

Roland Fischer's Logic of Sensation: Portrait Photography

Sarah K. Stanley

“Despite appearances, there is no longer a story to tell; the Figures are relieved of their representative role, and enter directly into relation with an order of celestial sensations.”

“The entire body becomes plexus.”

Gilles Deleuze in Francis Bacon. *The Logic of Sensation*¹

In the 1874 essay *The Use and Abuse of History for Life*², Nietzsche reasoned that happiness was only possible through the power of forgetting or in “the capacity of feeling unhistorically”. Fischer’s portraits likewise urge his subjects to leave themselves “on the threshold of the moment and forget the past” and “stand on a single point, like a goddess of victory, without fear or giddiness.” Of course, Nietzsche recognized that it is impossible to live without historical memory; such is the paradise reserved for wild nature. Nietzsche’s, and Fischer’s, answer is to find openings into this immediacy through the immersion of subjectivity into larger forces, whether they be natural or artistic. Roland Fischer’s diverse conceptual methods realized through portraiture provide some clues into these states of pure sensation. Each series varies between large-format portraits of a single person to a collection of Polaroid-sized portraits collected into large grids, such as those of Chinese military officers and sometimes of more ephemeral groupings, including religious pilgrims gathering in Santiago de Compostella or those traveling at the Frankfurt Airport. While the military and religious orders have traditionally provided powerful routes to transmute individual identity, it is the portrait series that Fischer has made in pools that most efficiently dissolve culturally and historically constructed personas. The Los Angeles Portraits was a series first formulated in swimming pools in that city, not necessarily due to the place, but for the luminous light conditions available there. This series was repeated again in China indoors using artificial lighting and Chinese models. For Fischer and his methods of portraiture, the figural is located in the face as a becoming charged with intensity. With these images, the body is made to escape from itself, which is how Deleuze discusses the painter’s use of technical photography to release the figure from narrative in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Fischer’s various portrait series often show only the head, or in other cases, the very top of the shoulders, referencing the classical sculptural bust that was thereafter utilized as a form of commemoration. Upon closer inspection, Fischer’s portraits have not much connection to the classical or historical personages found in sculpture or painting. Closer to Bacon’s figural portraits, sculptural qualities do manifest in Fischer’s portrait photography through the joining of figure and ground. It might be argued that photographic portraiture became concerned with generic attributes with German photographer August Sander’s portrait series that emphasized similitude and human types. No longer was it the exceptional personage, signed through interiors and clothing that mattered, but the anonymous person who now wore mass-produced clothing or a nun walking in a field with prayer book. Fischer’s development of group portraiture also has some relation to portraits of statesmen, artists and military officers collected by Gerhard Richter in *Atlas*, the artist’s graphic compendium that he then used to produce an installation of 48 painted portraits (*Atlas Sheet 30 – 37*, 1971). Similarities emerge, what might be recognized as a species likeness, through repetitive framing of close-ups placed in long rows. It is exactly these differences and repetitions integral to the graphic arts that continue to infiltrate the aesthetics of painting. The relation between photography and painting has mutated throughout modernism; both take turns pulling away from strict representational objectives. Deleuze says of photographs that they are not images of things, but are the thing itself, a content that imposes itself on sight. Perhaps due to this, Bacon always painted his portraits from photographs of the model or from photographic portraits that ascribe no

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aesthetic value, such as x-rays, medical plates and pictures from photo-booths, including scientific studies such as Muybridge's motion studies. Similar to Bacon's paintings, Fischer's photographs contain no reference to places or people, related to the nonspecificity found in collections of identification photos that underplay the value of the subject. However, the reversals in the historically constructed subject that Fischer enacts do not reduce humanity to numbers on a chart, but rather succeed in qualifying attributes intrinsic to the species, whether dressed in uniforms or stripped of all accessories.

“Pool Portraits”: Cross Species Memory

What Fischer achieves with his portraits of mostly women taken in pools of water is something like the reemergence of the human figure back into its fundamental habitat. Rather than the ‘man without qualities’ that define August Sander's portraits, Fischer is after something much more elemental and biological. The human body itself is 60 - 80 percent water, operating as a light-sensitive perceptual organism. The figure hovers in a suspended state, illuminated only by light reflected through water. The swimming pool becomes a framing device that mirrors the specifications of the camera. Rectangular with a depth of field, it is architectural in its configuration. To submerge, to merge, to become liquid once again. To stand in stillness in a pool partially submerged up to the shoulders, the breath is the only source of motion. The sessions typically last 20 to 30 minutes, which require a good deal of physical endurance on the part of the participating model. Meanwhile the floating feeling produced in the buoyant body produce a beatific expression. Amphibian dream. If posing for a portrait is a becoming one's self as image, the photo is always only one image among many. Contrary to this, Fischer's portraits instead vibrate with other principles, making it the one that could ever possibly be realized. In this sense, it is the return of a classical beauty; however, the models are not exceptional, yet are instead elevated into a continuum that transmutes cultural standards of beauty. What has previously come to define photographic portraiture is recalibrated through a perfected probability based in light-metered variations.

