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Of the Crowd

Miniature, memento, and miscommunication in the painting of portraits.

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree in

Masters of Fine Arts

at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Georgia Glass

2017

The project described in this exegesis was completed between April and November of 2017. One hundred and twenty-nine people, unknown to the artist, answered a call for participation via poster and each submitted a portrait photograph on the promise that it would be painted in miniature and then gifted back to them. It was an exchange that hoped to slow down some of the split-second interactions we usually have with the unknown people around us. The projects methodology was constructed in order to query what really separates us as strangers.

Approval was obtained from the Massey University Ethics Committee to proceed with the experiments described in this document.

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Between the 15th and the 17th of November 2017, one hundred and twenty-nine people will visit Wallace Street, Wellington, where they will be gifted the miniature oil portrait that has been painted of them.

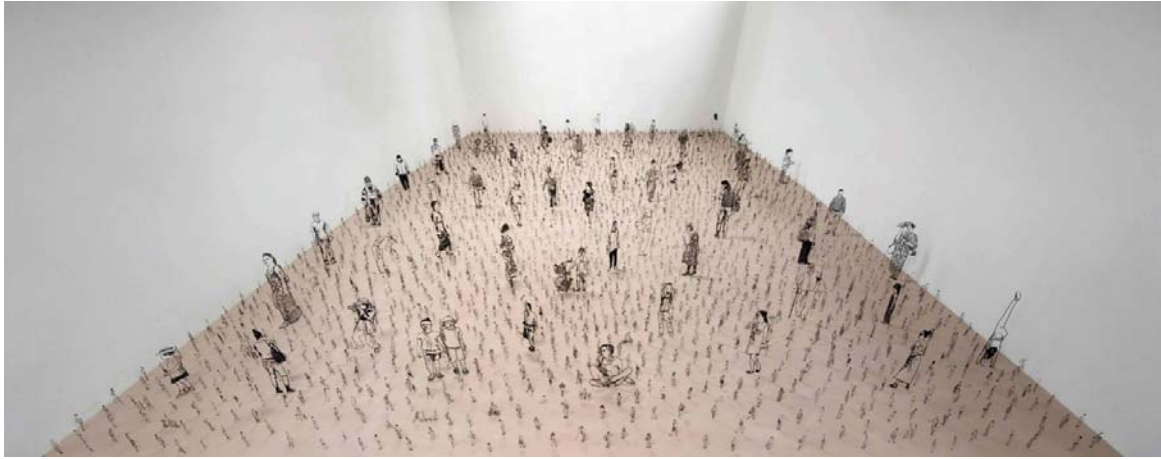
Chapter 1.

Stranger.

"I felt a calm but inquisitive interest in everything... At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregate relations, soon however, I descended into details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage and expression of countenance."

Edgar Allan Poe describes a descension into the observation of details while 'people watching,' in his 1845 work *'The Man of the Crowd.'* Poe's protagonist first ponders how he is overwhelmed by the size of the crowd and so lumps the passing figures into broad categories. But he soon comes to notice more minute details and it is in perceiving the countless intricacies of the masses that he realises the innumerable variety of the crowd.

Nowadays, how much attention do we really offer our fellows? How regularly do we pause like Poe's character and afford time to consider the complexities of our current crowd? At times we may witness the unique details of strangers, and in doing so appreciate their individuality, but we are still restricted by the small amount of time and the limited surface we are given to read. Poe's wanderer is ultimately left frustrated by one 'man of the crowd', illusive and unknowable beyond the odd teasing glimpse. The fleeting nature of the stranger offers up a one-dimensional reading; like attempting to understand the content of a book when all we are given to read is the cover. The complexity of human character renders it vulnerable to misinterpretation. Then in portraiture when we attempt to translate the stranger, or indeed any person, into a static painting, the same tendency towards being misread is inherited by the work. In this way, the stranger mirrors the parameters afforded most portrait paintings, where a constructed and often posed façade present us with one freeze-frame of a person; a potentially mistranslated and minute summary hoping to encapsulate its subject's vast and changeable character.



'People I Saw but Never Met.'

2017.

Zadok Ben-David.

Installation and detail of painted stainless-steel miniatures.

Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica.

Zadok Ben-David acted like Poe's observer in his 2017 work, *'People I saw but Never Met.'* The installation is made up of 3000 tiny and 45 slightly larger figures. Ben-David photographed strangers during his world travels and utilised their unique and detailed silhouettes to construct vast crowds of three-dimensional metal sculptures. They intended to query whether it is possible to remember everyone who passes us by.

Jody Zellen writes of her visit to the exhibition, "Ben-David has captured the thrill of people watching and has transformed something fleeting into something concrete. He presents the diversity of the world and allows viewers to create their own narratives" (2017).

Ben-David alludes to the movement and temporality inherent within any crowd of people by direct contrast. His static figures stand motionless, the translation between reality and miniature sculpture openly freezing many fleeting moments into concrete form. There is a slowness enriched by their handmade construction that informs the denial of movement in the final work and gifts the audience an unnaturally unlimited amount of time to observe the crowd's details. All is static in this gathering; they exist unchanging and outside the parameters of time. The characters that occupy the space are visibly hollow, and we can see through their bellies and limbs deep into the tangled web of human figures. Although each figure is unique, they are titled only as a group and sit without any reference to the real humans who informed their composition. Perhaps Ben-David justified the unreferenced utilisation of his unwitting subjects by presenting them with monochromatic anonymity.

Nicole Bourgea's also engaged with strangers in *'Urban Portrait Project: As Is,'* with which she intended to ask, "In a world where most human interaction is strained down to its digital pulp, do we really see each other anymore?" (2012). Bourgea made ten large-scale classically constructed oil portraits of people she had encountered in the streets around her home. The strangers she approached were aware that she was a portrait artist and they each gave her permission to be photographed, but none of them knew the full extent of the project. Bourgea chose her participants by consciously interrupting her own patterns of observation. Whenever she found herself hurrying past someone she took that as a warning that instead she ought to slow down and do the opposite, to notice them. With between 40 and 80 hours given to the construction of each painting, she well and truly slowed the pace of these normally fleeting interactions.

