

Ethnographic Portrait-Painting Today: Opening Up the Process at NYC's American Natural History Museum

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Abstract

This article contributes to today's discussions on the collaboration between art and anthropology and the necessity for ethnographers working with art to expound on their methodological process. The article discusses the application of contemporary ethnographic practice on portrait-painting in the specific institutional setting of New York City's American Natural History Museum (AMNH), as a way to reflect on the norms and politics of representational forms and relations between the ethnographer, the 'informant' and the public. It reflects specifically on a curatorial experiment in which I took part, invited by the collective Ethnographic Terminalia at the AMNH, within the framework of the annual Margaret Mead Film Festival. The experiment involved installing a pop-up painting studio in the main hall of AMNH where I, as both a social anthropologist and a realist artist, would paint the portraits of two anthropologists over the course of three days. The experiment was to publicly expose the process of depicting a live human-being on canvas and examine what it might involve in terms of doing visual ethnography. The location of the AMNH for this experiment is significant because of its historical status as an authoritative place for displaying human cultures and their natural environment since the late 19th century. This article talks about the experiment in light of current discussions in anthropology on the transformation of the discipline as a co-production of knowledge utilizing multimodal approaches.

Keywords

Portrait-Painting; Multimodal Ethnography; American Natural History Museum; Ethnographic Terminalia; Collaboration; Visual Representation; Curatorial Practice.

Biographical note

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Introduction

Note-taking, participant observation, hanging out, going native, interviews, spontaneous conversations, photography and video-making, these are some of the ethnographic methods, tools, and approaches that anthropologists rely on today when out in 'the field'. All the same, in this context, I have often felt stuck with the status of outsider with supposedly special knowledge and as ultimate decider on how to shed light on and represent the people I am researching on. I have frequently felt that, in my human encounters, relationships remained entrenched in social and political conventions, with the various hierarchies these imply. While this in itself is revealing and interesting for anthropology, it is also an obstacle, particularly pressing when we appreciate the discipline today as ethically engaged in a fair and egalitarian exchange of knowledge (Josephides 2015). Contemporary anthropologists are aware of the risks of the unequal power relationships between informants and researchers, and, over recent years, anthropology has made significant positive steps, re-thought as a discipline based on the striving for correspondence, and collaborative and intersubjective knowledge. Working with and through art has been one important way that some anthropologists have gone about tackling this new appreciation of the discipline, and numerous publications have appeared on the topic over recent years (Schneider and Wright 2010 and 2013). This article contributes to these discussions and the relevance of anthropologists working with art to reflect on their methodological process (Nielsen and Rapport 2017).

One of the practical ways that I have attempted to deal with my own challenges of effectively connecting with people in the field has been to use my skills as a realist portrait painter. Alongside my work as an anthropologist, I practice as an artist, specialising in portrait-painting from life. Aside from the different pleasures I get from artistic work, I enjoy specialising in the art of portrait-painting for the opportunity it gives me to delve into contemplation of and with another human being. As individuals, we have different preferences that fit with our personal characters, and I found that painting with someone else serves me well as a way to communicate. I came to discover that the painting sessions with the model offered a chance for both I and the model to engage in more relaxed social interaction, to be more ourselves in a way, where spontaneous thoughts and conversations with each other could take place; after a while, as the boundaries that come with expectation, role-playing and self-consciousness start to come down, the model and I can settle in to work together, undisturbed by outside influences and distractions, focusing on each other, I looking and painting the model, and the model looking back, posing, both of us involved in the portrait-making. We can give each other full attention, hang out together without the need to always talk, or to act a certain way with other people around. We can more easily just be and settle peacefully into our collaboration; there is room for silences and day-dreaming, and thus also for more fluid and reflexive dialogues.¹

People nowadays tend to be accustomed to being photographed and filmed, but suggesting to paint them is an unusual proposal. Even despite today's age of media-heightened ego vanity, such as with the trend of "selfies", this intent scrutiny on the face can feel rather too self-conscious and invasive. It requires distinctly uncommon time to be

¹ Portrait painting is just one way to obtain an exclusive face-to-face time with another person. It certainly does not replace, but rather complements other ethnographic encounters. My selection of models is based simply on who I think would be willing and available to pose. This is the only criteria that excludes other individuals, just as there is always some sort of not-necessarily determined selection in any fieldwork situation, where the anthropologist gets to talk and be with certain people and not others.

spent exclusively together, and unabashedly looking at each other for unconventional amounts of time. The process of painting involves numerous sittings, usually over several days, sometimes weeks. Some people thus hesitate at first at my unusual proposal, but they then accept to pose, usually simply out of curiosity. Most often, the 'informants' I paint have no familiarity of portrait painting and of posing. Through many hours spent together, facing each other and observing each other, the model/'informant' and I, the painter/anthropologist, experience each other's moods and share conversations and silences in a more spontaneous way than we might otherwise. The models often say they have learnt a lot from being involved and witnessing the process of being depicted and represented. Some also mentioned how relaxing and soothing it was to simply sit there, "do 'nothing'" and allow themselves to be considered. Drawing and painting are a slow media-commentary in our currently fast moving media world. They are also a slow channel, offering a gentle and unrushed way to reach out and connect (See also Berger 1953; Taussig 2009; Brew and Fava 2011; Causey 2012; Ingold 2013). As artist Molly Crabapple put it about her drawing practice, "It's saying, 'I cared, I did this, and you should care too.'"²



1. *Painting the portrait of Joan Arrizabalaga. Picture by Christian.*

I find that portrait-painting allows me to engage further in one to one communication with an individual in the field in a literally extraordinary way. The painting quickly

