

ABSTRACT

Disability and Portraiture: Ethical Representation of the Disabled in Art

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This project can be restrained to the exploration of three questions: *how has disability been presented in art and media? What are we losing if those with disabilities are 'othered' and excluded? How can those with disabilities be ethically portrayed in art?* The aim of this project is to highlight the humanity of disability and to discuss what will be lost if spaces, specifically artistic ones, continue to be closed off not only to the representation of those with disabilities but their actual presence. As a creative thesis, this exploration is structured in two parts, a series of six portraits and a written component. With three large-scale portraits and three smaller portraits, the painting component seeks to encapsulate the humanity and personality of the subjects painted. The written component traces a brief history of disability's representation, offers a synopsis of artists who have challenged the stereotypes surrounding disability, and presents a philosophical analysis of disability studies, its relationship with portraiture, and consequently how an artist should ethically portray disability in their work.

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DISABILITY AND PORTRAITURE:

ETHICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE DISABLED IN ART

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my grandmother Debra Hazen, lovingly known as “Mammy.”

Her love, support, and vulnerability have made me the person and artist I am today.

Though she passed before I began this project, she has been my inspiration and would have been included in the portraits.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Context

Overview

Although this project follows many artistic and conceptual avenues, it can be characterized by the exploration of three questions: *how has disability been presented in art and media? What are we losing if those with disabilities are “othered” and excluded? How can those with disabilities be ethically portrayed in art?* As a creative thesis, the exploration is structured in two parts, a series of six portraits and a written component. The aim of this project is to highlight the humanity of disability, to show people with disabilities as humans with agency, and to discuss what has been missed and what will be lost if social spaces, specifically artistic ones, are closed off not only to ethical representation of those with disabilities but to their physical presence.

To achieve these goals, I was highly intentional with the selection of the individuals portrayed in this project. Thus, I chose three close friends, each with a different disability—Zack who has Down syndrome, Faith who has cerebral palsy, and Kevin who has an intellectual disability. Their engagement and participation in the process was a vital aspect of the agency I hoped to highlight, so each individual was interviewed and was highly involved throughout the project. Building upon our relationship, our interview, and our collaborative approach, I painted both a large-scale portrait and a smaller, detailed portrait of a defining quality of the sitter. Although the

paintings are not self-portraits, my aim was to capture my subjects as authentically and genuinely as possible.

The written portion of this project is supplemental to the artistic work described above and is divided into four chapters. This chapter serves as an introduction to the project and its context, including an overview of disability studies in art historical discourse, its relationship with disability, and the stereotypes it enforced. The second chapter offers an insight into the artists that have questioned the notion of the “Other” in their work, many of them specifically challenging the stereotypical historical presentation of those with disabilities. Frida Kahlo, Mary Duffy, Marc Quinn, and Richard Avedon have been crucial to my research and inspiring to my work. The third chapter builds upon the foundation that those artists laid, tracing what this project adds to the conversation and the exploration of disability’s role in art. As it focuses on agency and humanity, the third chapter provides the conceptual and philosophical backing of the painting component. The fourth and final chapter is strictly reserved for the creative process. It discusses my growth as a painter and portraitist as it culminates with this series, and it documents the creative process I embarked upon with the subjects of the portraits.

Context

Disability is ever-present throughout history as a quality of the human condition, yet it has been underrepresented, misconstrued, and rejected in art. Specifically in art history, “people with disabilities have often served as visual and cultural objects, rather

than as active participants in and creators of culture and media.”¹ Reduced their disability, they are depicted by artists and interpreted by historians as a group othered from the rest of human society. Amanda Cachia articulates this process:

There is an internalized, almost unconscious assumption of able-bodiedness in art theory and praxis—if the assumption becomes “disrupted” by nonnormative corporeal forms, then these forms have historically been rejected and marked as pathological, diseased, and “other.”²

Thus, even when disability is displayed in artwork, it is pushed out of the scope of the normative, human experience. Simultaneously in art history, artists who were disabled themselves were not provided the opportunity to engage with their disability in their art. While Claude Monet was visually impaired later in his life and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was short-statured due to a congenital bone disorder, “there are no written accounts on the lived experiences of disability for each of these prominent artists, as their disabilities were perceived as irrelevant and invisible.”³

Survey of Art History

To provide the necessary context of disability in art history, I turn to Professor Keri Watson’s cohesive chronological survey of the ways in which disability has been artistically portrayed in the Western tradition and how those portrayals led to harmful stereotypes of people with disabilities. For brevity, I condense her survey into two major themes: disability in religion and disability as a novelty. Both highlight how those with

¹ Keri Watson, “Disability in Art History,” *Art History Teaching Resources*, December 23, 2016, <https://arthistoryteachingresources.org/lessons/disability-in-art-history/>.

² Amanda Cachia, “Disability Aesthetics: A Pedagogy for Teaching a Revisionist Art History,” in *Sex, Identity, Aesthetics: The Work of Tobin Siebers and Disability Studies*, ed. Jina B. Kim, Joshua Kupetz, Crystal Yin Lie, and Cynthia Wu (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 162.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

disabilities have been simultaneously excluded from being active participants in their culture and stereotypical objects of unwarranted attention.⁴ This paradox of exclusion and inclusion permeates disability history and is an important theme that I will draw upon throughout the course of this project.

Beginning with the fall of Hellenism and the rise of Christianity, disability transitioned from a societal burden to a sickness requiring supernatural healing. Works such as Niccolò Vicentino's *Christ Healing the Lepers* (ca. 1540-1550) and El Greco's *Christ Healing the Blind* (1570) reflect the negative attitude towards disability. While this characterization of disability was born from the Christian commission to care for the downtrodden, it has led to the common religious stereotype that disabilities were a form of divine punishment, that they "were cursed by Satan, and that their disability was a result of sin."⁵



Figure 1-2. Niccolò Vicentino, *Christ Healing the Lepers*, ca. 1540-1550, Chiaroscuro woodcut from three blocks in brown, and El Greco, *Christ Healing the Blind*, 1570, oil on canvas.

Both of these paintings are excellent examples of how such a stereotype strips those with disabilities to cast them instead as othered beings, so lowly that only an act of divine will

⁴ Keri Watson, "Disability in Art History."

⁵ Ibid.

could restore them to their rightful place. As the message of Christianity spread, so did the power it bestowed upon its followers. By the middle of the 17th century, apostles and other Christians can be observed healing the disabled in art history as well.



Figure 3-4. Rembrandt, *Peter and John Healing the Cripple at the Gate of the Temple*, 1659, Etching, drypoint, burin, and mezzotint, and Karel Dujardin, *St Paul Healing the Cripple at Lystra*, 1663, oil.

This shift in thought concerning disability is evident in writings from prominent church leaders of the 15th and 16th centuries. Not only did Martin Luther categorize those with cognitive disorders as “filled with Satan,” he even “advised that children with severe mental retardation be drowned, because they lacked souls.”⁶ John Calvin also claimed that predestination did not hold a place for those with disabilities.⁷ As the Church climbed as a world power, such religious attitudes towards disability deeply entrenched the stigma of disability and led to the characterization of certain individuals as the Other.

It is from this religious stereotype of disability that the medical classification of disability arises; no longer was this stereotype confined to the religious, but it spread to

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

the secular realm, as doctors and scientists searched for “cures” to disability. Eugenics, Social Darwinism, and the “survival of the fittest” became the general attitudes and proposed solutions to disability, further entrenching the identity of disability as subhuman and extra-societal, as the Other.⁸ Eventually, both the medical and religious stereotypes enabled media to portray those with disabilities as a thing to be feared. Villains in fiction consistently exhibited physical deformities and disabilities—characters such as Quasimodo, Captain Hook, Dr. Strangelove, and Frankenstein all encourage the trope that disabilities are evil and nonhuman.



Figures 5-6. Antoine Wiertz, *Quasimodo*, 1849, oil on canvas and drawing of Quasimodo from the first published edition of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1831.

Reinforced by eugenics and propaganda, the evil stereotype of those with disabilities enabled historical figures like Hitler to push extensive social exclusion and even genocide of those with disabilities.⁹ Negative stereotypes such as these, however, did not always culminate in such exclusive efforts; interestingly, an immense level of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

fascination with disability coexisted with such disdainful attitudes, causing those with disabilities to also be viewed as a novelty.

Going back to the 15th century, Watson traces the growth of the view of disability as a novelty based on the development of the so-called “Freakshow.”¹⁰ Undesirable members of society, especially those with physical and intellectual disabilities, were paraded and exhibited around the world for profits, often abandoned afterwards.

Hieronymus Bosch’s *Ship of Fools* (ca. 1490-1500), depicting a group of societal outsiders, has ties to this exploitation of those with disabilities. The characters in the painting, all deemed societal burdens of the time, are portrayed as “deranged, frivolous, and oblivious inhabitants who are seemingly ignorant of their course.”¹¹ Because neurodiversity was little understood in the Renaissance era, often mental illness and intellectual disability were lumped into the category of “lunacy.” In his translation of Michel Foucault’s *Madness & Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Jose Barchilon comments on the stigma displayed in Bosch’s *Ship of Fools*:

Renaissance men developed a delightful, yet horrible way of dealing with their mad denizens: they were put on a ship and entrusted to mariners because folly, water, and sea, as everyone then “knew,” had an affinity for each other. Thus, “Ships of Fools” crisscrossed the sea and canals of Europe with their comic and pathetic cargo of souls. Some of them found pleasure and even a cure in the changing surroundings, in the isolation of being cast off, while others withdrew further, became worse, or died alone and away from their families. The cities and villages which had thus rid themselves of their crazed and crazy, could now take pleasure in watching the exciting sideshow when a ship full of foreign lunatics would dock at their harbors.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Michel Foucault, “Introduction,” in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Jose Barchilon (London: Taylor & Francis Books, 2003), VII.



Figure 7. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools*, ca. 1490-1500, oil on panel.

