

# BLUM & POE

Los Angeles, New York, Tokyo

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*“Pictures Girls Make”: Portraitures*

Curated by Alison M. Gingeras

Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

September 9–October 21, 2023

Opening reception: Saturday, September 9, 5–7pm



Somaya Critchlow, *X Studies the work of Pythagoras*,  
2022, oil on linen, © Somaya Critchlow

Blum & Poe is pleased to present *“Pictures Girls Make”: Portraitures*, an exhibition bringing together over fifty artists from around the world, spanning the early nineteenth century until today. Curated by Alison M. Gingeras, this prodigious survey argues that this age-old mode of representation is an enduringly democratic, humanistic genre.

“Pictures girls make” is a quip attributed to Willem de Kooning who purportedly dismissed the inferior status of his wife Elaine’s portrait practice. [1] Inverting the original dismissal into an affirmation, “Pictures Girls Make” is a rallying cry for this exhibition which examines how different forms of portraitures defy old aesthetic, social, and ideological norms.

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Elaine de Kooning, *Frank O'Hara*, 1962, oil on canvas, © Elaine de Kooning Trust

Both historically and contemporarily speaking, the portrait has always been far more than a rendering of a specific person's likeness. Portraiture engages with ideas of identity, subjectivity, and agency. Moving beyond binary thinking, the exhibition strives to emphasize the diversity of subjects, complexities of biography, and array of individual characters that artists have been able to capture through various modes of portrait making.

## Gatekeeping through Genre

Gatekeeping is as old as art itself. For centuries, the policing of pictorial genres has been an effective means of wielding power and enforcing artistic hierarchies along gender, race, and class lines. In the Western European tradition, portraiture was the reserve of the elite: executed by a specialized cadre of male artists and supported through commissions by the aristocracy, the clergy, and merchant classes. Despite the hegemony of the genre's origins, a close re-reading of the history of portraiture and its continued vitality has overturned its privileged, homogenous foundations.

"It is very wonderful that a woman's picture should be so good," proclaimed Albrecht Dürer in 1521 after first learning about the existence of painter Susanna Horenbout. Those rare women artists who gained professional stature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were often disparaged as "copying" their male peers, revealing "the weakness of the feminine hand" as critics remarked of Dutch Golden Age artist Judith Leyster when she was compared to her male counterparts. Impressionist artist Marie Bracquemond, who was trained by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, wrote in her diary, "The severity of Monsieur Ingres frightened me... because he doubted the courage and perseverance of a woman in the field of painting... He would assign to them only the painting of flowers, of fruits, of still lifes, portraits and genre scenes." Relegating

women artists to "minor" art forms as well as essentializing claims about ALL women painters' inferior skills have shaped the art historical canon for generations. Fifty years of feminist art historical scholarship has only recently begun to successfully push back against the gatekeeping that has kept women—and non-white European—artists in the shadows.

Elaine de Kooning was no stranger to this type of gender/genre policing. Her distinctive portraiture practice was a direct response to the gatekeeping at work in her own artistic partnership. While she was a rare postwar artist that would confidently oscillate between figuration and abstraction, Elaine de Kooning embraced portraiture—"pictures that *girls* made"—as her chosen genre. Against the backdrop of Abstract Expressionism's macho bravura, Elaine de Kooning was compelled to stake out autonomous ground. Her distinctively brushy, expressive portraits were a powerful riposte to her husband's gendered gatekeeping.

Drawing upon revisionist histories that have uncovered forgotten or repressed artists, as well as through the range and diversity of artists working today, it can be argued that portraiture has always been an enduringly democratic, deeply humanistic genre. Both historically and contemporarily,



Chris Oh, *Spectacle*, 2023, acrylic enamel on antique leaded window, © Chris Oh

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portraiture has the capacity to capture a multitude of subjectivities, identities, and agencies. What was once considered a lesser form of painting, portraiture must be understood as a powerful vehicle for exploring human complexities. Portraiture was and is made by painters of every possible race, ethnicity, caste, and sexuality. They are also made by gender-fluid, non-binary artists. Straight white men still make them. Portraits are pictures *people* make.

