

ART REVIEW: Portraits that Go Head to Head with Selfies & the Formulaic

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by Charles A. Riley II

Viewers would do well to cherry-pick their way through “About Face” at the [Southampton Arts Center](#), a survey of portraiture in sculpture, painting and photography presented by the [New York Academy of Art](#). Most of the artists on view have an affiliation with the Academy either as faculty, lecturers, advisory council members, honorary degree holders or critics.

Coupled with invited artists, the show would have been right at home at the Academy’s gallery in Tribeca. Taking up the entirety of the SAC, the show includes a far-flung range of artists in terms of history, skill and temperament.

One of the most convincing moments in this uneven show greets visitors in the vestibule on the left wall upon entering: [Steve Mumford’s](#) *The Prayer*. Based on his amazing sojourn embedded with the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, the painting offers not just the technical tour de force that fulfills the mission of the Academy, but a psychological and historical work of unquestionable force that makes it stand out in this crowd.

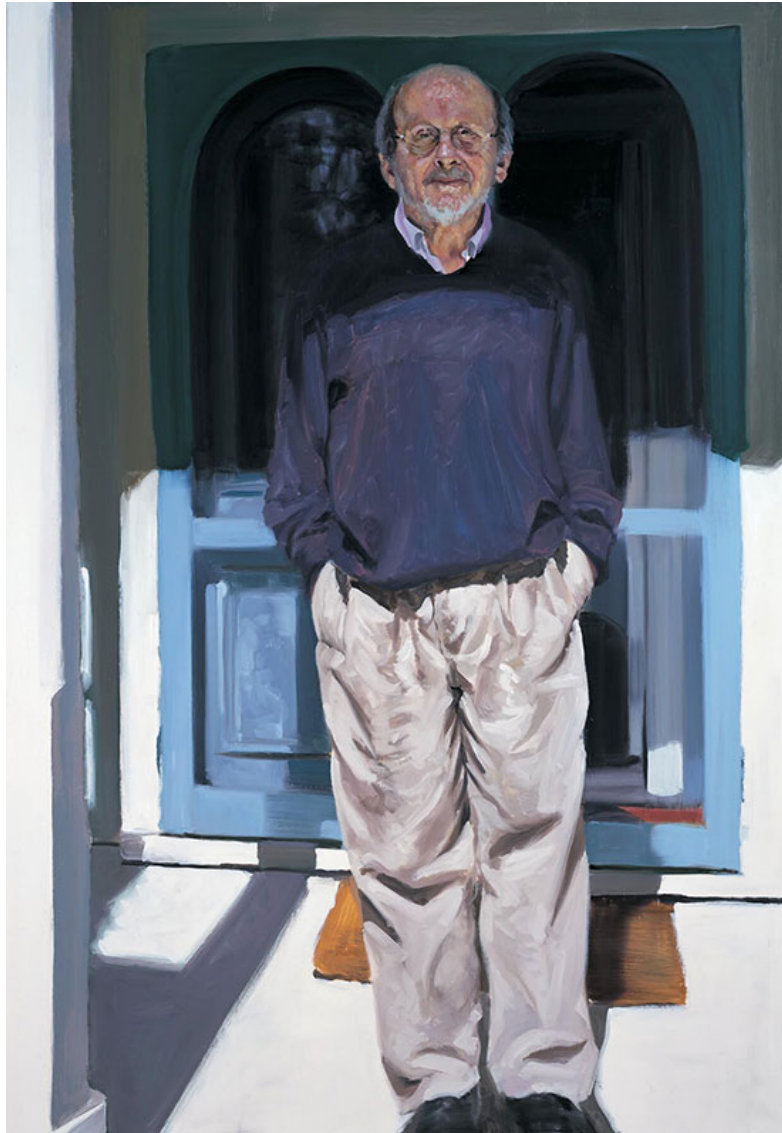
I have long admired Mumford’s virtuosic ability to push the paint around, and one of my favorite passages in this work is found at some distance from the kneeling American soldier who is the narrative if not literal center of the painting. To the right, the blue blur of an oil spill or a shadow by a barrel reminds me of the artist’s phenomenal blue paintings of cars in the 1990s.



“The Prayer” by Steve Mumford. Oil on linen, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy the New York Academy of Art.

