Portraits
from the 17th to the 21st century

Valérie Belin

Guillaume Bresson

Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot

Jacques-Louis David

Edgar Degas

Luc Delahaye

Maurice Denis

Joseph-Siffred Duplessis

Philippe de Champaigne

Nicolas de Largillierre

Patrick Faigenbaum

Seydou Keïta

Sophie Kuijken

Eugène Leroy

Youssef Nabil

Elizabeth Peyton

Hyacinthe Rigaud

Alexandre Roslin

Andres Serrano

Cindy Sherman

Mickalene Thomas

Agnès Varda

Xavier Veilhan

Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun

Kehinde Wiley

Jérôme Zonder

Friday 13 March - Saturday 2 May, 2020

From left to right: Eugène Leroy, *Portrait d'homme*, 1970-1990, Oil on canvas, 93 × 60 cm (36 5/8 × 235/8 in.) ;
Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, *Portrait of the Artist's Nephew, Camille Sennegon,* circa 1835, Oil on canvas, 42 × 35 cm (16 3/4 × 13 3/4 in.) ;
Valérie Belin, *Untitled (Models II),* 2006, Gelatin silver print, 130 × 105 cm (51 1/8 × 41 3/8 in.) ;
Edgar Degas, *Bust of a woman*, circa 1887-1890, Oil on canvas, 54,3 × 35,6 cm (21 3/8 × 14 in.)

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is very pleased to present an exhibition dedicated to portraits in its Brussels base. For the first time, the exhibition will open a dialogue between classic and contemporary artworks from the 17th century up until today. In that context, the gallery invited its artists to make proposals in relationship with a unique selection of portraits from private collections especially gathered for the occasion. Photographic, pictorial and graphic works by Valérie Belin, Guillaume Bresson, Luc Delahaye, Youssef Nabil, Mickalene Thomas, Andres Serrano, Agnès Varda and Jérôme Zonder will be presented alongside historic artists like Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Jacques-Louis David, Edgar Degas, Hyacinthe Rigaud and Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun. This exhibition will also include portraits by emblematic figures like Elizabeth Peyton, Cindy Sherman, Xavier Veilhan and Kehinde Wiley.

Through a scenography that underlines similarities, variations and tributes, the exhibition aims at giving an overview of a both universal and historical practice of portrait. While classical portrait, like historical painting, follows a set of explicit and contextual conventions and symbols, its canonical representations seem to have given rise to an entire visual culture and provided a breeding ground for many generations of artists.

Known for her various series of photographic portraits playing on the notion of "liveliness", **Valérie Belin** continuously probes the ambiguous relationships between realism and illusion through object-subject models, thus questioning the fundamental ambivalence of "being". Here, she presents a work from her 2006 *Models II* series, a three-quarter bust on a black background. The model sharp definition and unreal perfect skin contrast with the sensual rendering and shades of brown hues of the magnificent *Bust of a woman* by **Edgar Degas** depicted in a similar posture. A reflection around the ways in which the photographic medium seizes, captures and blurs, whereas painting outlines, touches, expands and unfolds in subtle interplays.

Going against the principles of realism and alikeness traditionally associated with portrait, the question of illusion is also an essential part of the work of conceptual American photographer **Cindy Sherman**. Using herself as the model of her own photographs, she dresses up to play various fictitious characters, questioning the notions of identity, appearance and gender in our contemporary society. The representation of women and gender-related social mechanisms hold a central place in her work.

The pictorial work of Belgian artist **Sophie Kuijken** also elaborates around the notion of model. In fact, she rather takes distance with it, trading live models for images collected on Internet from which she composes disturbing portraits of imaginary people, both human and chimeric, in a classical Flemish style. Her original approach is worth the emphasis: "*I really love painting people. I love reading in them simply by looking at them and penetrating their entire essence. But it's very intimate and private, so I don't do that with strangers, neither with friends nor acquaintances. I try to make up these experiences instead.*" Next to her portrait, the majestic 18th century magistrate depicted by **Nicolas de Largillierre** based on the standards of his time and profession exudes a sort of arbitrary strangeness.

The theatrical staging of these legal men echoes Agnès Varda's photographs, analog shots from the 50s showing Jeanne Moreau, Christiane Minazzoli, Gérard Philipe and Maria Casarès playing leading roles in period costumes. These mythical and very elegant portraits make evident **Agnès Varda's** major contribution to photography starting in the 50s, a media she discovered as a photographer for the Festival d'Avignon and the Théâtre National Populaire at the beginning of her cinematographic career.

