Refigured: Separations in Portraiture

Caroline Myers
cbm8@clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

Part of the Art Practice Commons, Communication Technology and New Media Commons, Contemporary Art Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons, Painting Commons, Printmaking Commons, and the Social Media Commons

Recommended Citation
Myers, Caroline, "Refigured: Separations in Portraiture" (2023). All Theses. 4045. https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/4045

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.
REFIGURED: SEPARATIONS IN PORTRAITURE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Caroline Myers
May 2023

Accepted by:
Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
Beth Lauritis
Anderson Wrangle
ABSTRACT

Utilizing traditional painting techniques embedded with digital syntaxes, *Refigured: Separations in Portraiture*, serves as a catalog of my experiences with communication in a hyperconnected world. Processing illegible information caused by my hearing loss informs the process of imposing similar boundaries within my paintings. Like a technical glitch, these obstructions create an illegible visual experience, with evidence of my process remaining as a clue for the viewer’s understanding of the image.

Though personal in nature, I expand from my experience with auditory communication to employ pertinent explorations into the sustained unpredictability of today’s ever-expanding medium that is technology. My paintings of my friends and family confront the viewer with a recognizable occurrence—a failing image. Taking images from my technologically mediated interactions, motifs such as pixels, blurred backgrounds, and saturated color reference the glitches experienced in digital communications. Manipulations allow me to interrogate the ability of images to facilitate our understanding of another person, with distortions serving to represent qualities of the subject’s identity and my relationship with them. Each portrait sees the collaboration between analog and digital elements that highlight juxtapositions such as surface quality and legibility. These glitches overwhelm the portraits of my loved ones, symbolizing the dissipating border between the physical and virtual spaces that we operate within.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of work to my parents, Kellie and Thomas Myers, my little sister, Sibley Myers, and my partner, Matthew Hudson. Your love has inspired this project, while your support ensured that I flourished.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This body of work is inspired by my connections to the people I hold near and dear to my heart. Therefore, I must take this opportunity to acknowledge the individuals that serve as a backbone of these images and in my journey to create them.

Thank you to my students for allowing me to grow and learn alongside you.

Thank you to the faculty for creating powerful artwork and challenging your students to do the same.

Thank you to my thesis committee for guiding and pushing me through this process.

Thank you to my advisor, Todd McDonald, for consistently ignoring my ‘do not disturb sign’ to share your wisdom with me.

Thank you to my graduate cohort for entering this program as strangers and finishing as life-long friends.

Thank you to Jon and Glory for surrounding me with your knowledge, compassion, and talent as we complete this journey together. You have made the process unforgettable.

Thank you to my mom, dad, and little sister for always believing in my passion. I can hear “Dat’s my baby!” from here.

Thank you to my partner, Matthew, for the many trips you made to Clemson just to spend weekends with me in the studio.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. COMMUNICATION</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE GLITCH</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE FILTERED IMAGE</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. MEDIATION</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURES</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Glitch</td>
<td>5, 6, 7, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Between You and Me</em></td>
<td>5, 7, 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Miguel Ángel Belinchón/Belin, <em>Mona Lisa Do Brazil</em></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <em>Lost in Translation</em></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gerhard Richter, <em>Portrait Müller</em></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. <em>Bits and Pieces</em></td>
<td>11, 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. <em>Reconfigured Noise</em></td>
<td>13, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. <em>Neither Here nor There</em></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. <em>Body’s Double</em></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. <em>CMYK</em></td>
<td>15, 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Jenny Saville, <em>Study for Pentimenti III (sinopia)</em></td>
<td>18, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. <em>Pop Ups (Selective Hearing)</em></td>
<td>19, 20, 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. <em>Home Screen</em></td>
<td>21, 22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Refigured: Separations in Portraiture serves as a catalog of my experiences with communication in a hyperconnected world. Taking cues from the history of painting, I create portraits of my friends and loved ones as a way of interrogating our digital communications. Using imagery from social media, screenshots of FaceTime calls, or photos from my personal archive, the paintings’ components symbolize and reflect qualities specific to the sitter and my relationship with them. Though personal in nature, I expand from my experience with auditory and sensorial communication to employ pertinent explorations into the sustained unpredictability of today’s ever-expanding medium that is technology.