² <http://time.com/collection-post/4518784/molly-crabapple-next-generation-leaders/> Last accessed November 14 2017.

becomes a common project, during which I can reveal my way of painting and the model/informant helps me by holding the pose, and can witness and comment on the work. Despite my solid training in fine art, as an anthropologist, I remain critical of how I understand and translate onto the canvas what I see and feel. I voice my questions and doubts on my process to the model and invite her or his input. The model is thus witness to my uncertainty. The conventional unequal and hierarchical relationship between I, the anthropologist/painter/'holder of knowledge and tools of representation', and the model/Other/passive object of interpretation and representation is thereby shaken, and the portrait-painting process may develop more as a collaboration of sorts where the final picture incorporates stages of knowledge exchanged and developed between us (for more see Bray 2015a).

All the same, in the end, all the individuals I paint usually accept the result (some of course with more enthusiasm and conviction than others!), and it seems to me that they suppose that I, as the painter, can ultimately decide on the depiction, and that my choices must be based on valid reasons, or, at least, are legitimate due to my artistic license and academic authority. While it is undeniably nice to be attributed ultimate expertise, this gives me limited satisfaction as my research and painting involve constant self-probing and questioning. Yes, I have worked at length to develop my painting skills, have trained rigorously in artistic techniques and studied the disciplines of art history and anthropology, and thus can claim to a definite *savoir-faire*, but I remain aware of my human weaknesses and limits, even as someone possibly with something 'deep' and 'unique' to communicate to the world.

It felt necessary to me then to open up the portrait-painting process to a wider audience, encourage discussion among more participants, including not only the models but also general onlookers, and thus more explicitly reflect on and critique what is going on in the act of doing ethnography via painting. I have wanted to bring my painting out of the exclusive, private setting and into different public contexts, where I would be forced to further confront my privileged position of ethnographer/ anthropologist/painter - that is, the person conventionally associated with knowledge, skills and power to make decisive interpretations - and to experiment with the opportunity to get other people involved and have their say in the process.

There also arises the question of how viewers see and understand the final painting. We are today, especially, in an age where looking at a painting is a challenging exercise, given it has become so common for the majority of us people leading globally-interconnected lives to be subjected to innumerable images flashing before us.³ As such, it has become increasingly uncommon to linger long in front of a painting, appreciating its subtleties and taking the time to explore its meanings behind the various layers of consciously and unconsciously applied paint.⁴ With limited acquaintance with the process behind painting an image, many people also tend often to be somewhat prejudiced by what they think a painting is about, possibly considered something traditionalist and stuffy, elitist or one-dimensional.

In this vein, my questioning inscribes itself in the various "turns" that anthropology and ethnography have taken over recent years. Together with the "reflexive", the "sensory" (Desjarlais 2003; Pink 2015), the "engaged" (Boyer no date), the "reciprocal" (Lawless 1992; 2000) and the "affective" (Stewart 2007) turns, dialogue with the arts has of late been given due attention in the new approach to the production of anthropological

³ <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-long-people-spend-art-museums> Last accessed November 14 2017.

⁴ <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-long-work-art-it> Last accessed November 14 2017.

knowledge. Already in the 1990s, anthropologists Marcus and Myers noted how “Art has come to occupy a space long associated with anthropology, becoming one of the main sites for tracking, representing, and performing the effects of difference in contemporary life” (1995:1). More recently, the artistic and aesthetic *mises-en-scène* of anthropologists (Greverus and Ritschel 2009) and the site-specific ethnographic turns of artists have also been up for questioning (Rutten et al 2013). Thanks to initiatives such as that of the anthropological collective Ethnographic Terminalia, curatorial practice is now additionally a central location for reflecting on the dialogs between art and anthropology (Errington 2012; Buckley 2016).

In this article, I recount an experiment that took place in 2013 in New York City’s American Natural History Museum (AMNH) with a couple of anthropologists as volunteer models for my portrait-painting, invited by Ethnographic Terminalia to reflect in a museum setting on what is involved in the representation of another person in paint as part of anthropological research. This reflection is particularly relevant today when we continue to debate what really constitutes the museum as “contact zone” (Boast 2011), as anthropologist James Clifford (1997) originally put forward, and to tackle controversies in the art world over the political implications of what artworks public institutions choose to display – such as NYC’s Whitney Museum over the exhibition of contemporary artist Dana Schutz’s painting “Emmett Till In His casket”, and the Metropolitan Museum with the late Balthus’ “Thérèse Dreaming”, both in 2017, in light of renewed and raised awareness of racism and sexual exploitation⁵. This article aims to open up to further necessary scrutiny and critique the ethnographic processes relating to fair representation and collaboration in art, and anthropology as a discipline thinking with people (Marcus and Fischer 1996; Lassiter 2005; Ingold 2011; Vargas-Cetina 2013). By recounting the experiment, I hope to contribute more openly to thinking about what ethnographic portrait-painting might look like today, and the intersubjective processes inherent to it.

Ethnographic Painted Portrait?

Before describing the experiment at the AMNH, it is necessary to clarify what can be understood by “ethnographic painted portrait” as it relates to what is at stake in recording, revealing and representing individual humans and their experiences through static, painted images. Can painted portraits be non-reductive, and how should they be seen and interpreted; and, by extension, what value do they have for anthropology?

