

1Not Beautiful: A Counter-Theme in the

History of Women's Portraiture

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Beauty has been implicated in the portraiture of women since the origin of the portrait. In early Italian Renaissance art, the portrait of the beautiful woman often stood for the beauty of painting itself. Physical beauty was also perceived to embody moral and spiritual virtue, and the profile portrait of these years came to be the canonic expression of their co-identification. Domenichino Ghirlandaio's c. 1488 *Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni* (Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza) is one of the best known examples of the genre. The subject is shown in a profile of exceptional delicacy. Her posture seems impossibly erect. A radiant face made more luminous still by its contrast to an ink-black background is framed by waves of crimped golden hair. Giovanna's hands are decorously folded, one over the other, a modest gesture which belies the sumptuousness of her costume. The dress, a confection of scarlets and ochers, suggests that the portrait was executed in the year of Giovanna's marriage, as would have been in the custom. (It was produced, however, in the year of her death.) An inscription just to the right of her profile reads, "Art, would that you could represent character and mind. There would be no more beautiful painting on earth."¹ Leonardo da Vinci was even more explicit when he painted "Virtutem Forma Decorat" ("Beauty adorns Virtue") on the obverse of his *Ginevra dei' Benci* of c. 1480 (Washington, D.C., National

Gallery of Art). The lettered scroll curls around a branch of juniper, an emblem of Ginevra's chastity. She was the object of a series of Platonic love poems by Bernardo Bembo, "celebrating her beauty and virtue." One can imagine that both properties are embodied in Leonardo's representation: the subject's exquisitely wrought alabaster face and eyes of dark gold are set into relief by the plain brown wool dress, its sheer insert modestly pinned at the neck.²

A century later, across the Atlantic Ocean, standards of beauty grew more pliant as Elizabeth I of England shaped them to accommodate her singular position as the Virgin Queen. In her own words, she possessed the "the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but ...the heart and stomach of a king."³ Fusing the two, Elizabeth shrewdly constructed a hybrid form of presentational beauty which conjoined the space-filling force of the masculine (with overscaled costumes to rival the dimensions of her father in Hans Holbein's *Portrait of Henry VIII*, 1539-40, Rome, Galleria Nazionale) with the delicacy of the feminine (signaled by yards of filigreed lace and elaborately-patterned textiles). Elizabeth also instituted the "Mask of Youth"—a whitened face, tightly-coiled ringlets of flame-colored hair, and crimson lips to enable her roster of portrait painters to conceal her age, the revelation of which would have weakened her position as the head of state.⁴ Canons of beauty naturally shift with time, geography, and factors of class and gender. A quick trajectory of various "ideals" might take us through Bronzino's court portraits (*Eleanora of Toledo and Her Son John*, c. 1545, Detroit Institute of Fine

Arts, for example); François Boucher's multiple representations of Madame de Pompadour; the ethereal maidens of Thomas Gainsborough, and Joshua Reynolds' contemporary goddesses. Of course, not all women in history were portrayed as beautiful—one could offer Bronzino's *Laura Battiferri*, (1555-60, Florence, Palazzo Vecchio) as a counterpoint to Eleanora, and the figure of Catherine de Medici as an austere contrast to Boucher's sensual Pompadour. There is also the time-honored tradition of presenting a broken-down old woman as a sign of Vanity's inevitable fate, or a grotesque hag as the emblem of Death. Generally, however, women of stature (which include most of the female subjects who had the prestige to have the portraits painted in the first place) were often imagined as physically attractive, within the conventions of the period. Rubens' portrait of his second wife, Hélène Fourment (*The Little Fur*, c. 1638, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), might not fulfill our era's notion of female allure, but the artist's compatriots understood her plump flesh to be sensually provocative.

But what if the woman to be portrayed were *not* beautiful? And what if that deficiency were considered significant enough to become a veritable counter-theme within the portrait itself? In this essay, I want to offer a new twist on the theme of beauty in women's portraits, and consider a series of images whose critical fortunes have been irrevocably shaped by the conviction that the female subjects depicted therein were emphatically not beautiful. I do this not simply to defend the innate worth of the supposedly unlovely subjects who were depicted, or

to argue for the relativity of beauty—which is accepted matter-of-factly these days. Nor do I want to belabor the point that these are specious grounds on which to evaluate any human subject—male or female. Rather, my aim is to show that the stubborn expectation that women, when portrayed, *should* be beautiful, has profoundly affected the way their portraits have been imagined, produced, and received. Historically, as sociologist Efrat Tseëlon has written, women are stigmatized by the expectation to be beautiful. If they are not, they are often defined by its absence.⁵ I want to explore how this perceived “absence” has been addressed in a handful of important portraits by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, John Singer Sargent, Paul Cézanne, and Cindy Sherman, who deliberately exploits prejudices against the “not-beautiful,” and in the process, dismantles assumptions about canonical female representation. Each of these artists conjures the not-beautiful in a different way. Approaches include forthright acknowledgment, equivocation, denial, and outright defiance, in which the subject’s not-beautiful state becomes a primary agent of meaning. I should say from the outset that my observations on the not-beautiful are not yet fully theorized. Rather, I am presenting what might be called “episodes” in the history of women’s portraiture—particularly in their reception—that are in need of a theory to be fully comprehended. I offer the first tentative steps.

Needless to say, Beauty has been the subject of philosophizing and psychologizing for centuries—beginning, as most of the pertinent discussions do,

with Plato, who was deeply suspicious of what he called *kosmètikè*, and proceeding to Kant—who emphasized the disinterested judgment of “pure” taste, and continuing with Hegel, who believed that artistic beauty was a higher form than its natural counterpart.⁶ After nearly a century of neglect, or the “repression of beauty,” as James Hillman calls it, critic Dave Hickey revived interest in thinking about Beauty with a short essay called “Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty,” and philosopher Arthur Danto introduced the idea of the “third realm” of beautification, the aspect of beauty, somewhere between art and nature, that is most relevant to human life.⁷

Despite all this recent attention, the subject of the “not-beautiful” has not yet been analyzed. Some might object that this is an equivocation rather than a category, let alone one worth investigating. I would contend that there *is* a constellation of prejudices, perceptions, reservations and resistances—as yet unexplored—that are set into motion, rather systematically, in the portraits I will focus upon here. More generally, I believe that this process—to a greater or lesser degree—is activated whenever the physical form of the female portraiture subject resists, or defies, the prevailing canons of beauty. This impulse has been deliberately exploited recently by a number of women artists—Cindy Sherman among them.⁸ Historically, when prejudices against the not-beautiful have been indulged, analysis has been foiled and criticism preempted, leaving these subtle

and complex, even contradictory, representations without a coherent way to be *seen*.