On the morning of October 1st 2012, after over a years work, the portraits were placed throughout the city at the exact sites where Bourgea had first met her unwitting subjects. Next to the paintings she placed a note 'If this is you, this painting is yours to take'. Bourgea's approach was provocative as she used the strangers' images without their explicit permission and then sat their recognisable portraits out in public spaces, to be viewed and taken. She had to trust that the audience would not interfere, or that they would interfere only to help the paintings end up with their intended recipient.

The vulnerability of the paintings out on the streets illustrated Bourgea's potent desire for trust within her community and exposed the well-meaning intent of her methodology. She wished that "in some small way the project might ignite conversations about the gift of notice" (2012). Bourgea's project addressed the invisible social barriers between us as and queried what connections we might make if we took a moment to look each other in the eye. Nine out of the ten portraits were collected by their subjects, who were reportedly shocked and flattered by the artists attention and generosity. But who ended up with the tenth painting, with the beautifully rendered portrait of a stranger?



'Ben at the Chilli Bowl' from 'Urban Portrait Project: As Is.'

The painting awaiting collection outside the Chilli Bowl, October 1st.

2012.

Nicole Bourgea.

2200 x 1500 mm.

Oil on Canvas.

Washington, D.C.



'The Gift.'

May, 2000.

Jochen Gerz.

Installation of two photographic prints in the home of participants.

Series of 702.

Le Freshoy, France.

Thousands of participants also received the portraits of people unknown to them, through Jochen Gerz's ongoing photography project *'The Gift'*. The first iteration of the project was in Le Fresnoy, France, where Gerz dispersed 500 posters, acquired three newspaper ads and hung two large banners, resulting in 702 local residents accepting his invitation to have their portrait taken.

At the end of an exhibition of the portraits, the participants returned in order to receive their image as a gift. Yet to everyone's surprise, they did not receive their own photograph but the portrait of another person, a stranger, randomly assigned. Gerz spoke of his intentions saying, "ultimately the work questions traditional ideas of authorship, but also traditional ideas of ownership... through extending the collection out of the public institution and into the world of endless private installations in motion" (2000).

The participants displayed their portraits in hundreds of domestic kitchens and living rooms. The trickery utilized in Gerz's methodology might initially seem unkind, but looking through images of how the recipients placed his gift within their homes, proudly hung alongside family portraits or balanced above televisions, we can assume any initial disappointment and shock the participants may have felt developed into an acceptance of the project as a larger piece. Gerz initiated an intimate face-to-face connection through shared photography as the portraits linked together a vast web of strangers, who had lived in close proximity without any previous connection.

Would the participants have remained 'strangers' to each other after such an exchange?

*These strangers, in a foreign World,
Protection asked of me-
Befriend them, lest yourself in Heaven
Be found a Refugee-*

Emily Dickinson's 1879 poem expresses a gentle warning within a call for generosity. Whether the opening line speaks literally of refugees, or more generally of people in need, she encourages us to 'befriend them'. She warns that if we do not, we ourselves may end up outcast and without aid in the afterlife. In our current era, crowded public environments are increasingly being targeted by acts of terror. The ordinary spaces where strangers' paths cross in daily endeavour now hold an unwelcome undertone of tension and the delicate barriers between us are becoming more and more fraught with nervousness and collective distrust. So, despite what our varied personal expectations for the afterlife might be, Dickinson's words would be wisely received today.

I intend to challenge the existing social parameters of 'the stranger'. Communication of any kind is dotted with micro-misunderstandings, but it should be the goal of everyone to endeavour to act with human decency regardless. I wanted to create a painting project that might inject a tiny notion of simplicity and kindness to the barriers between us as strangers, at this time when that space is being challenged.

Chapter 2.

Venture.

*Pull out the shoot,
Pull out the shoot of the flax bush
Where will the bellbird sing?
Say to me
What is the greatest thing?
What is the greatest thing in this world?
I will say
The people! The people! The people.*

'*Hutia*' by Hirini Melbourne (1994). (Translated from te reo Māori).

I am searching among strangers for the flax that connects us all, because if we are living as one, perhaps we are not heading along a linear notion of time into empty darkness but instead outward in new growth.

I have always been an avid 'people watcher', wanting to paint each of the hundreds of faces I pass on the streets. Early in 2017, aiming to construct a project based in generosity and needing to connect with strangers, I set out to convince members of the public to participate in a free portrait project. I asked that they submit their own self-portrait photograph with the promise that I would paint it in miniature and then gift the final work back to them.

This exchange hoped to slow down some of the split-second interactions we usually have with strangers. Paint and its inherent slowness was utilised to act as a soft resistance to the fast pace of technology, and the transient nature of some modern portrait making.

Admittedly, figurative painting can be a flawed means of portraying reality, and it is equally due to this trait that I warmly embraced it as my chosen medium. It is a material that constructs, edits, masks, and misinterprets in similar ways to the human that it is trying to depict. Although the translation between stranger and paint was an endeavour likely to be riddled with misinterpretations, the well-meaning intention of this project hoped to encourage 'people watching' and investigate the fragility of the social boundaries between us all.

There is a professional duty attached to making paintings when the artist is being paid for their skill. Such works are likely influenced and manipulated by fashion, flattery, and the fee paid. So, to soothe the effects that the commission induces, it was decided that these miniature portraits would be offered to any person free of charge. Unlike early miniature portraiture depicting patrons and aristocracy, this venture was to be as egalitarian and inclusive as possible. Generosity became entwined in the exchange as any payment was refused. But even without the cost attached, there is a certain frivolity to having one's miniature oil portrait painted that may have influenced potential participants. They are non-essential objects, extravagant and luxurious in nature, they do not clothe or feed, but at the same time they were also the best I had to give.



FREE PORTRAIT PAINTING



Do you have a photo of yourself that you'd like to be painted in miniature?



I will paint the first 120 I receive. I will gift the painting back to you.

