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LIS 258: Museum Informatics

Dr. Angel

Discussion 1: Museum Observation Assignment

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The Whitney Museum of American Art's *Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney's Collection* year-long exhibition coincides with the running of the acclaimed *Whitney Biennial* which opened this year on March 17th, 2017. Due to close on April 2, 2017, *Human Interest* was a way to display and provide access to the Whitney's permanent collection offering a connection to its wide and diverse collection of contemporary "American" artworks on the subject of portraiture, an enduring tradition in art making. Online, viewing the permanent collection partially shown in *Human Interest* not only mirrors this timely exhibit, it is also comprehensively accessible to online users indeterminate of time by choosing the "Browse the full collection" link.

Whitney Museum of American Art



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Collection Rest of site

Screen shot of online access to full Whitney Collection.

For this exhibit like most, the didactics, or informational descriptions as chosen in words of what one can expect to view in the museum, introduce the viewer to the thematic representation of art which conveys an exhibit's content. For *Human Interest*, the same wording as is presented in many of the onsite didactics is iterated to the online user. Staged as a survey of the permanent collection through the lens of the portrait, this exhibition invites the visitor to explore how artists treat the human portrayal of the self and what that means to the idea of identity and "how we perceive and commemorate others."

Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney's Collection offers new perspectives on one of art's oldest genres. Drawn entirely from the Museum's holdings, the more than two hundred works in the exhibition show changing approaches to portraiture from the early 1900s until today. Bringing iconic works together with lesser-known examples and recent acquisitions in a range of mediums, the exhibition unfolds in eleven thematic sections on the sixth and seventh floors. Some of these groupings concentrate on focused periods of time, while others span the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to forge links between the past and the present. This sense of connection is one of portraiture's most important aims, whether memorializing famous individuals long gone or calling to mind loved ones near at hand.

Portraits are one of the richest veins of the Whitney's collection, a result of the Museum's longstanding commitment to the figurative tradition, which was championed by its founder, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Yet the works included in this exhibition propose diverse and often unconventional ways of representing an individual. Many artists reconsider the pursuit of external likeness—portraiture's usual objective—within formal or conceptual explorations or reject it altogether. Some revel in the genre's glamorous allure, while others critique its elitist associations and instead call attention to the banal or even the grotesque.

Once a rarefied luxury good, portraits are now ubiquitous. Readily reproducible and ever-more accessible, photography has played a particularly vital role in the democratization of portraiture. Most recently, the proliferation of smartphones and the rise of social media have unleashed an unprecedented stream of portraits in the form of snapshots and selfies. Many contemporary artists confront this situation, stressing the fluidity of identity in a world where technology and the mass media are omnipresent. Through their varied takes on the portrait, the artists represented in *Human Interest* raise provocative questions about who we are and how we perceive and commemorate others.

Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney's Collection is curated by Dana Miller, Richard DeMartini Family Curator and Director of the Permanent Collection and Scott Rothkopf, Deputy Director for Programs and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator with Mia Curran, Curatorial Assistant; Jennie Goldstein, Assistant Curator; and Sasha Nicholas, consulting curator.

Screenshot of Didactic, onsite and online, from Whitney Museum of American Art, *Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney's Collection*.

The entire Floor 7 is dedicated to the exhibit, *Human Interest*. The other floors (except for Floor 8) are now completely dedicated to the *Whitney Biennial*, a two-year “anniversary” exhibition showcasing contemporary artists. The Whitney utilizes many approaches to allow access to

their permanent collection through the exhibit, *Human Interest*. As mentioned, didactics play an important role in presenting the works to the public and mirroring the online “infrastructure” on the Whitney’s website which helps the visitor and online user to have similar experiences when engaging with these artworks. As soon as one exits the elevator on Floor 7, the high ceilings of the new Whitney building and open presentation of select artworks facing the visitor introduce the theme of portraiture in the arts, specifically painting, photography, sculpture, and new media. To the right of the introductory didactic, Robert Bechtle’s ‘61 *Pontiac* is provided prime location status. An oil on canvas, this portrait of his family and himself in front of their automobile in 1968-69, signifies the importance of social identity and class during the late 20th century.

This object is also accessible online via the Whitney’s content management system, however in-person one can clearly see that the similitude to photography is an illusion when viewing this object online. In person, it is a precise exercise to examine the brushstrokes and perspective that the artist employs. Access, therefore to this object is changed when viewing ‘61 *Pontiac* online in that the image—a photograph by Whitney staff photographers of the painting—appears to also be a photograph as the details of the oil paint are blurred and less visible. Ironically, only an installation photography image of Bechtle’s piece is available to online visitors presented on the exhibition’s web page. In fact, an online Whitney website search of this Bechtle piece reveals it is not embedded in this current exhibition’s online category. Rather it is aggregated with the “On view” images “associated” with the *Human Interest* online exhibition presence. In many ways, the *Human Interest* exhibition takes on a new manifestation

online. The online experience closely resembles the onsite experience, however, there are distinct variations in content and form. Access to this object is a case study of how art, when viewed in person, can be fundamentally different from accessing a reproducible image in an online environment.