Is the “not-beautiful” simply a variant of the Ugly? We might consider Plotinus’s definition of the ugly: “that which makes the soul shrink within itself, denies the thing, turns away from it, resentful and alienated from it.”⁹ Freud was convinced that beauty had something to do with sexual attraction, but could not quite integrate the fact that for him, the human genitalia were without beauty. (He stopped just short of claiming that they were ugly.)¹⁰ In general, the ugly is conceived of that which cannot arouse or attract, that from which we turn ourselves away. Not infrequently, evil is represented by the ugly. The paintings and photographs I am discussing do not rivet the eye in the conventional way that the imagery of the beautiful woman does, but they are *not* turned away from. They too compel attention. They arouse curiosity, irritation, sometimes even anger or contempt. Yet each possesses a distinct appeal –in its parts, if not as a unified whole. The viewer’s relationship to these images seems to remain fixed in irresolution, without undergoing the catharsis of experiencing *either* the beautiful, or the ugly.

Ingres’ *Comtesse de Tournon*

I want to begin with an 1812 portrait by Ingres now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The *Comtesse de Tournon*, (Fig. 1) originally Geneviève de Seytres Caumont,

was the mother of the recently appointed Prefect of Rome, an official in Napoleon's occupation government, and thus an important figure within the circle of French citizens established in Rome. The visage of the Comtesse has generated some rather crude allusions to her unfortunate lack of beauty. For instance, art historian Walter Friedlander called the image a "pitiless description of a forceful and witty ugliness" and likened it to one of Goya's "gruesome" royal portraits of the Spanish court. Other writers have emphasized the subject's "rather bulbous nose," and the fact that her mouth had "fallen in with the loss of some teeth."¹¹ Lest the reader/viewer fail to comprehend, one writer points out that the Comtesse "who had almost certainly never been a great beauty, even in her youth, is not idealized."¹² Critics tend to underscore the Comtesse's apparent obliviousness to the fact that it is unseemly to be painted if one has fewer teeth or less hair than the canons of beauty require.

Philadelphia collector Henry McIlhenny owned the Ingres portrait before it passed to the Philadelphia Museum of Art upon his death. When he was trying to decide whether to buy the painting from the Paris dealer Pierre Rosenberg in 1935, he corresponded with his friend Agnes Mongan, one of the first women curators at a major American museum—the Fogg at Harvard University.¹³ Speaking about the *Comtesse de Tournon*, Mongan says that she and "P.J.S." [Paul Sachs, then director of the Fogg and also a friend of McIlhenny's] "both think it a perfectly swell portrait." Mongan then concedes her own reservations about the Comtesse's

appearance: “but my own feeling is that the lady is so ugly I don’t think I’d like to have her looking at me long.” (So much for the not-beautiful.) She suggests that perhaps McIlhenny should consider instead the full length portrait of *Madame Moitessier* (Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) of 1851. But then Mongan thinks better of her recommendation: “If it were to come to a choice between the two, I’d place my vote for Mme. de Tournon, for even I would prefer ugliness to that heavy type of French beauty.”

My own interest in the Comtesse was originally inspired by my students’ discomfort with her portrait, a collective reaction that was repeated with remarkable consistency over several years. What aroused the most distress in a group of sophisticated and sensitive students was the Comtesse de Tournon’s apparent lack of self-consciousness about her supposedly devastating homeliness. Indeed, the faint smile on her face, and the warmth of her lustrous brown eyes, suggest that she took a positive pleasure in being thus portrayed. In the history of visual culture, the homely woman is most often invoked as an allegory for Vanitas or Death. Response to Ingres’ portrait suggests that it is unsettling, still, when the failure of a woman’s countenance to please the viewer cannot be rationalized by its moralizing function. At least a portion of the observers’ sustained discomfort may have been activated by the portrait’s inconsistencies concerning the markers of age and sensuality. Ingres’s image oscillates between youth and age (the unblemished right arm of the Comtesse is counteracted by the slackness of her chin, and the

burnished brown curls unsettle the matronly, neck-concealing ruff), and between aristocratic poise and base materiality (the dignified pose of the Comtesse is undone by the prominence of the wart on her nose). There are also confusions about the signs of gender: the femininity of the cashmere shawl, the lush green velvet dress and the delicate filigree of the ruff and veil is at odds with the faint shadow of the moustache on the Comtesse's upper lip. Also, the subject's features do not cohere into a recognizable "whole"—a difficulty which Norman Bryson has identified in a number of Ingres portraits.¹⁴ Exaggerations and distortions emphasize certain features and diminish, or altogether deny, others.

The Comtesse de Tournon's body seems pyramidal at first glance, looming as it does into the space of the viewer. The portly body seems to expand—and the head to recede—as the eye moves down to the bottom edge of the frame. Yet in the next moment, the head is vividly, almost alarmingly, present, not recessive at all, for the fat brown sausage curls and the contrasting dry papery thinness of the ruff compel the eye. Provocations to touch are elicited by the ruff's finely wrought layers, the sheen of the green velvet, and the limpid veiling that is caught lightly at the back of the Comtesse's head. Yet for many, the portrait is difficult to look at, the Comtesse imaginatively repellant to the touch. Her slightly protuberant, glistening brown eyes are perhaps her most commanding feature. Convex upper and lower lids curve around them to underscore their primacy at the approximate center of her face. They rivet the viewer, and inevitably draw attention to the nose,

whose inelegant proportions leave a too-narrow lip below, which is, in turn, made more conspicuous by the faint dark downiness painted there. The fashionable blouson sleeve of the dress swells out above a surprisingly rounded, firm arm; this apparently youthful flesh is at odds with the subject's old-fashioned wig, veil and ruff. It is as if signs of the abject—the moustache, the artificial hair, the sagging chin—are conjoined to markers of the sublime: the lustrous velvet, the cashmere shawl, the delicate lace and fragile ruff, the gleam of the arm's polished skin. What guided Ingres' hand and mind as he produced this hybrid image, coupling youth with age, homeliness with beauty, the appealing with the repugnant? One wonders how Ingres would have fashioned the Comtesse de Tournon if he had had the chance to “perfect” her image in later variations, as he often chose to do with his mythological and historical genre paintings. In a hypothetical perfecting of the Comtesse's portrait, it is reasonable to assume that he would not have painted a wart on his subject's nose.

