Paintings of People We Don’t Know

by

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To Make Real:

An essay accompanying the exhibition *Paintings of People We Don’t Know*
In my parents’ house—

There is a bookshelf in the living room of the house where I grew up. Filling two of its shelves, edge to edge, there are many many photo albums. On one shelf they are cream-colored, large, square, and three-ringed like a binder, with delicate gold trim. Those are mine. The books on the other shelf, my brother’s, are navy blue. At a certain point each set of albums changes; the newer models are similarly colored, but narrower and with rounder spines—the company that manufactured the originals must have discontinued them. I have never known a family whose life has been so well documented (“Spring 1997, Grandma’s birthday—Sarah’s birthday”) as my own. I remember watching my mother sort the double prints into two piles and file the negatives in shoeboxes. Sometimes she would have three prints made, in case she wanted to send a copy to one of her aunts in North Carolina.

My mother, whose early childhood was defined by disruption, has very few photographs of herself. She cites this as the reason she made so sure her camera was always in the car before a trip to New Pond Farm, around her neck at birthday parties, and no more than an arm’s length away even, perhaps especially, on ordinary days. “When you and Reid grow up,” she tells us, “you’ll have all these pictures. If you want them,” she adds. “You might not even want them.” I wonder if the photos make her sad. I wonder how often she looks at them.

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An introduction—

During the course of my thesis, two major points of philosophical interest came into focus. The first was photography, particularly domestic photography. The source material for my thesis consists of other people’s family photographs, which I found at flea markets, yard sales, online, and, on one occasion, on the ground. What does it mean for family photographs to be kept? What does it mean for them to be given away or sold?

The fact that I chose to paint people I don’t know produces another set of questions, questions concerning the individual’s relationship to the stranger, and, by extension, our society’s relationship to the same. People often romanticize the stranger, and I want to explore the reasons for this tendency as well as its consequences. What happens when “stranger” becomes an idea rather than a person?

Instead of relying purely on my own experience, I decided to informally interview several (around twenty) friends and acquaintances, ranging in age from early twenties to late eighties, on the subjects I wished to address. I will use excerpts from people’s answers as a jumping-off point from which to explore photography, the stranger, my own work, and the connections between the three.

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In whichever room is mine—

My favorite picture of my brother and me is not a good picture. It is oddly cropped; my small body is crammed into the upper-left corner and a large boulder occupies most of the frame. At the time the photo was taken, I’d recently learned that the boulder (one of thousands that peppered the woods behind my house) had been deposited by a glacier during the Ice Age.

We are not looking at each other. Reid, knobbly-kneed in a blue T-shirt and Tevas, appears to be deep in thought. I, crouched like a bird, gaze at the ground.

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“The device that makes real”—

Several of the people I interviewed mention (unsurprisingly—this is practically a trope) that their family photos are the first thing they would save if their house were on fire. (To be fair, my father qualifies that they would be the first “non-human, non-canine” thing.)

We often see photographs as indisputable, mechanical records of events. This is not the case, but that doesn’t stop us from allowing (consciously and otherwise) photographs to influence our memories in powerful ways. How many of us have convinced ourselves that we remember a certain event from our childhood, when really, we’ve just seen a lot of photos of said event? “[My grandparents] send out calendars every year with pictures of all the cousins so we’ll remember what everyone looks like,” writes one friend. Writes another, “I’m all about remembering as much as I can from my life and photos are such a huge part of making that happen. It also sometimes freaks me out when there aren’t enough or available photos from certain experiences or periods of my life.” This speaks to the immensity of the role photography plays in the documentation of modern life—if no photograph exists of an event, it’s almost as though the event never took place. The photograph becomes a placeholder for the event.

Due to this assumption of accuracy, we imagine that a photograph has the power to capture the psychological reality of its subject, some essence or even soul that is grabbed and synthesized and stored in the reaction of light and chemical on paper. Conveniently, this attempt at the depiction of the subject’s interior has been the goal of much of the history of portraiture, at once its greatest triumph and its most profound failure. The idea that we can glean any significant information about a person’s selfhood
from a photograph (or a painting, or, as we’ll touch on later, a brief encounter) is a fiction. But the continued willingness to try on the part of the artist, the viewer, and, to some degree, the casual bystander, is telling. For what, in this case, is reality? Surely it is dubious to a construct a narrative around a single photograph—people have actual lives that they are actually living, and to make assumptions about their circumstances is careless at best and dangerous at worst. But don’t we construct reality all the time? One person I interviewed remembers a specific photograph from his childhood and the effect it had on him:

There’s this one picture my mom has of me when I was maybe 8 or 9 in the kitchen in my old house. Back when I was young I used to love to dress up, and in this picture I was wearing one of my mom’s sweaters, green, I think, that was way too big for me and fell over me like a dress, a clown nose, a ladies’ [sic] white had [sic], and most memorably, white high heels. And I remember that picture and smile because I think of it as backup for my notion of myself as a sort of goofy, playful, dressup sort. But I also wonder if maybe I think of myself in that way *because* of the picture, which in turn informs my actions and makes me act goofy and playful and dressup, so it sort of becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Who knows? I’m probably going too far.

