

On Time | Face Up

An Interview with Jenifer Pappararo and Elizabeth Zvonar

Elizabeth Zvonar's work often uses iconic symbols from pop culture to reference art historical works, mixing images through collage or rendering popular forms using traditional methods and materials. In Sign of the Times, for example, a monumental hand forming the peace sign is carved in serpentine stone. Similarly, in a recent series of collages, canonical works like Édouard Manet's The Fifer is intercut with images of a bronze Horn Blower from Benin, Nigeria or, in Canadian terms, Tom Thomson's Black Spruce In Autumn is layered with Lawren Harris's Pic Island. Through material and mass-produced images, Zvonar manages to connect the aesthetic, social, and conceptual conventions of art history with those derived from the larger collectivity of popular culture.

On Time, Zvonar's show for the CAG, carries this collision of representation into the realm of science, philosophy, and religion by examining how the desire to move between realms, earthly, spiritual or dimensional, is portrayed through invention, ritual, and, ultimately, image. Face Up, an exhibition I co-curated with Zvonar, uses the work of three artists to articulate Zvonar's interest in representations of the body: specifically how the body or images of the body can be broken down into single gestures. Repetition, exaggeration, and processes of making are common threads that tie the works together. In three works by Lee Lozano, the same gesture is repeated over and over through oil painting and pastel drawing, while Bruce Nauman's silkscreen print suite Studies for Holograms presents five contorted facial expressions emphasized by the use of acid yellow, grey green, and inky blacks. Sarah Lucas's Cigarette Tits II captures the full slump of a heavily

bosomed, seated female form through an economy of means and material. The following interview is an amalgamation of the artist's notes and our correspondence.

Jenifer Papararo

JP: I see you joining images not simply to create new images but to flatten time or at least represent attempts to control or reflect on time. Your images, whether two-dimensional or sculptural, show how time and space have been presented across disciplines, cultures, and, of course, time itself. As a result, your work taps into a common desire to transcend the physical limits of temporal reality.

EZ: We live in a place and time of extreme excess and privilege. Time is an important reference point for the work in this exhibition. I was in the mountains last fall, on a Banff Centre residency where the research for this show began. I was looking at the social and cultural circumstances of early twentieth-century artistic practices coming out of Paris, focusing primarily on the conditions that fostered Cubism and its relationship to Albert Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*.

I had a laptop and access to an incredible library and I would spend my mornings reading and going back in time, so to speak, trying to coalesce or make sense of a particular tangent of history and how I understood its relationship to contemporary artistic practices, and in a broader sense, other countercultural movements including Surrealism, The Beats, Hippie Culture, and so on. History books give us a safe distance to remember and retell these moments but it's an excellent exercise, subjectively speaking, to attempt to understand the momentum these moments in time gained and how they have become normalized in our conversations and our collective memory.

I was interested in the idea of the artist-novice's interest in new sciences and the social conditions that made it possible for those early interpretations to define these theories visually. I am fascinated by the crossover between disciplines and by the romantic mythology of early twentieth century Paris. There is a particular style and tone to that period that retains a humour, both absurd and ambiguous, that makes for a more hopeful, more innocent, more beautiful possibility than what comes after 1918, when the consequences of WWI sank in politically, socially, and culturally.

JP: A George Braque quote comes to mind: "Art is made to disturb. Science reassures." In thinking about Braque's words, it isn't the sentiment that interests me, but our differing perceptions of science and, in relation to your work, which images and forms you use to depict it. If you start your research for this exhibition with Cubism in mind, how has it influenced you materially? I see that it has focused your attention, away from representing countercultures and utopian symbols in general to more specifically reflecting on a desire to escape reality, capturing something that is outside of the everyday. But has it changed the way you look at images or the way you bring them together?

EZ: My initial interest in Cubism was the starting point and the work I made as a consequence is tangentially connected. The spirit in which I approach making work has more of an affinity to these practices perhaps and the end result should be something new but which inherently conveys an understanding of its historical trajectory.

I started casting before I went to Banff and then sent materials to work with there. There's nothing like being holed away in a studio in the mountains with a finite amount of time. This show has a lot of cedar and glass elements in it, too. I wanted to set a

particular tone and feel in the room. Glass and mirror are such elegant materials and work so well with the polished wood. Mixing in some cruder casts balances out the tone I intended, echoing that period for its humour, absurdity, and ambiguity.