Illustrious portrait artist of Bamako between 1948 and 1962, Malian photographer **Seydou Keïta** produced a considerable body of individual and group portraits staged according to classical representational codes and bourgeois lifestyle standards. Heir of a tradition of portrait conceived as a marker of social status, and witness of the modern and western aspirations of his contemporaries, Seydou Keïta paid a special attention to the objects, apparels and postures of his models, thus giving them a symbolical access to privileges and status then reserved to white people. The two works presented here harmoniously blend with *Portrait of the Philosopher and Encyclopedist Baron d'Holbach* by **Alexandre Roslin** as well as *Portrait of Madeleine Le Roux, wife of Manzeray de Courvaudon, President of the 'Parlement'* by **Nicolas de Largillierre**: all embody a certain vision of portrait and speak the same tongue yet in different times and cultures.

Guillaume Bresson has also drawn from art history, especially Renaissance and French classicism, to build a pictorial language through which he raises marginalized individuals and social groups to the status of "subject". Here, the artist presents a beautiful pencil on paper self-portrait along with the portrait of a queer New York activist borrowing to the codes of Flemish painting (for the balustrade, black background and three-quarter) and evocative of clergyman portraits for his posture. The artist will also exhibit two tondi, a format that became commonplace in the 18th century. All the more striking, his back view of a black woman looking downward stands in stark contrast with stereotyped 17th and 18th century beauties with pale skin, blond hairs, gracious elegance and ethereal eyes.

Become a topic of representational controversy, black women and their body hold a prominent place in the work of American artist **Mickalene Thomas**, as a social, historic and phantasmatic projection at the crossroad of multiple symbols and sources of inspiration. Both a tribute and a twist to the famous 19th century avant-garde portraits that have marked the history of painting and the evolution of society, her work appropriates the erotic and sulfurous potential of *La Grande Odalisque* of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, the *Olympia* and *The Luncheon on the Grass* of Édouard Manet, thus questioning canons of beauty throughout history.

The work of **Kehinde Wiley**, a major figure of the American art scene, originates in a similar desire to glorify those in the fringes of power and history of art. His works stage the flamboyant encounter between a representational system inherited from great classical portraits, a colorful Afro-American culture and an eroticized virility. His boys are staged on lavish flowery backgrounds in triumphal postures: a powerful representation of black men that proposes a much-needed twist of the genre.

American artist **Andres Serrano** has also been exploring the social and political dimension of portrait and revealing its tremendous power: many of his series explicitly tackle societal issues like racism, poverty and marginalization. Become master in the appropriation and detournement of symbols, especially religious, the artist often resorts to subversive associations, imbuing his portraits with a great allegoric load: here, a young girl wearing a thorn crown is maliciously looking at the camera, while standing next to her is a neoclassic vestal virgin painted by **Jacques-Louis David** right before the French Revolution, her ecstatic genuineness and chastity appearing even more salient.

On the occasion of this exhibition and through his work entitled *Jeune Veuve* (2000-2017), **Luc Delahaye** explains his relationship to portrait, and more specifically to the face, toward which many of his representational issues converge: *"It's the detail of a contact print from a reportage I have done during the second Intifada in Palestine, back in October 2000. This woman in profile (it's therefore not a portrait) is the wife of a young man killed by the Israeli forces in a small West Bank village. (…) After three small books published in the 90s*, I haven't worked much on portrait as such, but I have been haunted by the question of portrait in my images. Or rather the question of the face. In a photographic painting representing an action or a situation with bodies and objects, faces are a vortex. Because of their affective load and meaning, they irresistibly grab the viewer's attention to the detriment of what is around. They weigh on the composition of the image. I have often tried to avoid this problem by using three-quarter back views, faces looking down and partly hidden etc. It was also a way to contain the lyrical content of the image, to create a colder atmosphere. But the removal of the face also goes with a loss of humanity, and although it is an interesting motive in itself, I don't relate to it. I always feel attracted back to the face, as if it was the only thing that could bring my picture to life."*

Trained as a painter, **Patrick Faigenbaum** took his first photographs at the beginning of the 70s and quickly turned to portrait, which became one of his specialties. Here, the artist is exhibiting two works from his *Kolkatta* series made in India thanks to the prestigious Henri Cartier-Bresson Prize he received in 2013. Through a subtle work on - here transversal-lighting as well as the balance of blacks and whites, Patrick Faigenbaum seems to capture his models - looking away from the camera lens – in an intimate moment of their life or absorbed in contemplation: although similar, their natural, relaxed and even slack postures contrast with the rigor of the composed and stiff portrait by **Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot** representing his young nephew, as well as *The Vestal* by **Jacques-Louis David**.

Skilled in the art of photographic portrait and self-portrait, which has become one of his signatures, **Youssef Nabil** has also chosen to exhibit next to these two paintings. Influenced by the golden age of Egyptian cinema in the 40s-50s, the artist is here using the old Technicolor process. His analog hand-colored portraits express the melancholy of an eastern "belle époque" and invite us to take an introspective look, as is evidenced in his *Self-portrait with an Angel, Paris 2007*. Shyly looking down and overlooked by an angel, it is a magnificent visual and spiritual echo to **Jacques-Louis David**'s *Vestal.* His masculine nude entitled *Amin Standing, Paris 2001* also highlights the juvenile and androgynous beauty of the handsome man depicted by **Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot**.

