of the dress, which is now depicted as alive and blood-like, and seems to pulsate. The crowning glory of her hair, once part of a naturalistic *mis en scène*, is now an excessive dark brown mass framing her shoulders and neck. It can be argued that Werner's portrait increased the original subject's being according to Gadamer's notion of enrichment through a new event of being, through a more embodied subjectivity by underscoring her sensuality and making her more explicitly seductive.

But what is also striking and mystifying in this painting is Werner's addition of a crown of cartoonish ghost-like creatures that sit atop the figure's mass of hair perhaps as a replacement of the Duchess' dog, her original accessory. It has been remarked that Werner uses the accessory as a "self-defacement,"¹⁶ in the sense that accessories can undermine the authority of the person portrayed. In these terms, I want to ask: can the increase in being inherent in a picture, something which is supposedly even more intensified in a portrait, exist alongside a decrease in being? Werner's engagement with identity and subjectivity often seems to suggest a loss of self. Werner has displaced the likeness of the Duchess of Alba, both in time and in space, to reflect the ambivalent qualities of portraiture and further problematize the notion of the copy and the original.

The possibility that portraiture can involve loss has been taken up by some scholars. One of them, Ernst Van Alphen, argues that portraiture in the twentieth-century became a problematical genre, and that, semiotically speaking, the crisis of modernity can be viewed as the

¹⁶ Cameron Skeene, "Janet Werner," *Border Crossings* 29:3 (August 2010): 130.

irresoluble split between signified and signifier. The moment that artists stopped seeing the sign as a unity, the portrait lost its status regarding mimetic representation, and became prone to portraying the loss of self rather than its reinforcement and “shaping the subject as simulacrum instead of origin.”¹⁷ On this conflict between subjectivity and representation, Van Alphen refers back to Benjamin Buchloh’s recognition of the death of the genre of portraiture upon seeing Picasso’s 1910 portrait of his dealers, Kahnweiler, Vollard and Uhde. Buchloh uses the term “anti-portraits,” stating,

These anti-portraits fuse the sitter’s subjectivity in a continuous network of phenomenological interdependence between pictorial surface and virtual space, between bodily volume and painterly texture, as all physiognomic features merge instantly in a persistent negation in a pictorial erasure of efforts at mimetic resemblance.¹⁸

In conjunction with a new representational mode, whereby a signifier does not form a fixed unity with signified, Van Alphen argues that Picasso expressed a new conception of subjectivity. This new kind of portraiture underscores a subjectivity that is illusion; pictorial forms may signify mouths or heads but they are entirely arbitrary as mimetic signifiers to the signified. Moreover, in this kind of picture subjectivities are practically exchangeable, despite the two sitters looking quite different from one another.

James D. Campbell defines Werner’s work through a similar notion of anti-portraiture, one where there is a marked indeterminacy and illusion of subjectivity through the changes made to her subjects’ faces, from familiar to generic, as she keeps working and re-working a painted

¹⁷ Ernst Van Alphen, “The Portrait’s Dispersal: Concepts of Presentation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture,” in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 242.

¹⁸ Benjamin Buchloh as quoted in Van Alphen’s “The Portrait’s Dispersal,” 242.

portrait. On a return visit to Werner's studio, Campbell observes a significant change the artist has made to the face of one of her previous portraits, he notes, "This sheds light, I think, on the recurring theme of anti-portraiture in her work, of methodically disrupting the orthodoxies of the face."¹⁹ Werner's work seems to be subverting the conventions of traditional portraiture by underscoring the ambivalence of mimetic resemblance through pictorial erasures and re-workings.

Portraiture can thus become a site of conflict, both ontological and psychological. What is at stake is not just mimesis but the very notion of selfhood. The painting becomes a confrontational place where the viewer is invited into a space in which the conflict between subjectivity and representation is being played out. Much of postmodern and contemporary portraiture does indeed deal with the ways roles and identities can be assumed and discarded,²⁰ selfhood gained or lost.

The Decrease in Being

In thinking about negations and disruptions of likeness in the genre of portraiture, and the ambivalence of selfhood, it is worthwhile returning to Gadamer's copy-original model. Expanding on this model, Gadamer addresses works that are "not portraits" but rather portrait-like and he introduces the idea of the original being "crushed" by ambivalent pictorial gestures, even while these pictures still somehow "desire" to be acknowledged as portraits. Gadamer states,

¹⁹ James D. Campbell, "On the Inside: The Portraiture and Anti-Portraiture of Janet Werner," in *Janet Werner: Too Much Happiness* (Montréal, Quebec: Parisian Laundry, 2008), 68.

²⁰ Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 206.

A portrait desires to be understood as a portrait, even when the relation to the original is practically crushed by the actual pictorial content of the picture. This is particularly clear in the case of pictures which are not portraits, but which contain, as one says, elements of portraiture. They too can cause one to ask after the original that can be seen behind the picture, and therefore they are more than a mere model which is simply a schema that disappears.²¹

Gadamer seems to be suggesting that there can be an ambiguity between picture and original that challenges the notion of the portrait, yet still invites the viewer to wonder about its original.

Werner's work can be situated between these two poles: an increase or enrichment in being versus a decrease that can be crushing. While Gadamer does not specifically mention abstraction, I want to suggest that at times, the decrease in being and the tension between original and copy are enhanced through abstraction. Werner's paintings become a kind of performance, an act of painting a face that is easily diminished through abstraction or distortion. There is also a performative aspect to the portrait in that the viewer is waiting or expecting a process of resemblance, and then left to discover traces of an un-resemblance.