JP: You mention this tone ends with the beginning of WWI and I'm wondering if this loss is echoed in your work. Is capturing this hopelessness part of your intent?

EZ: I am thinking of all of the sculpture I am making for this exhibition as objects of contemplation. I am using this term as a way to think about how I would like to interact with work, moving beyond a passive role of seeing and into a realm of active intellectual engagement, anticipating the role of the object as having potential to connect with people and other objects in a manner that extends literal meaning beyond the denotative, becoming an exercise in balance or symbiotic co-existence—with things and with others. As much as we are living through this totally unsustainable period of extreme excess, there is a cloud of discontent rife with opposition to accepting this reality. It's nothing new and in fact, all of the countercultural movements I've been looking at were born in opposition to a political climate that was distasteful and didn't reflect the sentiment of a thinking population. My intentions are contrary to wanting to highlight hopelessness.

JP: In *The Ages* (2009) (figures 61 & 62), you've carved an oversized yet subtle universal gesture and it functions like a key for the viewer to look for less obvious depictions of gesture in the other works in the exhibition. *Hippy Sculpture* (2009) (figures 3, 66 & 67), for instance, captures the lean of a hip. Giorgio Agamben's "Notes on Gesture" has poetically brought the term and the notion up again for close consideration.

His distillation of movement into single gestures offers reflection on the limitations of language or, more succinctly, how gesture operates outside of language. In the contemporary art context, gesture has been liberally bandied about in relation to representation, with the common goal of capturing it. But I wonder if depicting a gesture is enough. What information is exchanged and produced in capturing a gesture? What does this reduction of movement into gestures signify?

EZ: We've been talking about gesture within the framework of portraiture. If the word portrait is defined as an artistic representation of a person or thing in which the face and its expression is predominant, in which the intention is to display a likeness, personality, and/or mood of the person or thing, then I interpret the definition to include the representation of an expression not necessarily confined to the depiction of a *visage*, but perhaps a singular part of the body or object that communicates *something* about the personality or mood or contributes to a likeness, and can also stretch that meaning to think about gesture as the *positive*, and the physical residue it may leave as the *negative*, a *negative* mark that may be the ephemeral residue of gesture.

I was experimenting with casting hand gestures and I was thinking about abstracted forms of communication outside of spoken language. These experiments helped me to move into the territory of the body and the subtle mannerisms that I personally have that illustrate characteristics of my person in a subtle and perhaps coded language.

And finally, it would be remiss to not consider that these gestures I am thinking about and making are coming from a feminine perspective and therefore are *feminine gestures*. We live in a male-dominated place and time and it would be naïve to believe that all is fair and equitable.

The argument suggesting that now is better than before isn't good enough. My point in delineating this difference between genders in the work for this exhibition is important, for to fully understand what I am doing, it is best to acknowledge that the *rules of engagement* are different.

JP: I'd like to continue to consider this link between your work and portraiture, using *Hippy Sculpture*, a sculpture you recently made at the Banff Centre from a cast of your leaning hip, to focus the discussion. Fixed through the sculpture is a gesture that is particular to you. For me this work is in contradiction to the conventions of portrait making while also a perfect reinvestigation of what portraiture is and how it functions differently today. It is obviously formally outside the traditions of portrait making; mainly it is not a representation of your face, but it is also not named a portrait—it is only one detailed part of you, and it is abstracted as you have broken the cast into shards and stacked those into two forms. Yet the piece is composed from your likeness, capturing you in a static moment, representative of your skin, your stance, and a moment in time. Can you speak to how you see this piece functioning as a representation of you?

EZ: When you told me that there would be a series of catalogues produced about the *petit genres*, it was a good opportunity to talk about literal and metaphorical gesture utilized liberally throughout this exhibition as an abstraction of portrait. Throughout the making of the work, I was experimenting with ways to mark or indicate myself through abstracted and fragmented representations of actual physical gestures that I do make. *Hippy Sculpture* is a broken cast of my actual hip, piled to mimic a cairn to mark the "hippie era" through this broken cast of my hip. Full circle. This Lis Rhodes text from her 1982 film *Pictures on Pink Paper* comes to mind:

Putting anything back where it belongs is always a shock. It never fits where it used to fit and probably doesn't belong. Fantasies are so ideal they don't feel real and never fit so to try and make the things fit where it will never fit is to mistake the very nature of things.

