

# The Dichotomy of Visual Beauty: Portraiture of the Ideal and Anti-Ideal

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HAVC 191P, Image of Time, Professor Kim Beil

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The representations considered desirable in Western portraiture reflect the tradition of the prolonged pose of oil painting. Classic portraiture often depicts the subject as stiff, or statue-like, and represents the sitter in what is conceived to be their most admirable state. The reoccurring idealizations found in portraiture demonstrate a cultural appreciation for a flawless, standardized beauty. The essence of the prolonged pose remains in our culture today, present in places such as school, wedding, or family portraits. These “perfect” moments in time not only echo Western ideals of beauty, but reinforce and perpetuate them. Despite the lingering ideal of the painted portrait, cameras hold the ability to quickly capture any moment. Artists such as Julia Peirone have used this ability to speak against the normalized imagery produced. In Peirone’s portraiture series *More than Violet*, rather than utilizing an extended pose she produces portraits that reflect the in-between moments. Isolated instances such as these are where the anti-ideal, or the Western conception of a flawed representation, is revealed and a person’s uniqueness is seen. By uniqueness I do not mean our contemporary notion of a human being’s individual personality. I am referring to the reality of the human form – the visual imperfections that are coupled with motion which are avoided and ignored because of Western cultures’ obsession with their ideal of “beauty.” By utilizing the anti-ideal in her work, Peirone counters cultural norms of beauty.

Contemporary society understands the pose as an intentional positioning of a person in order to be visually represented. In Philosophy Professor Cynthia Freeland’s article “Portraits in Painting and Photography” she describes how a person is taught to stand and smile for a camera early on in their lives expressing a standardized look which people strive for: “Very young children learn to put on a ‘say-cheese’ face for the camera, to display themselves for public approval” (106). By this definition Peirone’s *More than Violet* portraits do not demonstrate a pose. Her pictures consist of young girls seemingly positioned for a portrait, but no longer

prepared to be photographed; their faces are distracted and their posture is slack. Conversely, Roland Barthes argues that the pose consists of any moment of duration that has been frozen, or visually captured; he extends the pose past human beings and uses it to describe even drops of milk (78). If Peirone's portraits are considered posed by Barthes definition merely because they are imprinted moments, then by the contemporary definition perhaps they would be considered the failed pose. While photographing her subjects for her series she was waiting for the failed moments, so a failed pose seems a proper description for the positioning of the girls in *More than Violet*, and the association of failure with her images contributes to her representing the anti-ideal (Uitterlinden).

Despite the non-traditional aspects to her photography, the fact that Peirone is using portraiture to express the anti-ideal connects her *More than Violet* series to the traditions of portraiture within painting. Associations are seen through shared conventions such as focal emphasis on the sitter's face, or queues of beauty demonstrated by the subject's makeup and jewelry. These traditions produced what Professor Miles Orvell describes as a generalization of the sitter (89). Portrait painters aimed to capture the likeness of the subject, but because painting is such a time consuming process artists ignored any unflattering in-between moments, such as blinking, and instead captured an accumulation of the sitter's physical features and character. Nadia Tscherny's article "Likeness in Early Romantic Portraiture" discusses how the ideals of portraiture have varied depending on the time period, causing artists to shift focus between themes such as societal status or morality. Even with shifting perspectives painted portraits continually expressed the idyllic through some form of vanity. Tscherny points out that traditional recommendation for portrait painters was to "conceal defects" with flattery, and represent subjects in a dignified pose (194). By choosing to ignore how a person looked in

certain moments as opposed to others, and by representing the features considered attractive, the artist created a seemingly perfect portrait that conveyed what their culture considered ideal in terms of public representation. Although Peirone's *More than Violet* series resonates with painted portraits through its common subject matter, the moments presented in her photography are made possible because of the enhanced technology of the camera.