Gadamer's notion that "the original is practically crushed...by the picture" is worth returning to in regards to Werner's paintings. Is it, in the words of Gadamer, the "crushing" of the original by the pictorial content in Janet Werner's work that causes the viewer to linger over the faces of the women represented? Can one say that they are crushed pictorially by her painterly abstractions which can resemble slashing or bruising? If we do apply Gadamer's notion of increase in being of the original through representation, where "the original is more

²¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 128.

fully there, more properly as it truly is,”²² what are we to make of the original women in Werner’s portraits? Who are they? Or rather, who were they? I use the past tense because the original women in Werner’s portraits are collages of sorts, consisting of cut-out and pasted-back together images of women snatched out of fashion magazines. On the origin of these female portraits, Werner states,

I use photographs as source for clothes, hairstyles, gesture, but then deviate from sources to try and find ways of representing that go beyond external appearances to create a dialogue and tension with something else – something that is invisible. This is often represented by the paint itself, or by revealing the painting process – the movement of the paint, the brush marks, color, tonality, layering, and distortion.²³

Type vs. Portrait

The likeness of an individual, in terms of the realistic and accurate reproduction of their external features in a portrait, is closely related to the aesthetic conventions and social expectations during the time and place of its production.²⁴ It has also been argued that there is a duality in portraiture, a tension being played out between likeness and type. The conveyance of likeness (mimetic representation) is in constant negotiation with the social conventions and expectations and the limitations of representation. Likeness will inevitably butt up against notions of an ideal or type as mediated through artistic styles.

²² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 137.

²³ Janet Werner as quoted in “Janet Werner: Interview with Luanne Martineau,” in *Oh, Canada: Contemporary Art from North America*, ed. Denise Markonish (Cambridge, MA; London, England: MIT Press, 2012), 276.

²⁴ West, *Portraiture*, 22.

Discussing likeness and type in relation to the dual nature of portraiture, Erwin Panofsky states,

A portrait aims by definition at two essentials... On the one hand it seeks to bring out whatever it is in which the sitter differs from the rest of humanity and would even differ from himself were he portrayed at a different moment or in a different situation; and this is what distinguishes a portrait from an ideal figure or type. On the other hand it seeks to bring out whatever the sitter has in common with the rest of humanity and what remains in him regardless of place and time; and this is what distinguishes a portrait from a figure forming part of a genre painting or narrative.²⁵

The women in Werner's works are usually appropriated from fashion photography, their photographic faces transposed onto canvas through paint. It has been remarked that there is a "mind-bogglingly generic" quality to these women. As John Kissick writes,

There is something complicated and confounding in Werner's construction of these paintings. At best, they seem both mind-bogglingly generic and yet extremely specific - as if when you consider the subject, you don't just know her type, you actually know her, whomever she is.²⁶

Werner returns to the fashion model as an exemplary type, collaging photographs of fashion models to explore the generic quality of beauty. The tendency to regard women allegorically, as a model of beauty, can be traced back to fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italy, where portraits of

²⁵ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character vol.1*, (New York: Harper Row, 1971), 194.

²⁶ John Kissick, "Someone/Something/Nothing: Some Thoughts on Janet Werner's Recent Paintings," in *Janet Werner: Another Perfect Day* (Saskatoon: Kenderdine Art Gallery, College Art Galleries, University of Saskatchewan Art Collection, 2013), 34.

women could be based on abstract notions of beauty rather than attached to the specific features of a particular individual.²⁷ Werner's work focuses on contemporary versions of beautiful types although she sometimes puts names to these beautiful faces. Once anonymous models in a photo spread, identified only by the brand of whatever they were selling, these women now seem to be engaged in some sort of struggle in relation to their previously generic and largely physical representations. Within the conventions of traditional portraiture, the generic qualities of the sitter could be illustrated through expression and gesture, poses and props, to solidify the subject's place and value in their world. In a comparable way, fashion photography also involves learnt poses of aloofness and seduction. Werner challenges these conventions by attacking and eroding the superficial promise of their sitters' world through the painted illusion of exaggerated makeup that ridicules or disfigures or by adding accessories that threaten to subsume their wearer. Through this process there is a displacement of social expectations related to that particular time and place, which make these figures "appear newly cognizant of their surroundings and it is as if their previous identities will no longer suffice under these new circumstances."²⁸

²⁷ West, *Portraiture*, 149.

²⁸ Johanne Sloan, "Janet Werner and the Surface of Things," in *Janet Werner: Too Much Happiness* (Montréal, Quebec: Parisian Laundry, 2008), 59.



Fig.5 Janet Werner, *Twins with Poppies*, 2007, oil on canvas, 208.3 x 167.6 cm.

Werner's work explores the tension between likeness and type through her own repertory of repeated figures or body-parts, which is to say that a particular woman's face is placed and displaced, appearing on diverse bodies or in other spaces. There are the identical faces of the two women in *Twins with Poppies* (fig.5), for instance, where one assumes that one particular fashion model's face has been grafted onto two different bodies. Both women face and look past the viewer, their attention fixed elsewhere, posing with hands on their hips perhaps echoing their previous incarnation as models wearing once fashionable clothing.



Fig.6 2 *Cowgirls*, 2007, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 55.9 cm.

The same female face appears in 2 *Cowgirls* (fig.6), wearing the same white tank top as in *Twins with Poppies* but with a markedly altered expression, as her face has been disfigured with greyish white paint that makes her appear ghostly. The woman is now looking right at the viewer with enlarged eyes that suggest some sort of trauma, her lips now lightly parted, perhaps on the verge on telling us something about what afflicts her. She stands next to another other woman whose face has been deformed in the same manner.

Oscillating between someone and someone else, these women are represented as fragmented female subjects that are possibly in the process of “evolving into subjects.”²⁹ In his discussion of portraiture in relation to Gadamer, Van Alphen underscores the notion that

²⁹ Wayne Baerwaldt, “On Trance,” in *Trance: Patrick Traer & Janet Werner* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1998), 52.

“although the portrait refers to an original self already present, this self needs its portrayal in order to secure its own being.”³⁰ What this seems to mean in regards to Werner’s portraits is that someone is struggling to “secure its own being,” that they are suffering from insecurity. We do not encounter a coherent self, but rather a subjectivity that is not fully attained.