As a hard-of-hearing person, I experience gaps in my understanding. Processing the illegible information caused by my hearing loss informs the process of imposing similar boundaries within my paintings. Obstructions in the form of fracturing, layering, and concealing create an illegible visual experience. Evidence of my process remains in the final works as a contextual clue for the viewer’s understanding of the work. An increased reliance on technology to maintain personal connections inspired the works in my thesis, Refigured: Separations in Portraiture. Akin to the gaps caused by my hearing loss, discomfort with new technology and the inevitable glitches that ensue during these digital interactions result in information loss.
Though the glitch corresponds to my personal struggles with auditory communication, my paintings confront the viewer with a recognizable occurrence – a failing image. Digital errors are an inevitable shortcoming of the constant influx of new technologies and our subsequent and often thwarted desire to comprehend them. I create portraits of my friends and family using images taken from our everyday digital interactions. Repeating motifs, such as pixels, blurred backgrounds, and saturated color, reference the glitches experienced in digital communications. The obstructions that overwhelm the faces of my loved ones symbolize the dissipating border between the physical and virtual spaces we operate within. While still maintaining valuable connections that technology facilitates, the portraits in Refigured compensate for the intimacy that our screens lack.

Humans view thousands of images daily; many of them are portraits of the ever-present selfie variety. The faces of historical figures, one’s parents, close friends, favorite influencers and celebrities can be obtained directly from a smartphone in a matter of seconds. Pictures posted to social media are often edited, leaving the average scroller accustomed to falsehoods passing as facts. Furthermore, the complexity of identity and its constant state of flux makes it nearly impossible for a viewer to comprehend the totality of another person, especially through a single image of the individual. This body of work explores the ability of images to facilitate our understanding of another person, with depictions and distortions serving as a sort-of personal truth.

Each portrait in Refigured sees me dancing between analog and digital elements, highlighting juxtapositions in surface quality, legibility, afforded intimacy, perception,
etc. Depictions of glitches reference the image’s digital life as well as the imperfections that my hand creates. The variety in scale of these paintings mirrors the drastic shifts in images that we experience daily, while the intimate time spent with these portraits humanizes the resulting gaps of our digital interactions. Utilizing increased scale and the arduous process of painting, my portraits elevate images that we hastily scrolled past in the endless cycle of like-images or become frustrated with when technology refuses our directives.

My portraits operate within legibility, error, truth, and manipulation. They are recognizable and simultaneously distorted. The audience sees strangers, and yet the images are familiar. Through a semi-chronological display, I will explain how my paintings embody four characteristics: communication, the glitch, the filtered image, and mediation.
CHAPTER TWO

COMMUNICATION

Evolving in response to personal experiences, my paintings present visual cues that allude to elements of human connection. At its core, my interest in communication stems from an intense desire to understand the people around me, particularly as a hard-of-hearing individual. To compensate for the loss of hearing in my left ear, I learned to read lips – a deeply visual endeavor. Facemasks, an essential safety tool during the Covid-19 pandemic, disrupted my ability to understand those around me. I began to study movement and mannerism, as well as subtle shifts in facial expressions, as a point of context for conversation. These observations fill gaps in my understanding and prompt me to conceptualize the illegibility I experience by fracturing, deconstructing, and layering imagery in my portraits.

The paintings in *Refigured: Separations in Portraiture* display evidence of the process that I use to create them. The process of painting is a performance with the goal of revealing certain areas of information to the viewer and concealing others. I maintain a delicate balance between abstraction and reality in my attempt to reconcile language barriers and information loss. Typically, when the auditory falls short, visual observations inform my understanding. In the same way, the revealing of certain information such as an underpainting or a grid provides the viewer with just enough context to make something legible or appealing. Artist Joyce Ho speaks to a similar tension that she seeks to generate in her own work. She states:
“The images I paint all have some disturbing quality, whether it’s the angle of the character’s head or the awkwardness of the distorted bodies. But in order to complicate these unsettling images, I use strong yellow hues to create a warm overall lighting that emanates throughout the entire space. I like this idea of ‘peaceful violence’, of seducing the viewer with bright colours, while simultaneously confronting them with the damaged characters.”

Several paintings, such as *Glitch (Figure 1)* and *Between You and Me (Figure 2)*, feature amalgamations of facial features from me and various people in my life. These were the first paintings of the series and launched my exploration into identity. Towards the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, I became interested in the faces that were unfamiliar to me because of facemasks. Furthermore, courses during my final three semesters of undergraduate school were conducted over Zoom. The experience of viewing classmates in their own living spaces and confined to these ‘boxes’ was a strange sensation that stuck with me. These Zoom galleries inspired the confinement of facial features into boxes as I considered the legibility of an individual’s identity through this mediation. After the initial confinement, the features extend beyond their frames, merging with the others around them. The resulting compositions mimic the sensation of friends becoming unrecognizable in the absence of their facemask and the inability to predict what information the removal of a face covering would unveil.

