



4/30/70

1/2/70

6/1971

NYC, NY

FEBRUARY 2007

Polaroid 5H5MC66A

5

Susan Miller | Carter: A Couple of Random
Characters in Search of an Author

Carter, *Focus/Likeness*, 2007. Courtesy Yvonne Lambert, Paris



IT IS LIKELY THAT THE IMAGE ON THE LEFT PANEL OF THIS DIPTYCH is a picture of a man. We can only imagine his face, as it is nearly completely obscured by an image of a woman's face. We see his hand and an ear. His hair is dark and shoulder length. He is wearing a conventional powder-blue shirt under a comfortable-looking blue-black sweater. The shirt collar is open and casual. His right hand is placed unnaturally on his chest as a model's might be in an ad for men's clothing. The superimposed picture of the woman is in black and white. It has been sampled from a manual circa 1971 that illustrates the focus mechanism on a Polaroid camera.¹ Her picture is partially glued to the image of the underlying figure. It is not permanently stuck on, for there is the sense that if given the opportunity, one could simply lift up her image and take off the mask that is hiding the *true* subject of the Polaroid. But this is impossible. The characters are trapped within the frame, bound by the constraints upon which they are constructed.

The identity of the man in this image is unclear, only familiarity with the artist's body of work will lead the viewer to suspect that the artist called Carter has included his own concealed face in the collage. The simultaneous presence and absence of a clearly identifiable subject, a common feature of many of Carter's works, grounds my interpretation of *Focus/Likeness* as a conceptual approach to portraiture that extends questions of identity and identification

fundamental to the genre. In this essay I will argue that for Carter, portraiture is built as a series of expectations that cannot conclude in the identification of a subject. Drawing on the well-established art historical tenet that portraits are fictional constructions informed by cultural and historical norms, I will consider Carter's particular approach to portraiture, in which neither likeness nor identity are fixed in time but rather are changeable, and responsive to many forces in a subject's life. Through *Focus/Likeness*, as well as several of the artist's other works, we can see that the norms imposed on a portrait subject operate much like the social, historical, and cultural norms delimiting personal identity in American society.

On the right panel of *Focus/Likeness* are several dates inscribed in blue ink. "1/30/70" is the artist-subject Carter's birthdate. The hand-written date "6/1971" identifies the publication date of the camera manual, and with it the first appearance of the female image.² Pencil letters spell the location "NYC, NY" and the date "FEBRUARY 2007." These notations mark three beginnings—the artist's birth, the publication of the woman's image, and the place and time of their artistic confluence. Through the three dates we are alerted to the importance of time: its passage between the birth of the artist and his creation of this work; the photograph's capacity to fix a moment in time; and, specifically, to the cultural period of the early 1970s. The word "Polaroid" is printed along the bottom edge of the same panel. We are looking at the reverse of an exposed piece of instant-exposure film. Framing this nearly-blank surface as half of a diptych draws our attention to the significance of what is not seen, contesting portraiture's basic claim to represent its subjects. In fact, the longer we look at *Focus/Likeness*, the more evident its challenges to the strategies and agendas of conventional

portraiture become. For instance, portraiture assumes that the individuals it portrays are unique, just as a Polaroid is unique. But unlike the human subject, Polaroids are not precious in their uniqueness. They are a representation of a given subject, but are not the subject itself. So to frame a Polaroid as such raises questions: Is this artwork a tribute to the Polaroid or an interrogation of the idea of the portrait? Is there more to the subject than what can be seen in a photograph? Through such queries, and the very act of questioning itself, *Focus/Likeness* unseats the declarative authority of the traditional portrait.

Focus/Likeness engages the portrait as its central theme to divest it of its representational authority in two ways: it removes those qualities that permit identification of the subject (e.g., likeness), and eliminates those characteristics that define and limit the subject's identity. First, let's consider how likeness and subject identification exist in the portrait.³ In *Focus/Likeness* the figures are in three-quarter pose, a classic format of studio portraiture. Its assembled image contains standard components of subject identification in portraiture—facial features, hands, hairstyle and hair color, body shape and mass—yet identification is constantly thwarted. *Focus/Likeness* is a work that gives us just enough information to raise questions, without providing any answers. We are left with the object itself: the incomplete portrait that is a collage of images and concepts that reference a subject who cannot be located.