To consider Janet Werner’s work in relation to both contemporary portraiture and feminist debates about female subjectivity, it is worth turning to Cindy Sherman’s photographs from the late 1970s that address the notion of fluctuating identity. Sherman would deconstruct the genre of portraiture by highlighting the sitter’s potential loss of self. Sherman questioned the social and public dimensions of subjectivity and played with traditional notions that the portrait should make reference to an authentic self, illustrating how portraits can negotiate the space of representation.³¹ Identity is clearly a social construct in Sherman’s work, and this is examined through deconstruction, while relying on the performative notions of femininity. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, this is explored by performatively disclosing the simulacral nature of femininity itself; posing to simulate film stills or publicity shots, Sherman’s women are performing their femininity as the very condition of “being a copy without an original.”³² Sherman’s work has been approached through feminist psychoanalytical concepts of subjectivity, in that the place of woman within representation is understood in relation to the symbolic order, a concept originally formulated by Jacques Lacan. Krauss notes that, “masquerade...understood in psychoanalytical terms is thought of as the phenomenon to which all women are submitted both inside and outside representation, so that as far as femininity goes,

³⁰ Van Alphen, “The Portrait’s Dispersal,” 239.

³¹ Van Alphen, “The Portrait’s Dispersal,” 247.

³² Rosalind, Krauss, *Cindy Sherman, 1975-1993* (New York, Rizzoli, 1993), 17.

there is nothing but costume.”³³ Costumes and masks, as seen in both Sherman’s and Werner’s artworks, are, by definition, things that can be put on and taken off; these accouterments of the female masquerade imply a performance of femininity. However, they can also point to a “breaking apart”³⁴ of the fusion between woman and image and convey how individual identity can be submerged or obliterated by surface or stereotype. As part of her disruptive representational strategies, Werner keeps repeating painterly marks that are masquerade-like, so that the doubly re-worked and re-painted faces erode the beautiful feminine face. As Werner herself states, “They are familiar kinds of images. Superficially, they are beautiful girls but you don’t really know what the superficial surface is conveying, I think they function like masks.”³⁵ And ultimately, as can be noted in Werner’s work, what becomes apparent is a failure to cohere within or by the female subject.

³³ Krauss, *Cindy Sherman, 1975-1993*, 44.

³⁴ Amelia Jones, “Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman,” in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 38.

³⁵ Janet Werner as quoted in Robert Enright’s “Masking Self-Portraiture: An Interview with Janet Werner,” in *Janet Werner: Another Perfect Day* (Saskatoon: Kenderdine Art Gallery, College Art Galleries, University of Saskatchewan Art Collection, 2013), 61.

She carried her face like an object, newly made, still wet, in danger of smearing or losing shape.

– Jennifer Egan³⁶

Actions Performed Against Beauty

Beauty is usually conflated with desire and seduction but in the works of Janet Werner, beauty is infused with notions of loss and the failure of seduction. Beauty is erected as a wall, as an obstacle to what lies beneath the surface of the skin of the beautiful faces of the women in Werner's paintings. The viewer of these female faces, rather than being fully seduced, is destabilized and perhaps repelled through painterly actions that disfigure and undo these beautiful faces. Defacement and disfigurement are actions that are part of Werner's disruptive strategies in the depiction of the face of her female subjects. There is a constant argument between "pretty and its destruction,"³⁷ between beauty and the monstrous.

The seductive nature of Werner's images is in part fashioned through her technical virtuosity, an assuredness of her brushstrokes described, as "I was right the first time."³⁸ The figurative naturalism of the warm tones of skin visually seduce the viewer into lingering on facial features, skin and lips. These features quickly become objects of aesthetic pleasure, and vibrate with the heat of seduction. As David Elliott writes,

Werner's deftness with light and shadow. The way her brush caresses and pokes around the mouth, the patina of warm tones on the ear – take your pick –

³⁶ Jennifer Egan, *Look at Me* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 388.

³⁷ Robert Enright, "Masking Self-Portraiture: An Interview with Janet Werner," in *Janet Werner: Another Perfect Day* (Saskatoon: Kenderdine Art Gallery, College Art Galleries, University of Saskatchewan Art Collection, 2013), 58.

³⁸ David Elliott, "Paint Person," *Canadian Art* 19:2 (Summer 2002): 50.

something here should leave you aroused as both human animal and connoisseur.”³⁹

Elliott is describing a sexual magnetism that is being projected outwardly by these works, an invitation to approach these female figures haptically, something that is reinforced by the visible traces of the artist’s touch on the canvas. An intimacy is elicited through Werner’s predominantly life-size paintings, one that the viewer performs: we begin from seeing a female figure from a distance and quickly move closer to these works to fully absorb the warmth of her skin, to dwell in the curves and crevices of her face and body. Elliott, further describing the allure of Werner’s works, writes,

I found myself pivoting in front of these work. Backing off to see the whole and then moving in for a closer look...Reasons to linger are certainly best appreciated at close range where the canvases ignite both as art object and as psychosexual fetish.⁴⁰

These acts that seek the intimacy of being up-close to these female figures speak to an intersubjective performance of desire and seduction which these works seem to project and that we want to pursue. It is interesting how the vocabulary used by Elliott, a male critic, is so physical in tone. Using words such as “backing off,” “moving in,” “caresses,” and “pokes,” his response seems informed through heterosexual male desire that alludes to a sexual threesome of bodies: the artist’s body, the female body in these paintings and his own. While the entirety of his critique is rather nuanced, it can’t be denied that he is responding in a markedly sexual way.

³⁹ Elliott, “Paint Person,” 48.

⁴⁰ Elliott, “Paint Person,” 48.

As a female viewer, Amelia Jones, in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, posits that artistic meaning and interpretive engagements are performative in relation to female subjectivity in the realm of projection and desire. On this performance, Jones states,

The artist (as the first viewer of the work) and subsequent viewers/interpreters are caught up within the complex and fraught operations of representation – entangled in intersubjective spaces of desire, projection, and identification.⁴¹

Female subjectivity in Werner's work is performed through desire and projection and in turn creates intersubjective spaces that seek to seduce but, as can be noted in her later work, ultimately destabilize and repel the viewer.