In May of 1995, the Conservator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Mark Tucker, was painstakingly cleaning the portrait of the Comtesse.¹⁵ While removing the yellowed varnish from the subject's face and the veil around it, Tucker noticed several repaints of orange pigment that had been applied to the Comtesse's nose, and removed them. He found that the paint had concealed a sizeable wart, one that was originally painted by Ingres in 1812, and “corrected” later by someone other than the artist. Since the painting has had few owners—it passed to dealer Pierre

Rosenberg directly from the Comtesse's heirs—the wart must have been concealed in the service of a family member who found the blemish unseemly. One wonders why Ingres included it in the first place—especially during the early years in Rome when his career depended upon private patronage. The wart could so easily have been omitted, as, of course, could have been the faint moustache on the upper lip. Does the *Comtesse de Tournon* offer Ingres' recalibration of the possibilities for female display? Is this portrait his sly suggestion that beauty can be embodied, and discerned, in the *parts* of a woman, even if those fragments do not cohere into a conventionally beautiful whole?

Cindy Sherman also wondered about Ingres' vision of the feminine, and conjured an "Ingres" of her own. As a number of writers have already pointed out, Sherman's *History Portrait #204* draws upon several different Ingres portraits, although it was not beholden to one in particular. Sherman emulates the provocative décolletée of both *Madame Rivière* (1806, Paris, Musée du Louvre) and *Madame de Senonnes* (1814, Nantes, Musée des Beaux-Arts), the seated *Madame Moitessier's* upraised, coiled fingers, and the *Vicomtesse d'Hausonville's* (1845, New York, The Frick Collection) mirror frame adorned with visitors' calling cards. Karen Kleinfelder, at the suggestion of Susan Siegfried, has also linked *History Portrait #204* to yet another Ingres—the *Comtesse de Tournon*—because of the two conspicuous warts that Sherman affixed to her subject's face.¹⁶ Kleinfelder suggests that Sherman may have seen the Ingres

portrait at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. But in 1989, the date of the *History Portraits* series, the wart was still lying concealed under a layer of orange paint—which makes Sherman’s inclusion of it all the more interesting. As Ingres did before her, she turns the female ideal on its head. As Kleinfelder puts it, “It is almost as if Cindy Sherman went through Lacan’s looking glass to offer us a reverse view of the mirror stage” (p. 807). The Comtesse de Tournon, although part of a privileged circle in Rome, was a private woman whose image remained for years in the hands of her heirs. The next subject I will discuss lived a far more public life, and evidently had a significant share in determining how she was portrayed. Isabella Stewart Gardner’s portrait, by John Singer Sargent (*Isabella Stewart Gardner*, 1888-89, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum of Art. Fig. 2) has hung since her death in her house-museum in Boston, Fenway Court, presiding *in absentia* over the superb art collection that Gardner assembled in the decades before her death.

Sargent’s *Isabella Stewart Gardner*

The most famous characteristic of Isabella Stewart Gardner, apart from her wealth, was that her face was not beautiful, as nearly every piece written about her during her lifetime reminded the reader. And her subsequent biographers have continued to mention the absence of beauty, even as they invoke Gardner’s compensatory features. As one of Gardner’s biographers noted, “though she was not beautiful she

produced the effect of beauty.” A friend of Gardner’s, Elsie de Wolfe, mused that “...one never heeded her lack of beauty because of the radiant mentality and understanding heart behind it.”¹⁷

On the other hand, Gardner’s figure, as distinct from her face, was understood to be quite unrivaled in its attractions. Sargent produced a painting which emphasizes the former, at some expense to the latter. This strategy produced an equivocal representation of a woman who insisted that Sargent produce a portrait of her that was as sexually provocative as his infamous *Madame X*, (1884, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) in which the “professional beauty” Virginie Gautreau presented her lithe, flexed body to the viewer, while averting her face in profile, an immodest re-imagining of Ghirlandiao’s *Giovanna Tuornabuoni*.¹⁸ Sargent, on his part, had a desire for fame in America, and felt that, given the appropriately provocative portrait for the not-beautiful Mrs. Gardner, commissions would flow from the *cognoscenti* of Boston’s Back Bay.

To some degree, Gardner got her wish, even though Sargent had to wait a bit longer for his. The aggressive corporeal display of Sargent’s *Isabella Stewart Gardner* disturbed many viewers. Her much-praised sensual shape was held to be grossly exaggerated by the artist, as was the plunging depth of her neckline. On this last matter, the subject’s husband, Jack Gardner, became enraged when a remark circulated that Sargent had “painted [Gardner] all the way down to Crawford’s Notch” (a summer retreat favored by artists of the time).¹⁹ Ultimately,

Gardner forbade the exhibition of his wife's portrait during his lifetime, a decree that was scrupulously honored. Today the Sargent portrait is hung in the Gothic Room of Fenway Court, just above a large, altar-like, Italian *cassone*. The juxtaposition substantiates Henry James' remark that the artist had "painted a Byzantine Madonna."²⁰

Gardner was a woman whose authority—both economic and personal—seems to have prompted some ambivalence in Sargent, at least in the early years of their acquaintance. A Bostonian by marriage, she took pleasure in agitating the local Brahmins with her peculiarly New York dynamism and aggressive personal style. Her Back Bay home was a mecca for artists, intellectuals, musicians and distinguished visitors from afar. In 1888, Gardner was just beginning to collect the masterpieces that would fill Fenway Court. In the portrait, which was exhibited in February of 1889 at the St. Botolph's Club in Boston with the title—*Woman: an Enigma*, Sargent acknowledged Gardner's indisputable force of will, but inflected it with a recognition of his subject's vulnerabilities.