Such fascination with disability, Watson explains, led to the upper and aristocratic classes to take individuals with disabilities on as “pets.”¹³ Such treatment of disability is depicted in paintings of jesters in royal courts. Typically, jesters with dwarfism were illustrated as subservient and subhuman pets to their masters, like in Gaspar de Crayer’s *Portrait of Philip IV of Spain with His Court Dwarf* (ca. 1632) and Giacomo Vighi’s *Charles Emmanuel I of Savoy as a child accompanied by a dwarf* (ca. 1573). In these paintings, the artists not only placed the jesters in physically lower positions in the painting—like below and behind their master—but they even portrayed emotions of

¹³ Keri Watson, “Disability in Art History.”

subservience, adoration, and contentment on their faces, reinforcing their social position as well. Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Sebastián de Morra* (ca. 1645), more recently reidentified as *The Buffoon El Primo*, depicts on the other hand a more formal and respectful approach to dwarf portraiture that differed from others of its time. One of the few that focuses solely on the jester, the sitter feels solemn and even distrustful. Even so, in Velázquez's portrait, the jester is granted much more respect than many other court jesters of the time.



Figures 8-10. Giacomo Vighi, *Charles Emmanuel I of Savoy as a child accompanied by a dwarf*, ca. 1573, oil on canvas and Gaspar de Crayer, *Portrait of Philip IV of Spain with His Court Dwarf*, ca. 1632, oil on canvas, and Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Sebastián de Morra*, c. 1645, oil on canvas.

Beginning in the late 18th century, “entrepreneurs organized exhibitions of people with physical, mental, and behavioral disabilities or impairments to amuse the public and generate a profit.”¹⁴ P.T. Barnum—the most infamous of these entrepreneurs—gained notoriety from his exploitation and profit off of individuals with disabilities by marketing

¹⁴ Katie Stringer, “Disability, the Sideshow, and Modern Museum Practices,” *Scientia Et Humanitas: A Journal of Student Research* 3, (Spring 2013): 16.

them as “living curiosities” in museums and “freak shows.”¹⁵ Opening his American Museum in 1841, P.T. Barnum catalogs several individuals with disabilities as “profitable attractions” in his *An Illustrated Catalogue And Guide Book To Barnum’s American Museum*.¹⁶ He first names “General Tom Thumb,” a world-renowned individual with dwarfism, along with his wife and other “dwarfs”—“Commodore Nutt” and “Miss Minnie”—as the first curiosities of his museum.¹⁷ Their names alone exhibit the ridicule and belittlement these individuals were subjected to because of their disabilities. Among his other attractions, Barnum included a family of giants, siblings with albinism, and individuals with microcephaly in the guide to his collection of oddities.¹⁸

Photographers and artists document the rise of such establishments and their attractions, giving a glimpse into the ways in which disability was exploited for profit. What scholars have deemed “Freak Show Portraiture” features photographs of individuals with disabilities, especially those who gained renown because of their extraordinary bodies. Such portraiture of the nineteenth century—*carte-de-visites* and cabinet-card depictions of Freak Show performers—falls into the stylistic traditions of Victorian portraiture, specifically bourgeois self-portraiture.¹⁹ While many of these individuals capitalized off the public’s interest in their disability and lived comfortable, successful lives, they were often known for their disability alone. In many of the

¹⁵ Phineas T. Barnum, *An Illustrated Catalogue And Guide Book To Barnum’s American Museum* (New York: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck & Thomas, 1860), 104.

¹⁶ Ibid., 106

¹⁷ Ibid., 107.

¹⁸ Ibid., 107-113.

¹⁹ Guy C. M. Kirkwood, “Freak Show Portraiture and the Disenchantment of the Extraordinary Body,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 1 (July 2017): 4.

photographs and portraits of individuals with disabilities during this period, their name, agency, individuality, and often humanity, are stripped away.

Before an analysis of this photographic industry, it is necessary to offer a definition, clarification, and context for the terms “freak” and “Freak Show.”²⁰ Guy C. M. Kirkwood, in his analysis of Freak Show photography, does so in a concise statement:

By “Freak Shows” I refer to the practices of displaying human difference for profit, particularly popular in America from the mid-nineteenth century until around the 1920s and 1930s. However, the display of “extraordinary bodies” was as much a performance involving stylized modes of presentation as a bodily “condition.” It involved portraying oneself or being portrayed—in a certain manner or pose, drawing on historically and culturally contingent conceptualizations of what was considered “freakish” or “normal,” both of which were infused with fluid and contested elements of race, gender, ablebodiedness, and sexuality.²¹

Freak show photography, Kirkwood explains, was no longer the scientific documentation that was used in eugenics to “type” those outside of the norm—whether in categories of race, gender, disability, etc.—but had shifted towards an industry that capitalized on disability:

Freakishness was marketed and packaged and, like the fables of abundance, this commodification involved more than simply meeting the forces of supply and demand—it involved engaging with dominant ways of being in the world, contested identities, and shifting worldviews.²²

With the rise of this commodification of disability, individuals with disabilities were documented as novelties. Work from Charles Eisenmann and Diane Arbus offers a

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 6.

specific insight into the attitude surrounding disability during this period of the entertainment industry from the 18th and 19th centuries.²³

After the success of P.T. Barnum's American Museum, similar establishments displaying bodily abnormalities and curiosities became a trend in the entertainment industry.²⁴ Photographers from across the world flocked to places like the Bowery area in New York City because of its abundance of Freak Shows. Charles Eisenmann, "a German immigrant who came to America in 1868, proved highly successful in this trade for over a decade and a half, and left behind more photographic portraits of extraordinarily bodied performers than anyone else."²⁵ At the time, small, pocket-sized photographs—called-*carte de-visites* or cabinet cards— were immensely popular, and were collected, becoming "a common feature in Victorian homes."²⁶ Eisenmann capitalized upon this interest, focusing his work on capturing "Freaks" in small portraits.

It is important to acknowledge that Charles Eisenmann did expand the restricted perception of individuals with disabilities by the ways in which he had his subjects sit and pose.²⁷ He employed poses and styles associated with bourgeois portraiture—a practice that had historically "conferred status and authority"—granting much more

²³ Katie Stringer, "Disability, the Sideshow, and Modern Museum Practices," 16.

²⁴ Guy C. M. Kirkwood, "Freak Show Portraiture and the Disenchantment of the Extraordinary Body," 10.

²⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶ Ibid., 10.

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

respect to individuals with disabilities.²⁸ Still, however, Eisenmann along with other Freak Show photographers greatly profited off capturing disability as a novelty.

Kirkwood comments on Eisenmann's method of posing his subjects:

Extraordinary bodies could be portrayed in cabinet cards not simply as an example of a particular typology of bodily difference, but as part of a performance that emphasized the abundance of embodied possibilities, thus both stabilizing and undercutting dominant cultural narratives.²⁹

These posed photographs were an extension of the performers' acts at their Freak Shows. While individuals with disabilities were granted freedom of expression in this style of portraiture, it also enabled photographers to capitalize off of their bodily differentness, their Otherness. No matter how pompously dressed or stylishly posed, disability was the central focus of Eisenmann's photography of individuals with disabilities.



Figures 11-13. Charles Eisenmann, "Fanny Mills" or "The Ohio Big Foot Girl," ca. 1880s. "Untitled," ca. 1880s. "Sophia Shultz" or "Dwarf Fat Lady," ca. 1880s.

²⁸ Ibid., 8.

²⁹ Ibid., 12.

Diane Arbus, a twentieth-century photographer, is also recognized as working within the category of Freak Show photography. Although she lived much later than Eisenmann, she is acknowledged to have treated her subjects, especially those with disabilities, arguably worse than those of Eisenmann's age. She had an odd fascination with the outsiders of society—she often focused on populations that differed from the norm in ability, sexuality, and ethnicity. Germaine Greer, who posed for Arbus in the 1970s, comments from personal experience on the photographer and her treatment of her subjects:

Though formally Arbus is within the tradition of freak photography, there is an important difference between her and her predecessors like the Eisenmann Studio or Obermann and Kern. Their subjects had names, lots of them, stage names and real names. The giants, dwarves, midgets, conjoined twins, bird-girls, bearded women and dog-faced boys whose photographs appear on thousands of postcards were all professionals. Often the notes on the postcards spoke of them as well-educated and happily married. Arbus's nameless subjects are denied such confederacy and performativity. She often uses the devices of the older tradition in her treatment of otherwise unremarkable subjects. Her famous Identical Twins, Roselle, NJ of 1967 are posed as if they were joined at the shoulder and hip and had only three arms between them. She reduced her subjects to generic phenomena by the names she chose for them: Jewish Couple, Puerto Rican Housewife, Albino Sword-Swallower. My ordeal resulted in a picture called Feminist In Hotel Room. No permission for the reproduction of what is an undeniably bad picture was ever requested.³⁰

Greer goes on:

The language Arbus uses about her photographic practice is revealing: "Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot. It was one of the first things I photographed and it had a terrific kind of excitement for me. I just used to adore them. I still do adore some of them." "Freaks" (a word 21st-century sensibility finds hard to use) is "a thing", a medium for her use that Arbus finds quite distinct from herself.³¹

³⁰ Germaine Greer, "Wrestling with Diane Arbus," *The Guardian: Art and Design*, October 7, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2005/oct/08/photography>.

³¹ Ibid.

Greer pinpoints a crucial component of Arbus' attitude towards "Freaks." She reduced people with disabilities to their Otherness, documenting their difference or disability but neglecting to even record their name or allow them to approve any of the photos. While some praise Arbus for including disabled, queer, and other diverse populations in her work, the attitude she displays above is not inclusive by any means. Arbus viewed her subjects—her "Freaks"—as specimens different from herself. This insensitive fascination with disability especially in art is a reflection of the treatment of disability as a novelty and commodity that has permeated entertainment culture since the late eighteenth century. It is artists such as Diane Arbus that have prolonged such negative treatment of disability: "Arbus is not an artist who makes us see the world anew; she embeds us in our own limitations, our lack of empathy, our kneejerk reactions, our incuriosity and lack of concern. Hers is a world without horizons where there is no escape from self."³²

³² Ibid.



