Without Likeness: Paintings By Anne Harris: 2003
By Alison Ferris
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Anne Harris's portraits and self-portraits confound the expectations of traditional portraiture. They are about not realism but rather abstraction, both a formal and psychological abstraction, which nonetheless uses realist techniques. Like other painters working today such as John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, and Julie Heffernan, Harris does not pedantically adhere to tradition; rather she challenges realist figurative forms and techniques in order to provide new contexts for both subject matter and these artistic traditions. She uses methods, techniques, and iconography that refer to paintings from earlier centuries while unsettling these traditions through combinations of subtle (and sometimes not subtle) inversions, exaggerations, substitutions, and reorderings.

Without Likeness, the title Harris has given her first solo museum exhibition, features major works, from her focused self-portraits to her invented adolescents, produced in the last eight years. Since many of her paintings, created slowly and meticulously – at most she paints five pictures per year – are in private collections, this is the first occasion in which we can examine and extended body of her work in one place. With just a cursory glance, one can identify two lines of investigation undertaken by the artist that are intrinsic to one another: one is intensely psychological, the other is artistic. Though the majority of these works are self-portraits, we should not expect to find many clues to Harris's own psychological particularities. As critic Miles Unger astutely points out, Harris puts her image forward in her paintings at the exact moment she withdraws from them. Harris presents us then with moments – snapshots, if you will – of the human psyche, fleeting glimpses of interior worlds that are inherent to our material selves. One can't exist without the other, Harris seems to be reminding us, with her paint.

In his essay Breath of Modernism (Metonymic Drift), Richard Shiff explains how the representation of the face, especially a painting of the face, must be understood as a mask, since "…the human face is a surface appearance that masks what lies below or inside it. When understood in terms of vision and visual appearance, a mask transforms whatever exists underneath; you see the surface and nothing more." Harris's early Self-Portrait with Hood (1994), Portrait with Bridal Veil (1994), and Self-Portrait with Milk (1995-1996) illustrate the manner in which painted portraits, while they might suggest psychological complexity, function also and essentially as masks.

Harris literally envelops herself in two of these works. A hood obscures everything but her face in Self-Portrait with Hood, and a transparent veil parts to frame her face in Portrait with Bridal Veil. Both paintings suggest self-abnegation on the part of the depicted individuals (even, perhaps, the romantic notion of the artist's self-sacrifice

in creating art), made plain in their solemn expressions. Investigations of physiognomy begin in earnest in these works. Harris explores how the skin's wrinkles, discolorations, tautness or looseness can map the story of an individual's character or experience. However, neither the bloated, mottled skin nor the characters' dull eyes reveal their interior complexity. Rather, Harris deliberately defies the assumption that the face is a screen below which one can see the subject's hidden inner life. Furthermore, the drapery depicted I these paintings functions not to explicate a specific narrative, as it does in medieval European art, but rather to emphasize the veiling or obscuring taking place. In Self-Portrait with Milk, discovering that she could obscure her "self" while paradoxically exposing it, a frontal Harris looks out of the painting at the viewer almost aggressively. Engorged with milk, her breasts display a tapestry of veins. Harris offers her body in this painting as if it has taken over and she appears at once bewildered and resigned. There is no need for drapery in this picture; instead her skin becomes the covering in which she cloaks herself.

Harris boldly moves beyond the investigation of the portrait-as-mask in her three self-portraits pregnant with her son Max. Unclothed and in the last term of her pregnancy, Harris's body in Second Portrait with Max (1996-1997) radiates life from her belly and breasts. But her shoulders droop, her arms and hands are listless, and her face, with eyes half-closed and mouth slightly open, is blank, dark, even corpse-like. Taut over her large, swollen abdomen and corpulent thighs and breasts, the skin of Harris's body is translucent. The pellucid skin of her shoulders, arms, hands, and thighs recedes into the background, in turn, is skin-like and joins almost seamlessly with her body. The ambiguous boundaries between the subject and the background suggest that the qualities of Harris's body extend to the whole canvas. Her body is, in a sense, the painting.

As her pregnancy paintings make clear, Harris progressed from an academic understanding of portrait painting functioning as a mask, to incorporate "touch" in her work, a concept upon which Shiff elaborates. Moving beyond the visual surface and incorporating touch, Shiff observes, a mask acts differently than the top layer of a surface. He writes:

It does not magically transfigure; instead, because touch contacts more than just the thinnest surface layer, a mask is understood as disguising or disfiguring something that yet remains available to sense. Touching, you recognise that the mask does not hide but simply covers; you touch the top layer and feel that there are still others below. The layering has no end. Of course, when you paint, you are touching the mask you are seeing, forming and transforming it by adding layer upon layer. In painting, touch and vision into material, even physical, embodiment. The painter's touch makes flesh, as opposed to air or water, a medium of vision. It gives to flesh the character of an ambient fluid.