Suitably iconic, framed by what seems to be an aureole of gold, Gardner stands as if in expectation of the hordes who will come to worship. As Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt has put it, "When we come into Isabella's presence, she adds us to her collection."²¹ The French writer Paul Bourget, a friend of Sargent's, called Gardner the "American Idol, for whose service man labors, whom he has decked with the jewels of a queen, behind each of whose whims lie days and days spent in

the ardent battle of Wall Street.”²² The somewhat startlingly dynamic patron was originally introduced to Sargent by Henry James. The painter and Gardner eventually became close friends, but their initial collaboration was reportedly fraught with tension.

In *Isabella Stewart Gardner*, Sargent overtly paid homage to the subject’s corseted body by visually framing it within the curve of her conjoined arms, and amplifying her hips with a black shawl tied and draped there. Gardner stands erect before a gold, scarlet and burgundy brocade. Based on a much smaller textile in her own collection, Sargent greatly amplified its pomegranate pattern, so that it both frames and competes with Gardner’s figure as a near bodily “other.” Her evening dress, which resembles a Charles Worth design, has the aforementioned plunging V-neckline, slightly full sleeves that accentuate the roundness of her shoulders, and a fitted bodice that wraps tightly around her corseted waist. The subject’s provocative hourglass figure is triply emphasized: by two ropes of pearls draped around her waist, from which are suspended blood red ruby pendants; by a black shawl that Gardner tied tightly around her hips—thereby deliberately amplifying their breadth; and lastly, by the subject’s famously lustrous arms. Not uncommon was one critic’s observation that, “She is not a beautiful woman, but she has arms that are perfection—begging description.”²³ And the celebrated arms are striking indeed. In Sargent’s portrait, they are almost impossibly flexed and thrust forward to form a nearly perfect oval, which is completed by Gardner’s

rounded shoulders. Long, tapered fingers are knit together without marring the Euclidian geometry of the subject's anatomy. One result of the arms' artificial perfection is that Gardner's stiffened torso appears to hang slackly between those flexed limbs—inert, stranded in space. This impression, along with the prominence of the gleaming white pearls at her waist, generate the sensation that there is a discontinuity between the upper and lower halves of Gardner's body.

There is another, perhaps even more dominant, rupture within the composition of the subject's figure. As we behold the portrait, attention to *surface*—of skin, textile, golden thread, ivory arms, glistening pearls, even the upper chest and neck that strain visibly toward the viewer—emerges in concert with a masking, even occlusion, of the subject's face. Despite the razor-sharp clarity of the body's silhouette, Gardner's face is painted as if slightly out of focus—as if we are glimpsing it through a filmy veil. The indistinctness of Sargent's paint application produces an effect of absence, of a disclosure withheld. The rose lips are blurred, slightly smeary. The cheeks are ill-defined and the chin is weak. Above a low forehead, a cap of rather dull brown hair is arranged so nondescriptly that its style is difficult to discern. There seems to be a membrane, or scrim, between us and Gardner's famously not-beautiful face. We do know that, in fact, Gardner rarely went out into public without veiling her face, as if she knew that it was wise to redirect attention to her superb figure and stylish dress, just as she recognized that the harsh line of her mouth softened when she parted her lips, as

she does in Sargent's portrait. Many photographs of Gardner in these years show her surrounded (almost invariably) by a group of young men, and wearing a wide-brimmed hat with either a black or white veil that mediates visual contact with her face. Gossip in late nineteenth-century Boston could be cruel. Some years after Sargent's portrait was painted, Gardner went to a costume ball dressed as a "nautch girl" (an exotic dancer), wearing a clinging outfit and a face completely covered but for the eyes. This made, so the wags noted, "a most becoming headgear."²⁴

When Sargent's painting is seen under raking light, it is clear that Gardner's face was painted over and over, as if the artist were struggling to calculate the right balance of appealing revelation and judicious obfuscation. Sargent's repeated layering rendered Gardner's face effectively unseeable. Consider the striking differences in roughly contemporary portraits that Sargent made of other women. The determination of *Mrs. Adrian Iselin*, for instance (1888, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) can be imagined in the subject's square, thrust-out chin, and shapely but firmly-drawn mouth. Her eyes, which gaze towards us from a head slightly averted, are searching, penetrating. In the portrait of *Mrs. Charles Fairchild* (1887, Brunswick, Maine, Bowdoin College Museum of Art), the viewer has an immediate sense of the presence of the subject. Although her head is turned in a near-profile, we can still sense her sharply focused eyes, straight, mildly quizzical brow, and the mouth, which is not unpleasantly pursed in thought.

Gardner's painted face seems to recede from us even as we behold it. The oversized armatures of gold that form the scaffolding of the composition also direct attention *away* from the face. The embracing aureole of ochre is almost precisely mirrored by the downward slope of Gardner's shoulders. (In certain lights, the diagonal, upward thrusts of the pomegranate pattern can seem like wings sprouting from Gardner's erect back). Her shoulders are pressed forward, and the white arms seem to drop directly, and impossibly, from the nearest rim of the shoulder blades. This willed distortion, again, exaggerates the prominence of Gardner's sinuous curves and minimizes the importance of the face. Gardner's lower body seems to melt into the shadow that pools at the bottom of the canvas. Because of the blatant flexion of the arms, we have the curious sensation that she is balancing on her entwined fingers like a contortionist, whose torso remains visible to the audience, while her legs and hips are tucked somewhere out of sight. Not unlike Ingres' *Comtesse de Tournon*, *Isabella Stewart Gardner* must be appraised in parts. The artist made it impossible to ignore those parts that he (and perhaps the subject herself) found appealing; and did his best to minimize those he found wanting. Beauty is not so much absent from the portraits of Gardner and the Comtesse de Tournon as it is contingent, fragmentary, and found in unexpected places.²⁵