## Old Portraits, New Canons

At least historically speaking, the de Koonings were righter than they realized. Portraits *are* pictures girls make—going all the way back to the sixteenth century. The Flemish painter Caterina van Hemessen made the first-ever self-portrait as an artist at her easel in 1548—giving birth to a crucial genre of the palette self-portrait, the ultimate means of asserting artistic legitimacy and self-promotion. In her wake, Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Élisabeth Louise Vigée LeBrun, among other Old Mistresses, have made emblematic contributions to this genre while asserting their authorship and professional standing.

Catalyzed by feminist scholarship, a new canon forged from old portraits has emerged: forming the conceptual core of *"Pictures Girls Make."* Pictures of really important girls. This exhibition is an homage to these Old Mistress foundations. Specially created for *"Pictures Girls Make,"* Chris Oh's painting on antique glass, entitled *Spectacle* (2023), reprises Sofonisba Anguissola's iconic self-portrait (1556) at her easel with brush and maulstick in hand. Acknowledging this new art historical canon, Oh's work poignantly pays homage to the pioneering role women artists have historically played in this specific and powerful form of self-representation—a trope that is extensively explored in a range of studio self-portraits. These include an important self-portrait by Mela Muter—the first professional Polish-Jewish artist—who depicted herself in her Montparnasse studio (1915); June Leaf's studio scene *Broome Street (Sheila in the Studio)* (1969-70); and Somaya Critchlow's fictionalized, nude self-portrait *X Studies the work of Pythagoras* (2022). Ranging in style from Surrealism and magical realism to more quirky, cartoony styles, a number of powerful artist self-portraits constitute an important trope in the exhibition with works by Gertrude Abercrombie, March Avery, Joan Brown, Robert Colescott, Juanita Guccione, Sally J. Han, Agata Słowak, and Katja Seib, among others.



Mela Muter, *Autoportret (Self Portrait)*, 1912, oil on canvas



Joshua Johnson, *Portrait of a Woman*, date unknown, oil on canvas

## Identity Politics: A Double-Edged Sword

The complex impact of identity politics on artistic discourse is at the heart of *"Pictures Girls Make"*—particularly the many ways in which identity-based organizing has promoted diversity, demanded equality of representation and opportunity, raised awareness of specific group struggles, and have forced changes to socio-political power structures. Yet while a motor for political and representational change, identity politics presents a double-edged sword—something that is sometimes played out in the instrumentalization and oversimplification of portraiture. The sometimes-reductive nature of identarian thinking often flattens complexity—boiling down discussion of an artwork to checking a box of gender, race, or sexuality—obscuring other

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Aleksandra Waliszewska, *untitled [blondie]*, 2020, oil on canvas, © Aleksandra Waliszewska

meanings, aesthetics, and potential universal human values contained within the work.

A critical ambivalence about the progress and limits of identity politics thus informs this exhibition. How can portraiture function both as an emblem of social change and simultaneously be considered as an autonomous, complex painting that speaks to the history of art in its own right? Or in the words of Kerry James Marshall, “How do you address history with a painting [whose subject] that doesn’t look like Giotto or Géricault or Ingres, but without abandoning the knowledge that painters had accumulated over the centuries?” Speaking about the duality of Marshall’s contribution to representations that exceed the reductionism of identity politics, Carroll Dunham writes, “[Marshall is able to] simultaneously occupy a position of beauty, difficulty, didacticism, and formalism with such power.” As these two artists’ thoughts attest, the entwinement of formal and conceptual complexity is the only way to evade the oversimplification and pigeonholing of portraiture’s importance when discussed only through an identity politics lens.