Behind this powerful visual passage is another, a hastily painted group of three sentinels in a makeshift tower, shimmering like a heat mirage. Mumford arrived in Iraq in 2003, the day the statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled. His wartime diaries, watercolors and paintings are anything but “academic” in the pejorative sense. This is storytelling of the “all-in” school, picture-making with balls. Mumford is on the faculty at the Academy and lectures there as well.

In the same vein as the Mumford, [Eric Fischl's](#) portrait of E.L. Doctorow, located in the long gallery, was painted in 2005 on meticulously prepared linen. It is a densely worked, bravura statement on the importance of craftsmanship. Fischl is listed as a trustee and senior critic on the school's masthead, and there is a power to painting of this kind, which is demonstrated as well by [Alice Neel's](#) portrait of Ben Medary (from 1930) and [Alex Katz's](#) portrait of Bill Dunas, which Fischl owns.



“E.L. Doctorow” by Eric Fischl, 2005. Oil on linen, 72 x 50 inches. Rick and Monica Segal collection. Courtesy the New York Academy of Art.



"Portrait of Ben Medary" by Alice Neel, 1930. Oil on canvas, 30 x 25.125 inches. Rick and Monica Segal collection. Courtesy the New York Academy of Art.



“Bill Dunas” by Alex Katz, 1972. Oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches. Eric Fischl collection. Courtesy the New York Academy of Art.

These were among the strongest works the exhibition, when the rigorous standards of the Academy, Manhattan’s answer to the École des Beaux-Arts, could be seen to be pulling their weight in terms of visual rewards.

I wish I could say the same of the whole show. It was co-curated by David Kratz, the Academy’s president (he earned his MFA there in 2008) who has two works in the exhibition and a house in Southampton. The other curator is Scott Avett, a founding member of the Grammy nominated Avett Brothers who paints when not on tour. He too has two works in the show.

The Academy arose when a group of artists, teachers and public intellectuals (including, famously, Tom Wolfe incongruously paired with Andy Warhol) decided New York needed an École des Beaux-Arts rooted firmly in the tradition of representational painting, drawing and sculpture. At the time, they bucked trends in installation and abstraction with a return to skills and drills.

Accredited by the New York State Board of Regents within its first decade, the Academy’s MFA program has launched the careers of more than 1,000 artists. The 1861 Italianate neo-Greco landmark building in Tribeca is a hive of studio classes, lectures, workshops, seminars, special events and a massive continuing education program.

All courses and classes are guided by the commitment to helping artists acquire “the tools necessary to invest their work with sound draftsmanship, convincing technique and visual authority,” as stated in a summary of the Academy’s “Aims” in its listing on the “art colleges”

section of the [Saatchi Gallery website](#).

I am only one of many who are very grateful to the Academy, because I cherish the values of the well-made painting or sculpture much as I long for the golden age of grammatical writing and sight reading skills in music. The problem arose, for me, when I encountered the redundancy of the third gallery, just before entering the theater, which has been hung with a relentless lineup of similar portraits that felt too much like homework.

This raises a cautionary concern, because when an academy becomes a bastion of orthodoxy, the danger posed by the absence of any dissenting voices is the possibility of descending into the kind of automatic formulas that make this room so lacking in texture.

Ironically enough, Wolfe, one of the academy's founders, was one of the funniest and most adroit critics of the orthodoxies of such art theories as color field painting and Minimalism, expressed in such books as "The Painted Word." It is still true today, as in the humanities in general, that when a whole school drinks the Kool-Aid, the lack of dissent can be detrimental.

My advice to the visitor of the show? Tarry long at the wall at the front of the third gallery before venturing beyond its alcove. This is where a large, important [Cindy Sherman](#) photograph holds the viewer's gaze.



“Untitled” by Cindy Sherman, 1982. Chromogenic color print, 45 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures. Image courtesy the New York Academy of Art.

This, along with two similar photographic works by [Laurie Simmons](#), installed in the long gallery and both titled *How We See*, makes the case as a potent antidote to today’s vacuous selfies as well offers as well a welcome rebuke of the formulaic in portraiture.



“How We See / Tatiana (Green)” by Laurie Simmons, 2015. Pigment print, 70 x 48 inches. Edition 1 of 5, 2 AP’s. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94. Image courtesy the New York Academy of Art.

BASIC FACTS: “About Face” is on view July 28 through September 17, 2017 at the Southampton Arts Center, 25 Jobs Lane, Southampton, NY 11968. www.southamptonartscenter.org.

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