I make a distinction between a merely painted portrait and an ethnographically painted portrait. A painted portrait is essentially concerned with painting a “likeness” or “resemblance” (De Piles 2006: 7; Belting 2017). This painted portrait comes in many forms, from hyper-realist to entirely abstract, with a specific intention or message on the part of the artist and sometimes also of the model. In the history of (Western) realist art, we see this range of portraits performing various, often combined, functions. The portraits are produced by painters propelled by artistic drive in combination with other non-mutually-exclusive purposes, such as to embellish the subject (for example Hans Holbein’s portrait of King Henry the 8th), or to mark the social, political or economic status of the sitter (for example Jacques-Louis David’s Emperor Napoleon), to show off the skills of the

⁵ <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dana-schutz-painting-emmett-till-whitney-biennial-protest-897929>; <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/met-museum-responds-to-petition-calling-for-removal-of-balthus-painting-1169105> Last accessed December 21 2017.

painter (John Singer Sargent's Carolus-Duran), to evoke a mood (Cecilia Beaux of Henry Sturgis Drinker), or serve as a pretext to delve into other pictorial interests such as composition (Whistler's *Harmony in White and Blue*), or as a way to explore broader philosophical and psychological questions (Edvard Munch's *Jensen Hjell*), to document (George Catlin's *Chief Stumick-o-súcks* (Catlin 1975)), as a way to get to know the other better (Charles Frederick Goldie's *Chieftain Te Aitu Te Irikau*), to delve into the complexity of the self (Alberto Giacometti's *Caroline*), to promote the subject (Elizabeth Vigée le Brun of *Queen Marie-Antoinette*), to honor a loved and admired individual (Anna Klumpke on *Rosa Bonheur* (Klumpke 2001), or to "paint primitives" (Caroline Mytinger of the inhabitants of the Solomon Islands) (Mytinger 2016:7).⁶ They may well also be driven by ethnographic intentions, but the point is that they are not primarily so.

Technically, the kind of painting I do is very similar to that done by artists of the 19th century when the techniques of oil painting and naturalist-realist portraiture were systematically established in fine art schools, including the examples I sighted above and that can also be found in the AMNH's collection; the technical knowledge I acquired is tied to the tradition of European portraiture in which these artists also trained. The 19th century was also the beginning of evolutionary sciences and the establishment of racial classifications. Today, we critically reassess the artwork of this period, aware of the colonialist, ethno and andro-centric context in which these (mainly white male) painters went about their representations. Just like visual anthropology-photographers and film-makers reflect on the goals with which they use their craft today, I use the same painting technique but with a consciously different epistemological and ethical standpoint: the technical essence of realist-naturalist portrait painting is to try and understand as objectively as possible what you see, at the same time as try to remain aware of the subjectivity and interrelationality of the endeavor.

A painted portrait that is ethnographic has a distinct and predominating goal that is precisely that: to be ethnographic. But what does this mean? A dated understanding regards the late 18th, 19th and early 20th century portraits of individual members of ethnic groups and 'exotic' tribes, or which feature plenty of cultural artefacts, as ethnographic. Today this can clearly no longer hold. I must also clarify that an ethnographic portrait today does not mean painting a 'type' of person. During my research in the Basque Country, where I looked at how (Basque) identity was formed and negotiated in different contexts, portrait painting was a way to take a break with the model from the socially and politically tense atmosphere of the time. Consequently, I painted individuals just sitting or standing as they felt comfortable, in their ordinary clothes, for long stretches of time, just looking back at me, and without the usual paraphernalia and accompanying interlocutors with which I was used to seeing them in their usual social settings. I had some people then, including anthropologists, expressing to me puzzlement when seeing my series of Basque portraits, questioning what was Basque about them, as they could not pick out in them significant or outwardly recognisable signs to that effect. For instance, they did not pose in a 'certain' way, most had no distinctly Basque appendage or artefact featured on or beside them - none of them for instance wore a beret, there was no Basque flag or typically Basque landscape in the background - nothing in particular could lead the viewer to draw any conventional cultural conclusion. Nor did any of my portraits depict stereotypical physiognomical traits, as traditional painters of 'Basque people' have been wont to do. Interestingly, this puzzlement was not voiced when it came to the portraits I painted in

⁶ Like Caitlin, Mytinger later writes that she developed over the course of her experience painting these "primitives", a more personal connection, thereby narrowing the gap somewhat between her and the exotic Other.

Jerusalem of individuals who identified themselves to me as Palestinian, also depicted devoid of accompanying 'significant' objects. I venture to say that this might have to do with the implicit racial bias of the specific – lighter-skinned – viewers, to pick up on the detail of the comparatively darker skin tones as “ethnographically” significant to them.

As I explained in a previous article (Bray 2015a), a portrait that is painted with ethnographic intent as understood today is such by being created through the collaboration between the painter and the model, as well as through a rigorous method of checking, reviewing, reflecting, and re-checking by the painter. Just as with an ethnographic text, this kind of painting cannot claim to be the total, exhaustive and absolutely accurate visual interpretation and representation of the person – I do not think there is such a thing, only the striving towards this ideal. And there is no denying either that the personal subjectivity and aesthetics of the painter has also gone into the depiction. What is important is the effort by the anthropologist painter to be aware of her subjectivities, harness them and attempt to prioritize the honest and fair representation with the model. Through the emerging collaboration, the portrait can stand as an expression of both the individual and the social, the personal and the political.⁷ As a result of this effort, the portrait may develop under the painter's brushwork as a singular embodiment of larger collective structures, and in this way be ethnographically relevant today.⁸

At the same time, I do not claim that this mode of picture-making is universally seen and understood across cultures, histories and experiences. I only say that the naturalist-realist method of live painting can be used in a way that involves working and communicating with the human being in real time to make sense of what one sees, and, in doing so, strives to account for the subjective process of this endeavor. It remains all the same noteworthy to point out that the diversity of people with whom I have worked on a realist portrayal agreed with or could relate to the likeness I was creating, despite their different visual education, traditions and sensibilities. The ubiquitousness today of cameras or mirrors in most people's lives has certainly assisted in creating this increasingly common way of visually grasping “objective reality” (Sontag 2005). Painting people for my anthropological research assists me in my questioning of how do we see and know, and how do we make a fair interpretation and representation of this knowledge. It also relates to my question about how do we see, and what do we look for in order to make an accurate assessment.