Viewing these conglomerate portraits can be unsettling. Comparable to Picasso’s Cubist portraits, such as *Portrait de femme au col d’hermine (Olga)* (Figure 3), these paintings disturb viewers who are unfamiliar with distorted and fragmented portraiture.

---

1 Margherita and Valli, *A Brush with the Real: Figurative Painting Today*, p. 283
Rather than capturing a single subject from multiple points of view, I illustrate the identities of multiple subjects within one portrait.

Though the depictions are easily recognized as faces, viewers immediately grasp that the portraits are not natural representations of a single individual—that something is ‘off.’ Our prior understanding of portraiture elicits this gut reaction. With tradition establishing how a painted face should look, it can be deeply unsettling when an image disturbs our prior understanding and makes something illegible. The depicted lineaments belong to subjects of differing genders and races – the same people I was communicating with during quarantine. These connections were shaped in Zoom galleries, through social media, and the less frequently — face to face. The blending of depicted genders results in a vaguely androgynous portrait, forcing viewers to question their discomfort about the identity they are witnessing. The separation of facial features is further reiterated through their individual confinement, shifts in scale, assorted lighting conditions, and varied paint applications.

The nose depicted in *Glitch* was painted with translucent applications overtime; whereas the mouth was articulated quickly, using thicker paint. The composition of the portrait uses the contour of my own face and neck, seen most prominently on the left side of the portrait. This effect is reminiscent of the presence of a sitter’s reflection on the screen of their laptop. The consistency of this shape, as well as the overall cool hue of the painting, helps to maintain a sense of unity despite the disparate depictions. The blending of different individuals’ lineaments becomes a metaphor for the impersonal and dissociative experience of communicating digitally.
Spanish street artist Miguel Ángel Belinchón, better known as Belin, has coined the term *Neo Post Cubism* to characterize his works that are inspired by the deconstructed portraits of Pablo Picasso. “Belin’s peculiar portraits [such as *Mona Lisa Do Brazil* (*Figure 4*)] are rooted in reality yet stylistically surreal. While the features of each subject are lifelike and rendered in astounding detail, they are arranged in a fractured and frantic manner. This unique juxtaposition between realism and cubism accentuates the emotional aspect of each piece, as emphasis is placed on the subject’s stirring expression—much like a Picasso painting.”

*Between You and Me* operates in a similar way, with the conglomeration of features from me and a friend named Carleson. The meshing of our facial features represents the mediation of our friendship through digital applications. Carleson serves as the foundation of the portrait, with the mouth and right eye taken from my likeness. As in *Glitch*, *Between You and Me* challenges the viewer’s understanding of a portrait while maintaining a unified appearance through compositional choices and the use of a single source to render the contour of the face. My eye is pixelated, a clear reference to digital imagery. My mouth is depicted as a sort of “window” hit by a ray of sunlight. This glow, achieved using a technique I will detail in the next chapter, uses thin layers of strategically placed paint. Thicker applications of paint frame the window that bears the image of my lips. Again, the confinement of features to boxes and the differing paint applications reiterates the amalgamation, pointing towards a conglomerate rather than the individual and addressing the complexity of identity.

---

2 Richman-Abdou, “Neo Post Cubism”, My Modern Met
CHAPTER THREE

THE GLITCH

Legacy Russel, author of *Glitch Feminism*, describes ‘digital native,’ as the generation who remembers nothing other than a life intertwined with internet. Despite my categorization as a ‘digital native,’ having grown up during the rise of social media and the simultaneous influx of new technology, I struggle to adapt to the newness of it all. The constant, ever-multiplying stream of information and the inevitable glitches it elicits can be overwhelming to even the most tech-savvy. My reliance on technology to maintain relationships was exacerbated when I moved away from my home state of Alabama to attend graduate school. I began to document the FaceTime calls, Zoom meetings, and social media screenshots that mediated my relationships. I used these references of my friends and loved ones to create this body of work. The paintings in *Refigured* utilize tactics such as exposed underpaintings, saturated colors, and pixelation to reference the inevitable glitches that consume and complicate our contemporary interactions.