Figures 14-17. Diane Arbus, "Masked Woman in a Wheelchair," 1970. "Mexican Dwarf in His Hotel Room in NYC," 1970. "Untitled #7," 1970-1971. "Untitled #2," 1970-1971.



Figures 18-19. Diane Arbus, "A Jewish Giant at Home with his Parents NYC," 1970. "Russian Midget Friends in a Living Room on 100h Street NYC," 1963.

CHAPTER TWO

Inspiration and Research

Despite the negative stereotypes of disability—such as the views of disability in religion or in the entertainment industry—permeating art history, there are several artists whose work pushes against those norms. While some of these artists specifically addressed the topic of disability and others did not, each of these artists challenged the stigma of Otherness held by contemporary society with their work in portraiture, and their art has been vital to my research and composition of this project. This chapter serves to introduce the artists that proved especially influential in my research of disability in art. First, I will introduce them and their work, and then I will illustrate the ways in which they redefined the art of portraiture and influenced this project.

It would be beneficial to begin with a discussion of artists who challenged and redefined portraiture, though not specifically addressing disability. In their photography, artists such as Richard Avedon, Nan Goldin, Amy Sherald, and Kehinde Wiley have challenged the narrative in portraiture and the stereotypes that surrounded those who had been misrepresented and excluded from art. As this project is a work of portraiture, these artists have have been indispensable for both my creative development and for the evolution of this project.

Richard Avedon, born in 1923, is arguably one of the most influential photographers of the 20th century. He first gained fame in the fashion industry, after he

revolutionized the field by “elevating fashion photography to an art form.”³³ When Mitchell Wilder, the director of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, saw Avedon’s work in 1978, “he gave the photographer free license to photograph his view of the American West.”³⁴ From 1979 to 1984, Avedon toured through “13 states and 189 towns from Texas to Idaho, conducting 752 sittings and exposing 17,000 sheets of film” in his exposition of the people of the American West.³⁵

Visiting ranches, rodeos, truck stops, oil fields, and slaughterhouses, Avedon focused on the true, rural populations:

Rather than playing to the western myths of grandeur and space, he sought out people whose appearance and life circumstances were the antithesis of mythical images of the ruggedly handsome cowboy, beautiful pioneer wife, dashing outdoor adventurer, or industry mogul. The subjects he chose for his portraits were more ordinary people, coping with personal cycles of boom and bust.³⁶

The photographer did not seek to glamorize or romanticize the people and lifestyle he captured, but “brought their human frailties to the forefront.”³⁷ His portraits were “dramatically large” and black and white against a white backdrop, removing the subject from “any reference to place.”³⁸

³³ “In the American West: Photographs by Richard Avedon Opens at Fort Worth's Amon Carter Museum 20 Years After 1985 Exhibition,” *Amon Carter Museum of American Art*, March 3, 2005, <https://www.cartermuseum.org/press-release/american-west-photographs-richard-avedon-opens-carter-museum>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.



Figures 20-25. Richard Avedon, “Billy Mudd, Trucker, Alto, Texas, May 7 1981.” “Robert Lopez, Oil Field Worker, Lyons, Texas, September 28, 1980.” “Robert Gonzalez, San Antonio, Texas, 1980.” “Petra Alvarado, Factory Worker, El Paso, Texas, on her birthday April 22, 1982.” “Stan Riley and James Law, Oil Field Workers, Albany, Texas, June 10, 1979.” “Unidentified Migrant Worker, Eagle Pass, Texas, December 10, 1979.”

Both conceptual and physical qualities of Avedon’s “In the American West” have influenced this project. First, his careful aim to neither glorify his subjects’ way of life nor differentiate his subjects from the rest of humanity. Avedon sought to capture people as their authentic selves—not posed and dressed like the characters in “Freak Show” photography, but in , yet he simultaneously removed them from their background, forcing his viewers to be challenged by the stereotypes and stigma that they held for the subjects and their lifestyles. This aspect of Avedon’s work has been one that I have sought to

emulate in my own. I photographed my subjects in their home, amidst their daily life, but I utilized a neutral background, to draw focus to the subject alone. While Avedon's sitters often have a poised and posed composure, I sought to capture the sitters in their most genuine and natural state.

An artist who specifically focused on capturing her subjects as their natural, unposed selves, unlike her contemporary Richard Avedon, is Nan Goldin. Born in 1953, Goldin experienced a traumatic childhood and left home in her early teens. Her older sister Barbara, whom Goldin was very close with, took her own life when Goldin was eleven.³⁹ The secrecy and avoidance with which her parents dealt with Barbara's death led Goldin to seek intimacy in her photos. After leaving home, Goldin was taken in by a community of drag queens in Boston—she recognized them as her new family and wanted to document their lives together, thus her early work as a portraitist revolved around that world. It included intimate snapshots into the lives of the Boston queer community, the AIDs epidemic, and the sexual lives of Goldin and her friends.

Though many aspects of Goldin and her work influenced my project, one specific aspect of her creative process had a critical effect. She viewed her work as an ongoing, collaborative, creative process with the people around her: "A large part of my work is about the quality of the relationship between me and the person that I am photographing. It is almost a collaboration. It takes on its own life."⁴⁰ Goldin saw her work to be her

³⁹ "Nan Goldin," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/artists/7532>.

⁴⁰ Nan Goldin and Mark Holborn, "Nan Goldin's Ballas of Sexual Dependency," *Aperture*, no. 103 (Summer 1986): 38.

“public diary,” which she let people read.⁴¹ Unlike artists like Diane Arbus or even Richard Avedon, Goldin stated that she never sought to restrict her subjects—her friends, her family—to a single image:

I don't believe in the decisive moment. I'm interested in the cumulative images, and how they affect each other, the relationships between them. There is so much more said than by a single image.⁴²

Like Goldin, I hope to offer more than a singular image of the subjects of my paintings, thus I portrayed each individual in a two-part series. The first is a formal portrait, similar to the dramatically oversized and stark portraits of Avedon's “In the American West.” The second part, however, is much more like Goldin's concept of using multiple portraits to convey an ongoing narrative of an individual's life. Instructed by our interview and guided by our relationship, I painted each of these smaller portraits with the subject's favorite qualities about themselves in mind, offering an intimate snapshot into an individual's life, personality, and humanity. Goldin achieves a high level of intimacy in her work. Similarly in my project, I aimed to encapsulate and capture more than just the outward appearance of my subjects.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Stephen Westfall and Nan Goldin, “The Ballad of Nan Goldin,” *BOMB*, no. 37 (Fall 1991): 31.



Figures 26-27. Nan Goldin, “Joana and Aurèle in Bed,” Paris, 2001. “Bruce on top of French Chris,” Fire Island, N.Y., 1979.

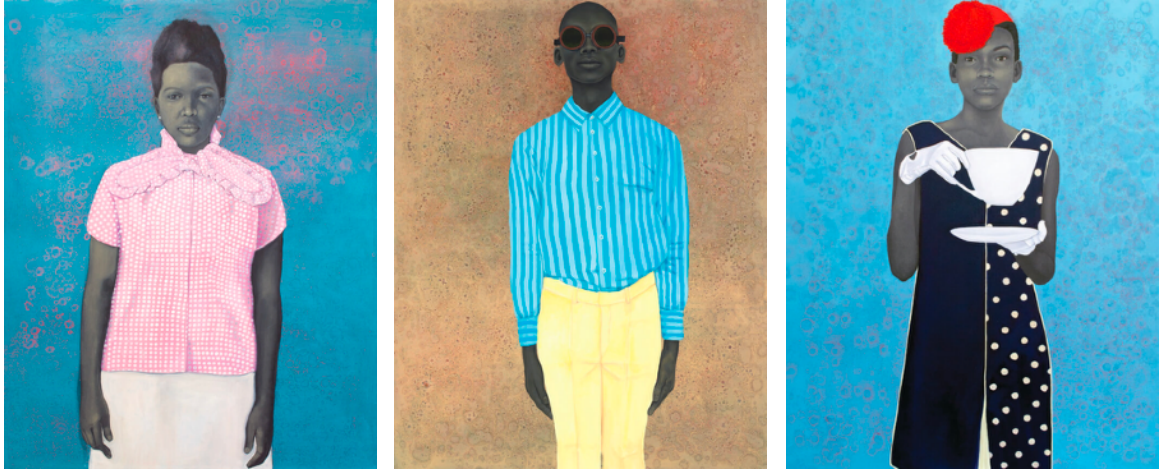
The next artist that greatly influenced this project is the contemporary painter, Amy Sherald. In 2016, Sherald was the first woman in twelve years to win the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery’s Outwit Boochever Portrait Competition with her *Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance)*.⁴³ Soon after, Sherald was selected to paint First Lady Michelle Obama for her official portrait, bringing so much “unimagined public attention,” that the National Portrait Gallery had to relocate the piece to a larger room.⁴⁴

Her portraits—large-scale pieces with hyper-realistic or even surreal features—deal with how Black people exist in the world, forcing viewers to “confront the psychological effects of stereotypical imagery on African-American subjects.”⁴⁵ Sherald displays her subjects with an air of quiet grace and poise—a sense of balance and peace pervades her work. Often juxtaposing a vague, yet stereotype-inciting title with a portrait of a Black person, Sherald forces her viewers to confront the subconscious stereotypes that they hold of the individual depicted in the portrait.