But if, as Sartre writes in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, “Man is nothing more than his own project,”¹ then of course memory influences self-perception and creation, and of course photography contributes to the same. John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing*:

…photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer’s way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing.²

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¹ Jean-Paul Sartre *Existentialism is a Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 37.
“Our own way of seeing” influences our perception, and what we perceive in turn
influences “our own way of seeing.” The photographs I used as source material for my
paintings represent someone else’s way of seeing—someone else’s eye and hand and
composition and choice of subject. In this way, I have renounced, to a certain degree,
ownership over my own work. However, my own way of seeing is inescapably present in
my hand, which makes my paintings inescapably my own.

I came to this thesis feeling doubtful of painting as a medium and nervous about
its arguable irrelevance in today’s art climate. I can’t say that these fears were alleviated
entirely over the course of the year, but I will say that I now stand by painting as one of
the best media through which to communicate one’s unique way of seeing; it is, I think, a
singularly personal way to work.

In choosing what to photograph, we choose what is worth documenting. We curate our lives into series of images that make up a narrative, and, in doing so, we present a set of values. Berger writes, “We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice.”

Many of the people I interviewed described the shifts that took place with the advent of digital photography and again with the widespread use of social media. One writes:

Once digital photography was introduced to our household there were many more photos taken of much more inane things. Like Celina taking pictures of the dog sitting on the floor, or Spongebob on TV. Domestic photo-taking became much less situation-reliant. Everything became worth documenting.”

And another:

Sometimes I find myself going through all my Facebook photos from ninth grade until now. This super narcissistic exercise allows me to think about who I was when these pics were taken, and what I wanted them to

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achieve by being on the internet. Looking at these pictures allows me to remember who I was and what I was feeling, what my friends and I enjoyed and hoped for and tried to be at various points in my life.

These quotations are products of a time in which we are hounded by our own image, in which we do things “for the picture.” It is for this reason that I chose to paint from photographs taken before the age of Facebook and Instagram. Now, we act as stewards of our own image, and may if not most of the photos that exist of us were taken by us or else at our request. The photos I used were different. They were presumably taken by loved ones of the subject, or at least someone who cared enough about the subject to take the photo.

It is true that “to look is an act of choice,” but looking is also an act of care; taking a picture of someone shows that you find that person worth taking a picture of. One of the things I am trying to accomplish with my thesis is to apply this act of care to things that have been discarded. In taking the time to paint these images, I restore to them the condition of care they once knew.

I used to have a theory that the most important thing anyone could do, the way to solve all the world’s problems, was to want to know. “I will be the Great Noticer,” I once wrote, “The Noticer of Small Things.” Painting these pictures was a way for me to practice that—to look and to care and to notice things that others had deemed unworthy of such attentions. I realize now that there are more important things, and I’m quite aware that my paintings won’t stop world hunger or alleviate poverty. Still though, I think it’s good to practice.

I knew that nostalgia would inevitably play a role in my work. Photographs imply fleetingness, and therefore a certain melancholy. My mother writes, “I couldn’t bear to let the times of their childhood pass by and be gone forever.” I hoped my paintings
would elicit this kind of general, existential nostalgia rather than—and the fact that
they’re old means that they certainly run this risk—nostalgia for a specific time period. I
wanted my viewers to think, What will happen to photos of me after I die?, not, Man,
the seventies were truly a magical time. To combat the latter, I changed some of the
mullets in the photos to normal haircuts.

Susan Sontag writes in her book On Photography, “To take a photograph is to
participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely
by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless
melt.”4 I hope that my thesis will inspire the viewer’s participation in the mortality,
vulnerability, and mutability of my subjects, as well as serve as a reminder of her own.
But I also hope that she will recognize in the marled surface of the paint that new life has
been breathed into these same subjects, that all, as they say, is not lost. I hope that the
obligatory nostalgia will be combined with the possibility of renewal and reinvention. It
was for me.

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Nowhere—

There are no photographs of the first two weeks of my life. My mother, delirious from the exhaustion of giving birth (I came out backwards—a good joke), forgot to put film in the camera. My dad tells me I was pretty ugly, with a squashed nose like a snake. And I was born with hair, lots of hair that never fell out.

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“Nothing more than his life”—

Love at first sight. That thing where you pay for the person behind you in line’s coffee. Amélie. All these speak to a cultural tendency to romanticize the stranger. Strangers are just other people, so why are we so determined to convince ourselves otherwise? What does the way in which we think about the stranger say about us, as individuals and as a society?