One of the strongest elements within this series is the exaggeration of color; many of the paintings can even be described as leaning cool or warm in temperature. This intensity is typical of images radiating from a brightly lit screen. Capturing this ‘glow’ involves more than amplifying color; in fact, it is achieved in the very first layer of paint. The imprimatura, or underpainting, is a transparent, toned ground that allows light falling

---

3 Russel, *Glitch Feminism*, p. 42
onto the painting to reflect through the paint layers. Traditionally in painting, earth toned pigments such as Yellow Ochre or Burnt Umber are used in this initial phase so that the subject—whether a landscape, still-life, or figure—is illuminated by a pigment that is natural to the depicted subject matter. Some contemporary painters, however, choose to use colors that are more vibrant and unnatural to their imagery.

Arcmanoro Niles is a contemporary figure painter best known for his use of vibrant colors to render brown skin as illuminated and glowing. Seen in his painting, *The Nights I Don’t Remember, The Nights I Can’t Forget* (Figure 5), he fluctuates between realistic renderings, like the oriental rug, and graphic displays, such as the brightly colored hair that adorns his figures. Niles leaves evidence of his saturated underpainting, providing a heightened intensity to seemingly mundane, domestic scenes – images that, like mine, might otherwise be scrolled past.

Utilizing pigments from analog and digital color models to communicate the dissipating border between the physical and virtual, my paintings reveal the deliberate residuum of their brightly colored imprimaturas as a conceptual vehicle for the glitch.

Two color models are used to explain the perception of color: subtractive color theory and additive color theory. Subtractive color theory explains how pigment is used to produce color through reflected light, such as in physical objects, the mixing of paint, and inkjet color printing, making it the analog color model. This color model is more commonly known with three primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. Additive color theory, on the other hand, describes how color is perceived through projected light, such as a TV screen and computer monitor, and is
therefore the digital color model. It utilizes the RGB color model with three primary colors: red, green, and blue. Mixing three sets of two of the primary colors from this model produces secondary colors: cyan, magenta, and yellow.

Using colors such as Quinacridone Magenta, I translate compositions onto their canvas. The high-key saturation of the pigment is reminiscent of viewing color via the transmitted light of a screen. As I create these underpaintings, the color of the stained canvas envelopes my face. Traces of the underpainting remain as evidence of the image’s digital life and my presence as the artist.

My painting, *Glitch*, sees the provisional paint layer lingering in the final image as a reference to a technical error. This deliberate inclusion is reminiscent of a glitch that can occur when a sitter’s fake Zoom background breaks the border of their body and encroaches across their form. The unresolved nature of this portion underscores not only the anxieties of digital communications—but also my imperfect hand as the artist—an analog glitch if you will.

*Lost in Translation* (Figure 6) is a portrait of my dad. Half of his face remains in the imprimatura stage, while the rest of the painting is broken into a grid-like pattern meant to represent pixels. The larger pixels overtake my father’s shoulders and the space surrounding him. Smaller pixels build a gridded wall that creeps across a large portion of his face. The topic of image resolution maintains a strong role in the reading of this painting as his face dissolves in and out of recognition. From a distance or with squinted eyes, the left side of my father’s face is realized, while the area of remaining underpainting becomes a mass of pink pigment. As the viewer approaches the painting, it
becomes harder to recognize the pixelation as depicting a face. Instead, the viewer is confronted with abstracted blocks of shifting colors and values, and the imprimatura becomes the tool for realizing the image as a portrait.

Several pixels are replaced by larger, yet subtle boxes of image rendering. The area to the right of my father’s forehead, and several other ‘windows,’ see a more accurate depiction of the space my dad inhabited when I captured this image on Zoom. Though still distorted, the viewer recognizes that this window portrays trees. Rather than painting solid blocks of color, these ‘windows’ are painted accurately to the reference image. A dry brush is then used to ‘swipe’ over the still-wet area, creating a photographic-type motion blur reminiscent of Gerhard Richter’s photo-paintings. Portrait Müller (Figure 7) sees the same process of ‘swiping’ at the wet, painted surface.

*Bits and Pieces* (Figure 8) depicts the confrontational image of my friend, Evan. The subject’s head is cropped by the frame, and his face overwhelms the majority of the frame. His nose takes center-stage, becoming enlarged as the camera holds focus on it. This composition is reminiscent of one we experience via FaceTime. The image, typically viewed on a phone slim enough to slide into our back pocket, is blown up, becoming five times larger than the actual screen size. The edge of the sitter’s face depicts the harsh separation between subject and background, a distinction mirrored in portrait mode on the iPhone camera. Though the effect does what it is promised – blurring the background while focusing on the portrait – the border between the two has a glitched and sometimes jagged appearance. The background in Evan’s portrait is indiscernible, leaving the viewer to question the truth in its depiction.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE FILTERED IMAGE