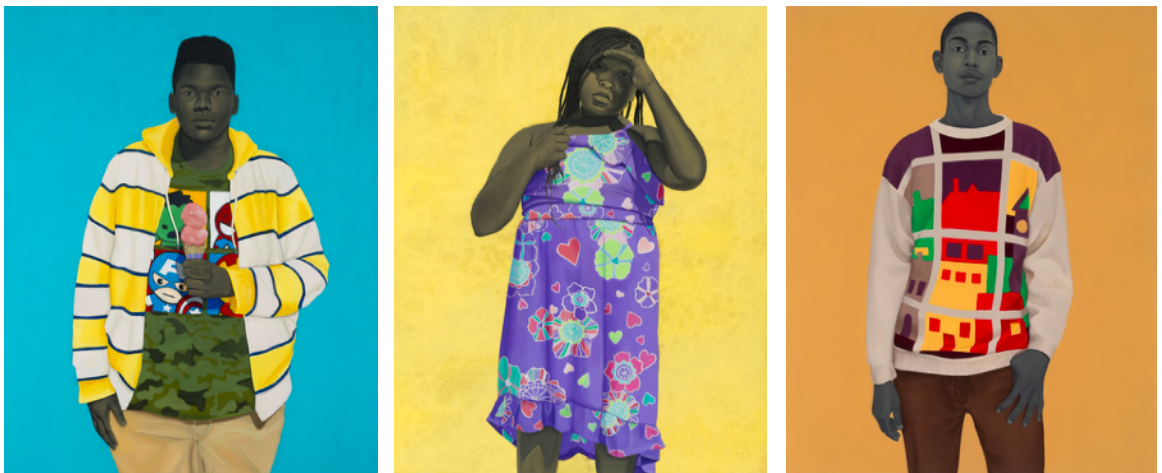
⁴³ Tiffany Ates, “How Amy Sherald’s Revelatory Portraits Challenge Expectations,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 1, 2019.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.



Figures 28-30. Amy Sherald, *Well Prepared and Maladjusted*, 2008, oil on canvas. *The Boy With No Past*, 2014, oil on canvas. *Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance)*, 2013, oil on canvas.

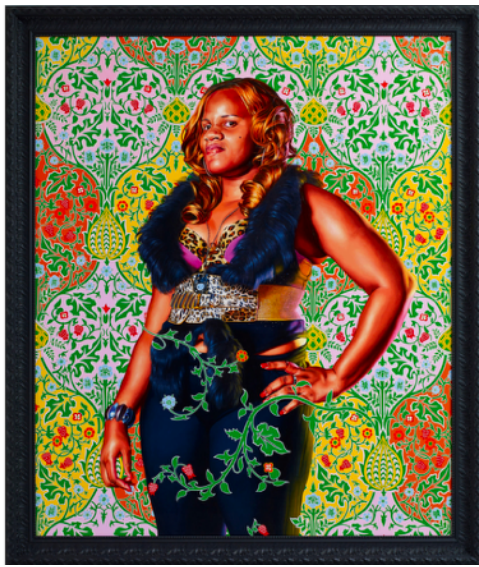


Figures 31-33. Amy Sherald, *Innocent You, Innocent Me*, 2016, oil on canvas. *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, 2016, oil on canvas. *A Single Man in Possession of a Good Fortune*, 2019, oil on canvas.

Though there are many admirable qualities in Sherald's paintings, I found the way in which she paints each of the individuals in her portraits to be the most influential. The poise, gracefulness, and power Sherald instilled in every painting, enabling her to challenge her viewers and their beliefs, are qualities I sought to portray in each of my portraits.

The next artist who proved especially significant in my research is Kehinde Wiley. Though the focus of Wiley's work is thematically similar to Amy Sherald, his method is different. Through his portraiture, Wiley has sought to insert African American men and women into art, specifically in positions of power. He uses classical portraits as inspiration to create images of Black men and women—often utilizing elements of pop culture and bright patterns to ensure that he is not just pasting Black people into a historically whitewashed art scene, but that he is showcasing the Black experience, narrative, and culture.

Wiley's work has been influential in my research in two specific ways: his artistic techniques and conceptual motives. While he often maintains traditional painting methods, Wiley creates artworks that push the boundaries of modern portraiture through his use of color, pattern, and pop culture references. In my project, I strove to do something similar: I wanted to maintain many of the formal qualities of traditional portraiture—like realistic proportions and color—but with a modern twist. I utilized neutral backdrops and modern objects—like tattoos or toys—in my portraits. Secondly, the way he paints a historically disenfranchised group in a position of power, agency, and beauty is a quality I sought to emulate in my project. Though I did not take specific classical portraits and reimagine them representing a marginalized group as Wiley does, I did call on classical portraiture in technique and seek to portray each of the individuals I painted with the same respect that Wiley often inscribes in his portraits.



Figures 34-35. Kehinde Wiley, *Alexander I, Emperor of Russia*, 2013, oil on canvas. *Equestrian Portrait of Philip III*, 2016.

Though the artists discussed greatly aided my development as a portraitist and the evolution of this project, the following individuals, who specifically dealt with disability in their work, have been the most vital: Frida Kahlo, Mary Duffy, and Alison Lapper. Of course, there are numerous artists, especially recently, that have created work relating to disability, but these artists, their work, and their creative process have been the main focus of my research. Not only did they challenge the stereotypes surrounding disability, they specifically used disability—the experience in a disabled body—as a narrative and expression in their work.

Frida Kahlo, the first and arguably most well-known artist who influenced this project, created much work that pertained to her experience as a disabled woman. After encountering polio as a young child and surviving a traumatic bus accident as a teenager,

Kahlo's life was riddled with complications and procedures.⁴⁶ Throughout her life, she used painting as a mode to process and invite others into her daily experience in her own body. She does not only paint her troubles but invites her viewers to witness the complexity of her lived experiences. "Rather than a one-dimensional depiction of her 'suffering,'" Kahlo paints her pain, sorrows, joys, relationships, memories, and her disability as an embodied narrative.⁴⁷ She does not isolate her disability as some other experience but includes it as an expression of her humanity. As Minae Inahara has argued, "constructed from a bricolage of her lived experiences," Kahlo's paintings are not focused only upon her disability, but rather on wholistic self-portraiture.⁴⁸ She continues: "her work can be seen as a creative inquiry into her life, death, pain, disability, and suffering, in which she is communicating the nature of living in/through a body such as hers. This inquiry is made through the mediation of art and thereby her experience of living is transformed through her art."⁴⁹

Kahlo's conceptualization of holistic representation has been priceless in this project. Similar to the inspiration I gathered from the manner in which Nan Goldin crafted an ongoing narrative through multiple images, I hope to emulate Kahlo and her approach to embodied portraiture. As I paint individuals with disabilities, I neither want to extract nor elevate their disability from their other qualities—doing so would not offer

⁴⁶ Minae Inahara, "The Art of Pain and Intersubjectivity in Frida Kahlo's Self-Portraits," in *Encountering Pain: Hearing, Seeing, Speaking*, ed. Deborah Padfield and Joanna M. Zakrzewska (United Kingdom: UCL Press, 2021), 224.

⁴⁷ Ann Millett-Gallant, *Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2-3.

⁴⁸ Minae Inahara, "The Art of Pain and Intersubjectivity in Frida Kahlo's Self-Portraits," 220.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

a holistic representation of who they are—nor do I wish to diminish the reality that their lived experience includes their disability. Through the two portraits of each individual, I offer a glimpse into who they are as human beings.



Figures 36-37. Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939, oil on canvas. *The Broken Column*, 1944, oil on canvas.



Figures 38-39. Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932, oil on canvas. *Without Hope*, 1945, oil on canvas.

Mary Duffy and Alison Lapper—the next two artists that influenced my study of disability in art—have both created work that is an extension of Kahlo’s holistic and embodied portraiture. However, these two artists used their own bodies as a medium in

performance art. Mary Duffy, born in 1961 without arms, is an expressionist painter and performance artist. I have followed her work as a painter for years, but have only recently come upon her performance art in researching this project.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Duffy used performance art to express her experience as a disabled person. Reminding her audience of famous statues from antiquity, Tobin Siebers has argued that “Duffy presents herself to the audience fully nude or draped, while reciting statements challenging the vision of her as defective and claiming her place alongside the Venus as a disabled beauty.”⁵⁰ As she chants the hateful things said to her on account of her disability, viewers are forced to reevaluate their standard of beauty and its connection with disability. Documented via photographs, these performances take on a form of a narrative of Duffy and her experience as a woman with a disability.

⁵⁰ Tobin Siebers, “Disability Aesthetics and the Body Beautiful: Signposts in the History of Art,” *Alter* 2, no. 4, (2008): 333.



Figure 40. Mary Duffy, *Cutting the Ties that Bind (Heroes)*, 1987, photograph.

Duffy reflects on her series, *Cutting the Ties that Bind*:

By confronting people with my naked body, with its softness, its roundness and its threat I wanted to take control, redress the balance in which media representations of disabled women are usually tragic, always pathetic. I wanted to hold up a mirror to all those people who had stripped me bare previously...the general public with naked stares, and more especially the medical profession [that caused those stares in the first place].⁵¹

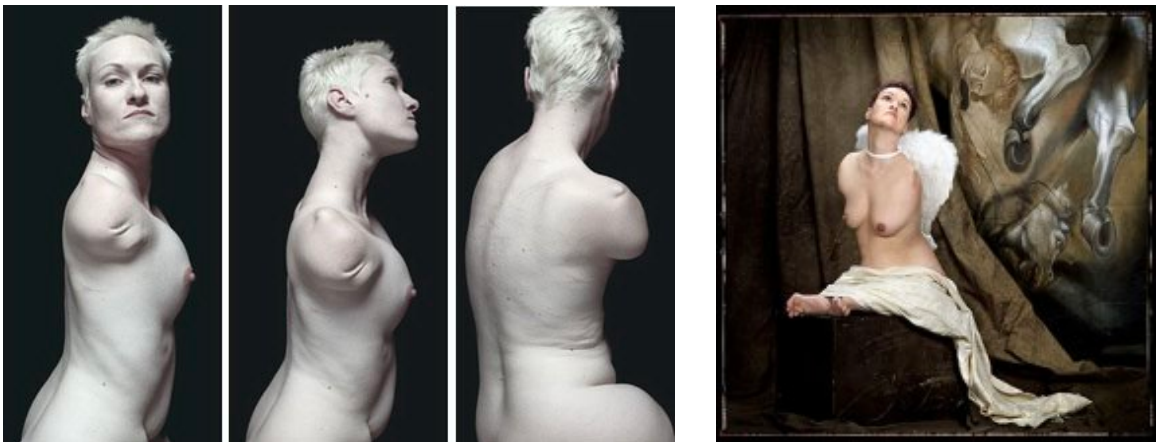
She goes on to address her performance work as a whole:

