

PORTRAITS AGAINST POWER

Every modern cultured man must wage war against art, as against opium.

Photograph and be photographed!

Crystallize man not by a single “synthetic” portrait, but by a whole lot of snapshots taken at different times and in different conditions.

Paint the truth.

Value all that is real and contemporary.

And we will be real people, not actors.

—Aleksandr Rodchenko, *AGAINST THE SYNTHETIC PORTRAIT, FOR THE SNAPSHOT*
Moscow, April 1928¹

A Hall of Unflattering Portraits is, collectively, a troubled vision of power, of how power is maintained, exercised and meted out, captured in Jason Dunda’s signature vernacular. Comprised of fourteen portraits of known and unknown subjects and seven polystyrene busts—interstitial studies now presented as discrete works in their own right—this is not exactly the exhibition I thought it might be four years ago.

“The thing that I’m least skilled at is the most earnest and raw,” Dunda told me on May 23, speaking over the phone a few months prior to the installation of the exhibition. He and I had been talking about photography, painting and power for four years at this point, a conversation that had begun soon after he submitted work from a prior series—*The Most Beautiful Things in the World* (2010-2014)—before leaving for a Canada Council-supported residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. He was working in gouache when he first contacted me, executing remarkably meticulous drawings of instruments of power—searchlights, duck blinds, home security systems, shipping containers and lecterns—shifted subtly into sites of civil unrest and disobedience. His process was research-intensive, and he worked from photographs sourced from Radio Free Europe, Al Jazeera, the BBC and other international agencies. My first contact in April 2014 was with the thought that he might engage with the MacLaren’s Sovfoto Archiveⁱⁱ in the creation of new work. Dunda’s practice at the time was political—his approach was to “highlight, satirize and impugn”ⁱⁱⁱ authority and control as it was manifested in the built landscape—but there was little evidence of the unruly gumption of this new work in the drawings he submitted.

Paris changed things. Dunda toured the Cité de la Muette, France’s first skyscraper public housing project turned World War II concentration camp in Drancy. He wandered the Musée Carnavalet, where ephemera from the French Revolution and the Bastille twiggled his interest in the smaller, more obscure stories buried in our grand political narratives. At the Orangérie—so named for its housing of the orange trees at the now-raised Palais des Tuileries—Impressionist and post-Impressionist paintings lured Dunda back to oil. At night he scoured YouTube for archive news reports on the rebellions at Clichy sous Bois, and sometime later was laid low by a summer cold. But most importantly, Dunda dropped the precision of the gouache and instead embraced something messier.

This exhibition is a focused survey of recent paintings and sculpture from Dunda’s series *Various Incidents* (2014-ongoing) that typify the artist’s recent move towards the “earnest and raw.” The works here are figurative, a trend visible in *Vendôme Column (the first one)* (2014), with a man’s face coalescing in the fluted masonry of the first Vendôme Column, destroyed by Communards in 1871 and recreated by the French government in 1874. This painting was executed in Paris, and in it Dunda’s tightly controlled palette, scraped application of paint and figurative references presage his newer works like *Sergei Kislyak does that thing where you scratch your nose but you’re actually flipping the bird* (2017).

Later works offer portraits of known and noteworthy figures, most made from the anti-heroic polystyrene busts that occupy the haphazard pedestal in the centre of the gallery. In this exhibition—as in Dunda’s studio—it can be tricky sorting out which reference materials refer to which painting. This is by design: “I try not to get too attached to one reference,” Dunda comments. In earlier works he used photographs abstracted through an iterative sketching process to create his final, made-strange compositions; now he works also from busts sawn with a serrated drywall knife from stacked layers of two-inch polystyrene foam, dredged in resin, occasionally draped in chiffon or organza. While it is tricky to suss out when these busts were introduced by looking at Dunda’s paintings, it is noticeable how voluminous some of his later subjects appear in contrast to his earlier works. *Mike Daisey needs a bigger net* (2016), for example, is slug-swollen, as heavy as a Henry Moore; *Vote for prisoner no. 9642* (2016) has little of this billowing presence, although it was made just months prior.

My curatorial background is in photography and it was through photography that I first met Dunda, so I am always curious to see what elements remain of the photograph in the final works. In *Sergei Kislyak* I see the trace of an aggressive flashbulb, the subject pinned against a dirty wall like a tenement portrait by Jacob Riis (1849-1914). In *Vote for prisoner no. 9642 (after)* (2016) it’s a blur that I respond to, an accident-turned-visual-trope first introduced to the world through the photochemical limitations of early photography. But these connections are incidental to Dunda’s project. The works are dense, layered and resist the individualization and idealization that portraits in oil typically trade in, and it is here that they resemble photographs the most. There is no romanticization of any of these subjects: while the paintings capture and synthesize the many gestures of their subjects in a process analogous to traditional portraiture, they are *unflattering*. This is how we wear power when we bear power badly.