An established Western artistic genre, portraiture employs a familiar set of symbols, clues, references, and details to infer likeness to the person being depicted. These tropes, or what art historian Richard Brilliant calls "schema,"⁴ were developed in the sixteenth century. Viewing portraits from that era is an exercise in reading surfaces and symbolic elements in a setting that point to a subject's position in

society. Schema also point to the norms to which the subject conforms in a life. Hair length and style, clothing, body type, and the setting of the portrait allow us to see the period and conventions of the moment in which the portrait was made. In *Focus/Likeness*, however, the details of clothing and hairstyle are so neutral that while they infer norms in dress and comportment, they do not enable us to identify the specific individuals represented. There is no singular identity on display here. In this way, the work suggests that the face in the portrait is a kind of mask, a suggestion that is doubled by Carter's placement of the female image over his own face. Brilliant notes that portraits "partake of the artificial nature of masks because they always impersonate the subject with some degree of conviction. What, if anything lies behind the mask can only be inferred by the viewer from clues provided by the mask, which may mislead as well as inform through the use of conventions of representation."⁵ Like masks, portraits are stand-ins for the identities of their subjects. As such they draw attention to the uncertainty of the relationship between the subject and his or her image.

In his experimental 2008 film *Erased James Franco*, Carter underscores the complexities of the subject/portrait relationship by enlisting an actor—in the guise of many characters—as his subject. For this project Carter directed Franco in a reenactment of all his past film roles as well as some parts originally played by other actors.⁶ The film is a tribute to Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953), which was created after Rauschenberg convinced de Kooning to give him a drawing that he could erase and remake as his own.⁷ The film asked Franco to "erase" these former characters, leaving only the essence or memory of the creative act, as Rauschenberg did when he erased the de Kooning drawing. In theory, the true person would remain if all the acted parts or masks the

Carter, Still from *Erased James Franco*, 2008. Courtesy Yvonne Lambert, Paris



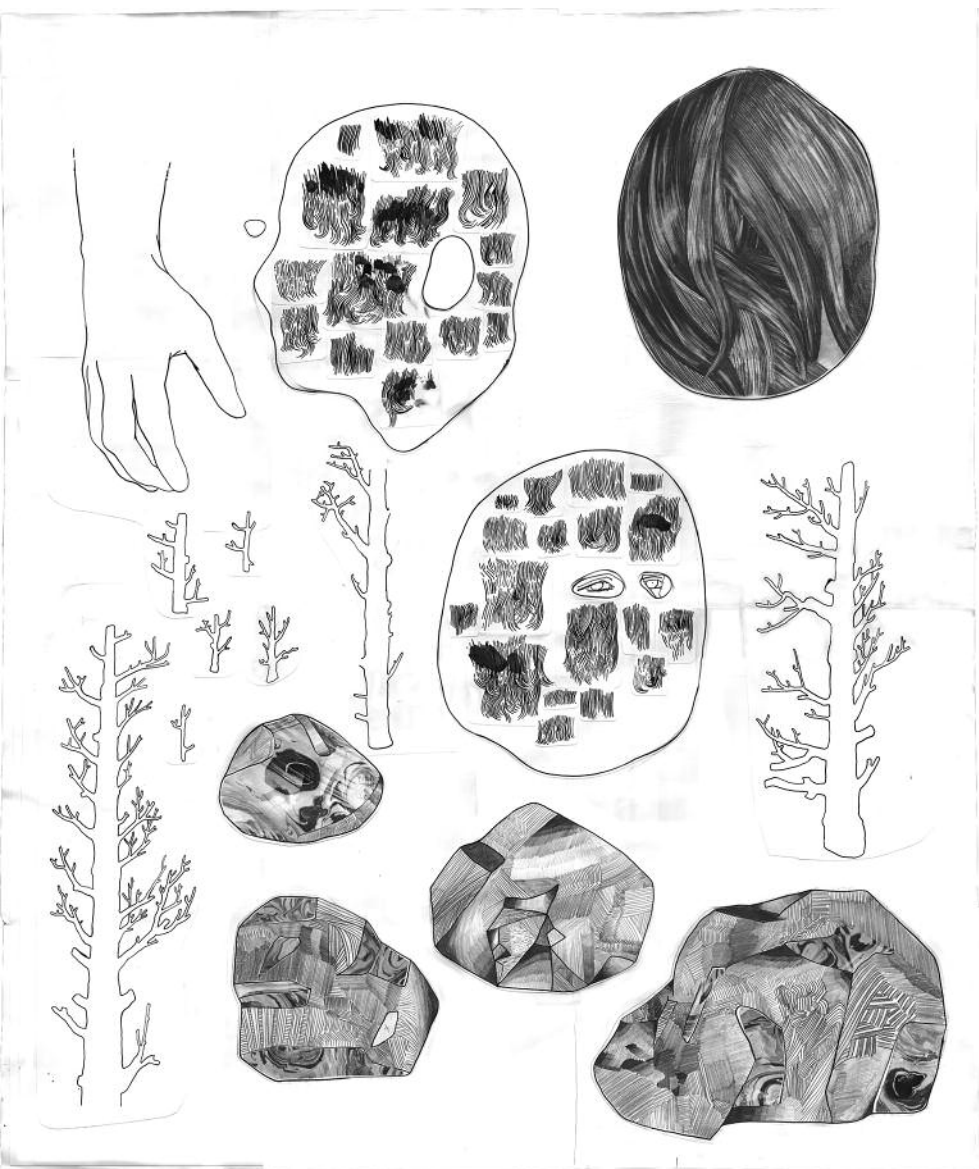
actor dons could be removed. (Indeed, a viewer of *Focus/Likeness* might also assume that if the female mask were removed, the true subject would be revealed.) Of course this is impossible, not least because the viewer's role in the construction of the actor's identity cannot be removed from the equation. A somewhat backhanded tribute to the actor, the film demonstrates that Franco's elevated social status is indelible. However hard he tries, he can be no other than the person the public perceives him to be. In its failure, the project succeeds in demonstrating that the actor's essence cannot be distilled through the filmmaker's system of rules and strategies, which are not unlike those which shape the creation of a painted portrait.

