

Press release

Drawn into the Present: Portraits on Paper

Georg Baselitz
Joseph Beuys
Adrian Ghenie
David Hockney
Alex Katz
Robert Longo
Bjarne Melgaard
Paul P.

Elizabeth Peyton
Francis Picabia
Robert Rauschenberg
Raqib Shaw
Sturtevant
Banks Violette
Andy Warhol
Yan Pei-Ming

14 December 2023—9 February 2024
Opening Thursday 14 December 2023, 6—8pm

Thaddaeus Ropac
Ely House, London
37 Dover Street, London, W1S 4NJ



Robert Longo, *Untitled (X-Ray of A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, 1882, After Manet), 2017*.
Charcoal on mounted paper. 243.8 x 330.8 cm (95.98 x 130.24 in).

Bringing together portraits from the 20th century to the present day, this exhibition traces a line through the varied approaches taken by artists to depict their subjects on paper. Often focussed on the head and shoulders of an individual, a portrait typically

seeks to convey something of a person's personality and inner life through the treatment of their form and environment. In ink, pencil, charcoal and paint, the artist captures the subtleties of their subject's facial features and expressions to lay bare the

interior landscape of the individual, as well as their own relationship to them, whether informed by lived experience or imagined encounters.

Certain motifs emerge and recur across particular groupings of work within the exhibition, drawing connective lines between the portraits. While some artists take prominent figures from both the past and present as their subject, others draw upon their immediate relationships to create likenesses of their friends, family and acquaintances, or depict themselves in self-portraits. In turn, some of the portraits on view directly respond to art-historical lineages, as artists reconceive well-known images or works of art within the register of their own practice, while others seek to break away from the conventions of the genre. Yet, despite this variety in approach, of foremost concern across the breadth of historical and contemporary works represented in the exhibition is a shared conceptualisation of portraiture as a boundless site of creative innovation and expression.

The earliest work on view, **Francis Picabia's** *La Chienne des Baskerville* (c.1932–3), offers a starting point for several of these themes. Related to the French artist's 'Transparencies' – paintings that layer art-historical imagery, including renditions of the female form, in surrealist expressions of the artist's 'interior desires' – the line drawing depicts the head and shoulders of a young woman. This is overlaid with a sculpture-like torso of a female nude and a suggestively placed pair of hands. Purposefully untethered from clear narrative intent, the drawing encapsulates Picabia's technically innovative synthesis of diverse references from mythology, literature and art history in a complex and elusive psychological portrait.

An engagement with art-historical imagery resonates elsewhere in the exhibition as artists reimagine visual references from the past through the lens of their own practice. Transposing iconic portrait paintings onto paper using charcoal, **Robert Longo** pays homage to the pioneers of European modern and post-war art, painstakingly replicating the modulations of each brushstroke. In his 2017 monumental drawing of an X-ray of Édouard Manet's last major work, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), Longo recovers traces of Manet's working process. Particularly compelling are

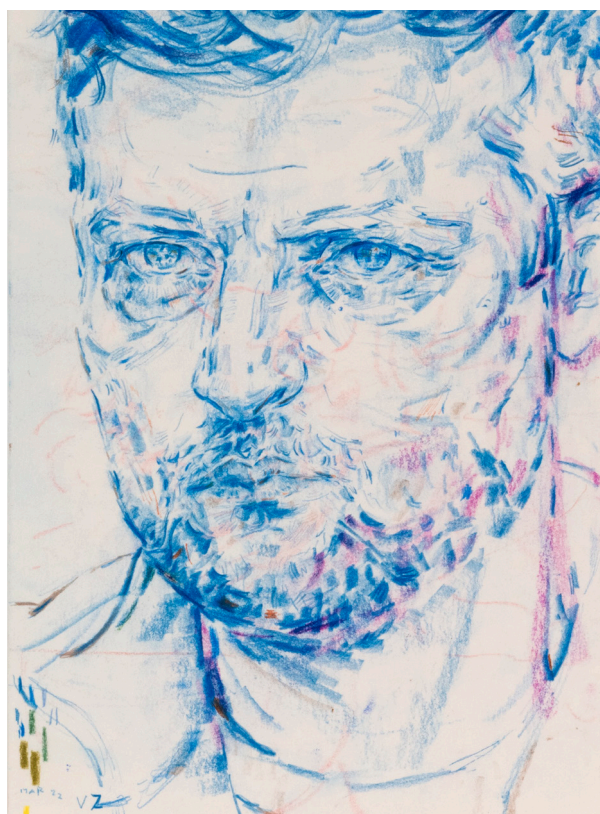
the adjustments Manet made to the barmaid's pose in earlier stages of the composition, before he settled on her assertive stance with her hands placed firmly on the bar. Multiple versions of the work are made visible in Longo's intricately-detailed depiction, standing at 2.5 metres tall and over 3 metres wide, showing the viewer what usually remains unseen under the layers of paint to reveal alternative histories.



