

SEANKELLY

Cole, Teju. "There's Less to Portraits Than Meets the Eye, and More." *The New York Times Magazine*. August 23, 2018.

The New York Times Magazine



"Young Man at a Tent Revival, Brooklyn, NY, 1989." Dawoud Bey. From Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery

Portraiture existed long before photography was invented. And for more than a dozen years after photography's invention, it was practically impossible to make a photographic portrait: the required exposure times were too long. But the two eventually came together, and now their pairing seems so natural that it's as though photography was invented for making portraits.

Last updated: 24 October 2019

SEANKELLY

One of the first photographic portraits, if not the first, was a self-portrait daguerreotype made by a 30-year-old amateur chemist from Philadelphia named Robert Cornelius. Cornelius held his pose for several minutes in the bright October sun in 1839. His dark coat has a high collar, and his hair is tousled. The catalog text at the Library of Congress adds that he is “peering uncertainly into the camera.” But is that true? How would we verify it?

We tend to interpret portraits as though we were reading something inherent in the person portrayed. We talk about strength and uncertainty; we praise people for their strong jaws and pity them their weak chins. High foreheads are deemed intelligent. We easily link the people’s facial features to the content of their character. This is odd. After all, we no longer believe you can determine someone’s personality by measuring their skull with a pair of calipers. Phrenology has rightly been consigned to the dustbin of history. But physiognomy, the idea that faces carry meanings, still haunts the interpretation of portraiture.

The reason for the temptation is obvious: Faces are malleable. A smile is intentional and might indeed indicate happiness, just as a furrowed brow might be proof of a melancholic temperament. But we also know that emotion is fleeting and can be faked. We thus shouldn’t really trust whatever it is a photographic portrait seems to be telling us.



Self-portrait by Robert Cornelius, 1839. Credit Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Last updated: 24 October 2019

SEANKELLY

This is not to deny any of the wonder or gratitude you feel before a superb portrait. Sometimes this response is amplified when it's a portrait of someone not famous, a face that isn't burdened with predetermined knowledge. I'm looking at one such image in Dawoud Bey's magnificent career retrospective, "Seeing Deeply" (2018). In the book, this black-and-white photograph is given a full page. The format invites contemplation, and this should be mentioned because what we see in a photograph is connected to its material circumstances: An exhibition print of the same image would give one impression, a magazine reproduction would be another, a digital file meant to be seen on a computer or hand-held device is something else again. The warm tone and low gloss of this photograph in this book are calming. A boy stands alone before a tent and some chairs. We don't know who he is, and the caption doesn't help much: "Young Man at a Tent Revival, Brooklyn, NY, 1989." The surprising detail there is the date, as this picture looks as if it could have been taken at any point in the past century. It is strangely timeless, with his attire somewhere between formal and casual, the slim dark tie and serious black pants contrasting with the baggy pale-colored plaid shirt.

I want to fall back on old ways and say that the gentle arch of the boy's left eyebrow seems to mark him as an ironic sort, or that the symmetry of his features make him both trusting and trustworthy. But really, that would be projecting. What we can really say is that there's something poignant about the way the skinny tie is tucked into the skinny belt and the way the numerous verticals in the picture — the tent poles, the ropes of its rigging, the legs of the chairs in the background, the tie, the lines of the shirt and finally the boy himself — all seem to be tilting just off true.

The picture wavers in tremulous equilibrium. Even the boy's head is cocked to the side. Quizzically? Or is he simply at his ease? I don't know. But the cumulative effect is endearing. There's a boy, and his appearance is dense with a life that we can only guess at. There's faith in it (it's a revival, after all); there's probably hope, too. But what we can be surer of is that there's love: the love with which Dawoud Bey has seen the elements of the moment and captured them for posterity, and the love with which, almost three decades later, I am looking at this portrait in a book.

The rise of portrait photography made immortality of a new kind available to ordinary people. Picture-making establishments in New York, Boston and San Francisco displayed countless photographs of seamstresses, servants, soldiers, laborers, lawyers and even the recently dead. A wide swath of society owned treasured likenesses of themselves that they displayed at home, kept in specially made cases, sent to their lovers or bequeathed to their descendants. And that abundance has become, in our time, positively torrential. There must be very few people on Earth who have not been photographed.

This is not to deny any of the wonder or gratitude you feel before a superb portrait. Sometimes this response is amplified when it's a portrait of someone not famous, a face that isn't burdened with predetermined knowledge. I'm looking at one such image in

Last updated: 24 October 2019

SEANKELLY

Dawoud Bey's magnificent career retrospective, "Seeing Deeply" (2018). In the book, this black-and-white photograph is given a full page. The format invites contemplation, and this should be mentioned because what we see in a photograph is connected to its material circumstances: An exhibition print of the same image would give one impression, a magazine reproduction would be another, a digital file meant to be seen on a computer or hand-held device is something else again. The warm tone and low gloss of this photograph in this book are calming. A boy stands alone before a tent and some chairs. We don't know who he is, and the caption doesn't help much: "Young Man at a Tent Revival, Brooklyn, NY, 1989." The surprising detail there is the date, as this picture looks as if it could have been taken at any point in the past century. It is strangely timeless, with his attire somewhere between formal and casual, the slim dark tie and serious black pants contrasting with the baggy pale-colored plaid shirt.

I want to fall back on old ways and say that the gentle arch of the boy's left eyebrow seems to mark him as an ironic sort, or that the symmetry of his features make him both trusting and trustworthy. But really, that would be projecting. What we can really say is that there's something poignant about the way the skinny tie is tucked into the skinny belt and the way the numerous verticals in the picture — the tent poles, the ropes of its rigging, the legs of the chairs in the background, the tie, the lines of the shirt and finally the boy himself — all seem to be tilting just off true.

