



HERE I AM AND NOWHERE ELSE

Hesse McGraw

"Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place."

In the opening words of her book *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag set us straddling the fundamental wager of Mark Gilbert's portraits.¹ I began working on this exhibition well after the collaboration between Virginia Aita and William Lydiatt and Gilbert was rolling, and Gilbert had been steadily producing works for some time. What at first seemed an odd pairing, an artist making portraits in a hospital, quickly solidified in my mind as a subtly radical art/medicine hybrid. This confluence of interests — Aita and Lydiatt seeking new cross-disciplinary research models, Gilbert making highly tuned and sensitive portraits and a volunteer body of caregivers and patients lending their time and much more — is certainly anomalous terrain for a contemporary art exhibition, but I was struck by the searching nature of their collaboration. Ultimately we asked large questions in unison: How could this community of portraits affect the relationship between patients and caregivers? What ramifications might it hold for the way medical research is conducted? How will this affect the potential for art to integrate with medicine and can it possibly alter public perceptions of illness? Will the portraits alter their subjects' understanding of themselves? What will the portraits do to a public audience?

There were quiet thrills along the way that continually asserted the singular nature of the project — Lydiatt graciously rushing out of meetings back to the surgical operating room, or visiting Gilbert's studio, a rabbit-hole hemmed in between research labs. In Gilbert's studio, surrounded by canvases and drawings in progress, the project's gravity and magnitude was apparent.

The style of Gilbert's portraits grabs you first. His charcoal lines veer from wild gestures and graceful abandon to elegantly described, animated facial features. The works manage to have momentum and solidity, social vibrance and a sense of solitude. Painted color is both a vivid smear and a tectonic plane. The dimensionality of the figures is perfect — even without grounds behind the bodies, the figures occupy a definitive space — one could even guess their weight. There is a remarkable range within the exhibition; in works on aluminum, paper and canvas, using diverse techniques, Gilbert is formally inventive and agile, and evinces an obsessive's skill for observation. Yet, the soul of the work

Bill, 2006, charcoal on canvas, 72" x 42"

is the embodiment of its subjects' essence. One feels the weight of personality and personal history in these portraits.

Of course, there can be no portrait without an observer. Gilbert's process required his subject to come to his studio and sit, often for long periods. Their social interaction, which varied widely depending on the health of the subject, saturates the portraits. However, that interaction remains an island until there is an audience for the portraits. The set of interactions and relationships Gilbert developed with his subjects ultimately is the hard core that drives an attempt to answer the project's larger questions.

One may not immediately think of a social experience, or even friendship, as the foundation for an exhibition of portraits. Yet the very root of these portraits is an understanding of the Self (Gilbert) in relation to the Other (subject) and vice versa. The health status, or care giving role, of Gilbert's subjects complicated this basic notion. To this end, Gilbert's portraits embrace the arrhythmic flux of life and a community of subjects dispersed between extremes.

It has been said art is always about death. The architects Arakawa + Gins have for four decades pursued an architecture against death in an attempt to fulfill their decision "not to die." Artist Matt Wycoff has attempted to outline the proximity of death to his own life. His work *Survey of disaster, war and death during the first twenty-five years of my life* (2006) makes a startlingly comprehensive account of the death tolls resulting from international events during that period. *Everyone I've ever met who has died* (2005) is a set of eight graphite portraits, drawn from photos provided by their closest surviving relatives. These works seem to say, 'Where am I in relation to death? Not far.'

Siebrren Versteeg's *Untitled Film 3* (2007) consists of a computer program that places a grainy photo of a hospital way-finding sign in a kind of flickering, suspended animation. The sign contains two arrows — one pointing toward the Family Childbirth Center, while the other directs to the Intensive Care Unit. Versteeg makes us implicit victims in a hazy infinitum; birth and death will continue when we are gone.

Following Gilbert's creation of the portraits, Aita and Lydiatt engaged in a sustained effort to collect responses from the subjects regarding their portraits. The responses localized around a common idea — 'Mark's portrait allowed me to recognize my self (in the context of my illness or role as a caregiver) more fully than I had before.' They said illness deprives the self and care fatigues it, even if resilience, determination and compassion are also present. The potential for a portrait, rooted in trust between individuals, to affirm one's self-image, is an ascendant capacity, far greater than conceived at the outset of this project.

Referring to relational aesthetics, a strain of contemporary art that places a premium on social interaction rather than artifacts, artist Joe Scanlan stated, "Indeed, firsthand experience has convinced me that relational aesthetics has more to do with peer pressure than collective action or egalitarianism, which would suggest that one of the best ways to control human behavior is to practice relational aesthetics... Peer pressure might produce a safer town square or a prosperous



Matt Wycoff, *Everyone I've ever met who has died* (detail of Kristin), 2005, graphite on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Matt Wycoff, *Everyone I've ever met who has died* (installation view), 2005, graphite on paper, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

magnet school, but it makes for rather timid art. By contrast, art should be a place where we can 'kill Grandma' and, rather than call an ambulance or the moral authorities, stand around and talk about what it means."² While Gilbert's work doesn't seek to kill Grandma, it directly engages mortality through an intimate social experience and cripples misconceptions regarding illness and care.

Ingmar Bergman's film *Persona* presents a pair of women, nurse and patient, who share no trust. The nurse, while suffering from visions of her blood-sucking patient, slowly finds her personality subsumed by the patient's. Conversely, French theorist Jacques Derrida proposed an unconditional hospitality — "Let us say yes to *who or what turns up*" — in effect an absolute giving up of the self to the other.³ Gilbert's works, due to their believability, prompt a similar effect — a marriage of the self to illness, or the responsibility of care. My hope is that all have a similar experience within the exhibition and leave somehow larger, empowered to take ownership of one's place, wherever it may be on the wellness spectrum. Then as a collective body, there will be the transformational possibility of action that recognizes the right, and gift, of care.

Hesse McGraw is curator at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts.

1 Sontag, Susan. (1978). *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday.
2 Scanlan, Joe. "Traffic control: Joe Scanlan on social space and relational aesthetics." *Art Forum* June 2005.
3 Derrida, Jacques. (2000). *Of Hospitality*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.



Jove White, 2008, charcoal on paper, 60" x 42"



Jarad, 2008, charcoal on paper, 60" x 42"