

Neither I nor the other person is an open book, and this capacity on both sides is part of our relation. The players in the system partake in both first/second-person engagement and third-person awareness of their bodies as objects in the world
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Pictorial duel:

Xenia Hausner and the dual performance portrait

Liz Rideal



Judith Leyster, *The Happy Couple*, 1630, Louvre, 68 x 57 cm

Xenia Hausner, *Winterreise*, 1996, 150.5 x 126.5 cm

Performance and fiction

Hausner's sensational use of pure colour recalls El Greco (1541-1614)², both artists savour the punch that the juxtaposition of a rich palette can convey and exploit this in their compositions. Hausner's paintings are confident and aware, the canvases almost casually assuming their place within a history of figuration whilst purporting to be documents of real events. In reality these works offer us a beguiling ruse of constructed fiction; the protagonists relating to each other within stories that expand into our individual consciousness, seducing us and offering an alternative painted relationship to reality.

I will consider the fiction of Hausner's double-figure works through the lens and context of paintings by other artists who also explore these dualities in order to play with the possibilities of action and reaction. Hausner's unnamed sitters are deeply involved in the mechanics of the enclosed dramas and appear to offer us a world of theatrical stasis. Portrayed as if caught in the moment of a story and in that abstracted instant they embody the creation of artifice, the images themselves performing the fiction. Historically the double portrait is flanked by the solo and the group; therefore employing this pictorial construct as comparison tool, we can focus and appreciate revelations not possible with works seen in isolation. Looking at Hausner's painting in the context

¹ *Borderlands: First, Second, and Third Person Adventures in Crossing Disciplines. From What are We?*

² For example, *St. Peter and St. Paul*, 1590-1600, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona

of other artists permits an insight into her complex, serious practice whilst this time-honoured methodology opens new doors of perception for the viewer.

Are not all portraits to some extent fictional performances? : the ritual of the sitting, the choosing of the pose, the negotiation of the relationship between artist and sitter? More than one sitter implies a complexity of interconnecting relationships, the artist becomes even more of a maestro-manipulator knowing that the interpretation and visualization of the relationship in paint will be a lasting record of that point in time, with the artist having the power to conduct the performance. Consequently, with two or more actors or sitters involved: the intertwining of their relationship becomes paramount within the composition of the work. Invented biographies and artistic possibilities are translated and then rebound as they reference the reality of the personal and genuine artistic self: confirmed by the authentic brush stroke. This emergence of the personal cannot be avoided, as the painter's autobiographical stance asserts itself, "Ogni pittore depinge se"³. Martin Kemp expands on this Renaissance notion - that there was something inherent in each artist at the deepest level that found expression in Girolamo Savonarola's (1452-1498) claim that,

Every painter paints himself. He does not paint himself as being a man, because he makes images of lions, horses, men and women that are not himself, but he paints himself as a painter, that is according to his concept [concetto]; and although the fantasie and figures that the painters paint will be diverse, they will all correspond to this concept.

One might understand that an artist literally paints figures looking like themselves, and that the character of the painter's personality is mirrored in their works. The concept of the self-portrait, even when invisible, is present and inevitably the personal is political, particularly through the lens and perspective of time.

How therefore do we interpret the glance of the woman who looks askance at the fiddler, in Judith Leyster's (1609-1660s) painting? Is this a sublimated self-portrait of the artist or is the woman portrayed offering a glass of wine or is she rudely pouring more for herself, as perhaps she is drunk and throwing all cares of sobriety to the wind? The viewer interprets the painting and the artist has no more control over it once it has left the studio. A title might help unwrap the meaning, but there is no certainty, especially with period works, that the artist who created the work gave this work this title. Additionally, the "couple" here could be married or not. The relationship portrayed might have been forged over one evening's merriment, or their bond (as clearly there is something going on) reflects a mutual love of music or both, or perhaps this is a celebration of many years together? The viewer projects onto the painting their own life experience, their memories of celebrating, of relationships and these inflect on the appreciation or otherwise of the painting. We assimilate and interpret in our turn, and aspects of the painted story connect to our story and consequently colour our world.

