

Manuel Solano's Portraits Re-Envisions Subjecthood

Article by Martha Lochhead // Oct. 15, 2019



Manuel Solano: 'Portraits,' 2019, Installation View // Photo by Matthias Kolb, courtesy of the artist and Peres Projects, Berlin

Manuel Solano's first solo exhibition at Peres Projects is a colourful, intimate and, at times, silly commentary on the interpersonal nature of identity. Solano lost their vision in early 2014 due to an HIV-related infection. As a result, some of the faces depicted in the portraits they create are of people that the artist has never seen. The portraits comment on the artist's memory, their experiences and self-identity.

Solano engages with the theme of subjecthood. At first glance, the portraits seem to have nothing in common. Up close, the viewer may recognise figures from pop culture, such as the fictional character Jake Sully from James Cameron's film 'Avatar,' and Black Phillip, a goat from the horror film 'The Witch.' Santa is also present. These figures appear in addition to friends of the artist, people from their childhood, a former love and 'The hottie from Starbucks.' The common thread between the subjects depicted is that they have been chosen by and, we may therefore speculate, are important to Solano. The exhibition examines the nature of identity by interspersing cultural figures with autobiographical ones, thereby demonstrating the proximity of pop culture to our sense of self. Solano conveys the conditional nature of identity; that one's selfhood may also encompass the many individuals in one's life.

Using their finger to smudge oil pastels onto the block colour acrylic painted background, Solano removes the tool that separates the artist from their work; the paintbrush. They touch the work and create soft lines and contours of the faces. This mimics how the blind use their sense of touch to see. The portraits are framed using the same bright acrylic as is in their background. The effect of this framing is sharp lines against the white walls of the gallery, contrasted by the soft contours of the oil pastel smudged faces.

PERES PROJECTS

One of the paintings, 'Damien' depicts a topless red-haired man, smiling widely. Solano met Damien a few months after going blind and knew only vague details about his appearance; the colour of his hair, for example. Solano explains that when they got to know each other better: "I could tell by the sound of his voice when he was smiling. I think it was probably the first time since my blindness that I noticed this, that you can tell people are smiling or not by the sound of their voice. I started listening for his smile, and noticing his smile was frequently on his face."

The exhibition also includes three video self-portraits. In 'PARCO'—a Spanish word that means sparing, frugal, moderate, laconic in English—Solano slowly peels the shell off a boiled egg and then starts to eat it, all while looking at the camera. Through this act, Solano creates a feeling of apprehension as they smile at the viewer, perhaps knowing something that we don't. The contrast between the bizarre peeling of the egg and the intense gaze gives a sense of the artist's more playful side.

It is curious that Solano created their self-portraits in video format, while their other portraits are painted. This lends to the duality of identity by inserting and simultaneously distancing themselves from the figures that have struck them, whether in person or in popular culture. The result is an intimate expression of the artist, while reminding the viewer of the conditional nature of identity and how our sense of selfhood is affected by and absorbs those who have touched us.



Manuel Solano: 'PARCO,' 2019, Video Still // Photo by Matthias Kolb, courtesy of the artist and Peres Projects, Berlin