I wanted to create new images. Images that would celebrate, challenge and change. My body became a kind of metaphor. I worked through photography. I wanted to confront and contradict my own image of myself. I wanted to create a mirror image, creating illusion of sameness and subtly introduce the notion of difference. Maybe we are not all the same, maybe difference could be welcomed and is worth celebrating. The question I was asking myself and other people was,

⁵¹ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses and Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 63.

can you understand and accept my pride in differentness, and really wanting to celebrate and share it? My work is an exploration of difference and all that it implies—deviance, death, deformity, distrust, dismay, and also of delight, wonder, variety, inventiveness, creativity and uniqueness. It is a statement about and with my body. A body which does not have quite all the pieces to fit the human jigsaw, and is therefore not always considered whole. It is about looking and seeing new ways, new images where there has never been an image before without an able-bodied cultural prejudice. It is about finding a new identity for myself as a woman with a disability and my right to define that identity and its politics for myself.⁵²

Similarly to Mary Duffy, Alison Lapper also calls upon classical art and reimagines it with her own body. Born without arms and shortened legs, Lapper utilizes the similarities between her body and statues such as *Venus de Milo* and *Winged Victory*. As Siebers explains, “like Duffy, Lapper engages in a deliberate recuperation of her own image as belonging among the most celebrated and valued representations of female beauty in the history of art.”⁵³



Figures 41-42. Alison Lapper, *Untitled*, 2000. *Untitled*, 1999.

⁵² Hilary Robinson, *Feminism Art Theory: An Anthology 1968–2014* (United Kingdom: Wiley, 2015), 344.

⁵³ Siebers, “Disability Aesthetics and the Body Beautiful,” 334.

Both Duffy and Lapper's form of self-portraiture challenge aesthetic norms in art and society. Viewers are forced to confront the presupposed disconnect between the disabled bodies they are looking at and the works of art that those bodies resemble—thus, viewers must reimagine their standards for beauty and extinguish their standards of able-bodiedness and retroactively reassess art history. Siebers, in his analysis of disability aesthetics, references this retroactive process:

The images that Duffy and Lapper make of themselves are seen as beautiful because they recall so powerfully the vision of beauty affirmed in the history of art by the Venus de Milo. But these images also change retroactively the perception of the Venus, for her beauty now incorporates necessarily the presence of disability. We cannot see Duffy and Lapper without seeing the Venus, and we cannot see the Venus without seeing Duffy and Lapper.⁵⁴

While my paintings are not self-representation and are therefore nowhere near the intimate, embodied, and holistic representations that Lapper and Duffy offer in their self-portraits, I have been inspired by their references to classical art. In style, I have attempted to emulate qualities—such as the softness and absence of brushstrokes—that classical portraits often carry. In some of my smaller portraits—like *Faith's Arms* and *Zack and Woody*—I have been able to subtly reference classical representations of hands. Similar to Duffy and Lapper, my goal with these subtly stylistic elements in my paintings is to force my viewers to retroactively reassess art history and the aesthetic standards it enforces. I hope my portraits remind viewers of classical portraiture in form and technique, yet I hope they are simultaneously challenged—like Lapper and Duffy's audiences—to confront the disparity between the people portrayed in my project and the

⁵⁴ Ibid.

history of portraiture, the able-bodied norms it enforces, and its underrepresentation and misrepresentation of people with disabilities.

Finally, the last artist, and the one whose work bears the most stylistic and philosophical similarities to this project, is Chris Rush. The writer and illustrator is alive but has very little digital footprint or social media presence. I stumbled across one of his paintings that was briefly mentioned in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Staring: How We Look*, and was shocked at the similarity between our work. The best context I can provide for Rush's work is how Garland-Thomson discusses him in her book, and how I believe his portraits relate to my paintings. Of Rush and his portrait *Swim II* (figure 42) Garland-Thomson comments:

Rush gets between his subjects and our discomfort by softening their differences with the medium of conte crayon and posing them with great dignity. Rush's pictures navigate between us and them, attending carefully to the visual relationship by gratifying our "deep curiosity" while at the same time inviting "empathy" and "sensitivity. . . One of Rush's most arresting drawings presents a young woman in the regal profile pose we know from the familiar commemorative portraits of the Italian Renaissance. Her likeness emerges from the sharp line her stately features form against the background; her nose and chin lift imperially; her eyes gaze impassively down on the world beneath her. Her head is turbaned with a richly colored and ornately patterned aristocratic headdress, and her shoulders reveal a simple but elegant gown. On first glance, she looks like a modern Florentine lady. On second glance, however, we recognize a face we have never seen in a portrait. We see the distinct features of a person with Down syndrome, her hair wrapped in a bright beach towel, her face in a faraway reverie, and a simple heart tattooed on her shoulder below her bathing suit strap. The portrait invites us to stare, engrossed perhaps less with the "strangeness" of this woman's disability and more with the strangeness of witnessing such dignity in a face that marks a life we have learned to imagine as unlivable and unworthy, as the kind of person we routinely detect in advance through medical technology and eliminate from our human community.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83.

Though the concepts of staring and portraiture will be addressed in the following chapter, it is important to highlight the similarities between this project and Rush's portrait. Unfortunately, I have been unable to ascertain if he has completed any other portraits similar to *Swim II*, or if it is the only one. Nevertheless, the dignity and regality embedded in Rush's portrait are qualities I aim to emulate in my own.

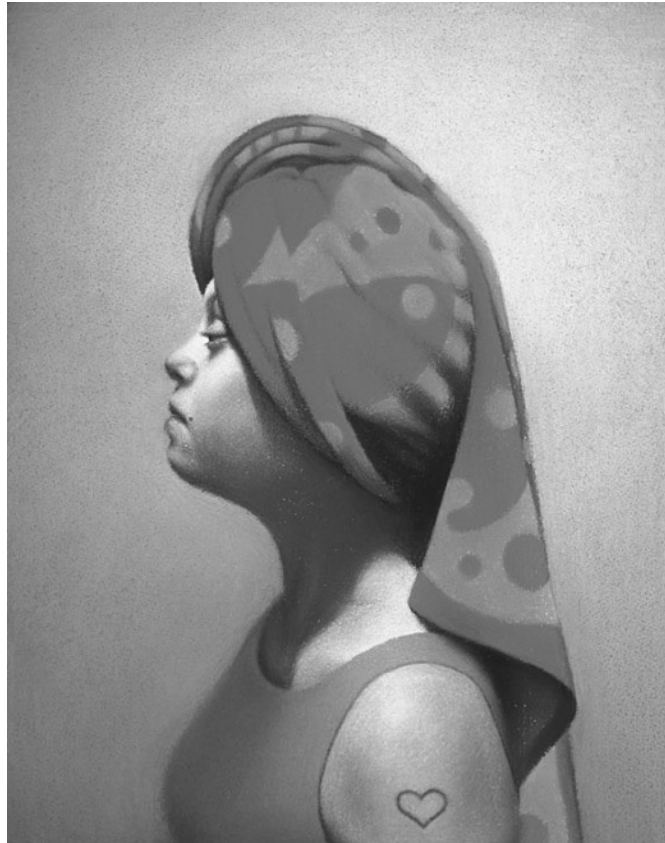


Figure 43. Chris Rush, *Swim II*. Conte crayon on paper. Portraits are life size in scale. No date.

Though not all directly pertain to disability, each of these artists and their work have challenged, provoked, and reimagined aesthetic standards of beauty in their representational work. In their own ways, they have each deeply informed my research and paintings and have given me the foundation to expand the discussion of disabled representation in portraiture.

CHAPTER THREE

Behind the Portraits

Despite the work of the artists discussed in the previous chapter, disability is still, as a whole, othered by society. Whether consciously or subconsciously, the general, nondisabled population does not consistently consider disability to be a quality of humanity. Thus, disabled individuals are pushed to the outskirts of society, severely underrepresented in art, media, and everyday life.

In her book *Staring: How We Look*, Rosmarie Garland-Thomson expounds upon this topic. She explains that disabled individuals continue to be othered on account of staring in American culture and how it has led to the simultaneous fascination and disgust with anything that differs from normalcy. Although she offers an extensive analysis of staring and its effect on all who are othered from society, the analysis she offers specifically pertaining to disability is essential to the discussion of the representation of individuals with disabilities. Garland-Thomson categorizes the different types of staring and the subsequent relationships between the staree and starrer—the starrer, most often those that meet all the standards of society’s definition of normalcy, and the staree, those who do not qualify as “normal,” often people within the disabled community.

Garland-Thomson clearly defines staring and its relation to disability, referring to it across her academic writings:

Staring at disability choreographs a visual relation between a spectator and a spectacle. A more intense form of looking than glancing, glimpsing, scanning, surveying, gazing, and other forms of casual or uninterested looking, staring

registers the perception of difference and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant.⁵⁶

She goes on:

Because staring at disability is considered illicit looking, the disabled body is at once the to-be-looked-at and not-to-be-looked-at, further dramatizing the staring encounter by making viewers furtive and the viewed defensive. Staring thus creates disability as a state of absolute difference rather than simply one more variation in human form. At the same time, staring constitutes disability identity by manifesting the power relations between the subject positions of disabled and able-bodied.⁵⁷

Although she addresses several negative forms of staring in her book *Staring: How We*

Look, her analysis of “domination staring” is most applicable here. She explains:

In humans, a stare can also communicate social status, conferring subordination on a staree and ascendancy on a starrer. . . . But human dominance staring is usually more complex than chest pounding. Often staring as a manifestation of dominance veils aggression with a restraint enabled by the hierarchy the staring enacts. In other words, a harsh stare can do the work of a foot on the neck because the subordinate accedes to the system of domination that is in place.⁵⁸

The “system of domination”—in this case ableism and stigma surrounding disability—is what empowers the starrer. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, negative staring can have dominance over the starees. Freak shows and their photographers capitalized off able-bodied society’s fascination and the system of domination in place to exploit those with disabilities. In such a system, even well-meaning artists—such as Diane Arbus, who is often praised as being a hero of diversity—

⁵⁶ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 56-75.