On a recent trip to Chicago, I asked Dunda to take me through the Art Institute of Chicago, an institution he knows and loves after attaining his MFA at the School of the Art Institute in 2001 and teaching there since 2005. It was a quick tour, but enlightening: I could suddenly see the society wives and debutantes of John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) in Dunda's treatment of draped organza in *Veiled portrait of Jon Burge* (2018) and the weather-lined features of Honoré Daumier's (1808-1879) comic figures in *Joe Arpaio gets a taste of his own medicine* (2018). We admired the acid-coloured characters in Nicole Eisenman's *The Drawing Class* (2011) and Edouard Vuillard's *Landscape: Window Overlooking the Woods* (1899), both bringing to mind the rococo pink ear in *Congressman Leo Ryan has seen better days* (2018). Rather than revealing the thieving sensibility of a magpie, the trip showed the deeply intentional and wildly divergent citations that inform Dunda's work.

I began this essay with Aleksandr Rodchenko's essay praising the snapshot for its ability to destroy the myth-making function of the traditional painted portrait. This quote was in part due to Dunda's research into the Sovfoto Archive, but the statement also reflects a new approach to portraiture that emphasizes the anti-heroic and human. Rodchenko noted, "It should be stated firmly that with the appearance of photographs, there can be no question of a single, immutable portrait." By this he meant that the surplus of images available in the world precluded the dominance of one fabricated image that might rule them all; he continues, "By means of a photograph or other documents, we can debunk any artistic synthesis produced by one man of another."^{iv} Rodchenko's words presage an attitude towards image saturation and excess that became central to the postmodernist project, when the "data-ingesting mind" of the artist resulted in practices where "the picture [is] conceived as the image of an image."^v

Dunda's work is synthetic, as is any oil portrait. He—like any painter—does not have the ability to freeze a frame at the fraction of a second. But what he synthesizes in his work is the human, the frail and the failed, produced from myriad snapshots, transitional sculptural studies and an internalized image database that comes from a lifetime of careful and close looking. The work here is messy, earnest and raw, but it is *real*: this, ultimately, is its power. "Value all that is real and contemporary," Rodchenko reminds us, "and we will be real people, not actors."^{vi}

—Emily McKibbin

Jason Dunda has shown his work internationally, participating in recent exhibitions at Slow, Chicago; Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC; Fluxspace, Philadelphia; Cain Schulte, San Francisco; Katharine Mulherin Contemporary Art, Toronto; Kuwait Art Foundation, Kuwait City; and Wexner Centre for the Arts, Columbus, OH. His work is in the collections of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston; the Doris McCarthy Gallery, Toronto; and the Todd Oldham Collection, New York, NY. A graduate of York University (BFA, 1995), he attained his MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2001) where he has taught since 2005. Jason Dunda lives and works in Chicago, Illinois.

ⁱ Aleksandr Rodchenko, AGAINST THE SYNTHETIC PORTRAIT, FOR THE SNAPSHOT, Moscow, April 1928. Available online: <http://theoria.art-zoo.com/against-the-synthetic-portrait-for-the-snapshot/> Accessed September 19, 2018.

ⁱⁱ The Sovfoto Archive at the MacLaren Art Centre is a collection of 23,116 vintage Soviet press prints dating from the Stalinist period, distributed to North American news outlets through the Sovfoto press agency in New York City (1931 to the present). Jason ultimately ended up conducting research in the archive and *Contributing Factors*, a related exhibition in Joan Lehman Gallery, presents prints that he used in the generation of new imagery. *Contributing Factors* runs December 6, 2018 through March 10, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jason Dunda, undated artist statement

^{iv} Aleksander Rodchenko, AGAINST THE SYNTHETIC PORTRAIT

^v "Excerpt from Other Criteria: The Flatbed Picture Plane," Leo Steinberg. Originally published as "Reflections on the State of Criticism" in *Artforum*, March 1972. Available online: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/othercriteria.pdf> Accessed November 6, 2018

^{vi} Rodchenko, AGAINST THE SYNTHETIC PORTRAIT

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37 Mulcaster Street
Barrie, ON L4M 3M2
www.maclarenart.com

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