Intersubjective Spaces

In Werner's *Since first I cast eyes on you* exhibit (2002), featuring works such as *Sweetie* (fig.9), the feminine figure, on the surface, seems caught in "the projective eye."⁴² The projective eye, as theorized in the 1970s and 1980s, most notably by John Berger and Laura Mulvey, has been described as "violent and penetrative,"⁴³ and one that pins women into place. Werner's female figures appear encased by their superficial beauty, and perhaps even trapped by it. This brings to mind Mulvey's notion of the "silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning."⁴⁴ It can be said that there is a certain muteness to Werner's women and their beauty can be defined as passive, in the sense that they need someone else to activate it, to look at it, acknowledge it and desire it. Meaning production in Werner's work is an entanglement

⁴¹ Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, introduction to *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 1.

⁴² Amelia Jones, "Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman," *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 34.

⁴³ Jones, "Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman," 34.

⁴⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:3 (1975): 15.

that is performative and therefore theatrical: women waiting to be looked at. While waiting can seem like a passive activity, it can also be said to be part of an act. Judith Butler, on the performative and theatrical model of female subjectivity, states,

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived at the scene...gender is an act which has been rehearsed...which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.⁴⁵

This suggests a complicity between viewer (whether female or male) and viewed subject, a reciprocal relationship between viewer and the female subject's looked-at-ness, an intersubjectivity formed by the expectations and enactments of desire of both actors in this performative play. As Butler argues,

As a given temporal duration within the entire performance, acts are a shared experience and collective action...the act that gender is, the act that embodied agents are inasmuch as they dramatically and actively embody and, indeed wear certain cultural signifiers, is clearly not one's act alone.⁴⁶

It has been remarked that the figures in Werner's work are often posed in a manner that would suggest they enjoy being looked at and perhaps even expect it.⁴⁷ This is something quite different from passivity, rather, this suggests agency, a subjectivity that is active and even a little demanding. Perhaps, though, it is not the women but the pictures themselves that have agency.

In *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005), W.J.T. Mitchell equips the

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 1:4 (December 1988): 526.

⁴⁶ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 525.

⁴⁷ Robert Enright, "Masking Self-Portraiture: An Interview with Janet Werner," in *Janet Werner: Another Perfect Day* (Saskatoon: Kenderdine Art Gallery, College Art Galleries, University of Saskatchewan Art Collection, 2013), 63.

picture with consciousness; it is likened to a life form that is driven by its own appetites and desires.⁴⁸ Rather than interpreting a picture solely by what it means, understanding a picture as its own entity begs the question: what do pictures want? We could then ask an even more specific question: what do Werner's pictures want?

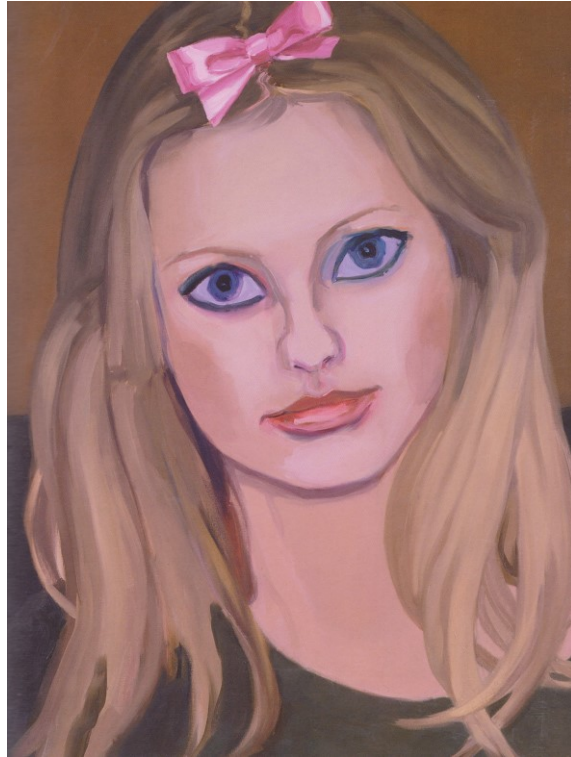


Fig.7 Janet Werner, *Girl with Pink Bow* (detail), 2008, oil on canvas, 140 x 168 cm.

In *Girl with Pink Bow* (fig.7), the oversized face of a woman encounters the viewer. An almost square canvas both contains and cuts off the woman's body, the top of her head overflows past the frame and she is cut off a little below her neck. The woman's eyes sit right above the horizon line making the focus the woman's freshly glossed lips. The same tawny colors are used

⁴⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6.

in both the figure and the background creating warmth that becomes seductive. Yet her hair seems somehow unfinished in comparison to her expertly made up face. While the allure of the beautiful face is immediate, there is also something that seems amiss. To begin with, the tilt of her head and the resulting confrontational gaze begins to contradict the vapidness of her beauty. There is a small shiny pink bow on the woman's head that looks too small for such a large head; a girlish relic that just doesn't seem to belong. Werner's treatment of make-up, meanwhile, serves to disfigure: too much bronzer contouring her cheeks makes her face look gaunt rather than reflecting the healthy glow of the sun. The woman's eyes are heavily made up with dark eyeliner in tones of blues, greens and mauves, but if this was once perfectly applied, now it is smudged and beginning to look like bruises. It has been remarked that Werner's painterly application of excessive eye make-up can be the guise for narrative. As Johanne Sloan writes,

On a Werner painting, a smear of greenish pigment on an eyelid seems to echo that arabesque eye-shadow so exactly. But then, a yellowish streak next to the green suggests an unexpected band of reflected light, or it could be a modeling device meant to emphasize three-dimensional form, or perhaps the artist introduced this tone to enhance a subtle impression of decay and mortality which lingers around this otherwise youthful face...and suggests that the surface of things is just an illusion anyway.⁴⁹

The more we stare, the more the painting stares back, and the more unsure we both become. Her look becomes ambiguous. Is that a smile or a frown? Is that a look of contemplation or rejection, an invitation to keep staring or an admonishment? As Mitchell states, on the ambivalence of what a picture wants, "Like people, pictures may not know what they want; they have to be

⁴⁹ Sloan, "Janet Werner and The Surface of Things," 60.

