

Class Action

Catalogue Essay by Jonathon Keats, October 2007

Back in the 1960s, before cameras were disposable or came embedded in cellphones, before pictures were taken casually and exchanged indiscriminately, posing for the high school yearbook was a rite of passage, an appeal to posterity. Viewed by a stranger at a distance of several decades, these black-and-white photographs are striking for their apparent uniformity: Through style of dress and lighting, subject and photographer seemingly conspire to make the entire class fit unobtrusively in a grid, as if everyone were seeking to be remembered unmemorably, as a face in a crowd. The portrait camera -- a device built to register specifics -- is pressed into service, paradoxically, as an instrument for enforcing group identity.

This paradox is at the core of Marshall Crossman's ongoing Class Photo Series, a project she began in the mid-'80s after attending her husband's 20th high school reunion, and continues to pursue in this exhibition. Her oil-on-canvas paintings show dozens of faces, sometimes individually, more often in rows, with the characteristic hairdos and outfits of '60s yearbook photos. Loosely rendered, her imaginary subjects are abstracted, evoking the depersonalization attempted in those '60s class pictures, yet her painted figures never appear anonymous. Through variations in her application of pigment, Crossman reveals her subjects' individuality, and revels in it, colorfully releasing them from conformity.

On the one hand, the tension between individuality and anonymity provides an opportunity for formal investigation. Crossman addresses the paradoxical qualities of old yearbook photos by fitting abstract expressionist gestures into a minimalist grid, an inspired juxtaposition: Abstract expressionism historically sought to make painting a purely personal feat, while minimalism attempted to make paintings perfectly impersonal artifacts. By putting these opposing ideas into play on the same canvas, Crossman subverts them, and tentatively suggests a reconciliation.

On the other hand, Crossman's treatment of her subject invites psychological consideration, for these paintings accentuate the peculiarity of old yearbook photos, in which people present themselves as typical. To fit in, these young men and women attempt to coordinate every detail of their appearance, yet the overall effect on each is radically different: From the same elements emerge countless distinctive gestalts. Crossman conveys this by making her figures vague in every particular yet distinctive in the unique way that those particulars come together. What seems to be painterly liberation from mid-century photographic sameness, turns out to be an observation about the indelibility of personality. The only thing we have in common is that we are all inescapably individual.

That this should be expressed in oil on canvas is apt, given the fraught history of painting and photography. For purposes of accurate depiction, the camera has threatened, since the 1840s, to put the paintbrush out of business. Daguerreotypes and tintypes and eventually black-and-white class photos supplanted the oil portrait, and while the driving force was economic, there were also strong technological assumptions that persist to the present day, in which digital photography is practically a surrogate for living. As the megapixels multiply, does photography approach reality? Devoid of distracting details yet strikingly individual, the figures in Crossman's Class Photo Series, in unison, protest.