With the rise of photography, social media, and other digital capabilities, it has become harder than ever to trust what we are viewing as the truth. Like a pixel, a brushstroke is a sample, a summation of the information it encodes. Similarly, one’s outer appearance, or an image of them taken at a split second in time, can never fully capture the multifaceted nature of the subject’s identity. Several of my paintings serve as personal truths, specific to my own relationship with the subject. Manipulating source imagery, I seek to capture a kind of realism that is the uncertainty and impossibility of truth among the abundance of filtered images and complexity of identity. In his book *Unrealism*, Jeffrey Deitch states, “In a ‘post truth’ world, many aspects of our situation have become more ‘unreal’ than ‘real.’ Unrealism, rather than Realism, may be the most cogent way to describe this new artistic direction.”⁴ The simultaneous realities that I explore point to contemporary occurrences that are increasingly felt and experienced.

Artist Karen Navarro’s series, *The Constructed Self*, explores themes of selfhood and the complexity of identity through what she describes as “unconventional portraiture.” With a basis in digital photography, pieces such as *I See You* (Figure 9) are deconstructed and rearranged sculpturally, a labor-intensive process that allows Navarro to reflect on her multiple senses of self. The dimensional portraits highlight the complexity of identity and invite the viewer to question their own perceptions and biases.

⁴ Deitch, *Unrealism: New Figurative Painting*, p. 9
She says “We can be complex and many, we could be whatever we want to be. We can fight invisibility and define ourselves by turning against the normative that dictates this world. We should recognize and celebrate ourselves and the multitudes we contain”⁵

*Reconfigured Noise* (Figure 10) is a portrait of Huan, a peer and friend. They are also non-binary, a person of color, an artist, and many other classifications – whether those are known, acknowledged, or visible to the viewer. Humans are placed, or place themselves, into boxes such as these to construct and organize their participation in society. Understanding the totality of these structures and our position within them is impossible, particularly because we are in a constant state of flux. Author Legacy Russell states, “The body is an idea that is cosmic, which is to say, ‘inconceivably vast’,”⁶ and argues that “we must embrace our multiplicity, or our body’s ‘right to range.’”⁷

I explore a variety of tactics to express the range that Huan possesses. Several layers of *Reconfigured Noise* are painted loosely, resulting in abstract pixels; while other pixels are clear in their depiction. These windows represent the multifaceted structures that Huan inhabits. Hidden images are present beneath other layers, evident only by the surface texture. Layers of shifted renderings mimic the portions of our identity that we choose to outwardly promote and those we attempt to subdue. Like Huan, their portrait explores and challenges tradition. As explained in my description of conglomerate portraits in Chapter One, viewers have a prior understanding of what a portrait should be.

---

⁵ Navarro, “The Constructed Self”
⁶ Russel, *Glitch Feminism*, p. 41
⁷ Russel, *Glitch Feminism*, p. 21
Reconfigured Noise flips the viewer’s expectation of portraiture as they are confronted with the struggle and yearning to find a face within the fractured image.

Deriving from my presence as the photographer, many of the portraits in Refigured maintain eye contact with the viewer. Whether captured mid-conversation, posing for my camera, or caught by surprise, the sitter is interacting with me when I take the reference image. Similar to the portraits created by artist, Jenny Morgan, this suggested presence in the final painting forms a sense of intimacy despite the audience’s unfamiliarity with the person depicted. Some demonstrate particular attention to facial expressions, giving the viewer hints into the personality of the sitter or narrative behind the image. They capture the spirit of the subject, gifting the viewer with a sense of truth. However, this truth is not the same for everyone that knows the sitter. These are glimpses into my relationship with them—my personal truths.

Neither Here nor There (Figure 11), is a portrait of my little sister, Sibley. She has a feisty spirit that she reserves for an unlucky few. The reference I used to create this piece was recorded as Sibley realized I was taking her photograph. The original image and resulting painting capture her scrunched brow as she prepares to scold me. Viewers are given an all-access pass to the unfiltered, fleeting interaction between sisters. Like many of the portraits in Refigured, the epic scale mediates an assertive interaction between viewer and object. The scale of this painting distorted my ability to accurately depict her in the beginning stages. With each mark, I was forced to take a step back to view the paint I just placed on the surface in relation to the rest of the portrait.
As seen in *Between You and Me* and *Bits and Pieces*, the depicted environment is made ambiguous with a blurred background. The audience is left unable to discern anything other than a chair, a curved ceiling, and a couple of windows. Pixels remain primarily within the bounds of the figure. This seclusion points to the reality of maintaining a relationship despite our physical separation.