To this point, as one moves from gallery to gallery, the subject headings match the online presentation subject categories: e.g. "Portraits without People," "Portrait of the Artist," and "Cracked Mirror." Online however, there are additional categories not defined in the exhibit space (e.g. "Street Life," "Price of Fame," and "Institutional Complex"). In this respect, the online experience contains additional data or memes to process and with which to interact (e.g. by selecting individual works for close-up viewing and in the arrangement or structuring of various, accessible topics or "subjects"). In person, the exhibition aims for a tactile-like interaction through the presentation of three sectioned galleries with minimally sized object labels. It is evident that the art itself is meant to carry the live exhibition. Online, there is a relationship between object content and affiliated information that facilitates the user's content knowledge. Descriptive text embellishes the presentation of art works online not necessarily found onsite.

Object Label

Though this painting depicts an all-American family, the title of Robert Bechtle's *'61 Pontiac* emphasizes the automobile, a symbol of affluence, style, and social status. Extending along the entire width of the painting, and portrayed from an elevated angle with its hood curiously cropped, the carefully maintained station wagon projects an optimism and comfort mirrored in the young family's deportment. From a distance, *'61 Pontiac* is indistinguishable from a photograph, but up close, the viewer can discern its three separate panels and minute brushstrokes. The work is suffused with the harsh glare of the California sun, which makes it difficult to determine the time of day depicted; such incandescence also flattens its subjects into muted washes of color redolent of a faded photograph. Unusual in its inclusion of people, the painting is autobiographical—it shows the artist and his family in front of their car. Captured with deadpan candor, this portrait of suburban normality assumes the poignancy of a time passed.

[Online object label for Robert Bechtle's '61 Pontiac.](#)

Audio tours available onsite are offered for listening online too, including the “Kids Audio Guide” making art accessible across generations and across a range of user abilities.

Additionally, multimedia guides with sign language closed captioning are free onsite for visitors with disabilities.

In person, one can experience the totality of the exhibit onsite not only by space but in time.

Sun filled galleries absorb the very sun as in Bechtle's piece, which has his family squinting in San Francisco's daylight. (Interestingly, *Sunrise/Sunset* inhabits one's computer if online at these said times on the Whitney's site daily). One may choose to participate in one of two scheduled guided tours per weekend day to supplement his or her comprehension of the exhibition. Free daily tours also run throughout the week and late into the evening on Friday nights (currently not on Friday evenings for *Human Interest*). A couch, on the back end of the exhibition, looks out to a terrace whose donors' contribution is signified in distinctive raised lettering on the outside wall, reading “Jasper Bloomberg and Zelda Violet Frissberg.” Also, it is perhaps the most recognizable figure, that of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney herself, the founder

of the Whitney Museum, that is highlighted in this exhibition. In the center gallery, a portrait of Whitney by Robert Henri is prominently displayed close to the “Portrait of the Artist” didactic on the immediate left wall. In addition, a sculpture of Whitney is purposefully placed in full commanding view in the corner of the same gallery. It is clear that the homage to the founder is seminal in the museum’s intentions and strategy of depicted portraiture from its permanent collection for without Whitney’s vision and perseverance, support for works by American artists would suffer all the more. It is most exciting that through this exhibition and the newly unveiled *Biennial*, the idea of “American” is also being tested and transformed. Portraiture although self-reflective, is a commentary on the current *ideals* of identity and what it means to be “American.”

The Whitney engages its viewership in person and online. Visitors are invited to share their ideas with comment cards, available at the admissions desk and are asked to provide their email addresses in order to receive additional information about exhibits and events.

WHITNEY

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YOU THINK?**

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of American Art**

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Online you may also subscribe to newsletters or interact with various social media platforms to include Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram. A visual and link for Google maps also directs the potential visitor to the museums conceptually linking them directly to the physical site.

HOW TO GET HERE



Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, New York, NY 10014
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BY SUBWAY

The closest lines are the A, C, E, and L at 14th Street.

BY BUS

BY CAR

The new building in the former meat packing district in downtown NYC adjacent to the Highline, makes visiting the Whitney in person an experience unlike that of primarily examining its collection online. From the couch and views of sculpture reflecting the sunlit sky to the tour of objects strategically placed or hung, the Whitney has made clear choices about how to engage its audiences with its permanent collection inclusive of its online presence. Sometimes the online presence is even an “enhancement,” accessibility-wise, as demonstrated above. *Human Interest*, lives true to its title in that whether accessing this exhibit online or in person, one’s knowledge of the human subject as expressed through artistic portrayals is driven by an exploratory, contemplative process. Stimulating the visitor to think about one’s place in this world, the art in this exhibition asks one to consider how access to the self can be challenged through resourceful expressions of one’s imagination.