Gardner's gaze seems wary in Sargent's portrait, as if she anticipates that her audience will search for something it will not find. In this way, she preempts the criticism to follow: that a public woman who dares to be painted should offer

beauty to her viewers. Even Gardner herself apparently had second thoughts about her face, as Sargent had rendered it. No one knows exactly how, but a Boston reporter came into possession of a photograph that Gardner had kept of the painting. On the print, Gardner herself had modified Sargent's handiwork, redrawing the eyes to make them wider, and making the mouth fuller and more sensual. The photo was printed in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, much to Sargent's annoyance, and Gardner's embarrassment.²⁶

There is yet another way to understand the perceptual projection and retreat of Gardner's portrait, and that is, to conceive of it as a tension between the masculine and the feminine. Many of Gardner's peers speculated on her seemingly unquenchable, and by implication, *masculine* energy. Henry James became positively anxious about it, and said that she was, "not a woman, she is a locomotive—with a Pullman car attached." Bernard Berenson, her art advisor for decades, observed about Gardner that "she lives at a rate and intensity, and with a reality, that makes other lives seem pale, thin, and shadowy." In his own homage to the "American Idol," Paul Bourget emphasized the impression of both physical and psychological power which he extracted from Sargent's portrait. He was particularly struck by Sargent's treatment of Gardner's "firm hands, the thumb almost too long, which might guide four horses with the precision of an English coachman." The portrait, Bourget wrote, demonstrated "a faith in the human Will, absolute, unique, systematic, and indomitable." The author summed up Gardner as,

“a highly finished person, self-made...a mixture of feminine delicacy and virile will.”²⁷

For some viewers, Gardner’s posture and clasped hands also evoke an Oriental despot. Brandt has suggested that the configuration of the hands may have a Buddhist association, as they seem to allude to the meditation pose called the “Mudra of Concentration”(p. 21). We know that Gardner had traveled widely to India, Japan, China and Cambodia, and had a passion for Eastern philosophy and culture. Such strategies only added to the mysterious power of Sargent’s image, and rendered its subject not entirely human. If Sargent painted Gardner’s face as if seen through a scrim, he imagined her body as a statue: arms forever linked in a graceful, petrified curve—Galatea to Sargent’s Pygmalion. Gardner is positioned for display, but fortified for rejection.

In 1922, less than two years before Gardner died, Sargent produced a very different kind of tribute, in which the subject’s body is completely concealed, while her eyes gaze forth with uncommon clarity (*Mrs. Gardner in White*, 1922, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Fig. 3). In Gardner’s old age, Sargent produced a glimpse of her interiority—that which was withheld so stringently by *both* artist and subject in the earlier portrait, while hiding her body—the emblem of her younger self—from sight. The late portrait is a large-scale, delicately-wrought watercolor. At the age of eighty, Gardner had become partially paralyzed after a stroke. For Sargent’s portrait, she had to be propped up on a sofa, and cushioned

with pillows. (If she wanted to be taken around Fenway Court, she was carried around in a gondola chair.) As Sargent paints her, Gardner is enveloped, Lady Lazarus-like, in white drapery that covers her entire body head to toe, leaving only her face visible. We know that Gardner lived somewhat eccentrically in her old age, and indeed her customary dress was admittedly odd: a tatty, yellowing wig, an ermine wrap, a series of chiffon scarves, and the inevitable pearls. Instead Sargent partially invented the wrapping that encompasses Gardner's head like a nun's habit, and then covered both her hands and feet. The body beneath—with all the imperfections and failures of age—is effectively dissolved. Gardner is immobilized, with her arms completely contained; yet she sits with the regal placidity of a queen. A close friend described Gardner's face at this time as "having as many wrinkles as an aging chimpanzee or a withered orange," and concluded that "she was a strange and frightening sight." (He likened her to one of the madwomen of Chaillot, an old psychiatric hospital outside Paris.²⁸) But, in fact, there is nothing of the grotesque, or the deranged, in Sargent's portrait. Indeed, Gardner's face is radiant, virtually ageless, except for some fine russet shadowing around the eyes. The gaze is now direct, incisive, and unapologetic. When compared to the earlier portrait, it is as if the butterfly has reverted to the cocoon, a return to the origins of life, enabled through the regeneration of art.

Cézanne's *Hortense Fiquet Cézanne's*

Several recent studies on portraiture have examined the series of exchanges through which the portrait is produced by both the maker and the sitter.²⁹ Historically, this has been viewed as an especially fraught encounter if the subject is, or is thought to be, the companion of the artist of genius. Judged on this basis, Hortense Fiquet Cézanne, first mistress, then wife, of Paul, has been found wanting. In fact, she has been much maligned for her regrettable lack of beauty (that being historically the ultimate arbiter as to whether a woman was worthy of being painted), as well as for her sour disposition, and for her failure to smile. In the criticisms directed at Fiquet Cézanne's portrayals are contained reactions that range from stupefaction to anger, boredom to pity. Because her representations evade the usual interpretive categories, Fiquet Cézanne has been either demonized or objectified, while her portraits remain largely unseen, often limited to the role of "illustrations" in the troubled personal history of Cézanne. One of the basic problems that the portraits of Fiquet Cézanne offer to the viewer is that no two are much alike. While Picasso is granted the freedom to jettison the demands of resemblance, Cézanne is seen as belonging to a time when it was still a fundamental expectation of portraiture—even if that resemblance should be generated by a subjective interpretation. Consider briefly the striking differences in just three paintings of Fiquet Cézanne produced within a decade of one another. In a portrait of 1879-82 (and reworked in 1886-88) now in the Bührle Collection in Zurich (Fig. 4), Fiquet Cézanne is a stern-faced, erect woman with a commanding,

