

Skeptical Signs

There is a necessary familiarity to the banknotes one holds in one's hand and yet so rarely inspects. Always there is a portrait or two, an icon that has been specifically cast to represent some aspect of national identity, differentiating not just one currency from another but also identifying a denomination. Depicting a figurehead, a statesman, or some notable cultural or scientific laureate, these portraits are indelibly connected to their respective currencies. As a signifier of nationhood and sovereignty, the subject personifies something of the values or achievements with which each country wishes to associate itself. Yet, who notices? Aren't most of these images just taken for granted, merely passed over in a glance? And isn't it true to say that they only undergo close inspection when redesigned, or when we encounter a currency we are not familiar with? The portrait sits there on the banknote, but is not so interesting to us as the exchange value that it helps signify. Of course this condition of familiarity is important, and is a necessary form of blindness that maintains a focus on money's use.

Djawid C. Borower is an artist who, for some time, has lifted images from the face of currency in order to make his paintings. Some earlier works used the numerous and various designs and texts found on a range of currencies, such as the reference to the State Opera House on the Austrian Schilling, or the appellation of God that appears on the U.S. dollar. Meticulously copying fragments, such as the Little Prince depicted on a French franc, or a sunflower design on the Dutch guilder,

he then subjected them to a process of abrasion. By dragging a squeegee across the still wet paint, he deliberately blurred the image, investing it with a material surface that unbalanced its simple pictoriality. The breaking down and dissolution of the surface, which resulted from that act of abrasion, focused the paintings on a discussion of identity and representation, a discussion which Borower continues through this new series, *Portraits of Monet*, by re-depicting portrait images that appear on an international array of paper currencies.

We tend, generally speaking, to think of the traditional portrait as a painting that tells us something special about the sitter, expecting the artist to be able to fathom some essential quality of the person being depicted and to translate this into a likeness on canvas. As a multifaceted record of the changing mood of both the artist and the sitter, the portrait is thought to convey something authentic that lies beyond appearance. This intrasubjectivity – the subjectivity of the sitter seen through the subjectivity of the painter – is a central tenet of a continuing romantic notion of portraiture and makes claim to reveal the essence of the sitter through the work of art. Portraits on banknotes, however, tend to be Stern, graphic renditions, where the sitters are posed like mannequins. They all portray a similar serious gaze, which loses any sense of subjectivity through both the context and medium of the bank note and the frequency with which these things pass through our hands.

Concentrating upon money's use, we ignore any possibility that this or that portrait might tell us something about the sitter and we certainly don't concern ourselves with questioning who the artist might be. Instead, the significance of these images as Subjects disappears under the rubric of monetary denomination and its concomitant meanings. Incorporated into the signs of money, the image of Washington found on the dollar, for instance, becomes a mythical icon, far removed from the particularity that the traditional portrait addresses, his identity subsumed within the dominant representations of the bank note. As familiarity breeds contempt, so the repetition of faces on money engenders indifference to any individuality of meaning betrayed in their countenance.

By rendering the Portraits of Monet' as large scale paintings, Djawid Borower brings these faces once again to our attention and seems to be restoring some semblance of subjectivity to them. The artist's hand surely copies what he sees, crafting the likeness in paint and creating a resemblance through the gesture of the brush. Reclaiming the portrait, he invests it with an originality that had been lost in its former state of reproduction. By realizing it on canvas, and on this scale, it is raised to a unique condition, so that what was formerly unseen can be brought to light through a subjective rendering. But, this allusion to the condition of a subjective rendition is itself illusory and these portraits are counterfeit. There is no living subject in front of the canvas, and it is clear that the artist is going through the motions of making a portrait without actually having to encounter the sitter personally.

These are copies of Images, which adopt the look of portrait painting, yet lack the authentic relationship of painter and subject that would seemingly validate intrasubjectivity. Their similarity to the genre of traditional portraiture simply mimics the look, and this act of mimesis draws any purported true subjectivity into question. Like simulacra, they are skeptical of the supposed original and demonstrate that the space between the real and its double becomes easily conflated. As the act of reproduction seems to invest the portrait with a new life, so it simultaneously unmask any semblance of intrasubjectivity in the painting as the result of a mimesis. By copying the portrait and fashioning it within the frame of painting, Borower has created an Illusion of authenticity, a resemblance of expressivity.