I bring it up because there are overlaps and contradictions that happen in real life and the work that I am really invested in. In the case of *Hippy Sculture* and its inclusion in this exhibition, it's an abstracted portrait of me that marks a time and place that I didn't experience directly (the sixties or the hippie era) yet which remain important socially as a countercultural moment that has had a lasting affect on cultural thought and production. This expansive way of approaching my work works for me because the work can have these messy layers of reference yet can be read in equally full and interesting ways whether read formally or without knowing all of these details.

I'm interested in making objects that work on multiple levels and portraits do that. There is the physical representation of the standard face that typically comes to mind if one were to locate the meaning of portrait in relation to an earlier, traditional art historical framework. And then within that framework there is a back story that exists that is traceable through archives and court or city documents. For example, one can discover who the sitter was, the role they played in their society, and in that way, lock in the sitter's subjective importance to a particular time and place, that doesn't actually matter as centuries pass. The content and importance of portrait morphs then, so these questions are no longer relevant, and instead the object that is the painting and the one who painted it end up holding more societal clout. I'm not interested in that structure of delineation at all. My objective is not about preserving my subjectivity through portrait. That's

too limiting for my intentions and boring, for myself as the maker and for the viewer. Whether I break a cast of my hip or make communicable hand gestures for example, the thread that exists is in the fragment. I am interested to see what happens to the reading when it morphs and doesn't fit into a conventional definition or is barely representational of what it's meant to represent that the meaning changes completely.

And to add more to that, I am specifically interested in discussing these layers through the lens of a feminine perspective, and in turn, I would like to suggest that the idea of portrait is not only defined by an individual, in this case, myself, but that it also can represent a woman's perspective, however individual that representation may appear, so it should also be flexible enough to be thought of in terms of a woman's gesture. The very act of delineating this difference between gender though is in conversation with my concerns and philosophical belief in the symbiotic nature of things and people which rely on balance, moderation and the recognition of the value that each element brings to form a whole. As Barbara Deming once said, "We are all part of one another," and this is very much in tune with what a feminist perspective is for me.

My concerns as an artist who is navigating and thinking about the world will inevitably be rooted in my personal experiences that are informed by my gender. There are many ways that I experience the world and being a woman in the world is a core part of my being. I bring this up not because I have an issue to unpack but because it is important to acknowledge that the rules of engagement are different in order to fully appreciate this work. I am consciously making work as a woman, meaning I am not trying to fit into a patriarchal conversation; I'm having another conversation altogether. This recognition is an attempt at balance and opens the possibilities of engagement beyond

the literal, leaning towards metaphor and embracing subjective responses as part of a work. Again, many parts make up the whole, meaning is contextual and subjective, and there are many ways to see the same thing.

JP: I chose this work to focus on because for me it is in form what you verbalize in words. It literally is a test in balance, parts become a whole, and your subjectivity is figuratively represented through the impression of your stance. What I'm looking for or seeing as a specific to this piece, as well as to *Analogous* (2009) (figure 70), for which you've cast nectarines that you've half eaten, is your body and direct representations of actions taken by you. In *The Ages* and *Sign of the Times* (2007), you use a generic body, almost graphic-like forms, to represent popular, rather clichéd hand gestures, and for your exhibition, *There are No Rules* (2009), you cast someone else's fingers in porcelain to build sculptures that reference historical artworks. But for these newer works in *On Time* you use your body, and I wonder what the implications are? How is meaning affected when the artist inserts her body? Are you now the subject?

These questions for me aren't necessarily in relation to the conventions of portraiture or more directly self-portraiture, but relate to the process of making as well as mark making. Yet, maybe they relate to *Face Up*, the exhibition we co-curated. In our early discussions you named artists you were interested in and later we started to focus on gesture, looking for works that captured gestures, but not in a generic sense. In the end we included *Studies for Holograms* (1970) (figure 79) by Bruce Nauman; two drawings and a painting of a figure pulling out a nose hair by Lee Lozano (figures 80–82); and *Cigarette Tits II* by Sarah Lucas (figure 78). Nauman's approach of making faces, distorting himself into expressions that don't transmit decipherable emotions, grows

out of his performance works. The prints record arbitrary activities as a material to manipulate and an image to capture but the faces he makes may mean nothing. And this is where I want to come back to the artist as material and subject. By using his body, Nauman appears to be offering himself, as an artist, as subject matter, as well as drawing attention to the processes of making the work. How does this fundamental reading of Nauman relate to what you're doing?