almost muscular presence. Her eyes are fixed asymmetrically within a face sufficiently inexpressive to prompt some writers to dub it “mask-like,” a phrase that is often applied to this subject’s physiognomy. Fiquet Cézanne’s nose is prominent, though not so exaggerated as to be distracting; the mouth is firmly set, almost grim in aspect, with the lower lip protruding slightly. In *Madame Cézanne in the Conservatory*, 1891-92, Fig.5, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Fiquet Cézanne is granted an entirely different facial structure and body type, neither of which is consistent with the kinds of corporeal and facial changes that might occur with the passage of time. The square solidity of the Bührle portrait is replaced here by a robust but pliant femininity, which is bolstered by the subject’s tight-fitting corset jacket and the semi-sheerness of its yoke. The feminine sensuality manifested in the dress is undermined by the smooth androgyny of the face. While the subject of the Bührle *Madame Cézanne* has squarely-shaped hands, strong and solidly planted, the hands of *Madame Cézanne in the Conservatory* are nearly fingerless. The digits that project beyond the edges of the semi-sheer mitaines end in sharp, crisscrossing lines that bisect one another. As the hands are unfinished, so is the dress they rest upon. The third example, *Madame Cézanne in a Yellow Chair*, (1888-90, Riehen/Basel, Fondation Beyeler, Fig. 6), painted around the same time, offers a wraithlike, austere figure in a plain, even homely, red house dress—the kind of dress so prosaic that it goes unreproduced in contemporary fashion illustrations. Fiquet Cézanne’s face is a

fragile arrangement of incomplete dissolving planes which are imperfectly fused together. Significant areas of bare canvas interrupt juxtapositions of strokes that signal “nose” or “cheekbone.” The subject’s very materiality is thrown into doubt. She seems no longer made of flesh, and appears to be more absent than present. Without their titles, these three portrait subjects would hardly be recognizable as the same woman, thereby violating one of the cardinal rules of traditional portraiture, as Joanna Woodall explains it: “Recognition of a visual resemblance is inseparable from a sense of the subject’s living presence as a social being and explicitly connected with admiration for the portraitist who created it.”³⁰

Cézanne’s refusal to conform to the type of the adoring helpmate has been routinely understood to be not the result of the artist’s own pictorial decisions, but rather as the failure of the woman who inspired them: her failure to ingratiate, to entertain, and above all, to seduce. As curator Joseph Rishel once pointed out, Fiquet Cézanne has never been identified as the artist’s muse, even though her recurring presence in his paintings allies her not so much with the wives of her own generation—Suzanne Manet, Camille Monet and Aline Renoir, for instance—but with the better known muses of an earlier age, Rembrandt’s Saskia and Hendrijke, and Rubens’ Isabella Brandt and Hélène Fourment.³¹ Some writers seem to have regarded Fiquet Cézanne as a veritable “counter-muse,” an uncooperative helpmate who not only failed to provide sufficient inspiration for the artist, but who acted as a positive hindrance to achievement. This is an extreme, but perhaps

comprehensible, reaction to paintings which are admittedly difficult. Their stubborn opacity frustrates viewers accustomed to anticipating the disclosure of self that the portrait is generally assumed to offer—especially when the subject is a woman fixed in the controlling gaze of a male painter.

Linda Nochlin has pointed out that, in general, the wives and mistresses of modernist artists have been poorly served by history.³² Indeed, one has only to read some of the standard tracts on Impressionism to learn of the homeliness of Suzanne Manet (with an occasional concession to her musical talent); the sullen ennui of Camille Monet (whose last portrait was painted by her husband as she lay dying); the bovine placidity of Aline Renoir, whose grave marker was originally intended to be a sculpture of her nursing her son; and, of course, the sheer irrelevance of Mette Gauguin, whose possible allure has been forever eclipsed by the nubile young Tahitian women who fill her husband's canvases. Fiquet Cézanne's constancy in her husband's work is actually rather exceptional for this period. As Nochlin put it, "Only Cezanne, the lone-wolf master of Aix, paints his wife so often, with such attentiveness" (p. 66). Even given the many instances of vilified mistresses and wives, however, Fiquet Cézanne seems to have been a special case, for the constancy and vituperation of the criticism which she—or rather, her representations—have provoked over the years. In general, there have been two stances towards the paintings of Fiquet Cézanne: benign neglect, with a number of relatively brief discussions in catalogues, and one article about the possibility of

dating the portraits through her dress; and on the other hand, there has been a distinct sense of aversion, even hostility, which has been directed towards the person of Fiquet Cézanne, about whom we actually know very little.³³

We have almost no account of Fiquet Cézanne's life before she met the painter, other than the fact that she was born in Saligny in the Jura, the daughter of a bank clerk. She and Paul Cézanne met in 1869, in Paris; she, a nineteen-year old artist's model, he an ambitious, though unfocused young painter from Provence, eleven years older and living on an allowance from his autocratic father, a hat-maker turned wealthy banker. Cézanne's hesitations about women in particular and sexuality in general, were already deeply entrenched. Nonetheless Paul and Hortense began an affair and three years later produced a son, named Paul after his father. For years, Cézanne tried desperately to conceal his liaison, and his illegitimate child, from his father, fearing that funds would be cut off. His father seems to have known of his son's family despite the subterfuge, and never interrupted his financial support (He himself had fathered his son, the painter, out of wedlock). Fiquet Cézanne and the child lived mostly in Paris. The artist lived mostly with his family in Aix. When the couple did finally marry in 1886, it was just a few months before the death of Cézanne's father, an event that left the painter and his sisters quite wealthy. While Hortense and Paul lived together only sporadically, they do seem to have taken vacations together on a fairly regular

basis. She appears in his sketches until just before his death, and Cézanne's letters to his son make it clear that they were in contact until the end of his life.³⁴

The correspondence of Cézanne's own peers established early on a narrative of Fiquet Cézanne as an impediment to be overcome. She was described with casual contempt in the letters that flowed back and forth between two of the painter's closest childhood friends, the critic Paul Alexis and the novelist and critic Emile Zola. Alexis referred to Fiquet Cézanne several times as "La Boule," (the ball), an undoubtedly unflattering nickname that has never been explained, and reported that Cézanne had confided that his wife liked nothing besides Switzerland and lemonade.³⁵ Some years later, Roger Fry, the eminent English art critic who forged Cézanne's reputation as the father of modern painting, wrote briefly about the painter's most enduring individual human subject, after himself. Writing to a friend about the life of the artist he was struggling to frame, Fry confided, "It's complicated to begin with, and life changed him enormously. Perhaps that sour-looking bitch of a Madame counts for something in the tremendous repression that took place."³⁶ Jack Lindsay, a later biographer, was even less decorous than Fry. He expressed incredulity at Fiquet Cézanne's relationship with the painter, and proceeded to enumerate all of her supposed flaws: her addiction to cheap romantic novels, her coarse skin and heavy chin, her reputation as a chatterbox, and her merely superficial interest in people and things." But it was, above all, her "stunned stupidity," confirmed, for the writer, by the impassivity of the portraits