In her three Portraits with Max, Harris depicts a self that is visibly as well as invisibly being transformed on a daily basis. She renders herself in what Julia

Kristeva describes as the "immeasurable, unconfinable maternal body." Harris, that is, presents her body as the vehicle through which to express the psychological currents of a woman soon to be a mother for the first time. But, as in her earlier paintings, here too we find a resolute refusal of psychological depth. This ambiguity combined with her lifeless appearance, suggests an impending anonymity as described by Kristeva, the self-sacrifice or annihilation of self required to give birth.

Silence weighs heavily…on the corporeal and psychological suffering of childbirth and especially the self-sacrifice involved in becoming anonymous in order to pass on the social norm, which one might repudiate for one's own sake but within which one must include the child in order to educate it along the chain of generations.

Harris's suggested self-annihilation resonates as well with her own imagined place within "the chain of generations" that is the history of art. In from and technique – Harris's decision to create a three-quarter-length self-portrait using realistically rendered details of her body – these three paintings are steeped in tradition. The reverence Harris has for traditional painting is evident in her own meticulous brushwork. Here, too, we can equate her commitment to continuing this tradition, even while symbolically losing herself in it, to Kristeva's notion of "the self-sacrifice involved in becoming anonymous in order to pass on the social norm…"

But Harris differs from Kristeva in her characterization of the maternal. Harris's women appear to be uneasy in their pregnancy, and though the precise cause of the anxiety is neither subtle nor silent. For instance there is a tension, both formally and conceptually, between Harris's retreating self and her protruding breasts and stomach, which glow in an almost ethereal light and threaten to rupture the surface of the painting itself. An unsettling stillness, found in all of Harris's paintings, adds to the suspense felt in the works. Again, this stillness ought not to be equated simply with silence; rather, it is best characterized as the depiction of an arrested, unresolved moment. In this way, Harris transforms the essentialized version of motherhood that can be found in Kristeva's work by showing, in three paintings, the excesses and multiplicities of maternity. Her simultaneous invocation and frustration of easily psychologized depth works to unsettle any possibility of reading her works as the depiction of a universal notion of maternity.

Rather than depict the result of her physical and artistic labor – her son – in an idealized or celebratory manner, Harris creates intense, complicated portraits of her newborn baby. Ambivalence once again prevails in these meticulous, small works, in which Harris microscopically observes the infant's terrifying fragility, strange beauty, and alien humanness. Some paintings are only four by five inches and suggest the fetishization of the infant, a phenomenon also explored in the 1970s by artist and theorist Mary Kelly whose monumental installation and book Post-Partum Document articulated a mother's fantasies about her infant. Kelly describes her project as

…an effort to articulate the mother's fantasies, her desire, her stake in that project called motherhood. In this sense…it is not a traditional narrative, a problem is continually posed but no resolution is reached. There is only a replay of moments of separation and loss, perhaps because desire has no ends, resists normalization, ignores biology, disperses the body.

Unlike Kelly, who strategically represents neither herself nor her son in the project, Harris, twenty years later, portrays her infant in a manner that is forthright in its ambiguity, uncertainty, and obsession. Her obsessive and exacting methods can be understood as a way in which to delay or disavow the separation from her child that is inevitable. Like Kelly, Harris explicitly displaces the fetishization of the child onto the work of art, and in so doing, invokes the fetishistic nature of representation itself.

Harris confides in her interview that she "grew up" following the birth of her son. In terms of her work this means that, following her intense involvement in the maternal, Harris returned briefly to herself in Self-Portrait (1998-1999), Self-Portrait with Bun (1998-1999) and Self-Portrait with Jane's Eyes (1998-1999) before seeking subject matter outside herself. When the "grown up" Harris looked to the world to seek new subject matter, she chose adolescence. Unlike childhood, which our culture defines as pure, innocent, and recognizable, adolescence is ambiguously figured and, to borrow art historian Carol Mavor's words, "smudged by sexuality, changing bodies and body fluids." Harris recognized in adolescence a parallel to her own artistic pursuit, which resists the static and easily defined. One could say that Harris is indebted to "the open structure of adolescence" which, Mavor explains, "emphasizes the multiple and often discomforting contradictions between adulthood and childhood, masculinity and femininity, responsibility and play, sexuality and innocence." Her virtuosity in laying down paint achieves meticulous details to describe characters who nevertheless remain completely enigmatic.

The "adolescents" begin in Self-Portrait, where she paints herself as a round, soft, and pump adolescent with eyes that express a mild, tender innocence. Her head floats above her body – she is without a neck – indicating the disjuncture between physical and mental selves experienced with much urgency during adolescence. The literary scholar Claudia Benthien, discussing works by the writer Sylvia Plath, describes this moment for adolescent girls. It is when "the feeling of being a unitary person in whom psyche and body are integrated poses a potential threat insofar as an attack on one of the two parts would mean a destruction of the entire person; one part of the self is sacrificed to save the other." Unlike Plath's harsh and hopeless descriptive metaphors – such as "soulless flesh," "a dead brain," "sallow-skinned with purple bruises," and "raw open scars and scabs" – Harris's girls, in Self-Portrait and her subsequent paintings, appear to teeter on the edge but not succumb to this same potential hopelessness.