PLEASE SEND YOUR PHOTO TO...
georgia.glass.nz@gmail.com



You may only submit an image of yourself. You may construct, edit or pose your self - portrait however you wish, be it silly, serious or whichever tone you like. Head and shoulders only please.



This is an MFA project focused on the interaction between strangers. It will use painting as a slow resistance to the fast pace of modern portraiture.

Instagram: [georgiaglasspainting](https://www.instagram.com/georgiaglasspainting)



A4 poster.

April- August 2017.

One of 30 around the Wellington Region.

In promising that the first 120 submissions would be accepted and that the artist would endeavour not to edit, but to paint them all, exactly how the participant had chosen to pose or construct their own image, the power of selection was shifted into the hands of the subjects.

The posters were scattered around Wellington in crowded public areas. They hung on local notice boards, at cafes and churches, shelters, and bus stops. Through the printed posters, the initial connection with participants was set up to be a physical encounter. There is a slowness and tactile intimacy attached to making objects such as paintings, which was why it had felt important to also keep initial engagement in the project hands-on. There was a poetic sensibility to the thought that people noticing the poster and choosing to participate may be doing so on the same streets where our paths had once crossed.

Online exchange was elicited in the method almost immediately afterward, as the next step in the process was an engagement via email, so struggling to keep the poster off-line may have seemed contradictory. But the attempt in itself was still a pertinent way to begin as it opened up a discourse surrounding the modern exchange of images and information that threaded throughout the entire process. Attempting to keep the call for submissions away from virtual sharing and online publication also intended to keep it Wellington bound. However, the moving nature of the crowd and fact that the city is a transient place of international interaction intervened. It very quickly became obvious that the poster had found its way online and that it was being shared via email. This outward momentum exposed my lack of control over the poster.

One man emailed asking for a link to any online explanation of the work. He had seen the poster in a café but it seemed he was unwilling to participate without an online presence that might secure his trust in the project and its intentions. The reasons for keeping the search for participation 'offline' were explained but he didn't respond. Must any form of social engagement connecting strangers be recorded online in order to be trustworthy? One participant mentioned how difficult it was to share the project without relying on the web but mentioned that she enjoyed the challenge. Others went ahead and shared it via online channels without permission. The distribution and circulation of the poster fell out of my hands but the work came back to me in the form of submissions.

This project's structure contrasted the classic mode of portrait painting where the artist physically stands before the subject, poses them, and speaks to them. The history of portrait painting traditionally ran on a system where patrons would commission an artist to paint their likeness in exchange for payment. The subjects were often strangers to the artist until they meet in the flesh for their sitting.

In more recent times portrait artists like Lucian Freud have engaged in lengthy sittings, in which the artist and subject form intimate bonds that inform the painting (Kamp, 2012). And so, the stranger becomes known. But despite never standing face-to-face during the making of these works it was increasingly difficult to hold up the barrier between artist and stranger as communication with the unknown participants deepened. When they had sent in their photograph but we had not met, it appeared to be a simple exchange. Almost business-like. But as conversations grew and hours were spent translating the shadows and crevices of their eyes and cheeks into paint, a connection emerged. Not one of true comprehension but of a mild familiarity. In this way the painted portraits retained the slippery connotations of the stranger, half known but illusive.

Chapter 3.

Miniature.

Writings about historical miniature painting often reference how they have been used as treasured objects within human relationships. Whether they embellished the walls of the Ancient Greeks, were combined with religious verse in Iran, accompanied erotic mythology in India, were lacquered onto snuff boxes in Russia, or were painted onto ivory jewellery pieces as they were in the Elizabethan era; the term 'miniature painting' was formed to be globally synonymous with their tactile exchange. Often records of loved ones, miniature objects and paintings were easily hidden in a pocket or sent via post, making them intrinsically intimate and useful in modes of secrecy, exchange, or remembrance.

Painted miniatures were often used to entice or secure romantic matches over distances prior to the potential couples meeting. In some instances, the artists were exposed to have knowingly edited or exaggerated the attractiveness and subsequent compatibility of their subjects. When the strangers finally met and found that their betrothed was not entirely what their painted likeness had promised, the manipulations that had occurred during their translation into paint became apparent. To be a 'catfish' is a modern term that refers to any person who actively deceives another by posing as someone else via online communication. A historical version of the 'catfish' can be found in the similar manipulations that occurred within the traditions of early miniature painting and exchange.

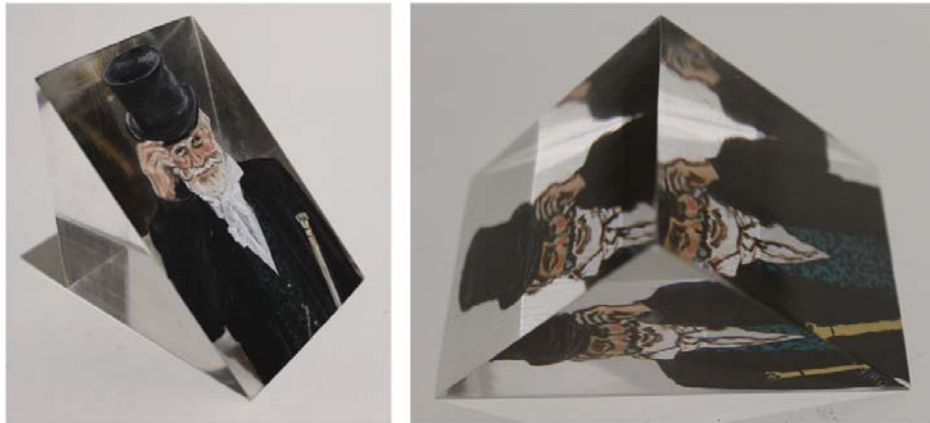
One participant of the project queried how big her painting might be. On being assured it would be miniature she responded, "Oh I'm glad it's small, would not want a huge portrait like the Chairman Mao one I saw at the airport in China once!" There is an egotistical connotation attached to the act of having one's portrait painted. The scale and familiarity of miniature painting as a practical means of commemoration aids in alleviating the concerns sometimes attributed to larger works.

