

Elizabeth Curtis
Oct. 12, 2009
Orvis Artist in Residence Proposal

Project Title: *The Visitors*

Medium: Photography

Basic Overview:

I would like to make portraits of willing museum visitors, either individually or in groups. I plan to set up studio lighting, props, and a backdrop in the available studio space. I am also considering bringing the studio lights out into one of the museum courtyards on certain days in order to make portraits against these content-rich backdrops, provided that the museum is agreeable to my use of this space. In some of the portraits, the subjects will be looking at the camera (generally without the prescriptive “Kodak Smile”), while in others, I may ask them to participate in soft playacting, assuming a gesture or expression that seems appropriate to what I surmise of their characters and appearances, or mimicking a pose from a book of historical portraits. Each portrait session will take approximately half an hour. I will also ask the participants to sign their names on a digital tablet so that I can add their signatures under the portraits (or perhaps on the title labels) to complete the works.

Historical Basis:

I have recently been intrigued by the modes of construction evident in the work of early portrait photographers, especially that of Julia Margaret Cameron and Charles Dodgson (Fig. 1 & 2). These photographers (and others of their time) drew upon the inspiration of historical portrait painters as well as the then current Pre-Raphaelite painters in their construction of images. Luxurious props (thick curtains, plush chairs, exotic rugs, carved writing desks, etc.) were often utilized to connote wealth or romantic ideals, and playacting was sometimes incorporated into portraiture as a means of expressing poetic emotion. Additionally, photographs were typically printed on a small scale and displayed in albums, alongside pages of copied or original verse and small drawings. The owners of albums often asked that their friends, relatives, or acquaintances sign their names next to their respective portraits or other album contributions, adding a further element of indexicality and palpability to the contents. Albums served as carefully constructed repositories of memory and forms of popular entertainment, as they were often brought out for viewing or editing in social contexts.



Fig. 1
Julia Margaret Cameron
The Echo, 1868



Fig. 2
Charles Dodgson
Professor Robert Gandell and his Daughter Florence,
10 July 1862

Current Interpretation:

This proposed project draws on several historical methods of creating and viewing imagery. As the finished pieces will be displayed in the context of the museum, the work will deal with reversing the gaze. Instead of the museum visitors merely gazing at works on the walls of the museum, they will be incorporated into the exhibit, to be gazed at or to gaze back. The portraits will mix elements of vernacular portraiture (the lighting, staging, and posing) and fine art portraiture (the post-modern discrepancy between the elaborate background and the visitors' street clothes, a thought-provoking view of the gesture or pose, etc.), and as such will not be easily dismissed into a popular category. The mixing of genres also adds a touch of humor to these works. Hopefully, this will cause viewers (who may also be the portrait subjects) to consider the implications of portraiture, its inherent construction, and its effect on identity formation.

This series of portraits will also function as a sort of guest book for the museum, featuring portraits of previous guests for current guests to interact with or relate to. In the same manner that a host or hostess (of a different era) might entertain guests with stories and images of other acquaintances, I hope that this project will amuse and interest the museum guests who view it, while serving as a record of my interactions with the guests who sat for their portraits.

Visitor Logistics:

Upon entering the museum, each visitor will be handed a small slip of paper with a short description of the project and an invitation to participate in a portrait session. I will have a sign-up sheet for half-hour sessions in the studio space, if needed, or I will work with visitors as they walk in. I will have an image release form for the participants or guardians to sign, giving me (and the museum) legal permission to use their likenesses. The form will include a section for contact information, as I will invite participants back to see their portraits hanging in the museum upon project completion. I also would like to write a press release in conjunction with the museum for submission to local newspapers, explaining the project and asking for volunteers to sit for portraits. This release would need to be sent prior to the project's beginning.

Work Flow/Visitor Interaction:

On the weekends during the residency I would primarily be working behind the camera, directing the portrait sessions, setting up lighting equipment, and taking the shots. I would interact with both the visitors who are the portrait subjects, and any onlookers, explaining what I am doing, both technically and conceptually. Onlookers might also be called upon to hold reflectors, give me ideas for poses, or otherwise assist in the process. As time allows between portrait sessions, I would load the images onto my computer and visitors could help me edit down to the best images. Above all, I hope to create a sort of spectacular pageant through my use of props and photographic equipment, and in conjunction with the museum guests.

During the week, I will work on further editing and printing the images from the weekend. This part of the process will be completed in the creative imaging lab at the university, as the archival ink jet printers located there are available to me. At the beginning of each weekend, I will hang up the selected portraits from the previous weekend with their accompanying labels. These images will be displayed in the first room of the studio space (the one with the green wall), so that visitors will have the opportunity to view the previous work prior to entering the back room of the studio, where the photographic equipment will be set up. Either in the glass case in the front room, or on a table in that room, I would like to have some books of portraiture set up for guests to look at in order to provide them with examples of historical portraiture to reference in comparison to the portraiture of this project.

Image Finishing:

The final images may be cropped slightly to fit into simple decorative templates (Fig. 3 & 4), evoking historical paintings and early photographs. Alternately, I will leave the images to be printed full frame as rectangles, depending on my artistic judgment when I arrive at that stage. I may pair some of the image as diptychs, as I have found that this format provokes interesting comparisons in my initial tests (some of which are included in my portfolio CD). I envision participant signatures to be included either below the image in the white space surrounding it, or on the title card for each piece.

Images will be printed with several inches of white border surrounding them and will initially be hung with magnets and thumbtacks.

If a final show is called for, I envision having a selection of the works laminated with a mat finish. They will then be mounted on gator board or a similar material and then I will affix two-inch wood blocks to the backs of the pieces so that they will protrude two inches from the wall when hung. The overall size of each piece will be no larger than 16x24.”



Fig. 3
Sample Cropping



Fig. 4
Sample Cropping