

Response to a painting by Luca del Baldo, included with the portraits of intellectuals gathered in his “Visionary Academy of Ocular Mentality.” <http://www.lucadelbaldo>. A photograph, chosen by the subject, is transformed into an oil painting, which becomes a gift from Del Baldo, in exchange for a written comment.

## **JAMES CLIFFORD:**

### “Portrait Time”

Before Luca del Baldo’s invitation, I hadn’t thought much about the difference between a painting and a photograph. Of course, the relationship has been exhaustively discussed in art history and criticism, ever since the first (often repeated) claim that photography would be “the death of painting.” Painting didn’t die and has even, in a sense, prevailed. Photography’s ontological claim to deliver what is, or as Barthes wrote, what was (*ça a été*), in front of the lens is subverted by digital manipulation. David Hockney even claims that photography is now a kind of painting, since any shape or color can be created.

Luca’s portrait-from-a-photograph combines the two different kinds of representation. And it’s a complicated performance. Where, and when, exactly is the referent? Is it still what was really there in front of the camera’s lens? Is this the portrait of an individual? A particular moment? A process of transformation?

Such questions, properly asked of any representation that makes claims to realism, are particularly tricky when “the referent” is doing the asking. I discovered this when accepting Luca’s invitation and then reacting (so far, only electronically) to successive versions of the work. The photo I chose was taken while I was speaking, last Fall, at the *Festival Filosofia*, in Modena. I wondered whether a photo that was clearly not posed would be appropriate. In my own amateur photography, I collect images in a file called “portraits” where the rule of inclusion is simply that an image should be in relative close-up, with its subject aware of the camera. I knew that photographs were being taken during my lecture, so what I sent to Luca qualified. In addition, its uniform background (the Festival’s signature red color) created a frame that suggested a portrait.

In any event, I liked the image because the person portrayed was not, like most of the others in Luca’s collection, looking toward the lens. The face seemed active and expressive: quizzical, even a bit hopeful.

When the first rendering appeared on my screen, I was drawn to its roughly-painted vitality. Two versions later, I still prefer it to the finished work, though I like that too. What struck me right away was the picture's mix of closeness and distance, familiarity and alienation. (I see from others' comments on Luca's portraits that I'm not alone in this reaction.) The painting closely resembled the original image, but with a realism quite different from a photographic record.

It seemed to be the portrait of another person. That person, whom I've found myself describing as "he," is made of paint. I was accustomed to confronting myself in photographs. Like an early morning glimpse in the bathroom mirror, they were unwelcome correctives for the imaginary self-image I normally live with. Unexpectedly, this portrait freed me from reactions based on vanity or ego. Since it wasn't me, I could look closely. The computer's zoom revealed how the paint had been brushed on and layered, and how pigments had been scattered in ways that subverted expectations of an objective body or a discrete shape. The colors, while flattening a spatial field, added temporal depth: evidence of making, unmaking, remaking. "Painting"—both noun and gerund.

I discovered not a person or even a moment, something captured once and for all, but instead a process, marks of transformation.

The background, which Luca tells me is a mix of Burnt Sienna, Terra di Siena bruciata, and vermilion, can be seen throughout the man's head. His hair is streaked with red filaments. His eyelids, cheeks, nostrils, lips, and especially his neck (where the color's thickness almost suggests blood) are all spattered with this strong color. More subtly, the blue of the shirt collar bleeds upwards into the cheeks, eyes, ear and hair, softening to a blue-grey that actively complements the background.

Patches of this bluish grey (or is it greyish blue) can be found all over the face, especially on its less-illuminated side. Here the skin (relatively smooth in the photo) appears to be gouged, or plastered. This is a surface that's changing: built-up, adhesive, crumbling. It's susceptible to the forces of gravity and oxidation, universal adversaries (as well as vital necessities) for any living creature. A body that both yields and resists.

Thinking about the portrait's realism, I'm reminded of Francis Bacon's absorbing interviews with David Sylvester in which he argues that violent deformation, rather than accurate illustration, is the way to render the real presence of someone or something. (Luca's paintings of corpses come to mind.) A painted portrait is manifestly a picture of someone altered by time, ageing and therefore dying. It's also evidence of animation: living and dying together.

I'm grateful to Luca for my translation into paint, for what it's showing me about temporality and the forms of realism. But having now joined his Academy, I feel a certain melancholy. Where and when are we, this gathering of intellectuals? Our portraits look out from inside Europe and North America (once the "First World," or "the West"). And from the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century (the time our ideas were formed).

The photo portrait I chose had seemed quizzical to me, even a bit hopeful. A friend called its expression "expectant." The person in Luca's painting looks worried, still expectant but no longer hopeful. Anxious inwardness and anxiety have emerged. The lines of the brow and on one cheek are deeper; a mouth that once hinted at a downturned smile is now more compressed, weighted with pigment; one eye seems, at times, to be looking in a slightly different direction from the other, unfocused. If I can't identify with this face that looks so much like mine, I do find it interesting, Interrogative.

I recognize myself in the painting's change of mood, a feeling that no doubt reflects my time of life with its deepening sensitivity to bodily alteration and decay. But I also feel something more impersonal at work: a historical context that subtly determines the painting and the viewing. Stuart Hall might call it, simply, "the present conjuncture," a constellation of forces we can't yet name. Or perhaps a "crisis" which, according to Gramsci, "consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born." "In this interregnum," he warned, "a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

I don't think I need to enumerate the morbid symptoms of our current situation, a time prophetically evoked by Norman O. Brown in the title of his final book: *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*. Luca's dying/living portraits express, for me, this double transformation.