With the advent of photography came the ability to capture singular moments as opposed to a generalized ideal, which opened up the opportunity for people to break away from the traditional stiff pose. However, Freeland points out that the advanced technology and speed of photography that enables sitters to rest in more natural positions can also be problematic (105). This is due to the camera's ability to catch a person off guard thus presenting the possibility for an undesirable image. While discussing the opportunities instantaneous photography offers, Orvell states ". . . commercial studios were slow to adopt the new technology," (89). Perhaps people were hesitant to evolve with technology because of the unattractive possibilities presented. In fact, Orvell discusses how in early photographic portraiture, instead of veering away from the stiff traditional pose, photographers stuck close to the generalized conception of the portrait; additionally, they used air-brushing techniques to flatter and normalize their subjects in order to conform to the dominant standards of beauty. This practice is still witnessed today in every type of photography, especially portraiture. Not only are models relentlessly airbrushed on magazine covers, but contemporary laptops are automatically equipped with photo-editing abilities. Freeland argues that portraiture in Western society is used to create relics and mementos of an idealized past that one is nostalgic for (103). While portraiture continues to fashion itself around the generalized, dignified and beautiful poses that are reminiscent of painting, the camera apparatus holds the ability to document the trivial, interstitial moments that

people are less interested in remembering. It is in these in-between moments that Peirone works in her portraiture series.

Peirone's photography constantly questions conventions and expectations, a result of being raised in conflict between two contrasting cultures, that of Argentina and Sweden. In her *More than Violet* series, taken from 2010 to 2011, the artist employs the motif of studio portraiture with a focus on teenage girls. Peirone utilizes the studio setting and context, taking hundreds of frames of each girl in order to get the "perfect" image. Yet instead of selecting what people expect to see, she chooses what will be comprehended as unattractive. The girls in the pictures are simultaneously similar and unique. Each is captured in the same full frontal, waist up position, with pale white skin and long light hair. They all appear to have been airbrushed, with no sign of the blemishes so frequently found on teenagers, and each has applied makeup for the occasion, a reflection of the standardized beauty imposed on young women. While these aspects are all interchangeable, and are reminiscent of Orwell's generalized portrait, the girls' expressions set them apart. Instead of capturing the predictable smile so often found in portraits, Peirone waits for the in-between – the moment when her subject is speaking, making a gesture, or rolling her eyes, and in this isolated moment the tradition of flattery within portraiture is countered.

The unflattering failed pose is not the only interstitial moment that Peirone takes advantage of in her series – her choice to solely photograph girls in their teen years emphasizes the in-between-ness that is core to *More than Violet's* subject matter. Teenage girls present a stage in life described as awkward and gawky, girls no longer considered endearing as they were as children, but not yet mature enough to hold the description of beautiful. The artist has chosen a transitional stage in life that is well known to Western culture therefore viewers will instantly

understand the uncomfortable connotations. Furthermore, the age of her subjects enhances the moment in temporality that Peirone relates in her series. The juxtaposition of the isolated moment of action with the in-between stage in the subject's lives capitalizes on the aspects that contribute to an unattractive anti-ideal.

*Isabella* is one of the girls Peirone photographed for her *More than Violet* series. Her white shirt is similar in tint to both her skin and hair, all of which reflect bleached-out tones. Like the rest of the subjects in the series, she is surrounded by a solid black background which enhances her ghost-like paleness. Isabella's head is slightly tilted toward her left shoulder which resides approximately two inches higher than her right, disrupting an otherwise symmetrical composition and therefore creating tension. This minor imbalance is enough to create a careless demeanor on the subject's behalf, speaking toward the associations of the teenage girl and a rebellious attitude. Near her collarbone is a necklace with a small heart shaped charm, the only adornment found aside from the slight amount of lavender makeup on her lips and eyelids. Isabella's lips are in a slack position, parted just enough to glimpse a small portion of her teeth. The striking aspect of this image rests in the viewer's inability to meet the subject's gaze. The girl's portrait was taken mid-blink; therefore the purple of Isabella's eyelids almost completely obscures her eyes, with only a small slit of white revealed beneath her lashes. The combination of the subject's drooping eyelids, parted lips, and imbalanced stance is enough to counter her seemingly attractive features, marking the portrait undesirable by general Western standards.

Representations like *Isabella* are available in today's culture because of the quickness of photography. The camera provides people the ability to rapidly capture any moment they want, and as many moments as they want. The isolated moments in temporality that were previously

ignored have now been introduced into our visual culture, and on an overwhelming scale. These seemingly unattractive in-betweens connect to French theorist Henri Bergson's thoughts on temporality. In his essay "Time and Free Will" Bergson describes the space between material objects as the interval (98). Therefore, Peirone's in-between moments can be additionally defined as the interval. "Real time" consists of a continuous, indivisible flow of moments that interconnect and penetrate one another (Bergson 88). Abstract time is that flow broken up into intervals which divide duration. The intervals that disrupt temporality are considered heterogeneous because of their observable differences, while he describes pure time as homogenous because of its uninterrupted flow (Bergson 97).