Even though Franco brings with him a level of public recognition that set him apart from the anonymous female model in *Focus/Likeness*, Carter's engagement with the actor continues and extends his use of models to play with identity location in an image. Each of the parts the actor performs is a mask, like the female "mask" covering the artist's face in *Focus/Likeness*. Conventionally, actors are evaluated for their ability to convince us that they can become the characters they perform. *Erased James Franco* points to the limitations of this expectation, suggesting instead that the character and the actor are always blended to constitute a mysterious hybrid identity that is open to multiple readings and interpretations. As in traditional portraiture, Carter's subjects are always much more complex than their representations.

Because portraits focus on surface appearances it is difficult for them to account for changes in their subjects' lives. Portraits insist on capturing or freezing a moment. Changes in personality, emotion, aging, mood and lifestyle are left out of the static image. In *Focus/Likeness* Carter addresses the passing of time by referring to

the culture of 1970s. There are thirty-six years between 1971, the date the image of the female model was created, and 2007, the year Carter completed *Focus/Likeness*. When masked with her image, Carter may be able to perform the role of a model from the early 1970s, but he was born in 1970 and therefore would have been too young to be conscious of the dynamic social forces that dramatically reshaped American culture, politics, sexuality, and identity in those years. The female subject, on the other hand, appears to be in her twenties at the time of the photograph. At that age and in that time, she was either a part of the generation active in the student, counter-culture, civil rights, and feminist movements or a passive witness. In either case, her experience of that period is very different from Carter's. By attaching specific dates to the images in the frame, we are reminded that time is frozen in the moment of the photographic portrait, but continues on in the life of the subject.

To assist in the identification of the subject, portraits often include a title featuring the sitters' names.⁸ The titles of Carter's works operate similarly by naming the subject; however, instead of naming individuals his titles identify the concepts he seeks to cull from his modified, deconstructed portraits. *Focus/Likeness*, for example, suggests the names of the two figures according to their roles in undermining the location of a subject in this portrait. The female is (out of) "Focus" and the male is (an unverifiable) "Likeness." While the model was originally assigned to the supporting role of illustrating a Polaroid instruction manual, her prominent placement in Carter's collage recasts her center stage. Her repositioning intimates that she is more than an illustration. Meanwhile, the male figure, who is ostensibly the principal subject of this work, is presented so obliquely as to be unidentifiable, an indication that there is more to him than what we see in this portrait.



Carter, *prosopopeia/stasis/landscape*, 2005. Saatchi Gallery, London

Taken word for word, the title of Carter's collage *prosopopeia/stasis/landscape* operates in a similar manner. By invoking the term "prosopopeia" it suggests that the portrait is a representation of a person who is speaking, but is absent. *Prosopopeia* recognizes that portraits are not the subject, but do *speak* for or in place of the subject, often retaining a voice long after the lives of those represented have ended. "Stasis" references the static nature of the portrait. It is fixed in time, even though the condition of any human subject is one of evolution and decay. The conclusion of the title with "landscape" likely references the Renaissance portraiture tradition of painting subjects in landscapes. Once we look inside the work itself, it suggests that a person, like a landscape, can be depicted in a highly simplistic manner, documenting surface qualities (profile or silhouette, hair style, facial features, details of the surrounding scenery) that establish the subject's identity. The figures and the landscape elements are rendered similarly, suggesting that the surface relationships are so powerful that a less-than-observant person might confuse a head with a rock or a hand with a tree. In other words, this potential portrait simplifies the problem of surface-only representations in relation to identity to remind us of the complexity of the human subject.