Another painting of my sister uses the photographic process of double exposure to merge Sibley’s face with the likeness of her boyfriend, hence the title— *Body’s Double* (Figure 12). This portrait considers how other people, especially romantic partners, can inform someone’s identity. Through their years together, Sibley’s boyfriend, Daniel, has become like a younger brother to me. He’s developed an important role in our family and in Sibley’s identity. His presence is consistent and would be even in his absence. The image, like a conglomerate portrait, is filtered and unreal. The meaning, however, represents a sort of personal truth.

*CMYK* (Figure 13) is the portrait of my friend, Jackie. This painting captures the playful vibrancy that the sitter emits, not unlike the goal of someone choosing their profile image. The square ratio of the canvas reinforces the idea of the painting as a profile picture. Typically, the goal of a social media profile image is to display an accurate but attractive image of yourself. Often-times, these images maintain a delicate balance between filter and truth. Make-up free, Jackie was hesitant to let me photograph her. She grabbed pink lipstick from her bag, rubbed the color into her cheeks, and I assured her that I would accentuate the lovely rose-color in my painting. This editing process— or performance— is common, even if it is not obvious, in the images we are
bombarded with every day. In the digital space, especially on social media, it can be hard to gauge what is real; however, it is also an opportunity to express and play with the complexity of our identities. *Glitch Feminism* reads, “…the digital skins we develop and don online help us understand who we are with greater nuance. Thus, we use glitch as a vehicle to rethink our physical selves.”

Those who are familiar with Jackie and her artwork recognize that this is a depiction of her in her studio space. However, the dream-like space, filled with what appear to be floating objects, seems unreal to the viewer unfamiliar with her artwork. The patterning present in Jackie’s laser-cut sculptures are mirrored in the moiré pattern that wraps across her face. Dancing between analog and digital mediation, this fleeting and alternating pattern was first captured in a video I took of Jackie’s photograph on my laptop screen. I took screenshots of the video and used sandpaper as a subtractive drawing tool to depict the pattern’s presence in her pre-painted portrait. The sanding revealed dots of gessoed canvas ground. It wasn’t until I added transparent layers of cyan, magenta, and yellow paint that the moiré pattern appeared. This technique is advertised in the title, *CMYK.*

---

8 Russel, *Glitch Feminism,* p. 31
CHAPTER FIVE

MEDIATION

Mediation is a vital process in *Refigured*. The paintings in this show transcend their source materials, breathing life back into the viewer’s experience with images. In his book *A Biography of the Pixel*, Alvy Ray Smith touches on the omnipresence of screens in our viewing experience. He says:

The Great Digital Convergence: a single new digital medium—the all-encompassing bit—replaced nearly all analogue media. The bit became the universal medium, and the pixel—a particularly packaging of bits—conquered the world. It became impossible to remove a painting, so to speak, from its canvas. As a consequence, most pictures in the world are now digital. Analog pictures have all but vanished relative to ubiquitous digital imagery. Museums and kindergartens are among the few reliable places to find the analog.⁹

Whether through the imbedding of digital residue or the untouched imperfections left by my hand on the surface, I strategically use paint to comment on the mediation of our contemporary interactions. Occasionally, elements from my sources are forgotten completely, prioritizing experimentation and play with the medium.

Though the 2D surfaces that house these paintings correspond to the flat boundary of the screens that mediate our cultural experience, the fleeting nature of digital interactions stands in great contrast to my painting process. I spend hours in front of the

---

⁹ Smith, *A Biography of the Pixel*, p. 2
faces of my loved ones as I build up their skin onto the woven surface of my canvas. Digital mediations are constrained by time and remaining battery life. The rich experience that these portraits grant the viewer is similar to the process of creating them: time slows down, the subject is present, and every surface texture is visible within the image.

