

CLAIBORNE, KATIE L., M.F.A. An Endeavor to Meet. (2008)
Directed by Mariam Stephan. 11pp.

This thesis is a reflection on how my thoughts about painting portraits have changed during my time at graduate school. It is arranged into three sections, which address my history as a painter, my studio practice, and my influences.

AN ENDEAVOR TO MEET

by

Katie L. Claiborne

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of The Graduate School at
the University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2008

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
AN ENDEAVOR TO MEET.....	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	10
CATALOGUE.....	11

AN ENDEAVOR TO MEET

The philosopher, Martin Buber wrote, “ All real living is meeting” (Buber 11). He was writing about empathy and ideal relationships between individuals. In my own terms I would say all real portraiture is an endeavor to meet. That meeting, that double presence, requires fullness on the part of my model and myself. It is the most worthwhile thing and the most challenging thing I am attempting in painting portraits. It is also one of my highest aims as a painter—to make a painting that exists to be encountered in this way. Presence—that meeting—is the condition I want my paintings to embody.

I did not begin with this goal in mind. My thoughts about what painting and portraiture mean to me have changed through my experience in graduate school because of questions I have had to ask myself about my work.

Before graduate school, I was working on portraits, but I was primarily concerned with making an image. I did not consider painting as a way of thinking, but as a means to an end. I was content to achieve the likeness of an individual, but the questions I posed to myself did not extend beyond that goal. I did not feel the same responsibility then that I do now to ask what my work lacks or demands. My practice involved a cobbling together of ideas taken from other paintings that I liked.

When I began graduate school, I was painting mostly self-portraits. One problem I encountered was I was not thinking about the painting as a whole entity. I was

concerned with the figure, but not the space around the figure. I did not set goals for myself in terms of color—my color was almost all local color. I was not thinking about composition—the portraits were almost all frontal and central. I was certain I was interested in painting people, but none of the decisions I made were specific enough to communicate the way I saw them.

So, the first questions I asked myself were about the space I was using in relation to the figure. An article by Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model*, helped me immensely. In the article, Bois writes about what he refers to as the technical model. His writing about the layering of paint, and the outward growth of paintings made me think about how I was dealing with space in my work. It made me question whether or not space had to be defined pictorially or if through the accumulation of decisions and mark I could define a different type of space. I began to question what was so important to me about painting self-portraits and whether or not the decisions I was making in my paintings were a reflection of that importance. I began to understand that the means of making were of equal importance to the image.

The first step toward defining what space meant to me was acknowledging that what I was looking for was not only pictorial space in the portraits, but also psychological space. I wanted to be physically close to my model—to be in their personal space. I limited myself almost exclusively to bust-length self-portraits because I thought the pose was the best way to get the physical closeness I wanted.

I began painting myself in front of a yellow paper background. In doing this, I was trying to make myself pay attention to that space behind my head, to make it another

presence in the painting. In terms of color, these paintings were all very warm.

Beginning with a color like yellow, part of the challenge was to see and use color differently than I had before. Most of the paintings I made previously were similar in that the figures were warm and the background was cool. Starting with a warm color as a base, the figures had to be warmer still. The paintings became more like bodies– they radiated their own “body heat.”

I also began to paint with a palette knife. This enabled me to make different kinds of marks in the paintings than I had with a brush. The more dense, layered paint became a visceral presence that was similar to the layering of flesh. Using a palette knife also helped me to stop outlining, and to stop thinking of the body as being absolutely contained by its visible outer limits. By dragging the background color through the figure, I was trying to make them merge, trying to defy that outer limit. The space that happened in the paintings as a result was almost like seeing through an atmosphere that was thicker than regular air. As I began to see that, the yellow became more important. The relationship of figure to background was less like matter and void and more like matter and matter– matter intertwined. The confusion of solidity was an exciting discovery, and it caused me to question other relationships I was taking for granted.

One of the relationships I started reconsidering was composition. Because of the limitations I gave myself, the paintings were all similar in this regard. The head occupied the majority of the space. The figures seemed trapped, over-exposed, and vulnerable. The paintings made me think about how my use of cropping and point of view made a statement about how I engaged with the model. Was it confrontation I was interested in,

or was it intimacy? What does it mean to have empathy for someone? Is it a spiritual connection, a physical connection, a psychological connection? Where does that connection come from?