⁵⁷ Garland-Thomson, “The Politics of Staring,” 57.

⁵⁸ Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look*, 40.

exploit and enable negative staring of individuals with disabilities, thus perpetuating the problem.

Along with negative staring, however, exists a paradox. Garland-Thomson calls it ‘looking away’:

Consequently, our eager stares often quickly shift to uncomfortable looking away. Our ocular id, in other words, jerks our eyes toward a stimulating sight and our ocular super-ego guiltily retracts them. We may withdraw a stare in simple deference to propriety or parental prohibition. Charges of rudeness further encourage us to cut and run. Sometimes, however, truncated stares come from our distress at witnessing fellow humans so unusual that we cannot accord them a look of acknowledgment. To be suddenly confronted with a person extraordinary enough to provoke our most baroque stares withers our ready curiosity and we turn away, snuffing out the possibility for mutual recognition. If the knowledge that staring delivers is unbearable, the expected elasticity of human connection that mutual looking offers becomes brittle. When we suddenly find ourselves face to face with some *momento mori* or our most dreaded fate—we look away.⁵⁹

Looking away is equally as harmful—if not more so—as negative staring. Rather than objectifying or capitalizing, however, looking away denies one's disability and humanity. She continues, “looking away is an active denial of acknowledgment rather than the tacit tipping of one's hat to ordinary fellow citizens expressed in simply not noticing one another. Looking away is for [an individual with a disability] a deliberate obliteration of [their] personhood.”⁶⁰ Thus, in social settings, those within the disabled community are underrepresented and often excluded.

For the past several decades, however, there has been an increase in the discussion of disability and its relation to society and humanity. Questions pertaining to disability have been raised in academic works across many different disciplines: what does it mean

⁵⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 83.

to be human? What qualities of human life should be valued? How do we, as a society, ethically respond to difference?⁶¹ “Much of the new work,” Catherine Kudlick explains in her article, “Disability History: Why We Need the ‘Other’,” “springs from disability studies, an interdisciplinary field dating from the mid-1980s that invites scholars to think about disability not as an isolated, individual medical pathology but instead as a key defining social category on par with race, class, and gender.”⁶² In her book, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, Simi Linton offers another helpful definition of disability studies:

Disability studies takes for its subject matter not simply the variations that exist in human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity and cognitive processing, but, more crucially, the meaning we make of those variations. . . . It is an interdisciplinary field based on a sociopolitical analysis of disability and informed both by the knowledge base and methodologies used in the traditional liberal arts, and by conceptualizations and approaches developed in areas of new scholarship.⁶³

Along with the rise in the discussion of disability and all it entails, there has also been an explosion of the discussion of disability in political and advocative fields. Individuals with disabilities have forced the nondisabled community to acknowledge their existence. Although there is still much progress to be made, there have been many legal and societal advances toward accessibility for and inclusion of the disabled community in American society over the past several decades.

⁶¹ Catherine J. Kudlick, “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other,’” *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (2003): 764.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 25.

Yet, for some reason, art—its history, study, and practice—has not kept pace with society’s growth in disability studies. Despite “art education’s longstanding social justice theory and advocacy. . . disability—among the most widely and severely oppressed human conditions—has been excluded from that tradition. Despite [the call] for a socio-political orientation of disability two decades ago, and the flourishing of disability theory and activism that supports [that call], the field continues to resemble orthodox special education discourses that largely ignore the first-hand perspectives of disabled students, teachers, researches, artists, and others.”⁶⁴ Disabled individuals have been and continue to be excluded from artistic spaces. Thus, art—its theory, history, and practice—has failed to properly and ethically include and represent individuals with disabilities. In some ways, art history has corresponded with Garland-Thomson’s analysis and utilized the culture of staring to capitalize off of those with disabilities: photographers such as Charles Eisenmann and Diane Arbus are prime examples. Yet at the same time, art history—with its underrepresentation and exclusion of those with disabilities—also falls under Garland-Thomson’s categorization of looking away from those with disabilities, denying their humanity. Disabled artists “continue to be wary of entering, lest they be cast as overcoming savants,” and able-bodied artists either fail to include people with disabilities in their artwork or fail to do so ethically.⁶⁵

The problem, then, is this: we, as nondisabled people, have simultaneously ogled at and capitalized off of individuals with disabilities yet failed to acknowledge their

⁶⁴ John Derby, “Disability Studies and Art Education,” *Studies in Art Education* 52, no. 2 (2011), 95.

⁶⁵ Petra Kuppers, “Diversity: Disability,” *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 97.

humanity alongside their disability; we need to look at individuals with disabilities—to include them in our social spaces, to acknowledge their humanity— but, with such a negative history surrounding our treatment of the disabled community, we, as a primarily nondisabled society, do not know how to do so ethically. Portraiture, if done right, provides a space for ethical looking at individuals with disabilities. It enables an able-bodied audience to encounter disability, unencumbered by the historical sense of “otherness,” and forces them to reconcile their stereotypical views of disability with the human being looking back at them from the canvas. The philosophical notions behind ethical portraiture—specifically of disabled individuals—can be lengthy. To be both concise and practical, I discuss the steps I took as an nondisabled artist to ensure ethical portraiture of individuals with disabilities.

In painting a portrait of anyone, there is a moral component that is not present in self-portraiture. Not only must the artist be conscious of the great honor it is to represent someone else to the world, but they must also be conscious of the history and stereotypes of the individual they are painting. As an able-bodied individual, I do not know or pretend to know what it is to have a disability. I hold deep love and respect for the friends that I have painted in this project, I also recognize that they are not only different from me in ability, but in the way that they experience the world and subsequently the way in which the world experiences them. With the project, I sincerely hope it is clear that my goal is *not* to speak for the individuals I am painting nor to speak to the disabled experience. I recognize that as a nondisabled person, my art will never add what a disabled artist’s work will to that conversation. Rather, my goal with this project is to

create a bridge for my viewers—a space that closes the gap between the simultaneous staring and looking away, the unwarranted attention and exclusion, and the rejection and fascination with individuals with disabilities. Garland-Thomson explains of portraits of individuals with disabilities:

They grant us more than permission to stare; they use the clout of high art to transform our staring from a breach of etiquette or an offensive intrusion into an act of appreciation. These portraits enable visual pilgrimages of deliberate contemplation that might be scuttled in a face-to-face encounter on the street. The invitation to look that a portrait offers precludes our skittish staring and instead allows us to look deep and long into these unfamiliar faces made strangely familiar.⁶⁶

Not only do I hope this project offers a space where people with disabilities can be viewed with respect, dignity, and love by able-bodied viewers, but I also hope that it challenges disability stereotypes and standards that have been upheld in art and society. Garland-Thomson goes on in a quote that is most essential to the heart of this project:

Conferring dignity on people whose differences draw stares is the challenge to which these portraits of disabled people rise. These portraits intervene between starees and starers to offer respectful, even beautiful, pictures of people we have not learned to look at in this way. They revalue devalued people, the kinds of people most of us have only glimpsed in institutions or in medical pictures with black boxes over the eyes. This anonymity that medical photographs impose on a staree also prevents the person pictured from staring back at the viewer. . . . Rush's portraits rework the way we usually stare, however. They keep us looking rather than looking away.⁶⁷

Because I was conscious of the negative history of misrepresentation and underrepresentation of individuals with disabilities, I chose individuals with disabilities whom I already knew and had developed a relationship with. I felt that, out of everyone I

⁶⁶ Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look*, 83.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

could have painted, I knew these three individuals best and could therefore render the most holistic portrait of them. From the beginning of the project, I knew that I wanted the subjects of the paintings heavily involved in the creative process. Thus, I interviewed each individual, picked the reference photo with them and their family, and painted the qualities, interests, and traits that they wished me to portray. The details of each relationship, interview, and creative process will be discussed in the following chapter, but I will offer a brief overview as it pertains to the present discussion.

For the first portrait, I painted Faith. In knowing her for over a year when the project started, I knew she loved tattoos, but it was after interviewing her that I learned that her tattoos were a way in which she displayed her personality. Faith's arms, embroidered with colorful references to her favorite books, quotes, songs, and more, are the subject of my second portrait. The second portrait-sitter is Zack, whom I had also known for over a year at the beginning of this project. Through our friendship, I noticed that Zack always carried a Woody doll with him, but it was through our interview that I learned that Woody is the only toy that Zack has ever played with. Woody has become a part of Zack's family and a friend to Zack's friends. Though tattered and stained, Woody is an integral part of Zack's life and personality and is the focus of my fourth image. My third subject is Kevin. I have been friends with Kevin the longest of all, almost four years. Though I knew Kevin loved disc golf (I have been beaten by him several times), it was through the interview that I learned how much it means to him. His lucky disc is one that he made a hole-in-one within the Redwood forest, and it is the central point of the sixth painting.

The next practical step I took to ensure ethical portraiture of disability is the style and technique with which I painted the portraits. I called upon classical portraiture—its softness, realism, and color—to paint these six portraits. Conscious of the history of exploitive and “Freak Show” portraiture, I sought to capture each individual as unposed as possible. For each, I interviewed and photographed them in their own home, to encourage them to feel comfortable, in control, and unposed. Though it cannot supplement face-to-face interaction between able-bodied and disabled individuals, portraiture provides a space for able-bodied people to ethically gaze at people with disabilities, and it opens the door to destigmatizing disability. With this project, I hope to have created such a space.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Portraits

The People

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the three individuals portrayed in this portrait series. I discuss our friendships, our interviews, and how these culminated in my portraits of them. I want to be explicitly clear that I recognize I am relaying the experiences of other individuals, who have lives that are different from mine. The experiences of Zack, Faith, and Kevin—their individual circumstances, personalities, interests, and disabilities—are not my own. I recognize with great honor and care the privilege it is to share another person's story. I also recognize that I cannot attempt to completely understand Zack, Faith, and Kevin's experiences. Rather, I hope to share and portray—through our friendship and experiences together—each person as authentically as I have come to know them. I view making these portraits as a collaborative endeavor: in the interview process, I asked about each person's favorite thing about themselves and what they would like people to know about them when they see the paintings. The final portraits are a result of these conversations.