Miniature painting doesn't allow the whole story to be known. Even more obviously than any other scale, it is visually restrictive as it attempts to sum-up an entire personality. The traditional mode of portrait painting normally presents a single frame; a flat surface.

My miniatures may show more than one surface through their transparent edges but the flashes of blue and umber underpainting are intended to further expose the fact that what we are seeing is not a human being but a construction.

Traditional oil-painting techniques follow specialist methods of application that build up texture and tone. With experimentation throughout the whole process of assembly, the underpainting of these miniatures were constructed with a mixture of painterly approaches. Having differences in style and colour visible through the back sides of the plexiglass meant that the mass of portraits would not appear to be the result of a production line. The sketchy lines, vibrant block colours or discordant patterns also reveal the loose and fragile translations that first transcribed the portrait photographs from the mobile phone onto the plexiglass.

The plexiglass substrate itself was cut in a range of different geometric shapes with slightly varied measurements. It was a pertinent surface to work on as it muddles any attempted reading of the front surface. Its back, edges, and sides play with reflections that move, splinter, and hide even as the viewer moves around the work to try and see it more clearly. A few of the pieces have foggy, sanded edges. This added another layer of distortion to the individual portraits and then to the reading of the other paintings in the crowd when they are viewed through those blurred surfaces.



'Of the Crowd.'

2017.

Georgia Glass.

Oil on Plexiglass.

Varied sizes.

Front, edge and back view.

Wellington, New Zealand.



'Blackfield.'

2006- 09.

Zadok Ben-David.

Installation of up to 20,000 painted stainless-steel sculptures on sand. Front and back view.

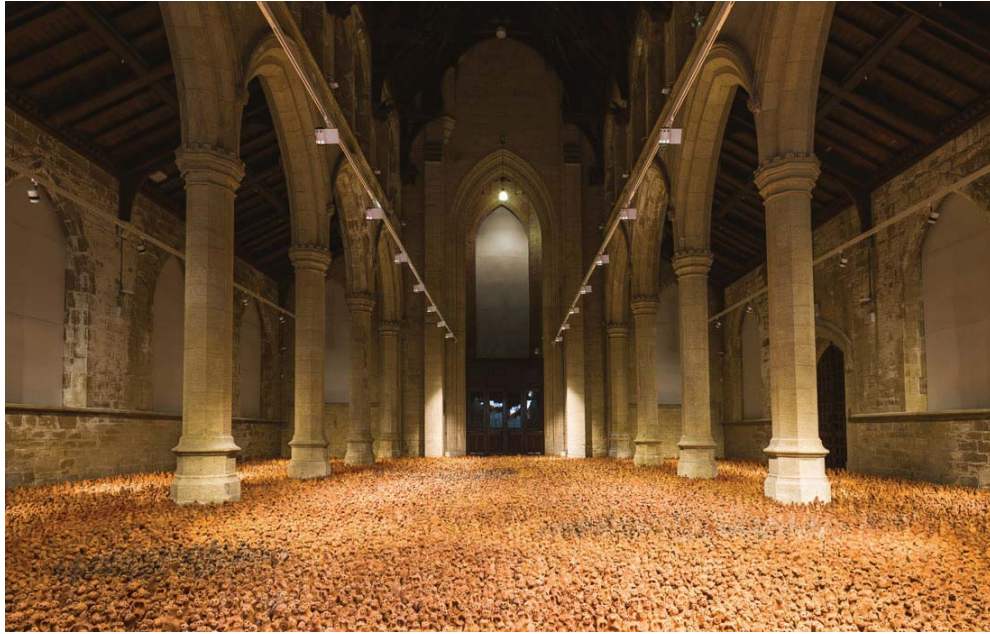
Los Angeles.

Zadok Ben-David employed a similar duality combined with miniaturism in his exhibition '*Blackfield*'. The installation consists of thousands of small steel cut outs of flora and fauna. On entry into the exhibition, the expansive field of flowers all appear to be black. But on walking around the installation, we see that Ben-David has painted on the reverse side with vibrant colours; tones of cherry, lime and grape.

Leah Ollman (2009) described the jarring experience, "As unnaturally vivid as the flip sides are unnaturally stark. Suddenly, we are part of a technicolour garden, where moments before we stood in a cemetery". Ben-David used the power of colour to construct an alarming dual surface which leads the viewer to reconsider the believability of what they had first considered to be the art. His audience's curiosity is rewarded with hidden details and the revelation of the vibrant underside.

The same exhibition relied on the connotations of the miniature to inform the audience's experience of the work. Ollman wrote, "From any angle, it's easy to appreciate the theatrical artifice of the entire assembly of little cut outs. By so dramatically scaling down the plants, Ben-David scales up our own presence and sense of power... It is engagement with the body on the dual scales of the miniature and the gigantic, the way it harnesses the power of the small, multiplied". There is an elegant capacity that small objects carry when installed in vast collections. The presentation of miniature in mass affords a certain wonder and audience contemplation that would likely not have occurred had only one of the single miniature objects been exhibited alone.

Antony Gormley is one of several other artists who construct large installations of miniature objects. In his 2005 installation '*Field*', thousands of small terracotta sculpted figures stood filling the floor-space of a large interior (Krysa, 2016). Gormley has been creating versions of this work since 1989, a testament to the timelessness of his thematic underpinnings; considering humanity and one's place within it. His mass of miniature figures confronts its audience, who appear giant by proximity. At first we are struck by the vast mass of terracotta clay but then the eye descends into detail and comes to notice the tiny variances between each of the thousands of little figures. The earthy weight of the material ties the group together; they are 'cut from the same cloth', as are we, but the handmade moulding of each individual renders them irrevocably unique. The power of the small multiplied is astonishing and confronting. They are almost cute and amusing until they inspire a deeper contemplation of their existence as a metaphor; a mirror that reflects our own minute existence.



'Field.'

2005.

Antony Gormley.

Installation of terracotta sculptures.

St John's Church, Scunthorpe.