helped to recollect it through a dialogue with others.”⁵⁰ So, what does *Girl with Pink Bow* want from us? What is she trying to tell us? In this work, amongst many others, Werner seems to emphasize and exaggerate female beauty as a strategy for producing distancing or confrontation. On gendered performance, Judith Butler writes that gender “is what we put on...with anxiety and pleasure.”⁵¹ This is clearly evident in this particular work especially as pertaining to the ridiculously girlish bow. This accessory, that is both girlish and hyper-feminine, injects some anxiety into an otherwise contemplative pose of pleasing beauty. There is a touch of narcissistic preoccupation to the figure, almost like she is looking at herself in the mirror. But the ambiguity of the figure is reinforced by the severity of the tilted pose; something is about to topple over. If the lips are on the verge of telling us something, that something just might not be that pretty. Werner thus seems to engage with female beauty through a process of struggle that is being enacted on canvas and on the faces of these women.

⁵⁰ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*, 46.

⁵¹ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 531.

Beauty vs. the Grotesque

The peculiarity of the organic monster is that s/he is both same and other. The monster is neither total stranger or completely familiar; s/he exists in an in-between zone.

- Elaine Graham⁵²



Fig.8 Henri Matisse, *Portrait of Madame Matisse with a Green Stripe*, 1905, oil on canvas, 40.5 x 32.5 cm.

The deformative force of the grotesque, as something directed against feminine beauty, can be situated historically within the development of modern portraiture and Abstraction. The disfigurement of the female face can be traced back to artists such as Henri Matisse, in a work such as his *Portrait of Madame Matisse with a Green Stripe* (1905) (fig.8), where an olive-green

⁵² Elaine Graham, *Representation of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens, and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 54.

stripe bisects his female subject's face. This seems to be disfiguration and it can be argued that Matisse has used color in a manner that distorts and disfigures the face. The green stripe separates the cool and warm tonalities of the woman's skin, pink toned and yellow-toned halves, against hot and cold backgrounds making the figure appear both naturalistic and abstracted, both inviting and repulsive. But color for Matisse was the rejection of mimesis and the affirmation of the intuitive, expressive and autonomous notion of art,⁵³ and underscored his commitment to explore color and shapes for their own sake. His abstracted paintings of women's faces have been inscribed to not be portraits of disfigured female faces, but rather abstract paintings that reiterated the celebration of Abstraction. While it can be said that color is applied in a way that distorts and expresses deformation, when Matisse was disfiguring, he was not interested in the disfigurement of the subject but rather in the abstraction of the formal elements of color and shapes.

On the one hand, Werner seems to undertake a similar disfiguration through abstraction, but on the other hand something very different is at stake, as her use of representational abstraction or rather "representational disfiguration"⁵⁴ seems to be signaling a subject in crisis. The women in Werner's paintings are snatched from the pages of fashion magazines, their seamless photographic faces transposed onto canvas through paint. It has been remarked that these women are constantly on the move through networks of representations, gathering and scattering layers of identity along the way.⁵⁵ Now, they seem to have been transformed into abstracted female portraits. Portraiture, as a temporal event, is informed by the meeting of the

⁵³ Tamar Gabar, *The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France 1814-1914* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 224.

⁵⁴ Luanne Martineau, "Janet Werner: Interview by Luanne Martineau," in *Oh, Canada: Contemporary Art from North America*, ed. Denise Markonish (Cambridge, MA; London, England: MIT Press, 2012), 276.

⁵⁵ Sloan, "Janet Werner and the Surface of Things," 61.

viewer and the representational image of a person whose subjectivity has now been arrested in time, and transformed into an aesthetic object.

Janet Werner's abstracted and disruptive strategies in the depiction of the female face can be placed in in two categories: the use of representational abstraction in the rendering of the face to propose a failure to comply with the feminine ideal and the juxtaposition of the beautiful and the monstrous to illustrate the alienation, the decomposition of beauty, and the mutability of the body.



Fig.9 Janet Werner, *Sweetie* (detail), 2001, oil on canvas, 137.2 x 121.9 cm.

Even an outwardly seductive work such as *Sweetie* (fig.9) can take a turn towards violence and the monstrous; she has been described as possessing “lacerating”⁵⁶ high cheekbones that are “almost dangerous to look at”⁵⁷ and a “machine-like quality”⁵⁸ of beauty that “is almost not human...right on the edge of being a bit scary.”⁵⁹ What is being described is a type of disfigurement that displaces the spectator’s possible projection of desire, replacing that desire with a sort of apprehension that verges on fear, rejection, and repulsion.



Fig. 10 Janet Werner, *Lucy*, 2011, oil on canvas, 223.5 x 167.6 cm.

⁵⁶ Meeka Walsh and Robert Enright, “Mute Ability: Janet Werner and the Face of Portraiture,” *Border Crossings* 21:3 (August 2002): 30.

⁵⁷ Walsh and Enright, “Mute Ability,” 30.

⁵⁸ Janet Werner as quoted in Meeka Walsh and Robert Enright’s “Mute Ability: Janet Werner and the Face of Portraiture,” *Border Crossings* 21:3 (August 2002): 30.

⁵⁹ Werner in Walsh and Enright’s “Mute Ability,” 31.

Subsequent works by Werner, following what she defines as the series about seduction and desire which featured *Sweetie*, become about the “desiring...rather than the desirable.”⁶⁰ In works like *Lucy* (fig.10), *Girlfriend* (fig.11), *Aging ballerina waving goodbye* (fig.12) and *Big girl* (fig.14), the veneer of beauty is more explicitly transgressed, and the failure to seduce is marked by the erosion of the figures’ beautiful faces and bodies through pictorial disfigurement and defacement. What lay right beneath the surface of the skin has now become fully visible; some faces are smeared and disfigured and in a state of deformation, others have been taken over by tumorous eruptions.



Fig.11 Janet Werner, *Girlfriend*, 2014, oil on canvas, 183 x 152.5 cm.

⁶⁰Janet Werner as quoted in Nancy Ring’s “Awkward Beauty,” in *Janet Werner: Too Much Happiness* (Montréal, Quebec: Parisian Laundry, 2008), 53.

