

Portraits of innovation

A half-dozen artists explore new avenues of displaying and illuminating the human face

By Kurt Shaw

FOR THE TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Portraiture is a longstanding tradition in the visual arts. It has its earliest beginnings in ancient Rome, where statues and coins featured the rich and powerful. Although virtually nonexistent during the Middle Ages, by the 14th century, portraits began to appear in religious pictures thanks in part to generous patrons and donors. Some of the greatest artists that ever lived — Albrecht Durer, Rembrandt and Leonardo da Vinci to name a few — were masters of the genre.

By 1900, photography became the dominant force in portraiture, but even so, artists still have not lost their interest in creating portraits.

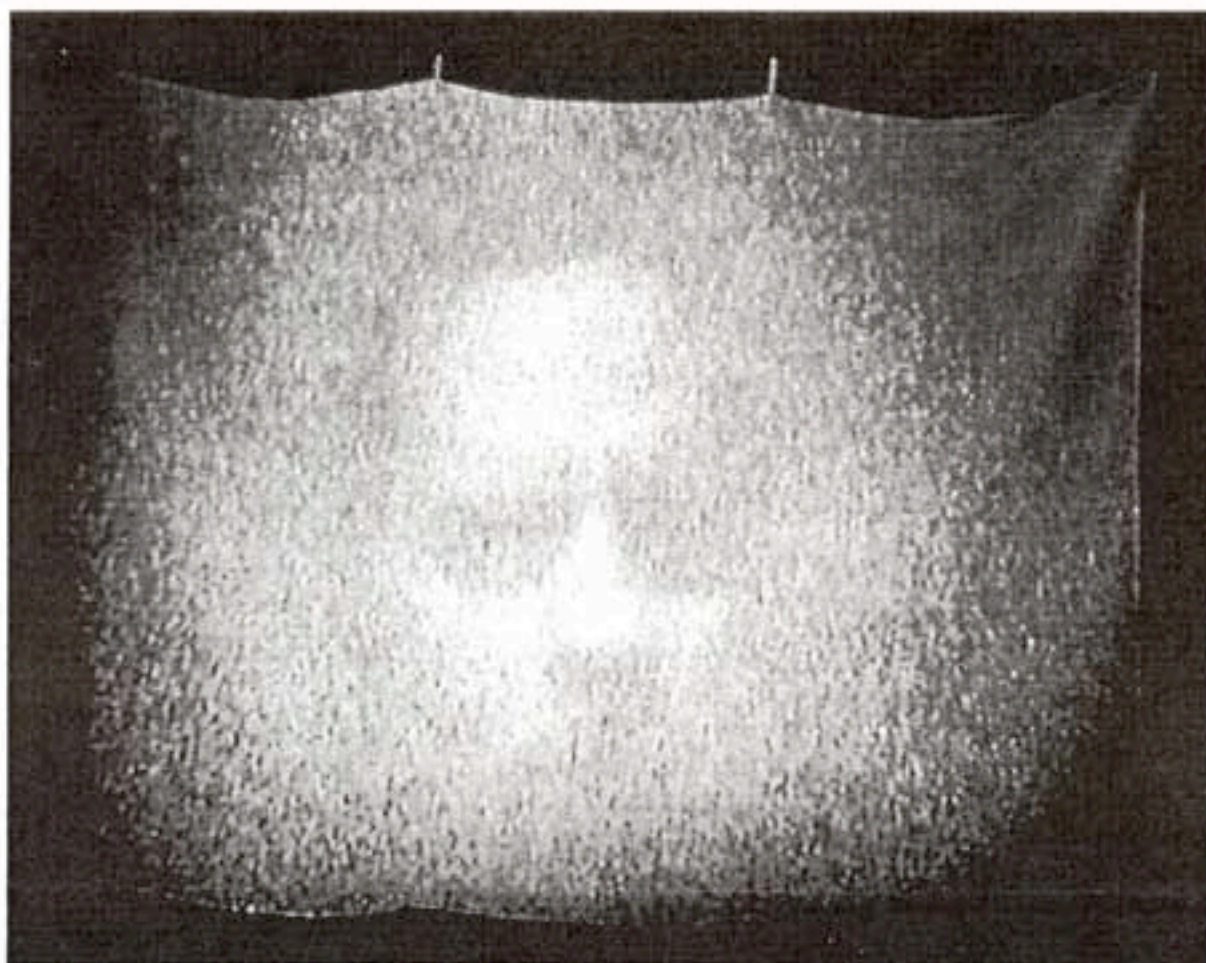
What has changed is the way artists view portraiture, largely in part because of photography and especially cinema. From video to virtual reality, contemporary artists have been exploring the idea of portraiture in real time, a sampling of which can be seen in "Moving Images (Portraits)," opening tonight at Wood Street Galleries, Downtown.

"This is the way artists are using real time to change the nature of portraiture now," says Murray Horne, director and curator for Wood Street Galleries, about the eight works by six artists he chose for this exhibition. "The nature of portraiture was completely changed as soon as the element of time was introduced."

The star of the show is "Memoria," a video piece by the eminent American video artist Bill Viola. Created in 2000, the piece was filmed using a circa World War I black-and-white surveillance camera and features the wizened face of an old man slowly emerging and submerging from a field of grainy pattern like a drowned cadaver bobbing to the surface of a body of water. At once, it is a reminiscent of the past while seeming to communicate a sense of immediate urgency.