I take then a contemporary ethnographic painted portrait to be a visual and sensory accumulation in one image of lots of things introspectively relevant to the model and during the time that this person posed for the picture in the presence of and in communication with the painter striving to remain self-reflexive and critically-thinking. In light of today's understanding of anthropology, the added value of these 'ethnographic' portrait paintings comes in the focus on the individual and on dwelling on the process of collaboration between the painter and the model in producing the portrait. These concerns, however, may not be clear to the general uninitiated individual, and that's where it was revealing to interact in a public setting, such as that of the AMNH, and with other anthropologists also preoccupied with the role of the arts in the various crucial “turns” in anthropology today.

⁷ I thank here Jenny Chio for her thoughts in conceiving the panel on “Portraiture, Portrayal (and Betrayal)” to which I was invited to take part at the AAA 2017 in Washington DC.

⁸ See Rapport (2009) for discussions on the relationship of individuality to sociocultural milieu.

Experiment at the AMNH

The location of the AMNH for my experiment was particularly significant because of this museum's historical status as an authoritative place for displaying knowledge about human cultures and their natural environment since the late 19th century. I was interested in painting at the AMNH as an interactive participant in its huge collection of human artifacts from different parts of the world. Museums such as the AMNH are associated with a complicated history of conservation in terms of gathering specimens from their environment, interpreting these for a Western world and displaying them as a lasting legacy both for the formation of anthropological inquiry and the creation of public attitudes towards difference (Qureshi 2011).

In its corridors, the AMNH includes exhibits of portraits of Native Americans from the early 20th century. The museum is also known for its hand-painted quasi life-size dioramas depicting animals and hunter-gathering peoples of yore in their natural habitats. While lauded for their artistic qualities, such dioramas, produced by non-Indigenous artists, have been critiqued for misrepresenting Indigenous cultures and reifying them as static and unchanging (Lonetree 2012:61) and presenting them as mere tropes and curiosities from the past (Qureshi 2011). Some of the dioramas in the AMNH even share a manner of depicting and narrating with the 'grand historical' paintings of the late 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. The diorama "Old New York", for example, located not far from where I was carrying out the portrait-painting collaboration, on the lower ground floor of the museum, showcases an encounter that took place in 1660 between Dutch settlers, including Peter Stuyvesant, Governor of New York, and Hackensack Natives, in a way similar with the depiction by the 17th century painter Benjamin West of the meeting between William Penn and members of the Lenape people on the banks of the River Delaware in 1682 to commemorate what was claimed by Penn and company to be a lawful, agreed-upon and unambiguous treaty between the two parties.

In the Grand gallery, where we had installed my pop-up studio, hangs another symbolically loaded artefact: the 63-foot long so-called Great Canoe, which was built and decorated by North West Coast Natives in the latter half of the 19th century and apparently bought by the museum a couple of years later.⁹ I gather that the ultimate belonging of the canoe remains an unresolved question. Until about a decade ago, it featured semi-clad mannequins in the act of rowing. These were taken down when the canoe was restored and under the pretext that it should now be exhibited in such a way as to display its craftsmanship. It appeared to me that, while exhibiting such works has problematic epistemological bases, they also have their value in reflecting today's established mainstream sociopolitical relationships to such objects (see also Sleeper Smith 2009; Lonetree 2012).

Of late, sensitive to these reflections, the AMNH has been working with Native communities in restoring and reinterpreting some of its collection. For instance, Jim Enote, member of the Native American Zuni tribe, and director of the A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center, collaborated with the AMNH in the creation of a common database.¹⁰ He

⁹ <https://www.amnh.org/explore/news-blogs/on-exhibit-posts/the-great-canoe-in-the-grand-gallery/>; <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/14/nyregion/14canoe.html> Both last accessed 29 November 2017.

¹⁰ Since 2011, Zuni tribal members are also working with the AMNH to re-edit a silent film of a private Zuni religious ceremony in a way that respects Zuni religious protocols and adds accuracy with Zuni narration that is also meaningful to Zunis today.

explained his take on museums as “contact zones” “for mediating different knowledge systems”¹¹.



2. “Old New York” diorama at AMNH. Photo credit:

<http://www.bridgeandtunnelclub.com/bigmap/manhattan/uws/amnh/oldnewyork/>

3. “Treaty of Penn with Indians” painting by Benjamin West. Photo credit: Wikipedia

My experiment was carried out at the AMNH within the framework of the Margaret Mead Festival, which has been taking place annually at the museum since 1977 in honor of this late anthropologist who used to be a curator there. Margaret Mead was also a precursor in her field in giving importance to images as part of ethnography, stating that “Pictures are held together by a way of looking that has grown out of anthropology_” (in Vallejo and Peirano 2017: 177).