Considered one of the most influential international figurative painters today, American artist **Elizabeth Peyton** has been dedicating herself to portrait since the 90s, representing her friends and acquaintances as well as historic figures in an intimate and delicate style. With colorful shimmering touches reminiscent of the impressionist movement, and a real sense for stylization, the artist has managed to capture the evanescent -and also androgynous- grace of her models. Here, her work is exhibited next to a portrait much more official and hieratic, that of the Marquis Paul François de L'Hospital by **Joseph-Siffred Duplessis**. **Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun** also inspired the artist a work on Marie-Antoinette in the 90s. This late portrait by an artist who -yet with great freedom- became the ultimate court painter of the Old Regime reveals a less baroque and frivolous style than her famous pre-revolutionary portraits, but as delicate and subtle.

Jérôme Zonder also falls into a "romantic" tradition of portraits looking to probe the soul and reveal the interiority of its models. Using the specific means of his favorite media, graphite and charcoal drawing, the artist opens his research to an ontological dimension, looking to represent subjects with the very material they are made of: carbon, one of the main molecular components of the human body. Jérôme Zonder especially focuses on adolescence, the very age of metamorphose, which works together with the maturation of his graphic creations. Here, Marthe Meurier, the sleeping muse of **Maurice Denis**, represented in oil, chalk and wood charcoal, enters in dialogue with Zonder's portrait of an adolescent with his face down, over which the artist has projected a vague and dreamlike inner world. In both cases, a moment of absence and vulnerability is delicately captured, reminding us that "*all portraits are at the confluence of dream and reality*" (Georges Perec).

 Portraits/1 (Ed. Sommaire) – portraits of homeless people in photobooths; Mémo (Ed. Hazan) - portraits of war victims in Bosnia, collected in the obituaries of the newspaper Oslobodjenje; L'Autre (Ed. Phaidon) - portraits taken in the subway of Paris.

Jérôme Zonder, *Pierre-François #4, 2019*,
Charcoal powder and graphite powder on cut papers and fabrics on canvas, 165 × 165 × 5 cm (64 31/32 × 64 31/32 × 1 31/32 in.)

Maurice Denis, *Marthe sleeping, with lace neckline*, circa 1900
Oil with black chalk and charcoal indications on prepared board,
31,8 × 54,9 cm (12 1/2 × 21 5/8 in.)

Yet portrait can also be tackled in more abstract ways: like in the works of the great northern painter **Eugène Leroy**. Silhouettes and faces emerge from his many layers of paint, acquiring maturity, volume and depth through the artist's impastos. Enlivened by a subtle play of light, their burying brings a quote by Blaise Pascal to mind: "*A portrait conveys absence and presence, pleasure and pain*".

On the opposite side of this elusive figuration, **Xavier Veilhan** resorts to geometrical shapes to capture physical presence. Through works that combines sculpture, painting, installation, video, performance and photography, the artist has been revisiting the genre of portrait since the 80s, as well as classic statuary through the means of contemporary digital technologies. He creates his anthropomorphic sculptures become a real signature using a 3D technique that generates digital copies of his models based on a cloud of dots identified by the scanner. They therefore prolong the paradigm of portrait in a postmodern way. The work featured in this exhibition is closely related to the history of the genre for it is a painting-sculpture bas-relief. Standing out of the pictorial background in a frontal and solemn way, this polygonal bust responds to the noble, majestic and slightly frightening posture of the man holding a letter painted by **Phillippe de Champaigne** in 1650-1655.

This collection of portraits reveals the pervasive influence of a classic repertoire, which transposed or appropriated rhetoric continues to appear relevant and impactful. But mostly, this confrontation underlines the fact that the art of portrait, renewed by the contribution of photography, conceptual art, abstraction and greater experimental freedom, is more topical than ever -especially for its ability to strike the viewer's mind through its sociological dimension. A permanence of the genre that can easily be put in perspective: we should recall that in the founding myths of the history of art, the origin of portrait has always been associated with the birth of the first images.

Andres Serrano, *Our Lady of Thorns I (Holy Works)*,
2011
Pigment print, back-mounted on dibond, wooden frame,
114,3 × 96,5 cm (45 × 38 in.)

Jacques-Louis David, *The Vestal*,
Circa 1788-1790
Oil on canvas,
81,3 × 65,1 cm (32 × 25 5/8 in.)

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13 March - 2 May, 2020	6 February - 4 April, 2020	11 January - 7 March, 2020
Hoda Kashiha		**Ni Youyu**
28 May - 11 July, 2020		29 April - July, 2020