Girlfriend (fig.11) is a woman's portrait rendered in profile. She is facing the viewer and perhaps was once looking at the viewer but a series of expressive painterly gestures and movements have disrupted the figure's face. The figure's prior identity as something like a beauty queen is still evident: a shapely torso, perfect posture, low cut dress, drop diamond earring with perfectly coiffed hair and luminous skin on neck and décolleté. In sharp contrast to these naturalistically rendered details, her face is a mess of blues and greys that is topped by a red circular shape that can all be said to depict facial lesions and grotesque growths.

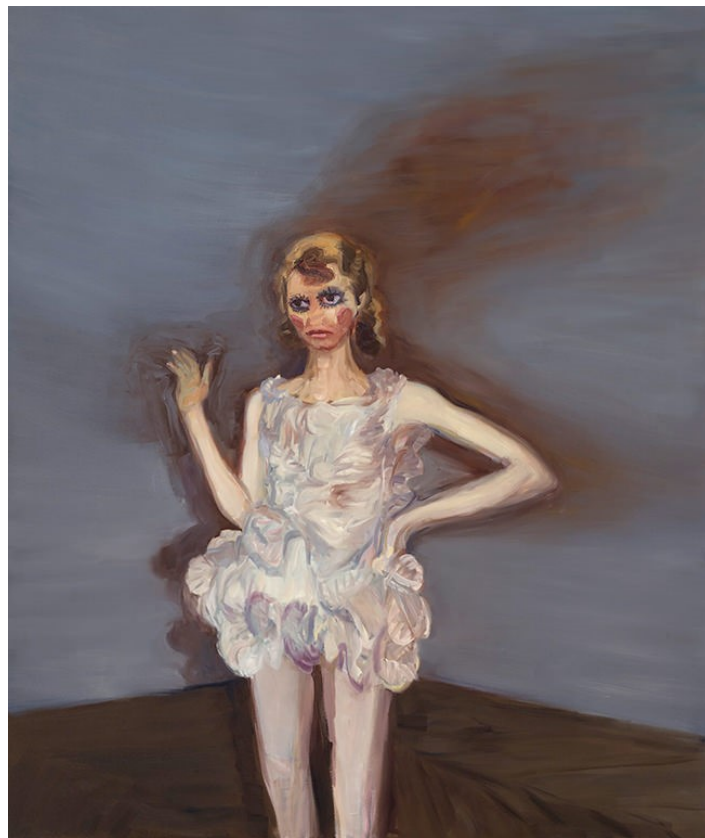


Fig.12 Janet Werner, *Aging ballerina waving goodbye*, 2012, oil on canvas, 221 x 168 cm.

Aging ballerina waving goodbye (fig.12) is a life size painting of a woman who is wearing a tutu - a ballerina - as the title would suggest. The figure stands in the center of a

shallow space, cut off just below the knees. Her ballerina's costume looks soiled and crumpled, the suggestion of the wear and tear of age. One hand is on her hip the other one is lifted in an awkward wave. Upon closer inspection of her waving hand, her claw-like thumb reveals a beautiful manicured pink nail. On the way to the figure's face, we notice the figure's neck is rendered in sculptural applications of paint, modeled to resemble the lasting impressions of a strangle-like hold. The figure's flattened face seems to have sustained some sort of physical trauma; the eyes are shaded in the same tones as the various stages of a bruise (yellow, red, grey, and black), cheeks and chin are smeared with red, while the nose has largely disappeared.



Fig.13. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 130 x 190 cm.

Werner's morphology of the monstrous and the grotesque, in a work such as *Big Girl* (fig.14) can be contextualized historically by considering Manet's *Olympia* (fig.13). It has been noted that Manet's painting underscored the decomposition and decay of seductive beauty, thus

enacting a kind of trauma on the beautiful female body.⁶¹ Contemporary critics thought that Manet's treatment of the skin resembled that of a decomposing corpse, and that compositionally, through breaks and intersections, he portrayed a fragmented and dismembered female body instead of a beautiful seamless whole.⁶²



Fig.14 Janet Werner, *Big girl*, 2010, oil on canvas, 213 x 168 cm.

Similarly to Manet's painting, Werner's *Big girl* (fig.14) exists in a between-zone, being both alluring and repulsive, both voluptuous and corpse-like. This seven-foot tall painting depicts the body of a woman in a bikini by the seaside. Werner's interpretation of makeup results in a cadaverous face – overly powdered, appearing sunken and bruise-like, burgundy lipstick looking

⁶¹ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Press, 1999), 97.

⁶² Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 134-136.

like drying blood. Compositionally, she is truncated, cut off right below her thighs, while her lower torso is disproportionately large. Her long elegant fingers are tugging at her bikini bottoms as if suggestively about to lower them. But as one writer has remarked “we so wish she wouldn’t.”⁶³ This is because the ostensibly sensuous curves of the figure’s stomach and hips are weirdly swollen and distended. This is a body that was made to repulse rather than seduce. A seemingly compliant feminine body has turned monstrous.

The Failure to Uphold the Feminine Ideal

On the nature of being a woman, Judith Butler states, “To be female is...a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of woman.”⁶⁴ To “become,” to “compel,” to “conform,” these are actions inscribed in the discourse of femininity, and ultimately speak to how femininity is performed and how it can fail. The women of fashion magazines, on which Werner bases her portraits, are infused with the facticity of the perfect and seamless representation of the feminine. In Werner’s work, they have been abducted or rather detached from their previous world, placed and displaced into a portrait that underscores a failure to meet the ideals of femininity. On gendered failure, Butler writes, “Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences.”⁶⁵ The beautiful female face in Werner’s paintings is constantly in a state of erosion. The viewer becomes witness to disfigurement conveying the bruises of someone who was in a fight that they lost, a collapsed pose of femininity fashioned out of exaggerated forms of beauty.

⁶³ Skeene, “Janet Werner,” 129.

⁶⁴ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 522.

⁶⁵ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 522.