Milan Kundera wrote, “When we look at two faces side by side we are struck but everything that makes one different from the other. But when we see two hundred and twenty-three faces side by side we realise that it all one face in many variations and that no such thing as an individual ever existed” (1991, p. 35).

Years ago I was caught up in this phrase, hoping to paint ‘one face’ and represent every person that had lived up until now and every person that was to come in a single work that every member of its audience could look upon and feel connected to. I find the humans array of unique details extremely captivating, but it is the complexity present in every individual that makes them impossible to capture entirely in paint. So, in reading Kundera’s phrase instead as a warning against creating a melting pot of human types within one portrait, I endeavoured to paint the vast crowd in all their complexity. Hopefully one hundred and twenty-nine of my miniature portraits might show some of Kundera’s collective humanity and shared condition, but also expose the rich and innumerable details of individuality and the potential of the small when assembled as a crowd.

In the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, we witness how eloquently the miniature lends itself to being extended into an experience. His audience members were literally able to take a small segment of the work away from the gallery space in their hands. This series allowed viewers to take packaged candies from a 175 pound pile in the corner of the room and, in doing so, contribute to the slow disappearance of the sculpture over the course of the exhibition. The title referenced Gonzalez-Torres’s late partner, Ross Laycock, and his battle and death from the complications of AIDS in 1991.

“The most pervasive reading of Gonzalez-Torres’s work take the process his works undergo (lightbulbs expiring, candies dispersing etc.) as a metaphor for the process of dying. However, many have seen the works as also representing the continuation of life with the possibility of regeneration (replacing bulbs, replenishing stacks of candies)” (Eckardt: 2016).

Adding even further to the work’s circular momentum, with the format set in place, repetitions of the project have been performed even after the artist’s own passing. Audience members are encouraged to take a piece of candy, but it is requested that photographing the work remain off limits. Despite this contraband images of audience interactions with the work, like the one included here, litter Instagram.

Gonzalez-Torres orchestrated a work that examined the shared human experiences of life and death and materialised that gigantic field of thought into something miniature. He contemplated life’s big questions, truths, and parameters, and represented those movements through the light-hearted and familiar pleasure of giving sweets. It was a simple and non-threatening way to engage audience participation. Like a seed, planted for further contemplation, having people leave the space with a reminder of the work in their pocket meant it was likely they thought back to the work even after the candy had disappeared from its crinkly wrapper.



'Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)'

1991.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

175 pounds of wrapped candy.

The Met Breuer, New York.

Chapter 4.

Current-day portrait exchange.

Working in miniature is important now due in part to the method's historical trajectory but also because of its modern connotations. Like the exchange of early miniature portraiture, the modern technological based methods of image sharing are also small-scale, hand-held and intimate.

My attraction to miniature painting was born from a nervous awareness of my own size within a self-established notion of time. It was also the most appropriate scale for me in which to make art as it paralleled my daily use of a mobile phone. There was an advert on television that compared a mobile phone to a dog as 'man's best friend', indispensable and always by your side. After initially bristling at this comparison, I came to revere the mobile phone as an electronic version of the painted miniature. An asset in my personal communication and a valued tool in my painting methodology, it was used to accommodate this project out of familiarity and the necessity to connect.

Transcribing the outline of each face directly from my phone onto the plexiglass gave some accuracy to the movement between the photo and painting. The mobile phone was the essential middle man of this exchange; it was both the vessel of participation and the tool of translation. However, it was also a hindrance as it meant I was always open to receiving calls and messages. This openness to distraction reflected the similar nature of daily wanderings within the crowd, where my attention is split between the real, the internal, and the technological. Our heads are down so often, connected maybe, but not with those physically around us. In this way the mobile phone acts as both a bridge and a boundary between us all.

My shock at opening the first emailed photograph from a participant, a pouting 'selfie' taken in bed, was quickly followed by familiarity. It is a sign of our times that strangers felt it was normal to share with me via email not only a photo of themselves, but in some cases also the faces of their children, parents, pets, or lovers.

One of the participant's photographs was recognised by my sister as she was looking through the painted crowd sitting half completed in the studio. Her flatmate had 'matched' him on the online dating app 'Tinder' and she had shown the man's photo to my sister to ask her opinion of him. He had submitted, to be painted in miniature, the exact same photo that she had seen him use online as a tool of romantic communication. The dialogue between us, as well as the secondary sharing of his image that had initially occurred, had exposed this stranger to recognition without his knowledge.

This layered exchange exposed the tangled nature of personal connections via the screen. Snapchat courtship and various other modes of web-based communication have normalised the fast pace and intimate exchange of one's own image. We have all been told 'not to judge a book by its cover', but the sharing overdrive that has been spurred along by the internet, encourages us to make decisions about a person based on visual judgement of their chosen photograph. In these online connections the image comes first, and the conversation comes second. The painted portrait and the stranger are restricted in a similar way, where visual material is usually all that we are given to address. In this project the pieces of transparent plexiglass were cut to a similar size and weight as a mobile phone, to reference the modern screen and its method of portrait exchange.



Images from my studio process.

The initial transfer from the photograph on my phone into a painting on plexiglass.

“The ‘ie’ at the end of selfie makes it diminutive, which generally implies some affection and familiarity. From a semantic perspective, a selfie is a ‘little self...’ A little portrait that speaks to the sense of immediacy, insignificance and impermanence of a single photo” (Rutledge, 2013).

This project set out to counteract the impermanence of the selfie, the culture of which encourages portrait making that is quickly taken and quickly shared but that is also easily lost and replaced. Where do the vast numbers of portraits taken eventually end up, in the ‘cloud,’ or hidden in devices that age and malfunction?

Although painted miniatures are certainly not infallible, the anachronistic mode of portrait painting attempts at least to be physically permanent. The slow production of small self-portrait photographs into miniature paintings intended to elevate the images’ significance. Replication and the almost constant regeneration of portrait imagery occurring on our small screens exposes the fragile ties of authorship and the speed of web-based distribution.