Catalyzed in large measure by the urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement, the art market, alongside museums, have rapidly embraced Black artists over the past few years—particularly emphasizing Black figurative painters. Whether spurred by political awakening or cynical opportunism, the race to foreground

“new” artists of color has been driven mostly by a narrow focus on Black subject matter, while egregiously ignoring the complex histories of artists of color. This amnesic approach to contemporary Black artists has mostly overlooked the crucial handful of artists of African ancestry working in Africa, Europe, and America who were known before the twentieth century—the seventeenth-century painter Juan de Pareja, the Neoclassicist Guillaume Guillon-Lethière, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and sculptor Edmonia Lewis are notable exceptions.

“*Pictures Girls Make*” pays homage to this history by featuring an important early portrait by Joshua Johnson (1763-1824), the earliest known African American professional artist. A formerly enslaved, freeman of color, Joshua Johnson eventually made a career as a portraitist in Baltimore where his clients were among the city’s vibrant merchant and middle classes. *Portrait of a Woman* (date unknown) portrays a now-unknown white lady who is dressed in her finery. The portrait features all the hallmarks of Johnson’s signature style—finely rendered details like her lace collar, her facial features and jewelry as well as a distinctive palette. Including Johnson’s work along with *Portrait of a Creole Gentleman* (circa nineteenth century) by an unknown artist of the Louisiana School [possibly a follower of Julien Hudson (1811-1844)] is intended to be a genealogical gesture that gives some context to a range of twentieth and twenty-first-century artists of color who have taken up the portraitist mantle—from twentieth-century trailblazers like Benny Andrews, Ernie Barnes, and Winfred Rembert, to twenty-first-century artists like Patrick Eugène, Andrew LaMar Hopkins, Danielle Mckinney, Umar Rashid, and many others who draw upon their predecessors. “*Pictures Girls Make*” will also include a selection of portraits by contemporary African artists such as Nigerian artist Chidinma Nnoli, South African artist Simphiwe Ndzube, and Ugandan artist Collin Sekajugo.



Yannis Tsarouchis, *To Telion*, 1967, 1967, watercolor and glue on canvas, © Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation

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## Who Gets Portraitized?

“People’s images reflect the era in a way that nothing else could,” proffered Alice Neel when speaking about her devotion to the genre. “When portraits are good art they reflect the culture, the time, and many other things...art is a form of history.” Neel was among a generation of artists who radically changed *who* got portraitized, and by extension, which histories were enshrined for posterity on canvas. Neel immortalized her Leftist comrades, working-class families, her neighbors in Spanish Harlem, heavily pregnant women, and queer artist friends. In the same spirit, many twentieth-century artists such as Benny Andrews, Maria Antò, Jerome Caja, Leonor Fini, Yannis Tsarouchis, and Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita painted individual subjects, groups or communities, allegorical or archetypal figures, or even themselves. Most of their sitters were not traditionally represented in mainstream art history.

Looking backwards and forwards, *“Pictures Girls Make”* will recontextualize a number of pioneering portraitists who escaped the narrow first draft of the past century as well as also surveying a wide range of contemporary painters. Far from “just girls,” an unprecedented diversity of contemporary artists who engage with portraiture have pushed the genre to capture the actual conditions, social structures, and day-to-day experiences that make up contemporary life while innovating a range of formal painterly languages.



Joan Brown, *Woman and Sphinx #1, 1977*, enamel on canvas, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery

[1] This quote was first cited in Lee Hall, “Jaunty” in: Maria Catalano Rand, *Elaine de Kooning Portraits* (Brooklyn: The Art Gallery, Brooklyn College, 1991): p. 21.

*“Oh, yes,” she said, speaking of Bill de Kooning, “Now, he wouldn’t consider painting portraits. I mean,” she said, “Bill just always thought that portraits were pictures that girls made. So,” she said, “I made portraits. I had that area free; I had it to myself; I didn’t have to make decisions. I knew I was going to make a portrait and It[sic] didn’t much matter of whom: once you are set to make a portrait, you’re free to make a painting.”*

There is some question about the context and tone in which Willem de Kooning purportedly made this comment—it is possible that it was made in jest or with an ironic tone—though the sexism of that era has been well-documented and has been the subject of much scholarship.