In Werner's work, abstraction and the figurative exist within the same painting. And the beautiful and the disfigured emanate from the same work accordingly. There is an oscillation of subjective acts of both a failure and an affirmation of female identities.

Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space.
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty⁶⁶

Affect, Anxiety and Distortions

When asked about the nature of her practice, Janet Werner responds, that even though, on one level her works are figure paintings, in the sense that they may not seem like specific people, it is important to note that she does insist on the idea of them belonging to portraiture. At the same time, she has spoken of her figures as “beings who embody states.”⁶⁷ Her works have been described as containing a “codex of emotional information,”⁶⁸ that awaits activation by the viewer. Even when turned towards the viewer and looking back at them, though, these figures seem to be looking inward, preoccupied by their own psychological space. There’s a spatial disruption to these works, manifested as a tension between surface and interior.

Affect

In 1984, Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote that the work of art “harbours within it an excess, a rapture, a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations of its reception and production.”⁶⁹ While the artwork is part of the world as a cultural object and as an object of knowledge, there is an excess associated with what art does. And it can be argued that what art *is* and *does* is *affect*.

⁶⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, The Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 5.

⁶⁷ Robert Enright, “Masking Self-Portraiture,” 61.

⁶⁸ Walsh and Enright, “Mute Ability,” 22.

⁶⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 93.

For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, art is “a bloc of sensations” that run parallel to viewer’s own subjectivity because as self-determined entities they are independent and unconstrained to those who perceive these sensations and feel these affects. In their chapter on art, in *What is Philosophy* (1994), they argue,

The work of art is...a bloc of sensations, that is to say a compound of percepts and affects. Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived.⁷⁰

Deleuze and Guattari are defining affects as autonomous entities that possess their own independent life force, that hover over perceptual processes. Contextualized in this manner, affects can be acknowledged as what constitutes life. Expanding on this life force, Guattari writes, “What is it then that makes us state phenomenologically that something is living? It is precisely this relation of affect...it is a living being.”⁷¹ Affect in these terms is a new event that comes to life out of this excess. This new event of being can be likened to Gadamer’s notion of the increase in being inherent in the picture in art. Deleuze and Guattari go on to describe this relationship between art, affect, and life forces: “life alone creates such zones where living beings whirl around, and only art can reach and penetrate them in its enterprise of co-creation.”⁷² There is an excess in art that creates these ambiguous zones, these in-between spaces of bodies interacting.

⁷⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994), 164.

⁷¹ Felix Guattari, “On Machines,” in *Complexity: Architecture/Art/Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Academy Editions, 1995), 10.

⁷² Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, 173.

Building on this notion of the excess of the artwork, J.E. Muñoz, in “From Surface to Depth, Between Psychoanalysis and Affect” (2009), engages with affect and artistic production by combining a strain of Deleuzian affect theory with psychoanalysis, in order to explore the in-between space that is created by the interaction of bodies (life forces) in the affective dimension of artworks. Using the notion of surface, a key theoretical term in Deleuze’s philosophical account of affect, Muñoz describes the space of interaction created by affect, he writes, “The term refers to the variation that ensues when surfaces, often bodies, come into contact. This idea of affect describes the field of interaction between bodies.”⁷³ But rather than define surface as impenetrable, in which surface supersedes depth, formulated as a critique of the privileging of interiority in traditional accounts of the formation of subjectivity (most notably psychoanalysis), Muñoz introduces Deleuze’s notion of the fold, the element that allows us to “see the inside as merely the other side of the outside or surface.”⁷⁴ In a comparable manner, argues Muñoz, psychoanalysis cannot merely be understood as the assertion of the interior over surface because the symptom does inscribe itself onto the body. As Muñoz states,

According to the logic of the symptom, an inner psychic phenomenon registers on the body. Thus from the psychoanalytic perspective, the dynamic relationship between interior and exterior, surface and depth, inside and outside...once again comes to view.⁷⁵

Werner implicates the viewer in the interior space of her subjects and the exterior space of their projections, and in so doing, tension between surface and depth becomes disruptive and affective. The bruise-like quality of her disfigurements can be considered

⁷³ J.E. Muñoz, “From Surface to Depth, Between Psychoanalysis and Affect,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19:2 (2009): 124.

⁷⁴ Muñoz, “From Surface to Depth, Between Psychoanalysis and Affect,” 124

⁷⁵ Muñoz, “From Surface to Depth, Between Psychoanalysis and Affect,” 124.

fold-like in that these passages traverse exterior and interior. The surfaces of faces are initially flat and blank, but as we go up to them, their textural eruptions are inscribed with psychic intensity and we are suddenly both on the inside and on the outside, attached to the surface but also delving underneath.

Anxiety

It was Sigmund Freud who firstly termed anxiety as an affective state in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1936). Freud sought to illustrate how the symptom denotes a pathological process that is above all felt, he writes,

Anxiety...is in the first place something that is felt. We call it an affective state, although we are also ignorant of what an affect is. As a feeling, anxiety has a marked quality of unpleasure. But that is not the whole of its quality. Not every unpleasure is anxiety.⁷⁶

It can be argued that here Freud is framing the concept of affect, psychoanalytically, as a borderline concept, located between the psychic and somatic, and anxiety as an embodied psychological process. As he goes on to write,

Its unpleasurable quality seems to have a character of its own...accompanied by definite physical sensations which can be referred to particular organs of the body...with the respiratory organs and with the heart...a special state of unpleasure with acts of discharge...and its innervations.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (London: Hogarth Press Ltd. and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1948), 96.

⁷⁷ Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, 97-98.