The year I carried out my painting experiment, 2013, the Festival had as its main theme “See for yourself”, asking participants the question “What compelled you to see for yourself?”.¹² Anthropologist Fiona P. McDonald, core member of Ethnographic Terminalia, had partnered with the Mead Festival and the AMNH to propose my experiment, with the title “Seeing Ethnography”.¹³ Committed to ethnography in all its sensory dimensions, Ethnographic Terminalia ET, represented in this case by Fiona and fellow anthropologist and core member of ET Craig Campbell, arranged to document the event in various ways; in addition to filming and photographing, they installed microphones in several places.¹⁴ One, for instance, was placed on the easel so as to record the conversations of the model and I, as well as the sounds of my brushstrokes, and another beside the table where I tinkered with my painting materials and mixed my colors. Another microphone recorded the general ambience in the space and the comments of bystanders. In addition to the AMNH’s own photographers, Fiona and Craig took pictures of the painting process from various angles. They set up monitors on either side of my pop-up studio to flag the event, featuring images of me painting individuals in the field, with the question “What does it mean to visually capture people and cultures?” As well as conceptually framing our

¹¹ <https://www.amnh.org/our-research/anthropology/news-events/zuni-delegation-visits-amnh/>

¹² <https://www.amnh.org/explore/margaret-mead-film-festival/archives/margaret-mead-film-festival-2013/see-for-yourself> Last accessed 29 November 2017.

¹³ <https://www.amnh.org/explore/margaret-mead-film-festival/archives/margaret-mead-film-festival-2013/mead-dialogues/seeing-ethnography-with-zoe-bray> Accessed 29 November 2017.

¹⁴ None of this material has so far been used, as we are still unclear about what to do with it. For now, it remains archived with ET and I for potential further exploration in the future.

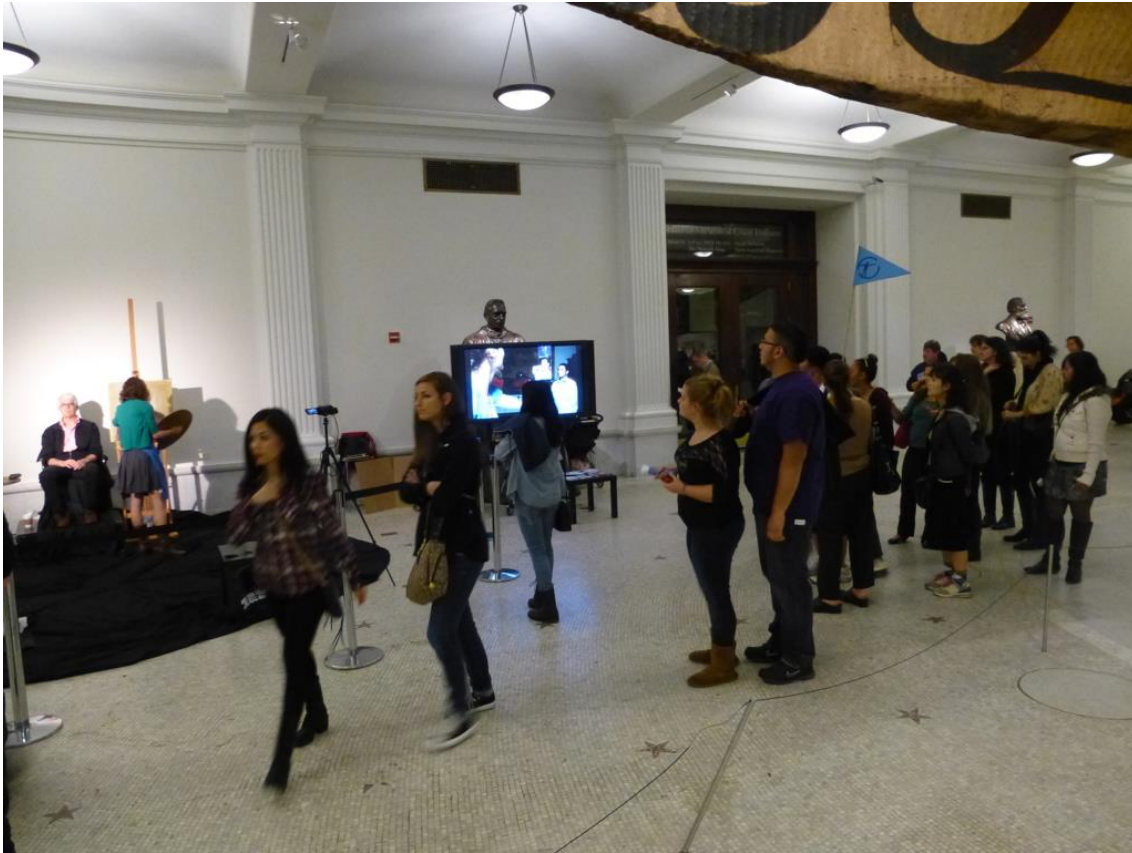
installation, the question intended to spark reflection and conversation among the public about what they were seeing and how they were possibly also participants. Jacqueline Hazen, a student of anthropology at NYU volunteering at the Mead festival, remained present throughout much of the painting process to talk with onlookers and answer their questions when the model and I were busy working and unable to talk.¹⁵



4, 5. *Painting Fred and Audra*. Figure 4 by Christian Thauer. Figure 5 by Ethnographic Terminalia.

