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Portraiture That Paints Engaging Images

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By Michael O'Sullivan
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Known primarily as a history museum -- where the selection of pictures on the wall is based more on the sitter's accomplishments than on the artist's message or merits -- the National Portrait Gallery has, since its reopening last summer, devoted a small corner of the building to just the opposite. "[Framing Memory](#)," the second installment in its long-overdue "Portraiture Now" series, presents five contemporary artists, each given a small room (and in one case, a hallway) devoted to work whose engagement with portraiture is less didactic and more lively than we have come to expect from the museum.

The key word here, I think, is "engagement."

That's clearest from Brett Cook's installation, which features paintings of such well-known activists as Angela Davis, Cesar Chavez and Howard Zinn, based on photographs. Rendered with a graffiti-style energy in spray paint and paint pen on mirrored plexiglass, the otherwise straightforward head-and-shoulder portraits invite visitors to identify with their subjects -- you, too, can make a difference, they seem to say -- in the way we are shown a little bit of ourselves in each one. That sense of connection carries over to the shelf mounted on the wall beneath each portrait, containing literature by and about each subject.

But Cook doesn't leave it at that. Known for collaborations with schools and communities, the artist's contribution to "Framing Memory" also includes two reflective panels, created in concert with students from the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Lining opposite walls of a hallway through which museumgoers must pass to see the rest of the show, they reflect not only each other, and the portrait of the as-yet un-famous high school kids they depict, but you and me as well. The message is obvious, implying that the only difference between a big name and a no-name is untapped potential.

Chavez pops up again in the work of Alfredo Arreguin, whose proud engagement with his own Mexican heritage is reflected in the quasi-hagiographic treatment of such icons of Mexican history as painter Frida Kahlo, revolutionary Emiliano Zapata and Miguel Hidalgo, known as a leader of Mexico's war of independence against Spain. Painting such figures of the past few centuries as if emerging from a backdrop of stylized faces lifted from earlier pre-Columbian art is the artist's way of not just honoring his past but connecting to it, as if through an unbroken lineage.

Faith Ringgold does something similar in her story-quilt-based art, incorporating personal narrative (as in the autobiographical "Seven Passages to a Flight") within the larger cultural context of African American experience (celebrated in one imaginary scenario featuring a stand-in for the artist attending a dinner party boasting prominent Harlem Renaissance figures as guests).

The portraiture of Tina Mion is a little slipperier, ranging from the hyper-realistic ("The Last Harvey Girl," whose subject, an elderly former waitress, offers a cup of tea so real I was tempted to sip from it) to the fanciful (a portrait of the late Jacques Cousteau consists of seashells where the French

oceanographer's eyes, nose and mouth should be).

In between those extremes lie two portraits from Mion's "Ladies First" series depicting presidential spouses and daughters. In "Stop Action Reaction," Jacqueline Kennedy holds a playing card -- with JFK as the king of hearts -- that's been penetrated by a bullet. It's a clever conflation of that famous high-speed photograph with the equally well-known Zapruder film, whose every frame has been analyzed, and argued about, to a fare-thee-well. Mion's engagement with her subjects, in other words, is both idiosyncratic and universal.

The work of Kerry James Marshall offers a kind of synthesis of the two. As with Cook, Arreguin, Ringgold and Mion, Marshall celebrates lives well-lived, even as he questions who and how we choose to remember. Along with the famous jazz musicians whose faces float above the living room depicted in "Souvenir IV" (Dinah Washington, Billie Holiday, etc.), the artist paints in a crudely rendered child's drawing, framed just behind the sofa that sits at the center of the picture.

It's his way of saying that memories are both communal and private property. They're something we can all share in, as members of the human race, as well as something deeply, intensely our own.



PORTRAITURE NOW: FRAMING MEMORY Through Jan. 6. National Portrait Gallery, Eighth and F streets NW (Metro: Gallery Place-Chinatown). 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285). <http://www.npg.si.edu>. Open daily 11:30 to 7. Free.

Public programs associated with the exhibition include:

June 9 from noon to 4 Drop-in family program focusing on the art of Faith Ringgold.

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