Every day on Instagram I scroll through near on a hundred miniaturised images of paintings and art objects. I do not own them, but for a quarter of a second or for as long as I choose, I can look upon them, in my hand, without cost. Online sharing questions the parameters of ownership.

It was obvious that some of the images arriving in the inbox submissions had already been subject to the participant’s own editing and application of filters. Reproducing them in paint would make them less erasable but it also intended to expose a little of the medium of paintings similarly edited and constructed nature.

“Selfie taking is complex and multidimensional, a cultural and social act, a call for connection, an act of mimicry, and a part of peoples ever-incomplete identity projects. If photographs are reflections of the way we see the world, selfies are reflections of the way we see ourselves” (Kozinets, 2017).

Then a third reflection occurred when the submitted selfie was translated into a painted reproduction by a stranger with only the given image and no other visual reference to work from.

Terrence Eduarte is an illustrator who recently undertook a self-enforced project titled ‘100 days of secrets’, via Instagram in which he drew his participants’ portrait in exchange for a written secret that they chose to share with him (Cowan, 2017). The figures were drawn from behind and remained anonymous. The collection is displayed on Eduarte’s site, where each character is presented alongside the written ‘secret’ that was exchanged for the portraits production.

Receiving more submissions than he had time to accept resulted in some form of selection process by the artist that no doubt affected the tone of submissions. Participants emailed in secrets that they hoped would be scandalous, banal, funny, or familiar enough to catch the artists attention and get them selected. This process highlighted how the overdrive of social media can spur sensationalism. Eduarte’s surplus of hopeful participants encouraged exaggerated experiences to be submitted. We all contended for space, just as the gigantic platform of the internet showcases only a few moments from the macro crowd, ever moving. For the participants, the desire to be selected into the project may have emphasised the reality of their own smallness within the jostling crowd.

Chapter 5.

Painting and time.

In the *'The Artificial Kingdom'*, Celeste Olalquiaga describes Rodney, a hermit crab frozen inside a glass paperweight that she had found in her hotel room. She writes, "When looking at Rodney in his glass globe, one can indulge the rare emotion of possessing his existence... When the illusion is maintained, Rodney fulfils the wish image's potential, in this case, to surpass death. Yet simultaneously, the creature has ceased to exist" (1999, p. 15).

Rodney offers up a segment of existence. From his glass casing, he attempts the illusion of freezing time. But it is a hoax, because his shell is empty, just as the transparent spaces inside my paintings are hollow.

Oscar Wilde famously played with the connotations of both time and paint in his novel *'The picture of Dorian Gray'* (1890). A painted portrait of the young and handsome Dorian Gray is mysteriously vulnerable to the progressions of time and proceeds to decay. Its physiognomy changes with old age, whereas Dorian the man stays strangely unchanging despite the movement of time, behaving as the painting should have. Wilde ultimately exposes Gray's foolishness at having attempted immortality by avoiding the movements of time through a painting.

Plexiglass is not biodegradable and so will neither age nor decay, but the unknown decomposition of the portrait made on its surface is pertinent. The unknown fate of oil paint on plexiglass mirrors the temporal lives of the painted subjects. And of us all.

In Donna Tartt's novel *'The Goldfinch'*, a painting is described as a 'deathless thing' (2013, p. 780). But I still see them as fragile objects. Painting on plexiglass holds the opportunity to explore my personal relationship to time and my measurement of it, from a predominantly Western linear didactic. It is the most pertinent surface for me on which to paint because it offers up several unique traits. When cut in thick blocks, reflections, and various parts of the underpainting, appear through the sides, from the back surface or through the frame. These multiple and changing reflections are dependent on that transparent ground and I feel that reflective 'infinity space' speaks to the parameters of portraiture within time that I set out to explore.

The history of painted portraiture reminds us that not only was the physiognomy of the sitter often purposefully mistranslated to flatter and elevate, but that oil paint itself has often intended to trick; to deceive its audience into believing the image it displays is in fact a reality. In my paintings, with the usually hidden underside visible, the construction becomes as equally as important as the normative finished front. The materiality of oil paint as a tool is exposed when painted on the transparent surface as the construction lines and discordant colours of the underpainting are left visible. Any illusion of reality is shattered. When viewed back and forth between the underpainting and the finished surface, there should be a spot-the-difference at play, an uncertainty as to which side, if either, could be truth. As the plexiglass bounces the painted image around its interior, the duality of the surface is intended to capture the viewer's curiosity and to have them query the validity of the translation that has taken place between the original living human character and their painted portrait.



'Of the Crowd.'

2017.

Georgia Glass.

Oil on Plexiglass.

Varied sizes.

Front, edge and back views.

Wellington, New Zealand.

Chapter 6.

Participants.

If I let you take my photograph, I let you take my soul.

Unlike my previous practice, I did not actively take, steal, or use the faces of people without permission. I soon came to appreciate the gravity of what the strangers were giving in response to my own offering. To be open and trusting enough to have offered up their own image, the very structure of their identity, highlighted the depth of generosity on both sides of the exchange. I was utterly reliant on their participation and trust. By requesting and waiting, I lost my power of selection, but what I gained revealed itself to be a delicate and complex collaboration.

In her writing *'Reciprocal Generosity,'* Mary Jane Jacob writes "Rather than subscribing to a deficiency model, I do not believe such audiences are lacking, that they are empty vessels that we need to fill with art history and art information. In fact, in commissioning public projects, such audience members are always the initial resources that inform the work. At times, they co-produce it. They offer ideas and bring issues to bear that give the work meaning" (2002, p. 3).

The subjects' rationales for engaging with the project emerged during the process. Various anecdotes surfaced among the group of participants with many having been attracted by the notion that the painted image might capture a moment that they treasured. Segments of time, of their own youth and the youth of their children, were offered. One couple sent images of themselves as children 40 years ago. There was an activist, a lady hoping to overcome shyness, a young woman clutching a bottle of wine and a young man proudly holding his University degree. The varied intentions for participation resulted in an eclectic mixture of moments and memories from the recent past, that now sit linked together within the assembled crowd.