A table with information about the Mead Festival greeted visitors as they entered the Museum and the Grand Gallery from 77th street. In the open space between the floor and the suspended canoe, one could look across the Grand Gallery and see the pop-up studio cordoned off and installed with monitors, lights, cameras, and animated by the presence of the model, Fiona and Craig, and I, all busying about. We hence became part of the Museum's scenography. From afar, our set-up could even be said to have aesthetic commonalities with the dioramas of the AMNH, as a *tableau vivant* of sorts. Looking back at the footage and pictures of the experiment, I see that the portrait-painting project had its own theatricality and visually artistic dimension which stood out in the museum setting. The performative quality of it recalls to me the words of the anthropologist Greverus: "the enduring ambivalence about our role as creators of life by performing life – either by creating something new or in catching the poetic spark that leaps between Self and Other – or as creators of performed lives, petrified testimonies of our Othering. Or are we to learn that each interpretive understanding and presentation of Other and Self is but a performance, an approach, a dialogue of the living?" (Greverus 2009: 4).

¹⁵ Hazen also reported some of her interactions with bystanders during the experiment (Hazen 2014: 94-95).



6. *Me painting Fred. View from across the Grand gallery with the North West Coast Native canoe above and behind us. Picture by Christian Thauer.*

I was interested in having the insights of other anthropologists on the experience of being the objects of curiosity and ethnography through painting and thus to ‘return the gaze’ – that the anthropologists willing to pose as models could observe and analyze me back. ET invited the anthropologists Fred Myers, professor at NYU, and Audra Simpson, professor at Columbia, to pose for me. These were for me ideal propositions, as Fred and Audra are key anthropologists active in the current debates today on colonization, Indigenous knowledge and the reflexive turn, and thus could be potential critical interlocutors for my experiment. I had never met them before and I was curious to know what they might think about how I observed and represented them – their analysis of my approach on them. How did they feel I was looking at them, how I was making sense of them both visually and personally, engaging with them and attempting to transmit their self onto the canvas?

At the time, Audra was in the final stages of publishing her monograph *Mohawk Interruptus*, a key work for understanding contemporary Native American realities. In her book, she explains how the Kahnawá:ke Mohawks are engaged in the politics of refusing colonial impositions on the part of Canadian and American governments, and how these refusals are part of what underscore Mohawk nationhood today. Audra’s work, challenging hegemonous notions of sovereignty, and cultural and political autonomy, and advocating the experience and position of the Mohawk Nation, was also relevant to my other research focus, looking at the different and contested articulations of identity and nationalism in the Basque Country. Audra’s work also shed light on how anthropological research has been complicit in state-sanctioned settler colonialism. When she posed for

me, Audra was still an assistant professor, preparing her tenure package, and therefore particularly busy with many commitments. She was giving a keynote lecture at Cornell University later in the evening of our first day together. That semester she was teaching a class on mis/representation of Indigenous peoples, and was including the AMNH amongst her class visits to various museums. As a Kahnawá:ke Mohawk herself, Audra was aware of the issue of her own participation, in light of colonial-era paintings such as by George Catlin and Paul Kane, and she was open to the game of rendering herself an object/subject of contemplation with my experiment. One of the most famous Mohawk figures to be portrait-painted was the late Thayendanegea, by the established 18th century painters Gilbert Stuart and George Romney, whose painting skills I appreciate, and I was curious to know what Audra might think about being interpreted and represented with a similar painting technique.



7. Me with Audra painting her portrait. Picture by Roderick Mickens, AMNH.

As for Fred, he was already a senior professor, with four decades dedicated to studying the Pintupi people of Aboriginal Australia. Of late, his work had concentrated on Pintupi production of acrylic paintings and how, through their interaction with Western institutions, these were transformed into objects of international 'high' art. With the Pintupi artists, he was aware of the importance of following closely the creation of their painting, in the attempt to better understand the process by which art is given meaning

and value. I also related to this with my recent research at the time in the Basque Country, focusing on the role that artists have in the construction and maintenance of certain understandings of Basque identity and culture (eg Bray 2014a, 2014b; 2015b). With Fred's anthropological knowledge of artistic practices, their cultural frameworks and colonial contexts, I was curious to know how he would reflect on my painting him as a form of art-making and ethnography.

I required Fred and Audra to commit to posing minimum two hours a day for three days. I asked them to pose looking at me, so that I could paint their eyes and they could see me looking at them. Thus we could also directly engage in conversation. The first half hour was spent figuring out a comfortable pose into which Audra and Fred would be able to settle and could keep for the duration of the project. Fred opted for a position in which his body was directed slightly away from me. In this position, he had to turn his head in order to look at me. I presumed that the pose he had chosen felt natural to him, but over the course of the next couple of hours, it had become uncomfortable – Fred was having trouble keeping his eyes looking at me, with his body slightly turned the other way and his neck craning. My portrait was also starting to look odd, as I was painting his glance sideways. I realise I had made a mistake in sticking with him to this initial pose. What I should have done was start again, rub out what I'd painted and begin afresh inviting Fred to find a more comfortable position. I think his pose did not work because we hadn't spent enough time trying it out and making him feel at ease. I had not stopped the painting for two 'unreasonable' reasons on my part: I was concerned with the lack of time I had to paint Fred and so thought I might as well build on what I have, so I would have more to show by the end; and I felt it might disconcert Fred and everyone else watching if I destroyed what I'd already begun. This I think is an example of the kind of mistake one can also make in field research – to rush or go doggedly on with a particular focus and ignore the intuition that one's focus is mistaken and that one should rather stop and reassess the situation, in concertation with the other person concerned.



