Notes on *Look: Portraits by Summer McCorkle and Lillian Mulero*

Recalling the early 20th C work of German photographer August Sander, **Lillian Mulero’s** portraits are titled not by the names of their subjects but by their professions. Though mostly all personally known to Mulero, this system of naming distances the artist and subsequently the viewer from the person pictured. Instead of looking to the drawings and paintings for a personal connection or expression, the titles lead us to be confronted by an archetype, an example of what a ‘psychiatrist’, or ‘money manager’ or ‘artist’ looks like.

Clearly taken from photographs, Mulero’s subjects stand plainly, looking (mostly) square at the camera, artist and viewer. Though rendered delicately in colored pencil or muted oil paints, the subjects stand their ground, almost challenging one to name them, to assign them another job, title, identity.

Even Mulero’s sculptures embody this directness; a mound of hair, a pile of pencil shavings from the artist’s studio, two door knobs installed at breast height. They serve as stand-ins for the physical existence of their owners. The only work that seems indirect, the model for “After Velazquez; Against Nature” an art historical reference, plunks a plastic stag amid a stunning potted garden. As reference to a little known work by one of the greatest and most complex portrait painters of all time, “After Velazquez; Against Nature” serves as the oblique foil to Mulero’s other works.

With their photographic clarity and head-on compositions, **Summer McCorkle’s** images seem at first to be as direct as Mulero’s drawings. However, there are subtle details in McCorkle’s work that belie that initial assessment. Shot in Wisconsin, these photographs of her own cousins, aunts and uncles represent a family in flux.

The title of the series, *Deathworklovebirth*, provides the first hint of context. Here, people who appear in one image may re-appear in another taken years later. They may have grown, aged, added or subtracted a member of their immediate family group. Some seem to be clearly concerned with their self presentation while others appear completely devoid of self-consciousness. One gets the sense that some members of this family may share little more than their genes.

In addition to being related to her sitters, McCorkle has provided another, visual connection to this seemingly disparate family group. Almost all of the images are grounded against some sort of flat background. Whether this background is a hillside, rough wood wall, or the side of an RV, its use not only unites the images visually but also introduces a sense of theatrical set up, or tableau connecting these very contemporary works to the greater tradition of formal portraiture.

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