I first came to know Zack a little over a year ago, as he began working at the local coffee shop Bitty and Beau's in Waco where a close friend of mine was the manager. Zack and I also participated in YoungLife together at Baylor. Through these different interactions, I came to know Zack, his sense of humor, his love for his toy Woody, his

competitive spirit, and so much more. Zack has Down syndrome. It is crucial to note here the importance of the role of a caregiver in communicating. Zack, who is limited in his verbal communication, is aided by his mother, who knows him better than anyone, in answering the questions. While I cannot speak for Zack, I can attest to the genuine friendship that he has offered me and to the person I have come to know.

As I sat with Zack and his mom at their kitchen table in September for our interview, Zack welcomed me as if I was one of his family. After I explained the project, we talked about his favorite drinks to make at Bitty and Beau's, what he planned to do for the rest of the day, and finally about the paintings. When I asked Zack about his favorite thing about himself, he and his mom communicated that Zack's ability to love and welcome all people is one of his best traits. He also communicated that Woody—his battered Toy Story doll—was one of his favorite things about himself.

After some thought, I realized how much those two aspects of Zack went hand-in-hand. Anyone who has come to know Zack has come to know Woody, who travels with him everywhere. To Zack's friends, Woody has become an integral part of their relationship with Zack. When we would play games at YoungLife events, Woody would compete alongside Zack, sometimes even acting as an independent player. One of Zack's staple comedic bits was whenever we played freeze dance, he would try to blame Woody for his own moves after the music had stopped. To all of Zack's friends, Woody was associated with Zack, his personality, his joy, his acceptance, his love, and his laughter. Thus, Zack, his mom, and I felt that Woody was one of the defining qualities of Zack and deserved to be present in his portrait.

As we stepped on the front porch to take some reference photos, Zack began laughing at something his mom was saying. I quickly pulled out my phone to capture the moment. The photo we chose shows Zack (figure 43), giggling so much his eyes are barely open. I then began taking some photos of Zack holding Woody. Again, Zack was focusing on his mom, absentmindedly fiddling with Woody as they conversed. The result was a renaissance-esque photo—the way that Zack’s fingers softly cradled Woody remind me of hands depicted in Da Vinci or Michelangelo’s artworks (figure 44).



Figures 44-45. Reference photos of Zack, September 18, 2022.

Like Zack, I came to know Faith through her job at Bitty and Beau’s. The summer before the opening of the coffee shop, I volunteered at the hiring fair, where I met Faith for the first time. Despite the stress of a job interview and the hectic environment, Faith introduced herself to me and spoke with me for several minutes. She was kind, personable, and excited to be present. Faith has cerebral palsy and has lived her life with a wheelchair as an extension of her body.

Ever since our first meeting, Faith has exhibited nothing but kindness and friendliness toward me. As our friendship grew from our first meeting in the summer of 2021, I have come to know Faith, her love of music, her creativity, her sense of justice, and her vulnerability. Because Faith is extremely open with her story, her struggles, and her pain, she has been able to uplift and encourage others.

In April, I sat with Faith in her bedroom for our interview. After catching up and discussing the scope of this project, we began talking about what Faith loved about herself. Among many things, her favorite feature is her tattoos. For the past several years, Faith has used her arms as a space to express her personality and share bits of her story. Studded with song lyrics, verses, plants, animals, and much more, Faith's two arms have become a canvas. As we sat in her room, she pointed to several, not only explaining what each meant to her, but what she was feeling at the time she got them. She explained that many of her tattoos are reminders of her strength, of the trials and pain that she has pushed through. Though I had known Faith for almost a year at the time, it was one of our most intimate conversations. We both knew that Faith's tattoos must be included in her portrait.

As Faith was telling me about her tattoos, I asked if it was alright if I started taking photos while we talked. Among the many I took, the final reference photo displayed many of her favorite and most colorful tattoos, but most notably, it exhibits her namesake piece, "keep the faith" (figure 45). After Faith went through each of her tattoos, she sat for the portrait. Natural and authentic, Faith laughed in one of the first photos I took. That one, we decided, would be the final reference for the portrait (figure 46).



Figures 46-47. Reference photos of Faith, April 8, 2022.

Of all the three people painted, I have known Kevin the longest and therefore know him the best. During my first year of college, I met Kevin at a Best Buddies party, a student-led organization that seeks to build friendships between college students and those within the disability community. It was a Halloween party, and Kevin—well over six feet—was dressed in a perfect replica of a WWII general. When we met, he gave me one of his tight hugs, and from then on we were friends. Kevin has an intellectual disability, so while I will not attempt to articulate his experience as a disabled individual, I will attest to the friendship that he has shared with me and do my best to share the person I know Kevin to be.

Over the course of my four years at Baylor, my friendship with Kevin has continued to grow. Despite the fact that we had to meet on Zoom over the course of the pandemic, it was Kevin who was the first to join and the last to leave every Zoom call. Aside from Best Buddies, we have played many rounds of disc golf and putt-putt, two of

Kevin's favorite activities. Since I met Kevin for the first time in the fall of 2019, I have heard from him every single week. He has never failed to reach out to see how I have been and what I have been doing. With each call, he consistently signs off with the question, "when are we hanging out next?" I have been blessed by Kevin's exuberant joy, his deep love for his friends, and his unending care for those around him.

As I sat with Kevin and his mom in their home, we discussed the project and what it would look like. Then, I asked Kevin what his favorite thing about himself was and what he wanted people to know about him when they saw his portrait. Immediately, Kevin got up and went into his room. His mom and I followed and watched as he lugged his large disc golf backpack out of his closet. He placed it on his bed, unzipped it, and decisively slid out his favorite disc, a peach one with a cheetah across the front. It seemed clear to me and Kevin's mom that he wanted viewers to know about his disc golf. After snapping some photos of Kevin holding his disc, he pulled out his phone and showed me a video of him making a hole-in-one in the redwood forest with that very disc, his best shot to date. As Kevin showed me the video, he was bursting with excitement.

Similar to the relationship between Zack and his doll Woody, Kevin and his disc are a recognizable pair. Any of Kevin's friends know that he is a very skilled disc golfer—many of them know from personally losing to Kevin's far throws and hole-in-ones. They also know the joy that disc golf brings him. As an opportunity to be around people, disc golf has enabled Kevin to grow even closer with his friends. Even though I am terrible at disc golf, Kevin sees our matches as an opportunity to deepen our friendship. As we walk around the course, he will ask me about my friends, tell me about his family, talk about

the trips he is excited about, and ask me about music that I like. One of Kevin's discs is a reminder of the intentional friendship that he displays to all around him. Being friends with Kevin is refreshing—the humor, genuine interest, and kindness that he has exhibited toward me throughout our friendship have made him one of my most cherished friendships from college. After discussing it with him and his mom, I decided that Kevin and his disc will provide an authentic narrative of the Kevin I have been so honored to know.

Kevin and I stepped out onto his front porch to take some photos, and I realized I had to stand up on my tiptoes to achieve the right angle because Kevin is much taller than I am. He posed for a few with a soft smile, but soon laughed, showing an open-mouthed grin. After sending a few to his mom, we decided on the one that captured his laugh (figure 47). Then, Kevin posed with his disc, his hands instinctively holding it about the edges, turning the cheetah-clad face towards me (figure 48).



Figures 48-49. Reference photos of Kevin, October 28, 2022.

I sought uniformity in each of the six portraits in color and style, but I was careful to still exhibit each individual as distinctive. Their personalities, interests, and hobbies, along with their disabilities have enabled them to offer genuine friendship to those around them, myself included. I have been deeply honored not only to know each person but also to be entrusted to share a glimpse of who they are.

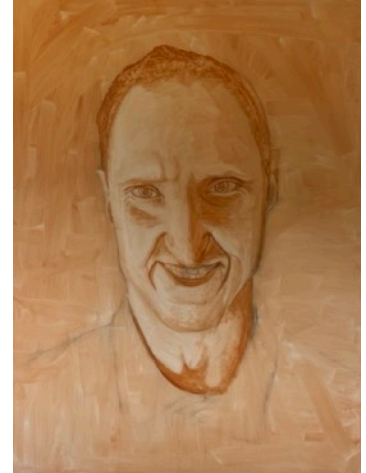
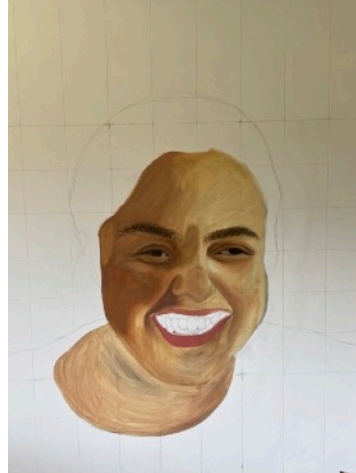
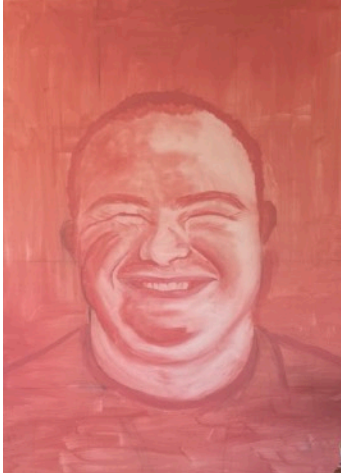
The Process

At the start of the project, I had no way of knowing how cohesive the project would come to be. I did not plan on all the subjects wearing a shade of red, I did not plan on all of them describing physical things as their favorite features about themselves, and I did not plan on consistent size and color. These qualities came together as the paintings took shape. Faith was the first person I interviewed. When we met for our interview and to take photos, she wore a pink shirt. Similarly, when I met with Zack and his mom, he wore a red shirt. So, when I met with Kevin to interview him and snap some photos, I asked him to wear a red shirt. Not only did I think the consistency was aesthetically pleasing, I also was pleased with the motif of the red shirt throughout the series. Historically, red dye was expensive and typically depicted upon the wealthy and elite. Thus, red has become associated with power and authority. I felt that the theme of red in this portrait series fit into my overall goal, to repaint a historically disenfranchised group into a position of respect and power.