themselves, that enabled their relationship to continue.³⁷ Lindsay was only the most explicit of those who cited the uningratiating representations of Fiquet Cézanne as explanation for Cézanne's legendary difficulties of temperament. Thus the painter's "misanthropic, cranky, and strange" nature, to quote the artist Émile Bernard, is elucidated, and thereby forgiven. Perhaps the most damning of all critiques emanated from the dean of Cézanne studies, John Rewald, who insisted that Fiquet Cézanne had no impact whatsoever on the painter's art or life, an assertion which was followed, without irony, by the observation that Cézanne's subject matter, shortly after he met Fiquet Cézanne, revolved around scenes of intermingled eroticism and violence, such as *The Murder* (1867-1870, National Museum and Galleries on Merseyside, Walker Art Gallery).³⁸

Highly problematic is the fact that one of the more influential "descriptions" of Fiquet Cézanne has been extrapolated from a work of fiction: Zola's novel *L'Oeuvre*, the book that scholars believe put an end to the long friendship between the writer and Cézanne. The painter is recognized as the initial inspiration, if not the sole source, for the ambitious, but ultimately, failed artist, Claude Lantier. Rewald long thought that the physical description of Lantier's mistress, named Christine Hallegrin, offered a picture of Fiquet Cézanne: Zola described her as, "A tall, supple, and slim girl, still a little thin in body but exquisitely pure, young, and virginal. Already rather full-breasted, with a slim waist...A brunette with black hair and black eyes. The upper part of the face very

gentle, with great tenderness. Long eyelids, pure and tender forehead, small and delicate nose. When her eyes laugh, exquisite tenderness. But the lower part of the face is passionate, the jaw is a little prominent, too strong....”³⁹ The fictive Christine Hallegrin thereby becomes Hortense Fiquet Cézanne, and we are asked to judge the “authenticity” of the likeness in relation to her portraits.

Over the years, other writers have expressed a different attitude towards Fiquet Cézanne. Instead of indulging in hostility towards a woman about whom they have no real knowledge, they emphasize Cézanne’s detachment, if not disinterest, as he portrayed her; and they remark on her parity, in their view, with any number of inanimate objects which Cézanne *preferred* to paint. It has become a veritable cliché to claim that Cézanne painted his wife with as much engagement and vitality as he bestowed upon the apples in his still lifes, or, as writer Robert Walser put it, as a pat of butter. He writes, “One wants to bear in mind how odd it was that [Cézanne] looked at his wife as though she were a piece of fruit on the tablecloth....A pat of butter was just as full of meaning for him as the gentle swellings he could make out in his wife’s dress.”⁴⁰

This stance toward the portraits of the not-beautiful Fiquet Cézanne (and there are 26 oil portraits, and scores of drawings and watercolors) has resulted in an almost complete neglect of their actual visual and psychological qualities, and attendant historical associations. Prejudice has preempted analysis. In addition, solidifying the oppositional stance has also caused writers not to realize the

exceptionally fluid nature of the portraits, which I believe are a prolonged meditation on the theme of self and other, rendered at a moment when the bounds of the self were understood to be far less fixed than they had previously been conceived. Beauty can be a limiting, preemptive, category—in painting as well as in life, and can foreclose searching and sustained acts of seeing.

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled's* of 2000.

Cindy Sherman's well known *Film Stills* of 1979 challenge the viewer to complete stories hinted at but never explained about a selection of anonymous, tentative young women who are always played by Sherman herself. These characters, recognizable but never identifiable, who seem to be drawn from 1950's black and white movies, appear stranded, somehow, in a series of faintly sinister settings, looking uncertainly around them, or perhaps absorbed in their own reflections.⁴¹ Over the past twenty years, Sherman has constructed an array of fictive female—and male—figures whose identity is never certain, but somehow always faintly familiar. She has used pastiches of historical costumes, masks, and inventively-applied make-up, prosthetic body parts, and a variety of medical accessories, many of them verging on the grotesque. In so doing, Sherman has plumbed the depths of ugliness in female representation, and she has also tested stereotypes about female beauty and representation.⁴²

In a show at Metro Pictures in December of 2000, Sherman's self-portraits without the self returned to some of the themes of female vulnerability advanced in the *Film Stills*, but developed them according to newly heightened expectations of how a woman constructs herself to be gazed upon. The series of photographs can best be described as variations on the interdependence between beauty and artifice, and the instability of the space (and perception) that separates them. Sherman addresses artificially constructed beauty, its loss, and the discomfort of its obviousness. Appearing in a variety of costumes, wigs, prostheses, postures, facial expressions, even a range of different eye colors, Sherman manipulates her own figure to chart an array of "types." These are positioned somewhere between those striving to be beautiful and those who never will be, despite the ministrations of every cosmetic and hair color available. The viewer becomes complicit in this process, for if beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so is the not-beautiful. Sherman manages to construct images which somehow contain, and celebrate, *both*, as well as the right of the woman, the subject, to make the choice.⁴³

1Joan Rivière's well known analysis of the "masquerade of femininity" seems a requisite association to images which emphasize the paraphernalia of beauty for women "of a certain age" (i.e. those no longer young but unwilling to give up the effort).⁴⁴ Sherman presents a veritable taxonomy of the various strategies of femininity as construction, at a poignant moment of receding possibilities. Her subjects have applied lip liner, concealer, foundation, eye

shadow, and highlights. Only none of them have done it properly—they would all fail the make-up test by which neurologists customarily assess the mental status of their women patients. Often, eyeliner is drawn heavily over and around the eyes, or around the shadows below. Concealer is everywhere apparent, which would seem to violate its *raison d'être*: it is applied to the tip of the nose, to the cheekbones, and to the chin, over and under the eyelids and eyebrows. Cheeks are at times deeply, even morbidly, contoured. It is as if a series of recipes for feminine beauty have been woefully misread. In this series, masking is an awkward, fraught material process by which women fortify themselves to be looked at.