Deleuze states that van Gogh and Gauguin rediscovered the art of the portrait, the portrait through color, by restoring to the background vast monochromatic fields that are carried toward infinity.³ Fischer also returns to the qualities intrinsic in the light spectrum and the perception of color fields. What makes the sky appear as blue rather than red is due to the reflective properties contained in atmospheric chemistry, primarily effects derived from water during its frequent change of phase. In the pool, the water's penetrating shades of light blue to midnight blue to black look more gaseous than liquid. To be immersed in the many variations of color that matches the tones of the sky both above and below creates an atmospheric plane that merges scientific and religious imagery. Because all horizon lines fall away, mathematically-derived sensations angle into the frame of the pool. The line of the pool's edge is not visible, yet the framing remains implied as containment with imagined boundaries. All of these invisible dimensions are pressing into the immersed figure as a gravitational force, felt rather than seen. It is due to these array of forces that the attributes of the model are able to transmit information that exceed divisions that usually separate out interior being from its supporting environment. If Fischer's Portraits evince a spectral light, it is an indication that atmospheric modulations cause a convergence of ‘the coloring sensation,’ those elements of painting that Deleuze points to, “the large fields of color on which the Figure detaches itself – fields without depth,

¹ Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon. *The logic of sensation* (transl. by Daniel W. Smith), London: Continuum, 2003.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The use and abuse of history*, originally published 1873, New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010, p. 6.

³ Gilles Deleuze, See note 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Preface.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9-10.

or with only the kind of shallow depth that characterizes post-cubism”.⁴ These descriptions also apply to Fischer’s Portraits: “The fields of color become figural and the figural becomes fields of color.” Like van Gogh and Gauguin had done with painting, Roland Fischer is also waging a battle with the image. Any return to either landscape or portraiture as a genre is necessarily based in cliché. The artist’s task, according to Deleuze, is to locate the methods to break out from imposed limitations of a genre.⁵ The same applies to photographic portraiture that can never free itself from the pictorial devices lodged in sculpture and painting. Something similar could be said about the cliché of woman as it has been constructed in painting. In Fischer’s portraits, it should be noted that woman as an artistic category is reformulated. In an interview, Fischer states that the feminine face works best for his portraits in pools. The Pool Portraits may revive some secrets about the origins of the species that emerged from water, and are born through immersion in water. How to break through into new territory with the genre of portraiture that has dominated the field of photography from its conception? Some of his strategies are the same as Francis Bacon. Make use of a monochromatic background to isolate the figure through the head. This was also a strategy employed by the masters of 15th Century portraiture like Jan van Eyck, whose models wore turbans, large fur hats and head ornamentation to create a color field canopy piled high above the head. This framing and offsetting of the smoothness of the face is also true of the stylized hats of Fischer’s military officers. For Fischer’s purposes, he had hit upon the importance of framing the face in fabric folds through his first portrait series ‘Nuns and Monks’. The monk or nun in this framing of the monastic hooded robe or habit reduces identity, allowing facial features to circulate more freely as indexical references to human types. It was in these figures of renunciation that Fischer first began to articulate the clearing away of narration that clings to personalized attributes, such as clothing, hairstyle, gesture and expression and all the rest of what gives a person the psychological aura found in portraiture. In this sense, Fischer is working to cut away all the elements of the human psyche that the photographer Cindy Sherman so painstakingly constructs using the details that contribute to psychological types, especially ones associated with cinematic genres. Similar to Warhol’s deemphasis of personality in Screen Tests, his film portrait series (1964–1966), Fischer instructs his models to relax all facial expression, reducing the face to presence. For the Chinese Pool Portraits, he directs the gaze of the model to points and vectors that further reduce the particulars of subjectivity. Rather than a portrait of a person, it becomes instead a non-individualized consciousness freed from human-centered intentions. In this sense, each woman (or man) in these portraits takes on the spirit of the renunciate, and bathe in her own emancipated condition.

“Façades” into “new architectures”: Surfaces, Repetition, and the Cut

Fischer’s strategy with his series of architectural facades bears certain similarities to his portraits. He works with the graphic qualities of architectural facades in order to reduce lines and colors into a design patterning, a virtual catalog of surfaces. In this condensation of visual reality, the photograph becomes an objective artifact rather than a flat surface. Meanwhile the solidness of the wall of the gallery required to hold the photograph appears limitless, thereby enlarging and expanding the architectural confines of the room. Likewise, the figure in the portraiture is rooted to a specific location yet appears to float detached, just as the building’s attributes float free via the animation of its facade. Architecture only acquires movement through the acquisition of multiple perspectives and viewing angles. Fischer’s most recent work with architecture is constructions made possible with

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finely tuned alterations to the frequency of lines, curves, light corridors and passageways. These ignite rhythms not possible within the confines of a single-perspective photography. In this sense, Fischer's newest work is a reinvigoration of some of the first artistic experiments with architecture by Moholy-Nagy, whose photographic 'light constructions' aimed to produce the outlines of new forms of design. Unlike so many other artists who work directly with images of iconic architectural modernism, Fischer's conceptual methods produce an unwinding of iconicity into an elaborated sign system for new architectures. It results in an almost total annihilation of the building through an holographic splitting into multiple perspectives, incisions, cuts and reversals that reference cinematic montage. Fischer's portraits also contain a certain architectural bearing. The angle from which the model looks back at the observer, or looks away, carries significant clues about where and how to direct the gaze. The glance backwards, half-turned, verses the glance away, also references the contours of the architectural, points and angles that enclose and define the figure. It is not the idea of space that Fischer is after, but instead, a shifting of perceptual conditions that draws out interior subjectivity into a manifold of what actually exists. The very attributes of a living organism's encounter with its environment are coaxed into revealing its substratum. The philosophical complexities of thinking oneself as material reality in relation to the location from which one looks out into the world – this is the actual subject of all of Roland Fischer's work. The images are precise technical constructions that allow the subject, and so too the viewer, to escape narration, to locate points of entry into a more fluid, open perceptual framework.