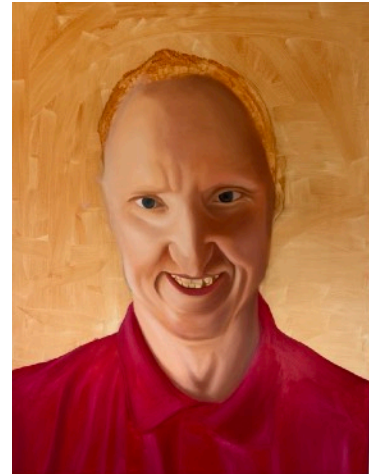
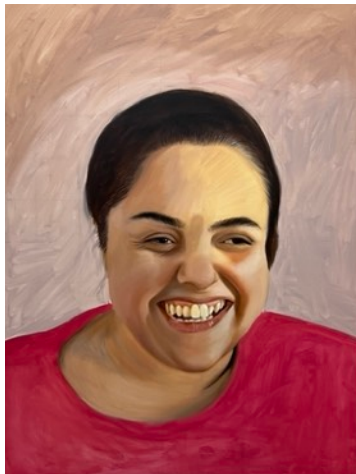
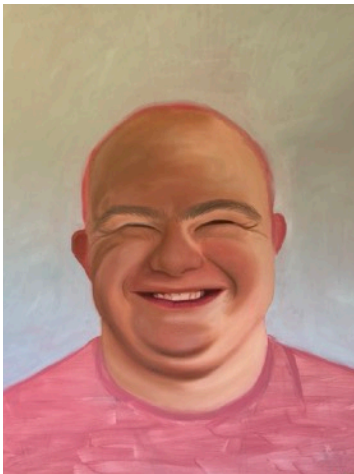
From the beginning of the project, I knew that I wanted the portraits to be bigger than life, for two reasons. First, I felt that my style of painting is most justified at the

large scale. Secondly and more conceptually, I wanted viewers to be abruptly confronted with the individuals—their personalities, liveliness, and humanness—portrayed, and it seemed that large scale was the best manner to accomplish that goal. Thus, I chose 36 by 48 inch canvases for one set of portraits and 22 by 28 inch canvases for the second set. If I had more time, I suppose I would have done the smaller portraits larger, but I ended up being extremely satisfied with the contrast between the large and the small canvases.

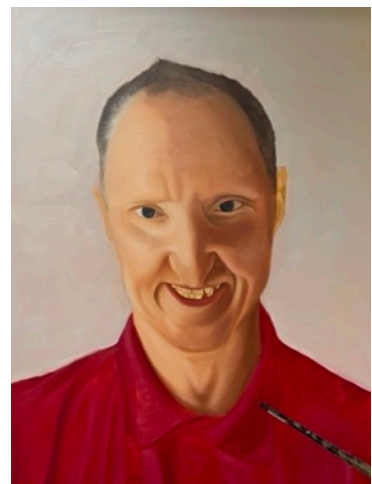
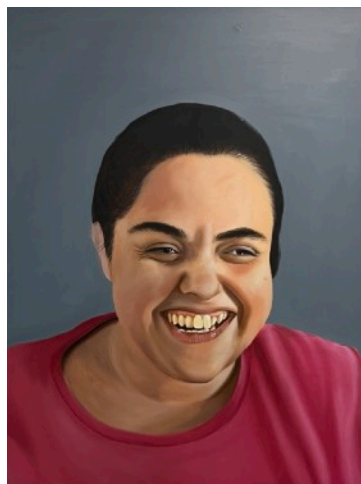
After photographing each individual, I employed the grid method to accurately transfer my reference onto the canvas. Since I was working with such a large scale, I knew that I needed the portraits to be accurate representations of their likeness, so I was very careful to capture the details and proportions of each face. After achieving an accurate sketch, I would use a thin wash of warm-colored acrylic paint to provide an underpainting for the piece. Then, I would begin with the first layers of the painting in oil paint, making sure to mark in shadows and highlights and to keep within the guidelines from the sketch. In most of the portraits, I tried to work as many layers as possible into wet paint, so that I could achieve a seamless and life-like look. The last layer of each painting, however, would be applied after the previous layers dried, allowing me to draw out details and highlights with stark contrast. I estimate that each of the larger portraits took around twenty to thirty hours and each of the smaller ones around fifteen to twenty-five.



Figures 50-52. Beginning stages of *Zack*, *Faith*, and *Kevin*.



Figures 53-55. Beginning intermediate stages of *Zack*, *Faith*, and *Kevin*.



Figures 56-58. Latter intermediate stages of *Zack*, *Faith*, and *Kevin*.

The Paintings



Figure 59. Natalie Stitt, final portrait of *Zack*, 36 by 48 inches, oil on canvas.



Figure 60. Natalie Stitt, final portrait of *Zack and Woody*, 22 by 28 inches, oil on canvas.



Figure 61. Natalie Stitt, final portrait of *Faith*, 36 by 48 inches, oil on canvas.



Figure 62. Natalie Stitt, final portrait of *Faith and Her Tattoos*, 22 by 28 inches, oil on canvas.

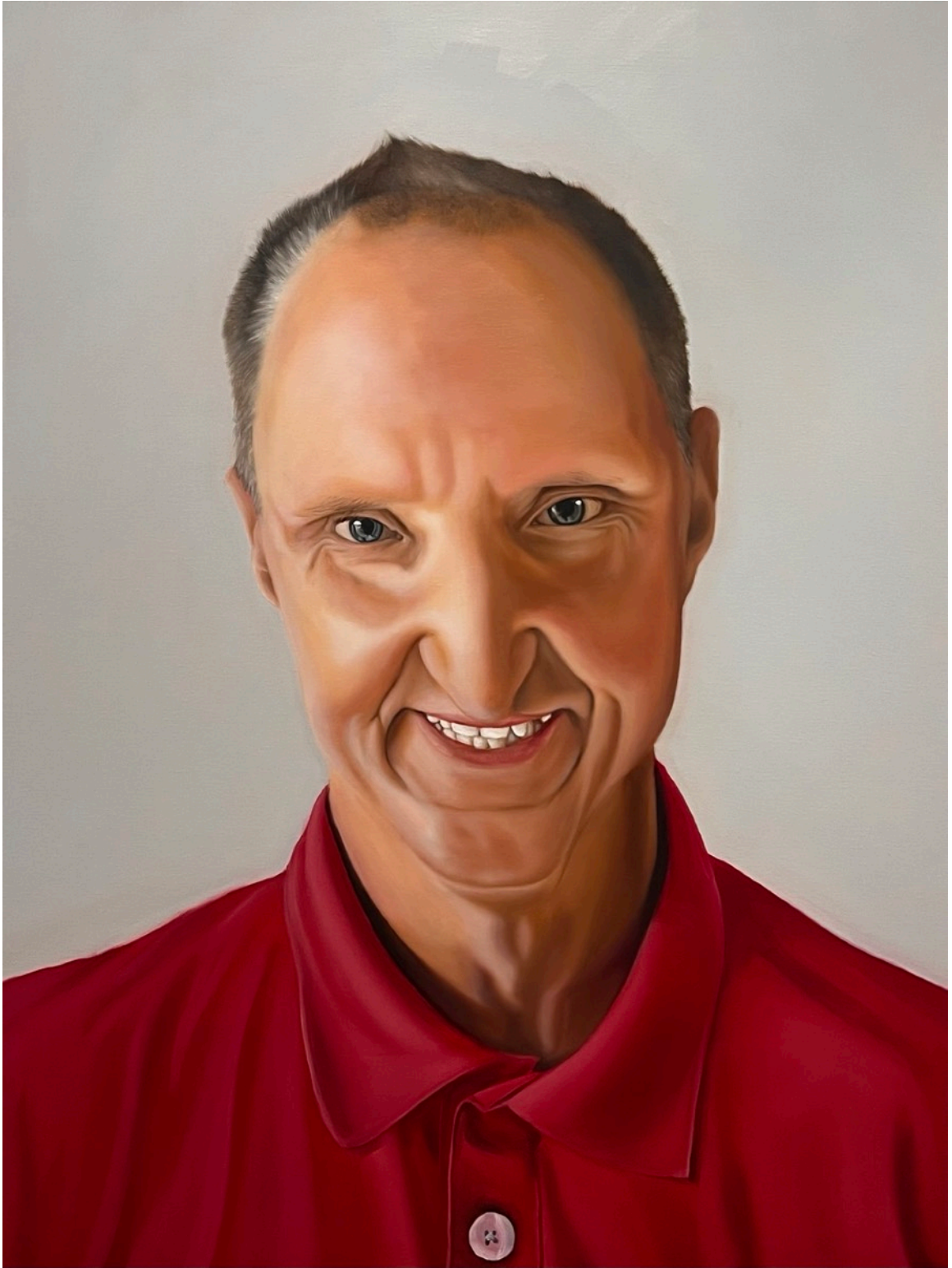


Figure 63. Natalie Stitt, final portrait of *Kevin*, 36 by 48 inches, oil on canvas.



Figure 64. Natalie Stitt, final portrait of *Kevin and His Disc*, 22 by 28 inches, oil on canvas.

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