Nearly all of Sherman's subjects are some variant of blonde: platinum, ash, tawny, strawberry, even, in one variation, egg-yolk yellow. Hair is always “done,” or perhaps overdone, stylized in a carefully blown back page-boy, an almost clown-like flip, a long tousled mane—lightly teased, or a silvery bob. The subjects seem variously eager and innocent, vain and world-weary, proud, mildly defiant, and sometimes determined to remain oblivious to the blemishes that mar their made up features. There is a veritable roster of personae, a series of possibilities for presenting oneself to the world of desire: we might recognize a tawdry lounge singer, an overworked, brittle executive, a lazy hippie, a divorcée with too dark a tan. Curiously, even as Sherman shows us the seams of their constructions, she never makes her characters ridiculous. In fact, some of them appear positively

valiant in their determination to thwart age and invite desire. The grotesque is present in this series, but far more subtly than in, say, the luridly rearranged anatomies of 1994, or the medical prosthetics of the 1992 series. Eyebrows are drawn not once but twice over the “real” brow; lip liner amplifies the lips to absurd proportions; tans are too dark, or patchily uneven. A middle-aged woman wears her hair too long; and there are large warts on an otherwise pleasant face. These are subjects who do not shrink from their mirror reflections. In fact, they appear to possess a certain pride, as if maintaining the illusion is part of the greater good.

Sherman has painted her face many times before: with mud, ash, gold, with ink-black color, with iridescent green or blue, a dehumanizing screen of color out of which her eyes stare balefully. But in this series, she is expressly using “feminine” paint for the occasion: make up used in the service of artifice. The images constitute a meditation upon the act and function of “making up” in middle age. These female characters are not the geographical, historical, or even biological “other;” indeed, they are almost painfully familiar. The photographs seem self-consciously shaped by the demands for a “head shot.” Such publicity stills might be part of the portfolio of a hopeful actress (*Untitled #360*), or an image of the CEO that adorns the corporate hallway (*Untitled # 405*), or perhaps the careworn singer whose platinum hair is advertised on the club’s sandwich board (*Untitled 403*)—even the local newspaper’s shot of the community volunteer who helped to organize the fourth of July parade (*Untitled #402*). Not only is Sherman posing

here, as she always does; she is posing *poses*—not in a manner that is cruel or ironic, but in one that suggests that she has an instinctual understanding for the vulnerabilities of female middle age.

Of course, the identities of Sherman's characters are unstable, as always: the CEO with the carefully blown out feathery bob and oversized glasses (Fig. 7) might also be an Orthodox Jewish woman from the suburbs of New Jersey (where Sherman grew up), bursting with pride for her family. The Hillary Clinton look-alike with her off-the shoulder black gown (*Untitled #400*) might not be a confident society woman, but a brassy imposter crashing the party, with an obvious tan-line, and unconcealed concealer. In these images, Sherman's capacity to perform with her eyes is underscored by the sheer range of colors, shapes, and direction and intensity of various gazes; there are myopic hazel eyes; light, direct eyes of azure blue; almond-shaped eyes of chocolate brown, all with differently calibrated eye liner, shadow, and/or concealer.

Some of the images seem to be odes to particular "looks" from a (recent) historic time impossible to identify with any certainty. One character (*Untitled #353*) is dressed in what seems to be a Hollywood version of a Grecian tunic, with a cord cinched tightly below what are obviously false breasts. Frosted hair is teased into an asymmetrical bouffant; the nose is enlarged, as are the lips, which are painted with pearl lipstick. Turquoise eye shadow matches the colors in the scarf tied around her neck. In another photograph (*Untitled #354*), a youngish

woman seems just home from the Peace Corps, dressed in an ethnic dress and adorned by ropes of beads. But her tan, splotchy and uneven, seems to have come from a tube, rather than from the hot sun of Africa. In another image (*Untitled # 404*), a character with long dark blonde hair and a striped polyester shirt-dress inexplicably holds a stuffed animal, an allusion to youth made almost morbid by her darkly hollowed out cheeks and dark eyebrows. Another “young” woman with large breasts straining against a white t-shirt, has streaming blonde hair, huge lips, and two sizeable warts on her face, reminiscent of Sherman’s earlier tribute to Ingres, *History Portrait, # 204*. In only one image is the feminine masquerade taken to grotesque extremes: *Untitled # 357* shows the woman with the bright yellow wig, flipped up like Bozo the Clown’s. Her hands are clasped and her eyes are raised—perhaps to the heavens. The ambiguity is deepened by the arch-shaped shadow that hovers above her like a canopy. The subject’s lips are widened with lipstick to look swollen, almost damaged. Jarring smudges of shadow appear at the corners of her mouth, under her nose, and below her eye sockets. Her eyes are rimmed by thick black eyeliner, around which are halos of very obvious concealer.

Conclusion

The different subjects I have considered here inspire different expectations—because of their age, their relation to the artist, their social standing, and the intention of the artists. Thus, they elicit different reactions. One woman is old, by

early 19th century standards (of course, she is “old” by the exacting display standards of our own age, as well), so the standards for beauty are somewhat relaxed. Yet the fact that the subject’s eyes shine with pleasure, that the skin of her arm gleams, that her dress and shawl are gracefully draped, disturbs viewers who find her sensuality incongruous, and perhaps even morally suspect. Another woman subject, of high social standing, probably wanted to intimidate, as well as impress, her audience, but her unbecoming, curiously vague face earned their pity, even disdain, at this revelation of the vulnerability of the rich and powerful. The third subject is the artist’s wife, and therefore she is expected to be a muse, a seductress, in other words. That she is not continues to arouse irritation, even anger, and has prevented the complexities of Cézanne’s series from being fully appreciated. Cindy Sherman’s multiple subjects, all invented and performed by the artist herself, serve as an extended commentary, and a kind of reproach, to all the responses which the earlier images arouse. Sherman’s series betrays an unexpected empathy for the vulnerabilities of the middle aged woman in our punishingly telegenic age. This artist who has produced famously pointed critiques on the process of feminine masking surprisingly conjures what might be considered the valor and the fortitude of the not-beautiful.