In their answers to my interview questions, many people allude to the fact that the idea of the stranger is accompanied by a heightened sense of possibility. One friend writes that her interactions with strangers seem more “magical” than ordinary interactions because they are brief and unexpected: “[An interaction with a stranger is] just a little snapshot that’s a flirtation with the scope and depth of the world.” Another rightly points out that, “You don’t imagine a handsome stranger brushing his teeth or making his bed.” Because of the nature of these interactions, we view them as representative of some universal truth. If you can only see the tip of the iceberg, you can’t help but imagine what expanses exist beneath the ocean’s surface. Brevity implies profundity.

In his poem, “Crowds,” Baudelaire writes, “What men call love is a very small, restricted, feeble thing compared with this ineffable orgy, this divine prostitution of the soul giving itself entire, all its poetry and all its charity, to the unexpected as it comes along, to the stranger as he passes.” Reading Baudelaire in high school, I believed this. Maybe, though I am less likely admit it now, I still do. And I don’t think I’m alone. While we can’t all give “our soul entire” to every passing stranger or participate in “ineffable

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orgies” with the throbbing mass of humanity or whatever, that desire for connection, for involvement in the lives of others, is undeniably present.

But what can we possibly be seeing? How can we read so much into a glance, a few words, or a nod? Easy—we project, we simplify, and we other, which is precarious because, as my Great-Aunt Kacky writes, “You don’t know the road they been down.”

Perhaps projection is inevitable. Sartre writes, “…man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself that man is realized.” But if we project in every interaction, we really project in our interactions with strangers. One friend writes, on whether or not we romanticize the stranger:

I mean we exoticize and other them a lot. I mean what even is a stranger? Some one you don’t owe SHIT to cause [sic] you think they aren’t gonna come back into your life? Well that's proven wrong ALL the time. Or someone that seems unfamiliar? Well that quickly becomes reductive and othering. I mean when you don’t know someone’s life story, you have to oversimplify in order to know how to react so I think that romanticizing is an easy thing to do with strangers, whether you envision them as malicious or angelic.

What strikes me here is the idea that a stranger is someone to whom one owes nothing and that this makes it okay to appropriate her life into a sound bite or a philosophy. Do we owe strangers anything? Do we have an obligation not to use them for our own stories and theories and painting theses? Or, if strangers are, as we’ve already said, just people, and we use “just people” for those things all the time, is it no big deal? Is there even a way around it?

In 2010, Brandon Stanton started a blog called Humans of New York. The site consists of photographs of New York residents, accompanied by short quotations from

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6 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 52.
interviews Stanton conducts with them. It is enormously successful, boasting eight million followers on social media, and now, a New York Times bestselling book.

There’s a lot to be said about Humans of New York. It certainly seems well meaning, as does the enthusiasm many have for it. But it’s also inarguable reductive, exoticizing and simplifying its subjects into a single photo and brief quotation. Furthermore, these quotations are pulled from much longer interviews, causing one to wonder, In what ways are the interviews tailored according to race, gender, sexual identity, and socioeconomic status? To what degree does Stanton alter the content of his questions to get the clickiest responses? And why only publish one quote, taken out of context?

In an essay for the online magazine Warscapes, Melissa Smyth asks all these questions in a piece titled, “On Sentimentality: A Critique of Humans of New York.” Smyth writes that HONY represents, “the triumph of sentimentality over empathy, of platitude over inquiry, of imitation over creativity.” These dichotomies address some of the primary concerns and tensions that exist in my thesis. I want my paintings to be empathetic rather than sentimental, to ask questions rather than provide answers or moralize, and to do so in a creative rather than imitative way. That said, I believe that one of the strengths of the work is that it exists, in some ways, at the centers of those dichotomies. It borders on sentimentality and on unoriginality, which I hope will cause my viewer to question what it means to be sentimental or unoriginal (without condemning my work to either of those sad categories). Smyth writes:

The blog grows like a collection of baseball cards, with individuals identified by whatever bits of personal information deem them “human,” their images representative of the exploits of a privileged voyeur who simultaneously exotifies and moderates the population around him.

Isn’t that just what I’m doing? Curating a sentimental reality in order to elicit a desired response?

Smyth’s same dichotomies—sentimentality vs. empathy, platitude vs. inquiry, and imitation vs. creativity—also speak to the existence of the widespread cultural belief that relating to strangers in the correct way can make us better people. In her interview, my grandmother points out that most religions emphasize being kind to strangers, which indicates that the way in which one relates to strangers is assumed to have moral weight.

People who visit Humans of New York are comforted by the feeling that they are expanding their worldview and their powers of empathy. As one friend writes, “I think we like the idea that [strangers] can introduce us to new ideas and norms that can improve our lives.”