I began to think my confusion about the location and degree of connection with my model was important to my paintings. So many of these questions were linked to my use of space in relation to the figure that I had to give myself more options. I wanted to think more about composition and to be able to question my original decisions about the position of the figure in space. One decision that helped me in this regard was that I started painting other people. I think that something about having actual space between myself and the person I am painting as opposed to painting only myself from a mirror offered me a different way of being able to see and paint the mass of their bodies. It is different to be alongside someone, below them, above them, across the room from them. These differences made it necessary for me to make more specific decisions in the paintings.

There is something in the understanding of that specific mass that is so important to the way I think of the body and my ability to empathize with the person in front of me. One of my primary goals in painting portraits is to find a way to connect with the model. In a sense, I want to do that physically. I think back to some of my first experiences with figuration in life drawing classes and remember some of the challenges we were given such as: imagining ourselves to be an ant crawling over the surface of the model's body or to think of the pressure on the joints of the model in a given pose as pressure on our own joints. We were challenged to feel the pose in our own bodies in order to understand

it from the inside. This desire for connection necessitates an understanding of mass. I believe it has to happen from the inside out.

The pose of the models is also important. I want the way I am seeing them to be like seeing a person who does not know you are looking—someone who is whole in themselves, who does not depend on my seeing them, someone who is not altered by my gaze. This is difficult to explain, because so much is made of voyeurism in modern photographic portraiture. What I am describing is more about waiting than voyeurism. I am waiting for them to assume their own natural gravity, waiting for that unassuming shoulder slump that is as distinct as a fingerprint.

As the way I think about mass and space changes, my color choices are also changing. In my previous paintings, the harsh, hot colors only projected outward. I want to move into the space where the person exists— to wrap around them, to move behind them. The nuance of that space is important to me. As a result, I am painting with less saturated colors. The subtle warmth of one mark is defined by coolness of its neighbor. I would not say the colors are co-dependent, as they can exist on their own. However, in their relationship, they enrich one another. The intimacy of the relationship between the colors mirrors the relationship I seek while painting my models. It is a way to clarify the type of presence I am looking for.

I am influenced by the common search for presence in the paintings of Giacometti, Anne Gale, and Frank Auerbach. They all name it in different ways in their paintings. Their individual struggles to define presence challenges me to think about how I might define it in my own work.

During a visit to New York, I had the opportunity to see two of Giacometti's paintings in person, *Diego* (1962) and *The Artist's Mother* (1950). One thing that interests me about Giacometti is that he never closes an image down completely. The decisions he makes in his paintings are not about an eventuality— a final image. Everything is fluid. In one of the portraits I saw, *Diego* (1962), Giacometti so wanted to describe the way that the form of his model's head receded that the head became compressed, knife-like. The head in this painting only exists to recede. For me, this is a good lesson about the bargaining that one has to do as a painter. The image, form, and space functioning mimetically is exchanged for a sense of space that operates differently. Color and likeness are given up for a sense of location. A little of the known is sacrificed to enter the unknown experience.

Contemporary painter Anne Gale is another influence. Her paintings are about questioning what she sees. In her painting, *Gary with Light Wall* (2004), Gale's experience of color in space is one thing in question. She lays down color one mark at a time. The colors shift so subtly, that they begin to merge, but they do not give up their integrity as marks. In this process of layering, she finds strange color relationships that she could not have predetermined. As I look back at the paintings I have made in graduate school, I think the most exciting decisions I have made are the ones I can't fully explain. They come from engagement in the process and an ability to relinquish a little control to it. This is a struggle for me sometimes because I am working from models. Sometimes I do get frustrated. I do just put down my initial response to a particular form, like the arms of the model in the painting I am working on right now, *Cusp* (2008). I am

trying to work through this problem by covering the rest of the painting and focusing on that area. I am trying to move beyond what my original response to that form is and ask myself what else is there, what is beyond likeness.