We see here how the schema of portraiture can be manipulated to unseat the genre's authority, but schemas can also be repurposed to

Carter, 1949, *Self-Portrait as a Homosexual*, 1965, 1970, 2006. Saatchi Gallery, London



illustrate new concepts of identity.¹⁰ The placement of the female face over the face of the man in *Focus/Likeness* is both a critique of the oversimplification of portrait subjects and a deployment of schema that reveals an ambiguity surrounding the subject's gender identity. The male and female figures are united in their placement and poses as they are in their avocations as models and stereotypes of normativity that falsely present as others. These "likenesses" among the figures reinforce the connection between the two images and suggest the inability for the principal subject to "be" him or herself.¹¹ Additionally, it is possible to read the male figure's graceful placement of his hand over his heart as a reference to his inner self, or a suggestion that the heart "leads him" to desire a feminine persona while outwardly he can only wear a mask. Within the constraints of portraiture, the subject performs a blended identity and cannot be revealed to possess only one gender.

Another work that deploys schema to address ambiguities in gender preference is Carter's 1949 *Self-Portrait as a Homosexual*, 1965, 1970.¹² The sculpture declares in its title that it is a self-portrait, but in fact neither of the two busts bear a physical resemblance to the artist. The distinctive hairline, hair color, and facial hair were apparently enlisted in an attempt to resemble "a homosexual." The inclusion of the word "as" in the title of the work may imply that the portrait describes a condition, role, or fashion choice rather than the subject's absolute identity. The artwork could have as easily been titled *Portrait of a Homosexual*. By identifying the work as a "self-portrait," we are led to experience its meaning as a statement made both about and by the artist himself. Likeness is complicated here, both because of the effectiveness of the use of facial hair to disguise the subject's identity, and because the two busts are conjoined under the singular title "self-portrait," signaling multiple views of a single subject. By exploring the unstable nature of appearance, this self-portrait questions how

sexual preference, identity, and the self are located in visual representations as well as in life. The sculpture asks, “Is identity construction a simple matter of hair shape and style?” and “Can you find Carter in this portrait?”

Carter’s tentative placement of the female mask over his face in *Focus/Likeness* makes both the identification of the subject and his/her gender preference impossible to know with absolute certainty. Is Carter asking the viewer to guess his gender? Is he telling the viewer that he wishes to be seen as a female or feminine? Or is he suggesting that others already see him that way? Is he telling us that his true identity is not seen nor understood? Such questions infer that the construction of the subject’s gender identity is inflected both by the subject and viewer’s reception of his self-presentation. This condition in the portrait mirrors that of life. Portraits are social enterprises involving the maker, the subject, and the viewer. *Focus/Likeness*, however, performs a dual function. Within the constraints of the genre of portraiture, it suggests, but never fulfills, the quest of identifying the portrait subject. What is revealed further confounds a singular and whole interpretation; isolating details such as the subject’s gender identity and sexual orientation are impossible. The work suggests that within the regime of portraiture that “likeness” is a construction, and perhaps fleeting at best, a matter of wearing a mask.

Carter’s exploration of norms of representation in portraiture and the construction of identity recall Judith Butler’s inquiry into the self. She asks, “. . . what are these norms, to which my very being is given over, which have the power to install me or, indeed, to dis-install me as a recognizable subject?”¹³ Carter’s manipulation of the expectations of likeness and identification in portraiture functions similarly. By masking likeness, he reveals the schema that attempt to produce it, inferring that identity cannot be defined by the representational con-

ventions of portraiture. *Focus/Likeness* does not make the empirical statement, “This is me.” Rather, it asks, “How am I constructed?”

What does Carter gain by presenting himself in his own work? He raises many questions about representation and identity when he is absent. *Erased James Franco* is one example. What is afforded by self-presentation in the fictional spaces of his artworks is the opportunity to perform as a character framed by the experiences of his own choosing, and not necessarily those imposed on him in life. Ultimately Carter is able to critique the artificial and manmade systems of representation embodied in portraiture and explore a new self (or selves) within the genre’s constraints. In *Focus/Likeness*, this new self is one whose gender preference is unspecified and whose identity cannot be located within the two dimensions of the picture plane. In other words, Carter offers, “I am more than what you see and not what you think I am,” a proposition that extends beyond the portrait and into the experience shared by the artist and viewer.