The picture wavers in tremulous equilibrium. Even the boy's head is cocked to the side. Quizzically? Or is he simply at his ease? I don't know. But the cumulative effect is endearing. There's a boy, and his appearance is dense with a life that we can only guess at. There's faith in it (it's a revival, after all); there's probably hope, too. But what we can be surer of is that there's love: the love with which Dawoud Bey has seen the elements of the moment and captured them for posterity, and the love with which, almost three decades later, I am looking at this portrait in a book.

The rise of portrait photography made immortality of a new kind available to ordinary people. Picture-making establishments in New York, Boston and San Francisco displayed countless photographs of seamstresses, servants, soldiers, laborers, lawyers and even the recently dead. A wide swath of society owned treasured likenesses of themselves that they displayed at home, kept in specially made cases, sent to their lovers or bequeathed to their descendants. And that abundance has become, in our time, positively torrential. There must be very few people on Earth who have not been photographed.

But something truly strange has also happened: Automation is playing an outsize role in the creation and dissemination of photographic portraits. Machines are making images of people for other machines to see and analyze. We are photographed when we cross international borders. Cameras in public places scan and collect the faces of passers-by. We rouse our mobile phones with our faces. Even the cameras on our computers

Last updated: 24 October 2019

SEANKELLY

cannot be trusted not to spy on us. Our faces are spirited away in the name of societal stability, crime prevention, corporate profit or national security.

Surveillance is nothing new, but with storage getting cheaper and analytical tools more ferocious, a dystopian future is closer than it has ever been. In many parts of China, ubiquitous facial data collection is already an everyday reality. Facial-recognition technology is giving the government there powerful tools to control and discipline its populace. Unsurprisingly, religious minorities and political activists, in addition to petty offenders and hardened criminals, are already bearing the brunt of these initiatives. To be ethnically Uighur in China today, for example, is to be under tremendous restriction. Other governments will follow, and arguments about the right to privacy or freedom will lag behind.

Machines take advantage of the particularity of each person's appearance to flatten out our collective individuality. A machine sees without sympathy. And yet our individual particularities might themselves serve as a comfort in this machine-driven age. The shape of my lips, the shine on my nose, the corners of my eyes, the breadth of my forehead: the same features that allow machines to track me are also dear to the people who love me (not because those features are objectively special but because they are mine). And those features also say something to people who don't know me: that I am not disembodied, that I am not abstraction. Physiognomy is of limited use: I am not my face. But a set of features retains affect, as in a cistern, and from this something more subtle can be retrieved.

A photographic portrait records a human encounter. The photographer's intent and the sitter's agreement, and vice versa, are made visible. The portrait also contains the tacit hope that a third party, the viewer, will be able to register the traces of that previous encounter. Better if it's printed out and held in the hand, vibrant to the touch. This was the experience of those who bought the small, inexpensive cardboard-mounted photographs known as *cartes de visite* in the 19th century.

Last updated: 24 October 2019

SEANKELLY



Carte de visite of Sojourner Truth, around 1864 From the American Antiquarian Society

Perhaps the most famous usage of the American carte de visite was by Sojourner Truth, in the 1860s. Truth escaped from slavery in Ulster County, New York, in 1826 and became a noted abolitionist activist. She was a gifted orator who, as one contemporary noted, “poured forth a torrent of natural eloquence which swept everything before it.” Illiteracy did not prevent her from producing (with the help of intermediaries) a large number of letters, speeches, petitions and autobiographical texts. And, particularly during the years of the Civil War, she also sat for numerous photographers, leaving behind at least 28 different photographs. Most of these were printed as cartes de visite and sold to support her abolitionist work.

Last updated: 24 October 2019

SEANKELLY

One of the senses of “shadow” at that time was “photograph,” and from 1864 onward, Truth’s cartes de visite included a caption text and her name: “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance. Sojourner Truth.” She was not the photographer of these images, but so insistent was her control over how she was seen that these are practically self-portraits.

Like Frederick Douglass (with whom she had a mutual antipathy), Truth knew how powerful a photographic presence could be in the struggle to make white Americans see black American humanity. Her photograph was not herself — it was a shadow, and as an ex-slave that distinction must have been one she sensed especially keenly — but she knew it did convey some indelible news of her reality. The photos show a tall and somewhat gaunt woman in her 60s, in modest dress and with a white shawl and cap, sometimes sitting, sometimes standing. Her skin is dark and smooth, and her expression might be read either as serious or neutral. Though she tends to look directly at the camera, her eyes are usually obscured behind glasses. Truth’s photographs did not have the cosmopolitan and occasionally conceited air that Douglass’s did but, like his, they reminded others that she did have a real self and that her dignity was not negotiable, and this reminder was a challenge to the conscience of all who saw, held or bought the “shadow.”

A portrait is an open door. It can remind us of our ethical duty to the other. “The face speaks to me, and thereby invites me to a relation,” as the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas puts it. Unlike machines, we see with sympathy. (This is why a mere portrait of a despot can be dangerously effective propaganda. The portrait humanizes the person depicted in ways we can’t quite control. Inhuman behavior is rarely apparent on a human face.) A photograph by Berenice Abbott, Seydou Keïta, Gordon Parks, Dawoud Bey or any of the greats in the history of photography, a portrait of Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass or an unnamed boy standing in front of a tent in Brooklyn presents us with the face of the other and restores us to ourselves. Some magic happens there, a magic as old and reliable as the portraits painted on the Fayyum funerary boards 2,000 years ago. Not all portraits are created equal: To be great, they must contain presence, tension, a finely balanced amalgam of feeling and craft. “This is human,” is the final meaning of a great portrait, “and I am human, and this is worth defending.”

Last updated: 24 October 2019