8. Me with Fred painting his portrait. Picture by Roderick Mickens, AMNH.

During our first session, Audra, Fred and I talked little as we concentrated on our tasks and getting used to this rather ‘unnatural’ situation: Fred and Audra had to get accustomed to posing and to having me and a public observing them, while I had to adjust my eyes to the specific setting and figure out how to paint with the warm spotlight as the source of light which created strong shadows on Fred and Audra and affected the quality of the colors. Whilst painting, I often looked at my canvas and the model through a small pocket mirror which I held close to one eye. Audra, Fred and members of the public were surprised to see this, stating they had never known of this technique. I explained that I used it to re-fresh my eyesight and thereby challenge whatever visual preconceptions I may have unconsciously developed as I concentrated at length on looking and painting the model; over time our eyes get lazy, and we think we know everything that there is to see. By looking through the mirror, I am presented with a reflection of the visual world in reverse, and this helps to re-awaken my critical capacities.



9. *Me looking at Audra and my portrait of her through the mirror held to my eye. Northwest Coast Native canoe hanging from the ceiling on the right. Picture by Christian Thauer.*

Two hours daily for three days was far from being the ideal time for me to paint “thick” portraits of Audra and Fred (see also Bray 2015: 119-120; 126 & 129. But it was, after all, an experiment and an opportunity to get people to see ethnography and anthropology differently and in action). The first stage of painting always requires a great deal of concentration, to make sure that I have correctly understood and ‘nailed down’ the basic structure of the face and body on the canvas. And so during this time I am not able to

converse much. It is usually in the second phase of painting, when the structure of the face and body of the sitter is established, and I feel I have sufficiently well understood the unique characteristic gesture of the sitter and accurately transferred these to the canvas that I can relax and multi-task, so to say – talk and paint. With the painting performance at the AMNH, there was only enough time to work on the first stage. I think there is a parallel here also with the first stage of fieldwork, the initial, explorative phase, whereby one is not yet clear what to focus on, and one must remain open to ideas possibly changing, discovering new things, and understanding the meaning of certain issues which one thought one already knew. This is the same as what I go through in the first phase of painting – I must avoid fixing my marks on the canvas too soon – because the sitter moves, gradually settles into the pose, and I am still in the process of understanding how the different shapes relate to each other. Adding talking to this work, could be the equivalent for instance of listening to music on one's personal stereo at the same time as doing participant observation in the field - it's just too much to concentrate on anything properly. Working only on this first stage at the AMNH could give viewers an idea of the process by which I would build up the portrait, working first on the broad visual information. In a second stage, which time at the AMNH did not allow, I would have gradually zoomed in to work on the smaller details, and in the process added more layers of paint – and meanings.¹⁶

Both Fred and Audra noted that it was a challenge to settle into a pose, to not move too much, and to allow themselves to be the objects of attention of not only I the painter but also of a passing public, whose comments they could sometimes overhear. It struck them how the public would unabashedly stare at them. Some of the onlookers would also try observing them the way I was. They said they were trying to see through the painter's eyes, and understand what it is I was seeing and looking for when I was looking at Fred and Audra, also with the mirror. During the breaks in our first session, Fred was reluctant to look at my painting in case it might influence how he would subsequently continue posing. He preferred, he said, to just see the final portrait; without seeing the portrait, he could relax and remain without *à priori*s. I think this is in itself revealing of how some of us human beings might respond to other people's representations of us.

The amount of people – adults and children – who stopped to look and ask questions confirmed to me the continuing fascination for and relevance of the capacity to draw and paint from life. I heard one onlooker comment that she would have painted Audra or Fred quite differently, and didn't agree with the way I had gone about it. She then left, so I was unfortunately unable to hear more of her perspective. I would have liked to find out more about she consciously goes about making sense of what she sees. Another visitor questioned the ethnographic dimension of our experiment, and disagreed with it being called visual anthropology. The person however did not elaborate, and I can only wonder whether her statement related to the choice of subject matter and the object of depiction, or to the definition of the discipline.

A group of children with their art teacher also stopped to ask questions. I explained to them the experiment, and mentioned how the act of seeing people and specific individuals is a consciously and unconsciously culturally and politically loaded enterprise, that it takes time to look carefully and sensitively, and the need to look over again at things that one may well not have understood – or thinks one has understood – the first time round. The teacher agreed that “painting is good for any kind of learning, not just art” and noted that

¹⁶ For more explanation on the actual process see my article “Anthropology with a Paintbrush” (2015).

she could see the importance of my interacting with my 'subjects' for "deeper appreciation".



10. Talking with passing art class. Picture by Christian Thauer.

A few other onlookers commented on various power dialectics. One specifically on gender and age: the fact that I, a middle-aged woman, am the painter, when this role and technique has generally traditionally been controlled by men in a status of comparative power who would have the ultimate decision-making on how to represent. This was indeed something I was already aware of, and that has also played a role in my actual choice of this medium for my personal and professional expression. I have not discounted either the fact that I remain privileged as a white person of middle-class background.