In two later adolescent paintings, Portrait (Beaded Dress) (1999-2000) and Portrait (Pearls) (1999-2001), Harris returns to the close observation and detailed painting of clothing. These two works, conceived in conjunction with one another, depict adolescent girls, one sheathed in white beaded lace and the other weighed down with large strings of pearls. The stiff white dress and the ropes of pearls prop the girls up, binding them tightly as if to prevent them from dissolving. Rather than suggesting light, life, and health, their virginal attire is like the wrappings of mummies; it preserves them, as do the paintings themselves, in a perpetual and uncomfortable adolescence.

Harris's most recent series of small paintings from 2001-2002 depict just the head and shoulders of a variety of adolescent girls, each crafted with a distinct "personality." They share, however, a creature-like quality ranging from mouse-like to teddy bear-ish, a trait that Harris acknowledges in the title Portrait (Snake Eyes) (1999-2002). They are all depicted with large, dry, cracked lips and painfully red eyes. Most look down or away from the viewer with their bloodshot eyes; only occasionally do they return the viewer's gaze, as with the girl in Portrait (2002), whose watery, yellow eyes are surrounded by puffy, bruised-brown skin.

Carol Mavor observes that "…there is a sense of violence when the girl crosses over that certain threshold into adolescent life. This violence can be attributed to not only the onset of menstruation and other seemingly abrupt changes that take place upon the body, but also to the break from the mother, the second cutting of the umbilicus, which frees growing girls into an inward retreat: into their rooms, into their minds, into and away from their bodies." Harris's collection shows young women who are caught in the midst of this stage – their cracked lips with which they once nursed imply the ambivalent need girls feel towards their mother, especially the mother who, in Nancy Chodorow's words, "represents infantile dependence and attachment to her." The girls' neglect of their inflamed lips suggests simultaneously the rejection of the mother and their desperate need for her. That their gaze rarely acknowledges the viewer confirms their retreat into themselves. Their painful, scorched eyes shrink from contact with the outside world. Claudia Benthien, again looking at Sylvia Plath , observes the same phenonmena in The Bell Jar. Esther Greenwood, the adolescent protagonist in the novel, describes the beginning of her psychic suffering as follows: "I feigned sleep until my mother left for school, but even my eyelids didn't shut out the light. They hung, the raw, red screen of their tiny vessels in front of me, like a wound. I crawled between the mattress and the padded bedstead and let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone." The eyelids, Benthien goes on to say, "do not represent protective membranes but are raw injured skin flaps incapable of keeping out the light."

Harris's adolescent girls are in a state of "becoming." Such a state is complex and involved; there are many paths to be explored, many conditions in which to exist. Conventional representations of adolescence are just as varied in possibility. On one hand there are the Lolitas, who flirt, pose, and pretend; on the other are the Esther Greenwoods, whose state of "becoming" ends in psychosis. Harris locates a space

within that continuum to create her adolescents: there is no "Adolescent reverie" in Harris's paintings, and the girls stop short of becoming madwomen in the attic. Harris instead arrests them in midst of their ambiguous "becoming," and the rest is left to our imagination.

Notes:
1. Miles Unger, Anne Harris: With Max, exhibition brochure published by Nielsen Gallery (October 18- November 15, 1997).
2. Richard Shiff, "Breath of Modernism (Metonymic Drift)," In Visible Touch: Modernism and Masculinity, Terry Smith, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 208.
3. See for instance, Ewa Kuryluk, Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism and Structure of "True" Image (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
4. I have had the opportunity to closely examine and write about Second Portrait with Max because it is held in the permanent collection of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.
5. Shiff, 208-209.
6. Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," The Kristeva Reader, Toril Moi, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 177.
7. Kristeva, 183.
8. Kristeva's "essentialism" has been criticized for the way that it confirms the association of the feminine with the body and leaves in place the paternal laws as the foundation of the culture.
9. Mary Kelly, Post-Partum Document, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xvii.
10. According to Freud, a fetish stands in for the absent penis, an anxiety-producing lack encountered when a young boy first observes a woman's (mother's) body. The fetish, in Freudian terms, is a partial object, our attachment to which, Freud theorizes, functions both as a cover recognition of the inevitability of separation and loss and as a compensatory attempt to guard against or defer such losses. However, Freud's theory of the fetish accounts solely for heterosexual male desire. As a result, the only way of understanding a representation of the female form is as that of a fetish, reshaped and transformed into something reassuring rather than threatening. Mary Kelly, in Post Partum Document, contests the notion that fetishism and its function in the realm of representation is driven only by male heterosexuality.
11. Carol Mavor, Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 21.
12. Mavor, 5-6. Mavor, in turn, is indebted to Julia Kristeva who introduces this idea in "The Adolescent Novel" in New Maladies of the Soul.
13. Claudia Benthien, Skin: on the cultural border between self and the world, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 126.
14. Mavor, 28.
15. Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 138.
16. Benthien, 124.

17. Ibid.
18. Here I am quoting the title of Mavor's book, Becoming, as well as alluding to her ideas about adolescence.
19. Mavor uses the term "adolescent reverie" in Becoming when writing about the photographs of adolescent girls taken by Clementina Hawarden and Sally Mann.