The residue of my process grants a temporal quality to these paintings. A technique that I utilize throughout this body of work is sourced from pentimento—“the presence or emergence of earlier images, forms, or strokes that have been changed and painted over.” Traditionally, the term has been used to describe the uncovering of visible changes that were made to a historical work of art during its creation. “These changes are usually hidden beneath a subsequent paint layer. In some instances, they become visible because the paint layer above has become transparent with time. Pentimenti (plural) can also be detected using infra-red reflectograms and X-rays.”¹⁰ The famous Erased de Kooning Drawing (Figure 14) completed by Robert Rauschenberg in 1953 is considered pentimento. Despite the removal of the original drawing with an eraser, the drawing is still present, embedded in the surface of the paper. As has been done with historical paintings by the greatest masters, the artwork was digitally enhanced (Figure 15) to show portions of the drawing that are no longer visible to the human eye.¹¹

Today, artists such as Jenny Saville use pentimenti as a technique to expose temporality and the creation process. Seen in her piece, Study for Pentimenti III (sinopia)

---

¹⁰ The National Gallery, “Pentimento.” Pentimento | Glossary
¹¹ Cain, “Why Robert Rauschenberg Erased a De Kooning”, Artsy
(Figure 16), the resulting renderings hold a similar appearance to a double exposure photograph as multiple contour drawings collide to seemingly depict the trace figures in motion.

Many of the works in *Refigured* use tape as a tool to section off blocks of a painted image. New images are painted between each layer of tape pixels. The repetitive nature of this process means that many subsequent layers of images and tape are imbedded in the surface. Removing the tape pixels reveals evidence of the image beneath it, altering the viewer’s understanding of pixels as flat, solid blocks of color. Instead, these windows display a form of pentimenti, my analog process of repetitively rendering the many stages of a portrait or the figure at various positions of movement. Disparate levels of paint application between each pixel grant viewers access to the painting’s history, much like the rings of a tree trunk. Similar to that of face masks, the result of removing tape pixels was unforeseeable. There was an element of surprise as I peeled away each block—again evoking the performative nature of the temporal work. This lack of predictability is equally as present in our digital interactions and in the gaps that I experience in my hearing.

*Pop Ups (Selective Hearing)* (Figure 17) is a self-portrait inspired by the distractions of contemporary life. Boxes are depicted as flashing in front of my frozen, glitched face. In the imprimatura stage, an earlier rendering of my portrait appears in specific selections that the tape preserved. The blue underpainting points to the blue light that our screens emit. Two images of my face mid-conversation are stacked transparently on top of each other, mimicking the movement of my face as I speak. Though tilted in
perspective, the doorframe behind me plays to the repetition of the other shapes. In the bottom, right-hand corner of Pop Ups, a plant appears. The x-acto knife I used to cut out the plant stencil in tape mirrors the rigidity of the selection tool I utilized in Photoshop. The inverse cutting of this stencil is placed in the same location within my mom’s portrait – a subtle, personal nod to a connection and love that we share.

In his book The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains, Nicholas Carr speaks to our fleeting focus when he says:

The net is designed to be an interruption system, a machine geared to dividing attention. We willingly accept the loss of concentration and focus, the division of our attention and the fragmentation of our thoughts, in return for the wealth of compelling or at least diverting information we receive.\textsuperscript{12}

In a similar vein, the utilization of digital resources in my painting practice interrupts my traditional painting tendencies. The embedded digital syntaxes, such as pixelation, glowing pigments, or harsh edges, requires an element of problem solving that traditional portraiture does not. I experiment with tools and processes as I consider how deploying digital artifacts will emphasize the areas of ‘realistically’ rendered flesh and vice versa.

Forcing glitches into images that do not have pre-existing breakage allows me to represent the ubiquitous yet fleeting quality of digital errors. Further editing of a manipulation allows me to maintain a careful balance between recognizable and

\textsuperscript{12} Carr, The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains
questionable information. In doing so, I want the viewer to step away from these portraits with a sustained sense of curiosity about the image, process, or meaning.

*Home Screen* (Figure 18) is a monumental family portrait that recaptures the presence of a digital interaction. My mom is depicted as the main figure. My dad’s forearm is seen resting on the sofa at the bottom of the frame. In the lower right-hand corner, my likeness, like in *Pop Ups*, is depicted frozen, mid conversation. The inclusion of my portrait in a smaller, separate frame provides the viewer with an understanding that this is a FaceTime call and further reiterates my physical separation from my family. The kitchen, where my parents spend most of their time, is depicted behind my mother. The space is messy and lived-in, and the objects are hardly discernible. The disorienting space is reinforced by the image’s mediation.

I used a projector to feed the information to the canvas in the beginning stages of *Home Screen*, careful not to become overly critical in correcting the conditions that my image and technology provided. With each layer of mediation, I altered the painting visually and conceptually. On the work of artists Harding Meyer and Justin Mortimer, the book, *A Brush with the Real*, states:

*The canvas becomes a screen, a board, on which to transpose a still and reflect upon our unbelievably complex contemporary visual landscape. Their paintings are thus ‘the mediation of an already mediated image.’ These painters use the intrinsic qualities of painting – stillness, texture; and in particular size and staying*
power – to examine our relationship to a world in which these types of images are prevalent.  