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## Featured Artists

Gertrude Abercrombie	June Leaf
Benny Andrews	Rosalind Letcher
Maria Anto	Louisiana School
March Avery	Rudolf Maeglin
Ernie Barnes	Danielle Mckinney
Joan Brown	Sam McKinniss
Jerome Caja	Jill Mulleady
Jonathan Lyndon Chase	Mela Muter
Xinyi Cheng	Simphiwe Ndzube
Zoya Cherkassky	Alice Neel
Robert Colescott	Gladys Nilsson
William N. Copley	Yu Nishimura
Somaya Critchlow	Chidinma Nnoli
Elaine de Kooning	Asuka Anastacia Ogawa
Beauford Delaney	Chris Oh
Martha Edelheit	Fairfield Porter
Patrick Eugène	Umar Rashid
Hadi Falapishi	Winfred Rembert
Cielo Félix-Hernández	Larry Rivers
Leonor Fini	Katja Seib
Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita	Collin Sekajugo
Jane Freilicher	Sylvia Sleigh
Mimi Gross	Agata Słowak
Mark Grotjahn	Devin Troy Strother
Juanita Guccione	Yannis Tsarouchis
Sally J. Han	Aleksandra Waliszewska
Clarity Haynes	Ambera Wellmann
Andrew LaMar Hopkins	Robin F. Williams
Karolina Jabłońska	Elisabetta Zangrandi
Joshua Johnson	

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## About Blum & Poe

Blum & Poe was founded by Tim Blum and Jeff Poe in Santa Monica in September of 1994 as a space to show local and international contemporary art in all media. Blum's extensive experience in the Japanese art world combined with Poe's keen knowledge of emerging artists in Los Angeles resulted in an international program of influential artists. Throughout a twenty-seven-year history, Blum & Poe has shaped the trajectory of contemporary art by championing artists at all stages of their careers—cultivating the lineages that run between emerging and established practices and working with artist estates to generate new discourse surrounding historical work. Currently, Blum & Poe represents fifty-one artists and nine estates from sixteen countries worldwide.

In 2003 the gallery moved to a larger space in Culver City, and in 2009 Blum & Poe purchased and renovated its current 22,000-square-foot complex on La Cienega Boulevard. In this location the gallery has since staged museum-caliber surveys, examining the historical work of such movements as the Japanese Mono-ha school (2012); the Korean Dansaekhwa monochrome painters (2014); the European postwar movement CoBrA (2015); Japanese art of 1980s and '90s (2019); a rereading of Brazilian Modernism (2019); and a revisionist take on the 1959 MoMA exhibition, *New Images of Man* (2020). To produce these exhibitions, Blum & Poe has worked with celebrated curators such as Alison M. Gingeras, Sofia Gotti, Joan Kee, and Mika Yoshitake.

In 2014, Blum & Poe opened galleries in New York and Tokyo to focus on intimately scaled projects in new contexts. These expansions tie into the gallery's wide-reaching program that includes exhibitions, lectures, performance series, screenings, and an annual art book fair at its base in Los Angeles. Blum & Poe's publishing division democratically circulates its program through original scholarship and accessible media ranging from academic monographs, audio series, magazines, to artists' books. In 2020, the gallery launched Blum & Poe Broadcasts, an online platform showcasing artists' projects in conjunction with physical installations or as standalone digital endeavors.

Across the three global locations, Blum & Poe prioritizes environmental and community stewardship in all operations. In 2015, Blum & Poe was certified as an Arts:Earth Partnership (AEP) green art gallery in Los Angeles and consequently became one of the first green certified galleries in the United States. The gallery is also a member of the Gallery Climate Coalition, which works to facilitate a more sustainable commercial art world and reduce the industry's collective carbon footprint. Blum & Poe is committed to fostering inclusive and equitable communities both in their physical and online spaces and believes that everybody should have equal access to creating and engaging with contemporary art.

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