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Art

# Superfluous Men Can't Get No Satisfaction

John Yau November 18, 2012

Peter Stichbury is a portrait painter whose work is unlike anyone else that I know of, and I am only stating the obvious. In "Skin-deep: Peter Stichbury and The Art of Appearances" (Art & Australia, September 2011), Justin Paton writes:

Hung alongside Zuckerberg's fizzog were faces of nearly oppressive flawlessness. There was a chiseled Donald Draper type called 'Roma', a waif-model named 'Bregje Heinen' and a riveting youth called 'Bernard M.'. They all have hair like sable, clear veinless eyes and skin that doesn't sweat. As you might have guessed from those details, Stichbury is an awed admirer of the portraits of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres ("halfway through making a show his book always makes its way onto my table to mock me," Stichbury told me recently, and he sets down his new characters with extraordinary patience and technical cunning.

However much Stichbury is an "awed admirer" of Ingres, he does part company with him in substantial ways. In his essay "The Painter of Modern Life," Charles Baudelaire's complaint about Ingres seems to have been implicitly understood by Stichbury:

The great failing of M. Ingres, in particular, is that he seeks to impose upon every type of sitter a more or less complete, by which I mean a more or less despot, form of perfection, borrowed from the repository of classical ideas.

For all of their "nearly oppressive flawlessness," Stichbury's paintings and drawings do not look back to "the repository of classical ideas," but to a world replete with cosmetic surgery, Photoshop, Facebook, Twitter and reality television, just to name a few of the ways society exhibits new and improved faces. Along with Ingres, I would advance that Stichbury belongs to a group of linear portrait painters that includes Christian Schad, Tamara de Lempicka, and early Lucien Freud, particularly "Girl in Bed" (1952), which is of his then wife, Lady Caroline Blackwood, who was known for astonishingly large blue eyes.

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In 2010, Stichbury had his first New York exhibition, which he titled *The Proteus Effect*, at Tracy Williams. The title signaled his interest in the phenomenon of creating a digital persona (or avatar) as a form of self-representation. Stichbury's second exhibition at Tracy Williams is *Superfluous Man* (November 8–December 22, 2012). The term was popularized in Russia in the mid-19th century by Ivan Turgenev's novel, *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850). The "superfluous man" was born into wealth and privilege. Unwilling to work in the government, which was where one could make a name, he gambled, dueled, and arranged romantic trysts. He tended to be shallow, cynical and bored.

Whereas Elizabeth Peyton romanticizes various examples of the superfluous man, making it seem as if idleness is the only important goal in life, Stichbury's aim is different. He isn't celebrating pop icons, like Lindsay Lohan and Adriana Lima, by making them into eleven-foot paintings in soft-core porn poses, as Richard Phillips did in his recent exhibition at Gagosian. Although Stichbury is exploring some of the



Peter Stichbury, "Xavier Gravas" (2012). (all images courtesy Tracy Williams)



Peter Stichbury, "Harold Child" (2012)



Peter Stichbury, "Estelle & Helena" (2012)

same territory as Peyton and Phillips, he isn't following in Andy Warhol's footsteps and trying to connect himself to celebrities, and that's saying something.

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There are seven paintings and four drawings in colored pencil on charcoal gray paper. The largest one, "Estelle & Helena" (2012) is 63 by 47 inches. It is a double portrait and the largest painting Stichbury has made to date. At the other end is "Augusta Vane" (2012), which is around 13 by 12 inches. The other five portraits – examples of the superfluous man – are all the same size, around 40 by 30 inches.

In his best paintings, Stichbury walks a fine line between the unblemished and the grotesque without showing his hand, either literally or metaphorically. We tend to associate flawlessness with beauty, but Stichbury's smooth, perfectly modulated, tight surfaces are unsettling. His paintings don't strike me as portraits of people but of people who want to look as smooth and flawless as dolls. In "Estelle & Helena," Estelle's head is a perfect oval; she looks like an egg with eyes that are just a little too far apart and a little too big. The carefully manicured eyebrows rise uniformly above the eyes, like the wings of seagull. The bridge of her nose drops down from where the eyebrows end, like a swimmer executing a perfect dive. Other than Estelle and Helena's gray eyes and rose lips, Stichbury works with a palette that consists of different tones of ocher, brown, black and white. The fact that Estelle is posed with whom you assume to be her adolescent daughter adds a note of creepiness to the painting. After all, what legacy is Estelle passing on to Helena?



Peter Stichbury, "Barnaby Pan" (2012)

Here is the real difference between Stichbury and both Peyton and Phillips. While they all focus on surface appearances, only Stichbury evokes interiority and depth. By not picking a celebrity – someone we recognize – or a clichéd romantic type (wan and thin young men), and by focusing on people who haven't been branded, Stichbury invites us to scrutinize these remote individuals who are uncomfortable in their perfect skin. Harold Child's forehead looks too big, with the skin stretched a little tightly over the skull. Barnaby Pan has a few tiny moles that, against the flawless skin, become visual irritations. (Imagine how Mr. Pan must feel. And this is also what makes Stichbury's work so extraordinary and riveting – one cannot guess at the turmoil seething behind these perfectly controlled faces, these calculated looks of introspection. Perhaps, as Gertrude Stein stated, "there is no there there." Or perhaps it might be that they have succeeded in repressing every errant thought or desire, have succeeded into making themselves into perfect robots.

Baudelaire's flaneur was at home everywhere in the world, including, presumably, the Internet. Stichbury's "superfluous man" isn't relaxed anywhere. He may be a young CEO or someone who inherited wealth, but you feel that his discomfort is synonymous with his existence. For all their individuality, these people know they are replaceable, that there is nothing special or inimitable about them.

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The longer you look at Stichbury's paintings, the weirder they become. It is almost as if the figures in them have become too perfect, too manicured, too controlled.

As viewers, we might have occasion to remember that this control is an illusion, that dissipation and entropy are unavoidable. Stichbury's fascination with the world of self-representation in the age of digital media goes far beyond the surface – it is a meditation on the lengths to which we will go to avoid being human and aging, and how deeply human such attempts make us.

Peter Stichbury: Superfluous Man continues at Tracy Williams (521 West 23rd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 22.