In an interview, Anne Gale described how her models affect her work, and what her ideas are about finding presence in a painting as opposed to likeness:

I'm not, like, putting this person forward. I'm not going to paint everything about them. I'm trying to just sort of desperately say, well is it here? Is it this bit of color? Is it this gesture going through their face? This sort of pull of energy in one direction, this kind of glow of light off their forehead. You know, where is this, why does it feel this way? I'm not trying to draw a perfect likeness of the person. ("Interview With Anne Gale")

While Gale's paintings may not be about recording a perfect likeness, she does acknowledge the intimate detail she sees— the bit of color, the gesture going through the model's face, the glow of light off their forehead—is her way of entering into a relationship with the model. She holds onto the specific singular experience. In *Gary with Light Wall* (2004), for instance, the detail Gale wants the viewer to see is the model's facial features. She draws the viewer in to this detail by making the passage along his cheeks and nose the only warm area in an otherwise cool painting. Her marks also become denser around his face. The specific detail, particularly the face or the head of my models, has also been a rich place of beginning for me in my paintings, but the more I work, the more I am sure that it is not the only place to begin. In my two most recent paintings, I am trying to force myself to work in a different way by limiting the visual information I have about the model's head and face from the beginning. In one painting,

Pocket (2008), the model is turned away from me. In the other, *Core* (2008), she is so strongly backlit I cannot distinguish her facial features.

Frank Auerbach is looking for a different kind of presence. While Gale's paintings are rooted in specific details about the model, his paintings are images of longing for a whole being, a whole person. He says that he “confronts the lump of the subject and wants to inhabit it” (Lampert 19). His paintings are not about something that happens once, though they probably have that in them. Rather, he paints the same models day after day for years. Because he reworks the portraits again and again to define the sense of an individual he amasses over time, his paintings become the embodiment of that amassed knowledge. They are massive with paint.

In Auerbach's painting, *Jake Seated* (2000), the build up over time is obvious in the surface of the painting. It seems like every time Auerbach worked on this painting, he reworked the entire surface. The yellow of the torso has been dragged through the green and red background, and the top most marks, the lines that run through larger patches of color were obviously made into wet paint. It is like he forces himself into a new relationship with his model every time they meet. He sees he has changed and they have changed enough that the painting must also be changed. It is through this repeated act of renewal that Auerbach attempts to describe a whole being. He is waiting for them to emerge.

I admire Auerbach's conviction that portraiture can communicate something so essential about being human yet so intangible. He enters his work seriously and does not settle for what he would consider a superficial image. He is a model for the perseverance

that is necessary in painting.

As a portrait painter, I am interested in exploring the connections between myself and the person I am painting. It is my belief that by being receptive to both my model and the painting, I will be able to make work that says something essential about their presence. It has become my goal to take in what I am seeing, but not feel absolutely beholden to it. My experience of the person in front of me is a way to begin. The paintings that come out of this experience are not chiefly about the details of the model's outward appearance, but trying to describe the repercussions of them being there. The marks that I make to describe this condition are located both inside and outside of the body. I try to imagine how the models displace the air— how they are displaced by it— how they merge and divide. The facts— the mass and gravity of the person, the space around them— all come into question in the paintings. It is my hope that by painting, I can describe a different experience of the body, an experience that has a beginning in the real world, but follows its own logic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berger, John. The Shape of a Pocket. New York: Pantheon Books, 2001.
- Bois, Yve-Alain. "Painting as Model." Painting as Model. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990. 245- 257.
- Buber, Martin. I and Thou. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.
- "Interview with Anne Gale." PBS: Egg: The Art Show. 2002. April 11. 2008
<<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/egg/307/gale/index.html>>.
- Lampert, Catherine. "Auerbach and His Sitters." Frank Auerbach: Paintings and Drawings 1954-2001. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2001. 18-33.

CATALOGUE

Claiborne, Katie. *Circulation*. Oil on canvas. 2008.

Claiborne, Katie. *Core*. Oil on canvas panel. 2008.

Claiborne, Katie. *Cusp*. Oil on canvas panel. 2008.

Claiborne, Katie. *Diffuse Gravity*. Oil on paper on panel. 2008.

Claiborne, Katie. *Mediate*. Oil on canvas panel. 2008.

Claiborne, Katie. *M.S.* Oil on canvas. 2007.

Claiborne, Katie. *Pocket*. Oil on canvas. 2008.