Like Viola's piece, which was made with the help of old technology, the work of Armenian artist Gregory Barsamian utilizes a variation of 19th-century zoetrope technique. A zoetrope is an optical Victorian toy comprised of a rotating cylinder in which successive images are viewed through a slit and give the appearance of continuous motion.

In his piece "The Scream" from 1998, Barsamian has included 16 sculptural self-portraits on a rapidly spinning armature illuminated by two strobe lights. Moving at 13 revolutions per second



Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York

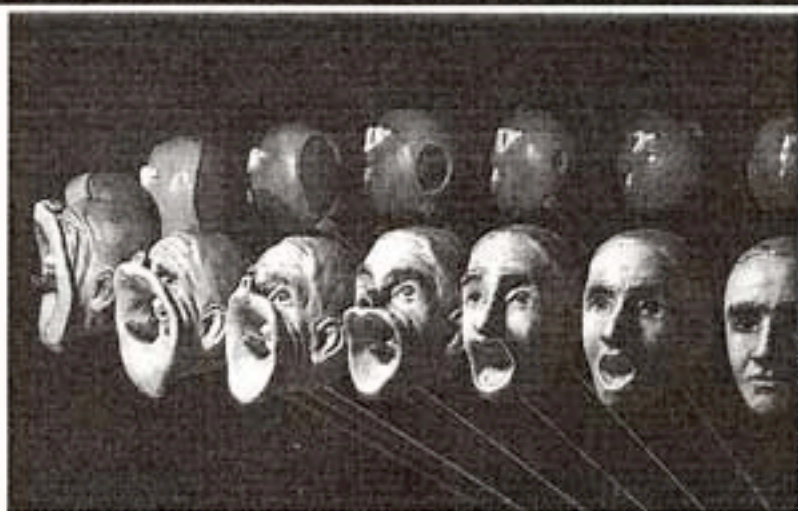
Above: "Memoria," a video piece by the eminent American video artist Bill Viola, is part of the new exhibit "Moving Images (Portraits)" at Wood Street Galleries.

Right: "The Scream," a 1998 work by Armenian artist Gregory Barsamian, utilizes a variation of the 19th-century zoetrope technique.

(slightly slower than movie film), the self-portraits morph from a screaming head to a mouth that totally engulfs the form and ultimately becomes a pink, fleshy blob containing everyday objects such as a spark plug, shoe and tooth-paste tube that swim around in the mass. The effect is jarring, to say the least.

Also hearkening to another time is "The Skipping Mind" (1994), by Dutch artist Bea de Visser. An installation piece in two parts, it is based on a photograph of a woman from the 1940s that de Visser found in a second-hand book at a flea market in Prague. Not knowing whether the woman was dead or still alive, the artist painted 25 portraits imagined from different angles after looking at the single photograph in an attempt to reconstruct her reality.

For the second part of the piece, de Visser downloaded the painted portraits into a computer and, through a morphing program, created a video that shows the



Courtesy Gregory Barsamian

head moving from all angles. It is a testament to an artist's perception, as well as an attempt to create an imagined memory out of an anonymous portrait.

An interesting footnote to the piece is that relatives of the woman in the photograph saw the piece on display at a museum in Prague in 2001 and have since contacted de Visser who, as a result, will be making a video of the 83-year-old woman this summer.

"It was a shock," de Visser says about finding the woman. "I imagined her — because she has Jewish features — in the midst of Europe, in Prague during the second World War, and we all know what happened there."

Norwegian artist AK Dolven

chooses to reference not individuals, but artists, in two video works that recall a painting by Edward Munch (the Norwegian painter who painted "The Scream" in 1893) in one and the traditional Northern lighting in works by Dutch masters in another. Although historically based, they are deadpan reconstructions with the inclusion of modern elements such as headphones and a cigarette, respectively.

Like Dolven, California artist Bruce Cannon references the earlier work of another artist in his "Reflection" (1999). Similar in concept to Robert Morris' "Box with the Sound of its Own Making" (1961), "Reflection" is a computer screen in a gilded frame that displays snapshot digital



Courtesy Bruce Cannon

A moment from California artist Bruce Cannon's "Reflection."

'Moving Images (Portraits)'

- ▶ Through March 16. Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays.
- ▶ Opening reception: 5 to 7:30 p.m. today.
- ▶ Guest lecture by artist Bea de Visser at 1 p.m. Saturday.
- ▶ Free.
- ▶ Wood Street Galleries, 601 Wood St. (above the Wood Street "T" Station), Downtown.
- ▶ (412) 471-5605.

images of Cannon that he took while creating the piece. In addition to referencing Morris' famed work, it alludes to Bill Gates' concept of interchangeable digital images of art for home use.

Lastly, Canadian artist Luc Courchesne returns to the gallery with another of his interactive video installations. In "Portrait One" (1990), visitors can interact with a woman named Marie who responds to a series of questions activated on a touch screen, thereby bringing portraiture full circle through autobiography.

"He is the most current," Horne says, "in the sense that he is using interactive technology within the nature of portraiture."

Kurt Shaw covers the art scene for the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. He can be reached at kshaw@tribweb.com.