Anxiety is being defined as an intrapersonal struggle, triggered by internal stimuli such as thoughts, a narrowing of the person's attentional focus, and an increased awareness of bodily sensations.⁷⁸ It has been noted that anxiety disorders are a culmination of an unsettled unconscious conflict whose content, as Freud has asserted, "remains unconscious and only becomes conscious in the form of a distortion."⁷⁹ Existential psychologist, Rollo May, attempting a comprehensive theory of anxiety by synthesizing cultural, historical, biological and psychological aspects, in *The Meaning of Anxiety* (1977), proposes the following definition of anxiety. May writes,

Anxiety is the apprehension cued off by a threat to some value that the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality... Anxiety is experienced as a dissolution of the self.⁸⁰

The dissolution or loss of self has similarly been discussed in the context of contemporary art. In *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* (2006), Christine Ross proposes an insufficiency-based conception of subjectivity to examine the depressed body and the image of depression in contemporary artistic practices. Ross argues that the performative dimension of contemporary art enacts depression. Ross states,

I am arguing that contemporary art...does not so much represent as enact depression in the triple sense of the word: it simultaneously performs and

⁷⁸ Thomas F. Oltmanns and Robert E. Emery, *Abnormal Psychology*, 8th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2015), 155.

⁷⁹ Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, 87.

⁸⁰ Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* (New York: Norton, 1977), 205-7.

contributes to the depressive paradigm, but it also acts out depression discursively, structurally, formally, and symptomatically.⁸¹

According to Ross, the symptoms of depression that emerge in contemporary art are most notably withdrawal and inwardness that underscore a rupture of communicational intersubjectivity between viewer and artwork and point to a sense of insufficiency in the depressed subject. Ross argues that these same depressive symptoms possess pictorial equivalents in the actual configuration of the image. Bodily symptoms can therefore be viewed as “a plastic state, a process, a potential site of deformation.”⁸² Ross contends that contemporary art practices can equip the image itself with a plasticity that deforms and defamiliarizes.⁸³ Symptomatically, then, the qualities of distortion and plasticity are both formal and pathological.

Depression is a mood disorder similar to anxiety, and anxiety is often simultaneously present in major depression. My approach to Werner’s images is comparable to Ross’, in the sense that I contend with the affective, performative dimension of Werner’s paintings, both discursively and symptomatically. However, I differ from Ross’s study in that I want to propose that Werner’s paintings articulate anxiety, more specifically. Rather than conforming to a mimetic approach to portraiture, Werner’s approach is affective. It is as an affective state that anxiety disrupts and distorts bodies, and this is what is evidenced on the faces and bodies of the women in Werner’s paintings.

⁸¹ Christine Ross, introduction to *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xviii.

⁸² Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, 156.

⁸³ Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, 156.

I do want them [distortions] to be extreme in some way, to have intensity...I like it when they give the feeling of being punched in the stomach. It's something very guttural I want.

– Janet Werner ⁸⁴

Distortions: The Panic Attack

Anxiety is a moment of bodily intensity, a reaction in and on the physical body. It is a disturbance that becomes manifest in the form of distortions such as depersonalization (the feeling of being detached from oneself), and derealization (the feeling of unreality). As Freud has posited, anxiety is felt, and defined as an exceptional state of “unpleasure” with “acts of discharge” and “innervations.” A panic attack, the more acute and focused attack of anxiety, is even more visceral, involving unpleasant bodily sensations such as palpitations, sweating, trembling/shaking, sensations of smothering, feelings of choking, chest pain/discomfort, nausea/abdominal stress, dizzy/unsteady/light-headed/faint, chills/heat sensations, paresthesia.⁸⁵

Werner distorts in a manner that, it can be argued, is informed by a subject that is anxious. Her painterly acts of erosion and fragmentation are revealing a subject that is in crisis.

⁸⁴ Janet Werner in *Oh, Canada*, 276.

⁸⁵ The *DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013)) diagnostic criteria for panic disorder as reprinted in Oltmanns and Emery, *Abnormal Psychology*, 148.



Fig.15 Janet Werner, *Zero Eyes*, 2010, oil on canvas, 137 x 114 cm.

Zero Eyes (fig.15) shows a female figure that is slightly off center. Tones of muted greys and mauves fashion both the figure and the space behind her. The viewer comes face to face with the figure, but her gaze is looking down somewhere outside of the picture frame. The figure has strange zero-shaped eyes, similarly rendered to the button fasteners on the shoulders of her shirt. An otherwise naturalistic presentation is thus undermined by the eyes which have the effect of fixing and locking the figure's gaze, ensuring that it cannot intersect with the gaze of the viewer. The subject's attention is focused inwards as a sort of cognitive closing of the mind, resulting in a sort of anxious apprehension, and a break in the intersubjective bond between viewer and subject. The figure almost fades into the emptiness of her background, so that we're not sure if she's emerging or fading into the space behind her. Characteristics of anxiety such as

depersonalization and derealization are conveyed by Werner's painterly marks of deformation, notably here by erasing the figure's eyes and replacing them by zeros that signify nothingness.



Fig.16 Janet Werner, *The splits*, 2012, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 61 cm.

In *The splits* (fig.16) Werner takes the depiction of anxiety to a whole other level, in what is barely recognizable as a portrait of a woman, made up of a kind of collision of shapes and smears. This is a more focused and intense attack on the subject and on the canvas. An intense disruption of self has completely taken over the figure. There is a durational and experiential aspect to the artist's slashes and paint strokes that seem to vibrate, similar to the recurrent and abrupt surges of intense fear in the subject in the form of heart palpitations while in the midst of a panic attack, and the subsequent trembling and shaking following such an attack. Sensations of

smothering and feelings of choking are reflected in the absence of a nose and throat, the displacement of a mouth seemingly gasping for air, and the dizzy and unsteady symptoms of a panic attack in the stretched apart and distorted placement of the eyes. In this case, the aesthetic of deformation and disfiguration culminates in an almost complete loss of self.

The mode of being of Janet Werner's paintings is performative and confrontational. As images of people, they desire to be understood as portraits, and as subjects they are increased and decreased; they are enriched by a more embodied subjectivity and crushed by disfigurations that bruise. As portraits of women who could be someone, or someone else, or no one, they evolve and devolve. As portraits of beautiful women or portraits of women that are grotesque, they seduce and repulse; they affirm and fail. They entangle us in that in-between space where they affect us the same way we have affected them. They emerge distorted and fragmented – as ruptured subjects in the midst of a crisis, deformed by a potential loss of self. They get anxious and they panic; we watch and we witness.

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