The projector was out of focus, and sunlight peeked into the room despite the drawn blinds. The printed image, a screenshot from my family’s pixelated FaceTime call, broke down further once it was blown up. These conditions yielded shapes, not objects. I painted these. Reminiscent of the saturated imprimaturas that cast a glow onto my face as I paint them, the projector caused my silhouette to appear on the surface of the canvas. In the bottom edge of Home Screen, I embedded a piece of this history. My painting chair is illustrated loosely, an outline of the silhouette that appeared against the canvas as I painted it. Further glimpses into the painting’s creation are viewable in the pixels, showing the indiscernible, provisional shapes I captured from the projected image. Like a game of telephone, this filtered information becomes completely unintelligible, and players are left to guess the answer based on limited information. These mediations humanize the feeling of now.

---

13 Margherita and Valli, A Brush with the Real: Figurative Painting Today, p. 13
Refigured: Separations in Portraiture is an autobiographical account of my contemporary encounters through the lens of digital communication. This show captures my enthusiasm for the medium of painting and process of play. Stressors rooted in auditory illegibility and my encounters as a ‘digital native’ provoke the separations in my portraits. Renderings jump between figuration and abstraction, into the digital and out of the analog, and vice versa. My goal in creating this tension is to capture the kind of reality that I find myself traversing today. At times, this reality seems more unreal than real.

My contemporary experience is made of distorted encounters—online and in the physical world. While I don’t anticipate this changing anytime soon, painting about my reality alleviates the frustrations surrounding it. Time slows down as I create these portraits, and I allow myself to become subsumed in thought and experimentation. 

Refigured: Separations in Portraiture is a reclamation of the gaps that I will continue to face.
FIGURES

Figure 1: *Glitch*, Caroline Myers, 2022, Oil on canvas, 36” x 24”
Figure 2: Between You and Me, Caroline Myers, 2022
Oil on wood panel, 26” x 20”
Figure 3: Portrait de femme au col d’hermine (Olga), Pablo Picasso 1923, Oil on canvas; 24.02” x 19.69”
Figure 4: *Mona Lisa Do Brazil*, Belin, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 35.43” x 23.62”
Figure 5: The Nights I Don’t Remember, The Nights I Can’t Forget, Arcmanoro Niles, 2018, Oil, acrylic, and glitter on canvas, 70” x 72”
Figure 6: *Lost in Translation*, Caroline Myers, 2022
Oil on canvas, 48” x 36”
Figure 7: *Portrait Müller*, Gerhard Richter, 1965
Oil on linen, 31.5" x 23.75"
Figure 8: Bits and Pieces, Caroline Myers, 2022
Oil and pigment stick on wood panel, 24” x 18”
Figure 9: *I See You*, Karen Navarro, 2020
Archival injet print, wood, acrylic paint, and resin, 9.13” x 6.81”
Figure 10: Reconfigured Noise, Caroline Myers, 2022
Oil and acrylic on wood panel, 30” x 20”
Figure 11: *Neither Here nor There*, Caroline Myers, 2023
Oil and pigment stick on canvas, 60” x 48”
Figure 12: Body’s Double, Caroline Myers, 2023
Oil and pigment stick on canvas, 40” x 30”
Figure 13: CMYK, Caroline Myers, 2023
Oil on canvas, 36” x 36”
Figure 14: Erased De Kooning Drawing, Robert Rauschenberg
Traces of drawing media on paper with label and gilded frame; 25.25” x 21.75”
Figure 15: “Digitally Enhanced Infrared Scan of Erased de Kooning Drawing”, Robert Rauschenberg, Ben Blackwell and Robin D Myers, 2010, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Figure 16: Study for Pentimenti III (sinopia), Jenny Saville, 2011
Charcoal and pastel on paper; 78.25" x 59.88"
Figure 17: Pop Ups (Selective Hearing), Caroline Myers, 2023
Oil and pigment stick on canvas, 40” x 30”
Figure 18: Home Screen, Caroline Myers, 2023
Oil, acrylic, and pigment stick on canvas, 60” x 48”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Picasso, Pablo. “Portrait de femme au col d'hermine (Olga).” Oil on canvas; 24.02 x 19.69 in., 1923.


Saville, Jenny. “Study for Pentimenti III (Sinopia).” Charcoal and pastel on paper; 78.25 x 59.88 in., 2011.