Carter enacts self-portraiture by staging a collection of images that substitutes models for artist himself. The result is a self-reflexive investigation and performance of the nature of identity and its representation. By using overlays, cutouts, collage, and generic poses to mask his subjects’ identifying characteristics, Carter creates portraits without subjects that function equally as self-portraits without an author. His works tackle the genre of portraiture and turns it into a conceptual project that asks literally, and metaphorically, how the self is constructed.

Moreover, we have seen that through self-presentation Carter is able to prototype new identities within his artworks. These identities he can don, shed, and transform as an actor might in a performance on a stage. This kind of experimentation is not as easily managed on the stage of life, where there are ramifications if one’s appearance and manner are inconsistent, unpredictable, or deviate visibly from

societal norms.¹⁴ I have said that Carter’s presence in his experimental portraits not only questions how his identity is constructed, but also adds fresh concepts of transience, instability, and incongruity to identity construction—concepts that are difficult to model in life, but possible within the virtual spaces of an artwork. Through such efforts, we see how portraiture as a genre of representation is not only an opportune platform for identity experimentation, but also a sophisticated genre of representation that must be questioned and remade constantly if it is ever to truly represent the complex and ever-changing human self.

Notes

- 1 Carter, *An Arm with Hair, The Vienna Catalog 1973*, ed. Georg Kargi (Vienna: Skarabaeus, 2008), 174.
- 2 *Polaroid Portrait Land Camera* (Cambridge: Polaroid Corporation, 1971), 4.
- 3 Regarding “likeness” in portraiture: “. . . the common assumption, perhaps most strongly engendered in portraits, that there is some substratum of mimetic representation underlying the purported resemblance between the original and the work of art, especially because the sign function of the portrait is so strong that it seems to be some form of substitution for the original.” Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 40.
- 4 Brilliant writes, “Artists, therefore, represent people in portraits by means of the established or invented schema whose recognizable content shapes the identity of the subject and conveys it to the beholder.” Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 38. Each in their own distinctive ways, contemporary portrait artists Cindy Sherman, Maurizio Cattelan, Chuck Close, Rashaad Newsome, and John Currin make portraits that play with the schema and representational traditions of class, rank, and physical appearance in portraiture dating from the Renaissance.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 6 He performed Julianne Moore in her role as Carol White in Todd Haines’s *Safe* (1995), and Rock Hudson as Arthur Hamilton in John Frankenheimer’s *Seconds* (1966). Both film dramas depict the downfall of characters who experience severe emotional and physical alienation once they discover they can no longer masquerade as normal in the otherwise idyllic and privileged social worlds they inhabit.
- 7 Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning* (1953) is in the collection of the San

Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The work is discussed in a presentation by the museum’s education department online. “Making Sense of Modern Art,” SFMOMA, www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/interactive_features/78#.

- 8 Richard Brilliant describes how portraits and names collude for the purpose of isolating a unique subject. He writes, “A real, named person seems to exist somewhere within or behind the portrait; therefore, any portrait is essentially denotative, that is to say, it refers specifically to a human being, that human being has or had a name, and that name, a proper name, identifies that individual and distinguishes him or her from all others.” Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 36. There may be a redundancy in naming a work where the subject’s likeness is obvious, but titles also ensure that generations long past the subject’s death will recognize and know who is depicted in the portrait.
- 9 *Prosopopeia* is Greek term that means to communicate as or through another object or person.
- 10 This tactic might appear to be daunting, but it is less so because schema comprises the five-hundred-year-old visual language of portraiture, one so engrained in Western experience that it operates across many linguistic borders.
- 11 In describing expressions of gender identity in portraiture, historian Shearer West writes, “Whether portraitists engage with masculinity self-consciously or accept certain normative yet variable cultural stereotypes, these specific examples belie the fact that there are many models of masculinity, as well as femininity, at any particular time and place. The choices made by portraitists and their sitters about how such qualities should be expressed have been both unconscious and explicit, responsive to social expectations and sensitive to the changing perceptions of audiences about those qualities of masculinity and femininity that have been expected or valued.” Shearer West, *Oxford History of Art: Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 161.
- 12 The events referenced by the dates in the title are not obvious, but we do know that 1970 is Carter’s birthdate. Other specific events referenced could include the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, The Kent State Slaying, or the first Gay Pride Parade in 1970. In 1965 the March on Selma took place and the Voting Rights Act was passed. The use of dates in Carter’s work often references personal events as well as broader cultural forces that shape the identity of the subject.
- 13 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham), 22.
- 14 Experimental behaviors are simply more acceptable in artworks, even if sometimes controversial—David Wojnarowicz, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Karen Finley were all marginalized because of the radical selves they presented in their art.