EZ: Casting my own body is convenient and in fact, both *The Ages* and *Sign of the Times* are carved from plaster casts of my own hand. A representation of a representation, so to speak. Both works were produced by Darren MacDonald although in the case of the *Sign of the Times*, Paul Slipper was initially involved. *Hippy Sculture* came out of a series of gesture experiments I developed while in Banff in 2008. I was intentionally using my own body and also intentionally morphing the literal. I am interested in abstracting language in order to move into non-representational territory. I wanted to record the residue of a gesture, what is left or what happens as a result of my own idiosyncratic actions.

The self-referential aspect nixes the problem of referencing another work, while at the same time, introduces another set of connections and with that, an historical lineage. Because my interest is not about preserving myself for posterity however, the implications have more to do with the freedom to experiment and the process of how I make and shape the overall body of work. Maybe this could be read as an investigation that embraces the effort of repetition and failure. Samuel Beckett said it best, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better." Bruce Nauman clearly uses process and experimentation to develop work. *Studies for*

Holograms illustrates this way of working and is a fantastic example of exercising a practice, in other words, working out an idea and recording it. Process and experimentation is not about failing in this case but that potential is there. The artist is vulnerable. But what's really interesting in my mind about that conundrum is that being vulnerable doesn't necessarily dictate a negative outcome or what I associate with a definition of failure. It opens things up to potential and more often than not, this is what allows for something interesting to happen in the studio and in life.

JP: This brings us to again to *Face Up*. In choosing the works for this exhibition, your interest in representations of the body, specifically how the body or images of the body can be broken down into single gestures was a primary focus. But in re-examining the exhibition as a whole, another theme becomes apparent, which is the use of repetition, both in the artists' process as well as the way the work is presented. How do you see such repetition in form and concept in relation to your work?

EZ: Repetition, process, self-awareness, and material variety are key elements of Lee Lozano, Bruce Nauman, and Sarah Lucas' practices that I am interested in. The act of repetitively doing an action or the same drawing or carefully covering an object with cigarettes creates a working rhythm for the artist and sets a tone for the work. This is where I see affinities between my own practice and what I admire about the working processes of Lozano, Nauman, and Lucas. The works in this exhibition were chosen because the individual works are interesting on their own and when put together, they take on a dynamic that extends and layers the initial work to come up with new meaning. The works use gesture repetitively through their physical representation and process of making; practice

through repetition, not as an allusion to perfection, but rather as a method of concentration to find things out.

JP: But there is also humour here. There is comedy that plays out in each of the works in *Face Up*. Lee Lozano's drawing and painting serial of pulling out nose hairs is crudely comic. Bruce Nauman makes funny faces in *Studies for Holograms* and Sarah Lucas' *Cigarette Tits II* is totally absurd. There seems to be a relationship between humour and repetition. One funny face is humorous, but what happens when you add another? It's a standard technique in comedy to use repetition to get more laughs, but there is also a tipping point when it's no longer funny. All the works seem to push past this pinnacle into the not funny anymore. In all the works, humour gives way to something grotesque. Lozano turns pruning into manic compulsion, capturing something base and obsessive in her repeated face poking. Nauman uses an acid green screen print to exaggerate his expression and wash himself out, turning his face into the most frightening of clowns, and Lucas' rendering of the female form is vulgar, blunt, and somewhat self-conscious. I wonder if this is a tension you're also after in your work?

EZ: Humour stimulates and it makes people think. I am very interested in living in a world where the people I am surrounded by are encouraged to think critically and independently, and I work with the confidence that people are capable of balancing what they do, think, and say against a larger whole. I think Lozano, Nauman, and Lucas all use humour a bit differently from each other: repetitiously, experimentally, and satirically. You and I have talked about the process of experimentation that a studio practice sets up, a situation of repetition, practice, and experimentation that leads the artist into a range of states from boredom to stimulation, all valuable stages of an artist's process and productivity. The

task then is to translate that into work and often humour is inevitable. Titling for me is crucial and the key often to unpacking the layers of a work. I look for that key in the works of other artists, too, and am often disappointed when an artist regresses and “untitles” work. The lack of a title can come off as lazy and self-important or just insecure: too afraid to name or direct what they want to talk about; too afraid of tension perhaps. Humour is a fantastic opener and levelling of the playing field, so to speak. There are of course various levels of humour and I’m inclined to bust a gut and spend time thinking about the smart variety.