Francis Picabia, *La Chienne des Baskerville*, c.1932–3.
Ink and charcoal on paper. 64 x 49 cm (25.2 x 19.29 in).

Taking a distinct approach to her source material, **Sturtevant** repeats the works of other artists from memory, as in her 1988 version of Roy Lichtenstein's study for his painting *Female Head* (1977), interrogating notions of authorship, authenticity and originality in artmaking. Similarly seeking to question the meaning of existing images, **Banks Violette** creates stark replicas of photographs in graphite. The spectral quality of these drawings gestures to the darker connotations that might lurk beneath their surfaces as he destabilises the interpretations typically associated with particular images. In turn, Canadian artist **Paul P.** creates intimate studies of male figures adapted from gay pornographic magazines to recontextualise the erotic imagery.

Also identifying the influence of the past on her approach to portraiture, **Elizabeth Peyton** depicts individuals who ‘are dealing with their feelings through art’ or ‘who defined their moment in history,’ such as Empress Elisabeth of Austria and the current president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. For her, ‘portraits are like love letters to the people I paint’ – a sentiment evidenced in the sensitive approach she takes to her subjects. For **David Hockney**, too, portraits are a celebration of the individuals he depicts, as well as a site of creative vigour. ‘A portrait is a private view of someone,’ he explains. ‘It’s like a diary entry.’



Elizabeth Peyton, *Volodymyr Zelenskyy, March 2022, 2022*.
Coloured pencil and pastel on paper. 21.3 x 15.2 cm (8.39 x 5.98 in).

A number of artists turn their gaze further inwards as they engage with forms of self-portraiture. Articulated in his signature monochromatic palette, **Yan Pei-Ming** depicts himself as a young boy, illustrating his ongoing documentation of the individual’s relationship to the passage of time. In turn, just as Picabia experimented with overlaying diverse images to express his hidden desires in the ‘Transparencies’, **Adrian Ghenie** and **Bjarne Melgaard** fuse their own forms with animal elements to lay bare the darker impulses that lie beneath the fragile veneer of civilisation.



Andy Warhol, *Ladies & Gentlemen*, c.1975.
Graphite on HMP paper. 101.6 x 68.6 cm (40 x 27 in).

Other artists use portraiture to capture evocative snapshots of particular moments in time, as epitomised by **Andy Warhol’s** visual record of the most prominent figures of the twentieth century. However, as a line drawing from his *Ladies and Gentlemen* series demonstrates, Warhol also sought to capture the experiences of underrepresented subjects operating in New York’s subcultures, in this instance, Black and Latinx trans women and drag queens. In turn, a rare portrait by **Robert Rauschenberg**, who was active in New York at the same time as Warhol, depicts mega-collector Ethel Scull, who supported the city’s booming art scene in this period. Her head emerges from the page alongside abstract forms and cropped imagery, the latter applied using a solvent transfer technique that epitomises Rauschenberg’s sustained interest in juxtaposing reproduced imagery with hand-drawn elements.

This experimental approach to technique in portraiture is also evident in the work of **Joseph Beuys**, for whom drawing was an essential, daily activity that allowed him to explore the metamorphic potential of delicately



Alex Katz, *Purple Split 5*, 2022.
Charcoal and red chalk on kraft paper. 121.9 x 121.9 cm (48 x 48 in).

sketched pencil lines, here, resolved into female figures. For **Georg Baselitz** too, portraits are a site of representational enquiry as he turns his subjects upside down. Exploring the permeability between abstraction and figuration, he returns again and again to the form of his wife, Elke, while also confronting the complexities of ageing in imposing portraits of skulls perched atop ringed, skeletal bodies. Finally, a large-scale close-up of a female face, articulated in pencil and red chalk on brown kraft paper, asserts the experimental approach to depicting the human form pursued by **Alex Katz** across his celebrated career, as represented in his recent retrospective at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Emulating cinematic perspectives through drawing, he demonstrates how modes of representation might be shaped through dialogue with other mediums, just as Picabia found inspiration for his series by overlaying photographic transparencies.

Together, the assembled works – including a new portrait by **Raqib Shaw** made especially for the exhibition – encapsulate the breadth of human experience, while simultaneously standing as a generative site of creative experimentation for the artists.

The exhibition is curated by Julia Peyton-Jones in association with Kitty Gurnos-Davies.

Drawn into the Present: Portraits on Paper is on view concurrently with *Andy Warhol: The Joseph Beuys Portraits*.



Georg Baselitz, *Ohne Titel*, 2016.
Ink pen on paper. 65.8 x 50.1 cm (25.91 x 19.72 in).

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