Several of the people I interviewed expressed a relatively cynical view of our relationship to the stranger. One friend writes:

I think strangers are over/under appreciated. Under because people are mostly wrapped up in themselves, I know I am, and while we’re empathetic and sympathetic etc. in the end were [sic] gonna give a lil [sic] more mental perspiration thinkin [sic] bout [sic] ourselves rather than strangers. But then there’s also definitely a romanticized kickback because people are also so voyeuristic and love watching others, mostly to compare them to themselves.

Perhaps people feel the need to romanticize the stranger, and to attribute moral relevance to their ability to empathize with her, because they ignore her in practice. We are forced to ascribe disproportionate gravity to the theoretical stranger because we cut the actual stranger in line and grow frustrated when she stands on the escalator. Are we merely making up for our own inconsiderateness, our own self-involvement?
We come to know ourselves through other people. Hegel writes, “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself by way of its existing in and for itself for an other.” He calls the act of recognizing the other, “the doubling of self consciousness in its unity.” If this is the case, then the individual’s relationship with the stranger is one of self-creation and self-perception. We see ourselves in strangers, and their recognition helps us to recognize ourselves. In fact, our interactions with strangers provide us with the purest possibility of self-discovery because our relationship with them is, as my mother writes, “undiluted.” The stranger is our only un-dusty, untarnished mirror. Sartre writes:

Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, or of Kant, when we say, ‘I think,’ we each attain ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. Therefore, the man who becomes aware of himself directly in the cogito also perceives all others, and he does so as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which we say someone is spiritual, or cruel, or jealous) unless others acknowledge him as such. I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself. Under these conditions, my intimate discovery of myself is at the same time a revelation of the other as a freedom that confronts my own and that cannot think of will without doing so for or against me.

If, as Sartre believes, “the other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself,” then the stranger plays a huge role in the individual’s conception of selfhood. Perhaps we are so fascinated by the stranger because how we interact with her provides us with crucial information about our own nature. It’s not only that the stranger is a mirror in which we see ourselves reflected back, but also that how we act in relation to her is revealing in a way other kinds of interactions do not have the capacity to be.

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9 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 41-42.
A lot of people ask me how I chose which photos to paint. They want to know how the pictures are connected, what story I’m trying to tell, what idea I’m trying to get across. When this happens, I change the subject. The truth is that the pictures aren’t connected, and I chose them specifically to illicit those kinds of questions.

This was the hardest thing for me to navigate as I made my paintings: Was I making them because I truly believe that human beings are connected to one another and that there is meaning to be found in that connection? Or was my work a critique of that belief? My answer changed weekly if not daily, and I constantly worried that one or the other view was not being communicated. In the end I settled for the possibility that different people would come to different conclusions about my work, either emphasizing its sarcasm or its sincerity. Art should ask questions, I reasoned, not provide answers.

I wanted my viewers to look for connections, to invent meaning and generate narratives themselves, because that is what we do when confronted with a world full of strangers. We pretend that we are connected to them, that everything is connected to everything else. We imagine that we share some vast universal human mind and heart, and that all the endless ways in which we are divided break down somehow in the face of that reality. We hold onto meaning the same way we hold onto old photos, and maybe we need to, in order to feel that our lives are worthwhile, that our actions make a difference. Maybe we need to in order to remember to be kind. Or, alternatively, maybe we should all be taking a page out of my Aunt Kacky’s book:

Q: Do you ever think about where your family’s photos will end up?

A: Yes, I think about that all the time, and I think they’ll end up in the dump.

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Resilient—

In my mother’s interview, she explains her tendency to strike up conversations with strangers, a habit I was, for a long time, embarrassed by. She writes:

I have many meaningful interactions with strangers. I talk to people whenever I am out and around and generally after a few sentences there is a commonality and we are discussing whatever that is. I find myself thinking about wise things that people say because most people are capable and resilient.

My mother was born in Gastonia, North Carolina to the eldest of ten children. Gastonia is chock full of Campbells; my grandmother and her brothers and sisters monopolized the Gaston County paper route for nearly thirty years. Both women moved north when my mother was four years old. She weathered the winter months in Bergen County, New Jersey, but every summer she went back to that old mill town (an illogical migration, most would say, south for the summer) and lived with her aunts and uncles who let her have second scoops of ice cream, and her cousins who made fun of her accent. She says that when August ended and she had to leave, she felt the missing in her chest for weeks afterward.

My mother keeps a photo of herself, surrounded by her family, on her desk. In front of someone’s whitewashed house, a small crowd is gathered on the grass. All the so many cousins in front, held in arms or leaning against their parents’ calves, glance around distractedly. Only my mother looks at the camera.
Bibliography


Jean-Paul Sartre *Existentialism is a Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).


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