The experiment also highlighted to me how, by painting in public, both the model and I are objectified, the model yet more than me, as the model appears passive in his/her act of posing, and I more active in my 'powerful' act of painting. At the same time, in such an institutional and public set-up, random passersby and onlookers are not necessarily clear on their role and what it is they are allowed or supposed to do, if anything. Fred and Audra regularly had friends, family, students and acquaintances in the audience trying to catch their attention and to communicate with them while they were posing. As the model and I engaged in our collaboration, we sometimes also forgot that the public was there and could play a role extraneous to the world we were creating for ourselves. A particularly poignant instance of this took place during another painting project I carried out over a year later, in an art space open to the public in the commercial center of Israel's West Jerusalem, where the project was to publically paint volunteer Jerusalemites and invite conversations on identity – a conflictive topic in this part of the Middle East. The model – a

local artist – and I were focused on our work together, enjoying ourselves in our mutually created peaceful atmosphere of collaboration. As we worked, the model, also someone I had never met before, told me she felt at ease and grateful for this opportunity to just sit and be. She told me about her past difficult life, having run away from an abusive ultra orthodox religious home and living on the streets. She had discovered art, she said, as a vehicle for her personal liberation and transformation, and so had been enthusiastic to take part in my portrait-painting project in Jerusalem as a volunteer model. Blissfully enjoying our work together however, we forgot about our own exposure and entanglement with real life, and inadvertently found ourselves unprepared for the incursion of a passing onlooker, a sixty-year-old-or-so religiously dressed man, who presumed our public collaboration as two women was an invitation for him to get salaciously involved.

Audra noted that whilst she sat posing for me, she thought about the Hall in which we were and its legacy, and how the ways in which being a live Native model felt probably quite different to how it must have been over a century ago. She said she did not feel she was perceived as a museological piece, but rather, positively, as a subject of aesthetic reflection. Another visitor at the AMNH who stopped to watch the portrait-painting, likened it to the intimacy of details that she enjoys looking at in the museum's dioramas. I responded mentioning that the process of painting also invites others to take a more attentive look at something, and in my case, to “focus on the person” as both an anthropologist and an artist. I am reminded then of what Ingold says about the connection of curiosity with caring, that “the responsible search for truth demands that care and curiosity go together. They are really two sides of the same coin” (Ingold 2016: 19. See also Todd 2016).

Conclusion

As part of their discipline today, anthropologists need “to show the academic, political, personal, and performative processes inherent in [their] research and [their] writing” (Vargas-Cetina et al 2013: 1) This article aimed to contribute to the necessity to open up and demonstrate the contemporary ethnographic process of representation and collaboration in art, with a focus on my particular practice of portrait-painting. The public live portrait-painting at the AMNH was an opportunity for me to demonstrate as an anthropologist my process of depicting a person in real time and engage public thinking about how we anthropologists make visual representations through conventional mediums. Fred observed how our experiment together was a rhetorical comment on “looking” and on “making something to look at” in the museum setting.

The experiment also invited reflection on how painting could be a slow and contemplative, as well as rigorous and interactive way for doing visual anthropology, and on how we see what we see and how that gets further interpreted on the canvas. It revealed how different participants related to the process of portrait-painting taking place before their eyes in the public institutional setting, equipped and infused with different skills, experiences and mindsets; how we go about making sense of what we presume to be valid representations, confront expectations, and make re-evaluations of our ways of seeing and understanding our environment. The painting experiment also exposed the fragility and messiness of interpretation and representation via paint in the presence of the model and a public.

Contemporary anthropologists are sensitive to the risks of their unequal power relationships in the field. But the question of to what extent is an equal collaboration really possible remains a tricky one, given the fact that we tend to be equipped with different

skills and knowledge. Fred and Audra expressed being intrigued on how the portraits developed but did not further more pointed observations on my actual process of depicting them. I suspect that despite my stressing my questioning of my approach, they may have felt insufficiently equipped with some necessary procedural basis to comment, as well as possibly being unsure at that stage how to engage with what I was technically doing. In my case, the interpretive medium as focal point is the painted portrait, a medium not so easily accessible as the more commonly ethnographic one of writing. There are clearly limits then to the collaboration in portrait painting an informant, I as the ultimate depicter of the representation despite the model being present and invited to be witness and potential commentator to the process. Nonetheless, what is still valuable is the revelation in real time of the process by which relationships and meanings are created, and the possibility of giving input. What is also most important at this point is that there was the mutual desire of all parties to engage in working together, in taking the risk and being open to seeing where that could lead, even if perhaps inconclusively. “Anthropology may be the practice of being taken by surprise, but more than that, it is the art of being taken with surprise” (Howe and Takaragawa 2017).¹⁷

In looking at the portraits as they were left after our painting sessions were over, it is necessary to remember that they are not finished, just as the quest for understanding and the dialogue necessarily inherent to it should always goes on. The process, involving the striving for accurate, fair, meaningful, and comprehensive depiction is what matters. The final resulting representation remains an unrealized and unrealizable ideal, but it is the actual experience of the painting and collaboration that is really key – what one continues to learn from doing and communicating together. All this is consciously and unconsciously embodied in the artwork, part of the constant search for this “something more” (Stewart 1996:5-6).

The attempt to show the process of making ethnographic visual representations is made further meaningful by having it take place in the museum setting. The meanings given to the resulting painted interpretation of the person is constructed through yet more acts of interpretation: how other people look at and interpret the portrait from their personal perspective, conventional understandings of the visual, and in their social and cultural context with their respective “foreknowledge” (Gadamer 2004:586).

Another question that frequently came up from onlookers was the question of ownership, and whether the portraits were for sale. This indicates the prevailing association of painting with the elite world of the capitalist art market. It also resonates with the issue of repatriation central to anthropological efforts at decolonization. In our case, at the end of our time together at the AMNH, Craig, Fiona, Fred, Audra and I agreed that Fred and Audra should take the portraits home with them. I also own them, together with Ethnographic Terminalia, but for now, they remain with Audra and Fred, the anthropologist-models/collaborators, for whatever might come next, certainly in new challenging and interpreting contexts.

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¹⁷ <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1173-surprise> Accessed 29 November 2017.

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