There was a noticeable amount of 'teeth showing smiles' in this process where the subject was choosing their own image. And although the hundreds of miniscule pearly whites were a testing challenge in miniature skill, it also exposed a pleasant notion; that people wanted to see themselves, reflected in paint, as being happy.

A few times I spotted participants walking past me on the street. They did not know my face, but I had already spent hours already with theirs. It was an odd feeling, telling of the separation that technology affords and the smallness of the distances truly between us.

Mother and child.

A substantial number of mothers submitted photographs of their children. The decision was made early on to allow these images, despite the poster's request of 'one image of yourself', not due to any legal right of guardianship, but owing more to the familiarity of mothers who carry dog-eared miniature photographs of their children around in their purses. Just as those photographs sit for years without change, clad in school blazers and smiling out from between the coins and coffee cards, their children's painted miniatures might be treasured.

Romeo and Juliet.

Leniency was also given when images of participant's lovers were submitted. Many enquiries came from strangers hoping for a miniature painting to be made of their boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, or wife. Struck by the parallel to the romantic exchange of Elizabethan miniatures, these submissions were added to the crowd, but with the request that the subject be told of the project and themselves give permission for their photo to be used. All responded that yes, their lover was aware and willing, but I suspect that some may in fact be surprise gestures, either to be given as a token of reverence to their partner, or to be kept as a trinket of the relationship for themselves.

Location, Location.

From details within the written communication it was apparent that, for some, the location of their portrait had influenced their selection of that image. To remove the background would have meant editing out the environment that was almost as characteristic to the construction of their portrait as the actual face and body. For one participant, the Parliamentary building in the background was included in reference to his own social and political agenda. To deny the context that this detail added to the composition would have been to edit beyond the initial promise of the project. Enough mistranslation happens naturally between the photograph and painting without having purposefully cropped these significant details.

In a few instances, the colour pallet of the background was used not to fill in the entire front surface, but to fill in the underpainting of the figure. A young man sent in an image of himself standing in a glorious rusty orange light at dusk, so the mottled sunset hues were used in his underpainting, to peek through and inform the flesh tones painted over top.

The nervous participants.

There was a small number of folk who expressed interest in submitting an image of themselves, only to later back away. After months of promising to send an image, an email arrived, "I personally don't like posing for pictures so I don't have anything of myself other than my passport picture". A passport picture would have been perfectly fine, in fact one other submission was a square little passport snap, but not wanting to be pushy, the illusive stranger was simply wished well as he exited the exchange.

One woman submitted a photo of her white-haired mother to be painted, but when invited to also submit a photo of herself, responded "I couldn't find a photo of myself worthy enough to be immortalised on glass". It was a moving response. She had elevated the act of miniature painting to only being afforded to 'worthy participants', and in doing so she held her mother in high esteem. She also exposed the wish of the painted portrait to operate outside of mortality, an improbable but potent desire. Though assured that she was both worthy and welcome to submit regardless of her gut reaction, she politely declined. This was the opposite of the 'selfie', the treasuring of another person that embodied memento and favoured memory over self-reflection.

Treasured Pet.

It is common to attempt to immortalise in art the things we treasure most. Knowing the connection miniature painting has with a tradition of sentimentality and memento, it was not surprising that several submissions included animals. But I must admit to being surprised and amused that someone could have a 'favourite' chicken! Miniature portraiture is a presentation that holds potential in soothing the inevitability of death. Pets don't often outlive their human companions and carry a weighted history of teaching children about time and passing. They embody an innocence that often leaves us yearning to preserve something of their existence. Just as Rodney still resides in his glass paperweight, the humans and animals painted on these plexiglass block will stay. Miniature painting has a small power in that it can lay preserved and unchanging, a vessel of fond memories.

The ghost.

Miniature painting and the jewel-like, tactile treasure it presents lends itself comfortably to memento and memorial. But the request that participants submit 'one image of yourself', intended to avoid receiving a mixture of living and departed individuals. Being sensitive to the fact that some cultures separate photographs of their ancestors from the living by placing them on separate walls or surfaces, influenced the decision to keep this collection tied to the current time. Nevertheless, one participant submitted an image of a sibling who had recently passed away. I responded that I would be honoured to paint the photograph and gift it directly back to her, but that it would not be exhibited alongside the rest of the crowd. She was pleased with this compromise, and the small work was made and gifted in private, a weighted but warm moment of exchange.



'Of the Crowd.'

2017.

Georgia Glass.

Oil on Plexiglass.

Varied sizes.

Front, edge and back views.

Wellington, New Zealand.

Chapter 7.

Of the Crowd.

The rough move between photograph and painting is similar to the children's game 'Chinese-whispers' in its transference. Many details were no doubt lost or jumbled but the final crowd of one hundred and twenty-nine painted portraits hold some gesture of their original photographs.

This methodology, where paintings were made from photographs before their subjects were ever seen in the flesh, increased the likelihood of mistranslations. The reality of some participant's age and other characteristics features may have been muddled in the movements between person and photograph, phone, and painting.

"Opening the process of art making to those previously held at a distance is demanding. It involves inserting them into the process and being accountable to them... It is not a passive giving and receiving, and responsibilities exist for each party involved." (Jacob, 2002, p.7).

I had been used to control, to relying only on myself and not on the temperamental and unknowable input of strangers. However, I had not previously experienced the richness that such a collaboration could give. During the making, I always found something about each submitted photograph that I was enchanted to paint. I tried to give them equal attention, equal time, and to finish the front surface with similar levels of detail and care, but I naturally got caught up in the patterns and complexities of some more than others.

The labour of the process was my gift to the strangers, but it was not always an entirely pleasurable endeavour. The large volume of work was a test in endurance, but my promise to the participants was never regretted. Decisions along the way were influenced by the 'gentleman's' agreement that had been entered into with the one hundred and twenty-nine strangers and my ultimate output was focused toward pleasing them. It was a process of luxury not only because of the final product, but also due to the amount of time with which I was free to make the work. During the hundreds of hours in the studio, I swayed between moments of gratitude, fear of disappointing the participants, physical pain that had resulted from the extended periods of tension demanded by the miniature, and pleasure in the gift that I was creating.