When comparing Peirone's work to Bergsonian theory, the ideal and the anti-ideal correspond to homogeneity and heterogeneity. The ideal portrait has become a homogeneous pose that can be predicted and mimicked, while the anti-ideal is heterogeneous in so that it is unpredictable and not necessarily the attractive norm. When comparing portraiture to Bergson's theory, specifically to his connection between homogeneity and "real time," the painted portrait becomes the "real" representation, while the snapshot is considered abstract. Peirone's photographs relay moments which Bergson considers outside of real time because they represent instances removed from continuity. To Bergson these single intervals are a negative addition to visual culture.

Bergson's critique on representational art evokes his preference for homogeneity. As discussed in Mary Ann Doane's article "The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive" Bergson believed the generalized notions of painting yielded "privileged moments" which illuminated a whole period (66). Any aesthetic significance that these moments had before photography is now lost with the massive influx of images being

produced. To Bergson the instantaneous photograph can isolate any instant, ranking each the same. The one generalized, momentous, representation that visual art previously consisted of in classical painting and sculpture is now interspersed amongst a series of “meaningless” moments, causing time to become banal (66). Bergson’s distaste toward the spatializing of time through the photographic interval correlates to Western culture’s aversion with “unattractive” instances. Our society in general seems to prefer the universal over the specific, the prolonged over the instant, and the homogenous over the heterogeneous, all of which is demonstrated by mass culture’s tendency follow popular trends. However, both time and attractiveness are cultural constructs, and constructs can be questioned and changed.

Through the natural inclinations of popular culture, regardless of the time period, ideals are formed. Because of this innate tendency toward normalization anti-ideals are automatically generated. When one considers some object or idea beautiful, there must be something “ugly” to compare it to. The anti-ideal makes users uncomfortable with themselves due to the cultural imprint of the ideal already present. Without the long history behind portraiture, Peirone’s series of pictures are no longer provocative – so while they challenge they are also dependent on the ideal for meaning. In Peirone’s 2010 portrait of *Lovisa*, the image produced shows a girl with powdery white complexion and long blond hair. The subject has been caught in the act of beautifying herself with hands raised to her head in order to fix the headband holding her hair. Following the theme of the series the girl’s face is presented with an unattractive expression, revealing a slack mouth and eyes rolled back. However, the component which draws the eye rests on her left elbow. A dark bruise interrupts her otherwise flawless skin. The mixture of “ugliness” and “violence” that is associated with her expression and her bruise contrasts with the subject, a seemingly innocent, attractive girl who is attempting to mold to societal standards by

applying makeup and styling her hair. Peirone's focus on unattractive details atop an otherwise normalized character attests to her critique on the popularized notions of beauty.

It is obvious that our society has created a balanced system of opposites, one pair of those opposites being attractive and unattractive. So, what is the point of documenting the anti-ideal? Peirone's imagery in *More than Violet* forces viewers to confront subject matter they wouldn't expect to see – imagery that may cause discomfort. But once the implications behind the imagery are realized the portraits lead people to, in the least, contemplate the notion of beauty. And when this contemplation occurs it opens up room for questions, and room for change. Peirone's photography, and other artists who utilize some form of an anti-ideal, push the boundaries of ideology and present people with the opportunity to alter their perceptions.

Attractiveness is a construction of society, and one that pressures people to mold themselves after ideals. I argue against Bergson in that the interval, or the in-between, does indeed hold significance. This space is where reality is expressed rather than conformed, and this is what Julia Peirone conveys in her photography. Through the history of portraiture the quirks and flaws found in each individual, those details that separate one person from the next, have developed into what Western culture understands as unattractive. Yet the generalized representations that are seen as beautiful and desirable are untruthful to the true essence of each person. We have come to expect people's portraits to convey some sort of untruthful perfection, while in reality it is actually the intermediate moments that make up that generalized beauty, so why are they seen as ugly? Peirone's photography raises questions such as these while simultaneously pushing the barriers of our expectations. By utilizing a commonly ignored temporality and producing imagery that others believe to be unattractive or unnecessary Peirone is producing an anti-ideal which counters and questions commonly held notions of beauty.



Julia Peirone, *Isabella*, 2010



Julia Peirone, *Lovisa*, 2010

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