By abrading this illusory surface, the skeptical original – the painting that questions its own subjectivity – also becomes a denial of its own reproduction. The streaking of the pigment across the canvas, suggestive of a defective printing process or a badly tracking video, creates a veil before the portrait that blurs the boundaries between the real and the simulated. By dragging a squeegee across the painting, any gestural details are reduced into a general smear of paint, subverting the detailed character of the brushwork. Generating a tension between representation and dissimulation, figuration and abstraction, the portrayed individual is center-staged, but the act of painting will not relinquish its hold on the image.

There is an inherent instability in these paintings, a reflex that hampers their identification as either totally real or totally simulated and

which is further aggravated by the titles that accompany them. While acknowledging the equal significance of both the perceptual and the

conceptual in his practice, Borower resists privileging either so that his work is dominated neither by the rhetoric of painting nor the center staged subject. Likewise, the titles that he adopts have an internal tension which mirrors that found in the paintings.

These long designations counter our normal idea of the title appended to a portrait, where we would, typically, expect a narration to simply confirm the identity of the subject. Whereas narrative text might lend itself to the sitter's own words, these titles seem dislocated by reference to the third person. "And what would happen," he said, "if that faith *were* undermined, if large numbers of people suddenly began to doubt the System?" How can this Statement be attributed to the sitter? And if so, to whom, or what, can it refer? We might then consider Borower's titles as commentaries about the depicted individuals, except that, through their obliquity, they resist describing the portrait. Abstracted from their original context, these texts are fragments that refuse a normal reading. They effectively bar access to the paintings, continually rejecting attempts to adjoin them as interpretive aids. Reflecting the process that forms the painting, the title simultaneously affirms and denies its own condition as a hook to catch the meaning of the image. Set up like a trap to lure us into the work, it repeatedly thwarts our efforts to close its relationship to the image, disavowing the painting, which, in turn, reciprocates this disavowal.

This concept of disavowal is critical to a fuller understanding of these works and opens them out onto other interpretive possibilities. The refusal that we encounter in trying to tie together the title and the painting results from a displacement of the center of the work, a shifting of the locus of meaning. As the work does not exist in the painting alone, neither is the title just a convenient Label attached to it, nor even just a cue to its meaning. Instead, these two elements form poles of tension on a plane of imaginative interpretations. As viewers we find ourselves in the void that occupies the center of this arena, opening a Pandora's box of possible meanings. We are in effect the constructed subjects at the center of the work.

The image and the text both operate within a fold. The painting continually folds the authentic into the illusory and vice versa. It plays with layers of Simulation and reality, in a process of continual assertion and denial that destabilizes the certainty of representation. The titles, on the other hand, fold into their function as signifiers, offering, but refusing to furnish the clues that would create an interpretive closure onto the images. The titles Gould, then, also be seen as a kind of fake, a text that pretends to have a function that it simultaneously refuses.

Sharing more in common with Conceptualism than Pop, Borower's portraits use questions about representation and identity in Order to interrogate power and manipulation through the work. The appropriation of images from money is not so much about the commonality of everyday images as the way in which Chose images are manipulated and

co-opted in the Service of power. Even though some of these faces are less familiar to us than others, it is clear that they all emanate from money. They can never be fully detached from this level of representation, so that, even though the portrait has been transposed to the canvas, it can never quite lose the mediating framework of capital. Each of these portraits carries this supplement. In this context — of the representation and its supplement — the titles take on a different significance and, as each sentence makes reference to a relationship, so it alludes to power and control. This is not at first apparent as we struggle to make the titles Interpret the images for us. But once we reconnect the painting to its supplemental body, the text begin to resonate. (The texts are in fact fragments abstracted from Thomas Pynchon's novel, Gravity's Rainbow, which itself is a study in the relationship of power and control.)

The Portraits of Monet' do not just depict power and control. They are, rather, shot through with its tropes. The painting and its title act out the processes of simulation and dissimulation, which are responsible for the continual state of crisis that is central to the exertion of power. Attempts by the viewer to tie title and image together, to create a closure, are thwarted by the repeated disappearance of an original. However, by shifting away from the idea of the title interpreting the image, a metaphoric space opens, where the work can be seen to refer out to the social, figuring relationships, and in consequence to ideas of power and manipulation. These works, then, are allegories of what Baudrillard has called the "hyperreal." They Chart and interlocate the mechanisms of equivalence and exchange

which are instrumental to the power of capital, revealing themselves truly as Portraits of Monet'.

by Julien Robson