The final collection has been placed in piles, rows, and in loose groups. When some sat balanced on the top of others, their faces displayed stacked or touching, one became wary of the intimacy being forced upon the strangers. Wanting to avoid any hierarchical reading of the group, they were finally displayed side by side in loose clusters on a waist height plinth. The box stands in the centre of a small white walled space prompting visitors to walk around the crowd and view them from different positions. The installation is structured to entice curious observation of the miniatures and to encourage, in equal measure, contemplation of both their normative 'finished' painted fronts and their discordant underpainting.

The first name of each participant was catalogued with the intention that each would be etched into the side of the plexiglass and act as individual titles. But the crowd better retained their 'stranger-ness' when deprived of names, so in the end they were left anonymous. Without text the eye roves undistracted by letters and the common act of 'people watching' is induced. The audience might attempt to hunt for familiar faces among the crowd, but by not etching in the names, any way of checking the identity of the subject is denied; as is the true nature of the stranger.

On the window at the entry to the space is a sign requesting the audience do not photograph the work. In part to protect the privacy of the participants, it is also a measure that attempts some control in selecting the publication and distribution of any visual material that will act as the only record of the work in its entirety. Without the sign there would be a strong temptation to photograph the miniatures and to take home a record of the experience via a mobile phone or camera. Yet it is likely some will disregard the request and images of the work will no doubt end up online. This is an inevitable layer of movement that speaks to the lack of control authorship and ownership hold over art in 2017.

Scrolling up through the email threads that webbed around behind the submissions, it became apparent that some participation was undertaken in order to receive a portrait with the intention to then re-gift it. Some had been encouraged to engage with the project and receive a portrait as 'it would make a great Christmas gift for your Mum'. These layers of further movement and connection that might occur, beyond my final giving of the pieces, adds an unknown but pleasantly open-ended resolution to the gift process. They are small, static objects, but their scale lends them poised to travel as they are easily posted, held, or given.

"There is an idea that commerce and gifts are two separate kinds of activity, the first based on exact recompenses, the second spontaneous, pure of ulterior motive... Pure gift? Nonsense! Declares Mauss, the idea of a pure gift is a contradiction... right across the globe as far back as we can go in human civilisation, the major transfer of goods has been by cycles of obligatory return of gifts" (1990, p. 20).

In the beginning, I had assumed that my gift could be an act of pure generosity. It didn't occur to me that I might be disadvantaging the participants but refusing reciprocation. It is at the tail end of this project that I can see the balance of the exchange.

Those travellers who submitted images, eager to receive portraits as mementos from their trip, will have their miniature paintings posted directly to wherever they may now be. Our connection will remain an ephemeral one, but we will be linked by the physical object that will soon journey from the studio to their mail-boxes and onwards.

On submitting this document, the collection event has not yet taken place. In this final segment of the process, the participants will arrive and be handed their miniature. We will stand face to face for the first time and from the miniature crowd to their hand the portrait will be given. The retrieval of the miniatures will be filmed from above to record the movement of the painted crowd as the real people who instigated each piece come forward to take their portrait. And like Poe's protagonist observed, the painted crowd will go out from the space in a hundred different directions.

In her 1990 forward to Mauss' text Mary Douglas wrote, "Gifts are given in a context of public drama, with nothing secret about them. In being more directly cued to public esteem, the distribution of honour, and the sanctions of religion, the gift economy is more visible than the market. Just by being visible, the resultant distribution of goods and services is more readily subject to public scrutiny..."

This project was tumultuously constructed because on one hand I hoped to satisfy the stranger, to show good intent and generosity, but on the other hand I accepted that the movement from photograph to painting would be riddled with mistranslations. I do not assume to be presenting them with 'true' representations of themselves. I imagine that I might say to them, *'You know your own face, I did not, so please be gentle as you assess the portrait that I have painted from the*

photograph you kindly submitted. Painting inherently mistranslates, the visible underpainting acts as a clue to this construction, but still I hope that you find some joy in them.'

I anticipate that upon meeting the strangers of the assembled crowd, I may discover that I have been observing their photos and day-dreaming about their characters, in totally false directions. As is the manner of 'people watching' and assumption.

Nothing will be required of the participants after they take their painted miniature away from the gallery space. It is likely I will not be made aware of where the paintings end up or where they move to as time goes on. When they leave Wallace street in November I will not follow them and I hold no expectation for either forced or spontaneous reconnection.

This work initially set out to investigate the boundaries shared by the stranger and the painted portrait. The act of 'people watching' influenced the construction of a methodology that requested the participation of strangers. Submitted self-portrait photographs were translated through the slow process of oil-painting to counteract the fast pace of current-day image exchange, with the size of the plexiglass surface acting as a reference to the mobile phone screen.

This work embraced the anachronistic techniques of miniature portraiture, utilising hand-held and intimate methods of exchange comparable to the current technological sharing of images. The painted miniature portrait holds a weighted relationship to time and mortality through its affinity to memento. The final installation of one hundred and twenty-nine portraits expose a similar intention, to hold in place that which is inherently fleeting. The warmth of communication provoked by 'the gift' element of the transaction, was an unanticipated consequence of the process. Both the physical object exchanged and the wealth of conversation shared, interrupted the fragile barriers that separated us as strangers.

Although the divide between artist and participant was softened, misinterpretations were still admitted. When painted on transparent plexiglass, the visual duality of the portrait reflects the micro mistranslations that have occurred in the movements between person, photograph, phone, and painting. The combination of these thematic undercurrents allowed the final piece to present a macro view of a constructed crowd, loosely tied to Wellington in 2017.

As this piece comes to a gentle close, I am thinking toward the next venture. In querying how miniature portraits might be able to operate within daily interventions, I am eager to begin constructing new methodologies centred around collaboration and local participation.

These days I watch the crowd around me with a renewed intensity, still wanting to paint all of them. My work will always be about the people, the people, the people.

List of images.

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Zadok Ben-David.

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