Traditionally this type of painting is recognized as a genre picture, specializing in the subject of ordinary unknown people engaged in everyday activity, here the music and drinking symbolizing entertainment, and the painting portrays this and is acquired for giving pleasure. Genre works were fashionable in the Low Countries in the seventeenth century, painted to recognised specifications

³ Kemp, 1997, p. 242. Accessed 16/12/19. <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/literature/helen-langdons-caravaggio/content-section-2.2>

and repetitive in scale and format. The genre portrayal of the carousing couple can relate to Hausner's constructed scenarios, however, even though Hausner's unknown painted people also suggest relationships and echo a reality, they are not bound by the convention of the genre. Although purporting to be 'portraits', her works refuse this direct and tacit engagement of the genre picture. Hausner's connote and appear to be more like isolated recorded instances, film stills, the only point of access within an unknown narrative. We know that they are fabrications so how should we respond to the implied relationships? Should we only react to colour and form? Or should we project onto the figures as we do with those performing within the genre works? Or do we acknowledge that this is a new form, another genre invented by Hausner? In fact, our viewing, is performative, as we enter into a silent dialogue with the work. Furthermore, in the instance of *Winterreise*, the title of this painting plunges us into a parallel creative world of Schubert's mysterious song cycle. The music is in our head rather than as suggested visually by the violin in Leyster's image.

The double portrait implies equality but often portrays a hierarchy, and sometimes a deception, as further study of this work by Leyster reveals. The happy couple appear to be at equal ease as they quaff their drink, play music and unwind together in a complicity of merriment. But in reality, during that period, they were not equal, as Leyster's biography testifies, for she gave up her painting practice when she married fellow artist Jan Miense Molenaer (1610-68) and went on to bear and look after their five children. In a further twist of double-bluff come understudy-substitution, Leyster's work was often mistaken and repurposed as painted by her contemporary Frans Hals (1582-1666). This work was attributed to Hals until 1892, when Leyster's monogram was uncovered under his signature, Leyster was one of the first women to be elected to the Haarlem Guild of Painters and she was a friend and contemporary of Hals⁴.

Relationships and reality

When two protagonists take their places within the scenario of a picture space, a certain stability within the organization of the framing of the picture is required, and this often lends a satisfying pictorial equilibrium to the work. It is the compositional construction of a double portrait therefore, that confirms an equality of balance or certainly a visual dialogue within the story of the painted canvas.



⁴ <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/04/04/daughters-of-the-guild/>
Accessed 3/1/2020

Xenia Hausner, *On Fire*, 2019

Anthony Van Dyck, *Endymion Porter and Sir Anthony Van Dyck*, 1633, Prado. 119 x 114cm

This balancing act is exemplified in the charming work by Van Dyck (1599-1641) that portrays himself with his best friend and patron; Endymion Porter (1587-1649)⁵. If we consider this in relation to Hausner's work entitled 'On Fire' we can appreciate the advantage of the ovoid shape of canvas that both exploit. Porter was a diplomat and worked for the Duke of Buckingham, tasked with acquiring art works for King Charles I, it is likely that he helped Van Dyck to secure commissions in court. The painting exists as a testament to their friendship, symbolized by the rock on which both friends lay their hands and the pillar indicated behind Van Dyck. Porter is shown standing slightly forward, as being noble, he is given the hierarchical edge in relation to Van Dyck, he was also older. However, Van Dyck, by dint of his portrait inclusion, gives ballast to his position as artist, distinguishing the status of his practical art-making activity and upgrading it. The oval here is an alternative to the landscape format canvas accommodating the equal billing of the sitters, focusing on the sitters without the encumbrance of too much supporting or extraneous material. In both works the sideways oval gives them equal space to breathe and the black and white references reinforce their dynamic. *On Fire*, uses colour to expand on the relationship portrayed, together with the sitter's expressions which suggest subdued aggression, the violent red, blue and green fighting to demand our attention. One sitter holds a hammer and the other a chisel, or is it perhaps a cable release? both objects suggesting diverse trails of interpretation. They give nothing away and the background is urban and ambiguous. We have a sense that they are compadres on some joint action, perhaps photographing themselves in this aggressive stance as part of a play-acting activity, but we are but voyeurs in this scenario of fiction that mocks reality. By contrast we know that that there was a real documented friendship between Porter and Van Dyck.

Legacy of art history



Xenia Hausner, *Hotwire*, 2012, 175 x 220 cm

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvAh9yleDEo#action=share> Commentary on the double portrait of Endymion Porter and Anthony Van Dyck by Gabriele Finaldi, Prado, 2015

Lavinia Fontana, *Self-portrait at the Spinet*, 1577, Accademia di San Luca, Rome, 27 x 24cm

Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807) painted a work that offered us a portal into her life's dilemma: which life-path to choose: painting or music?⁶ She deliberates between the traditionally male dominated field of painting (symbolized by brushes, paint palette and a far away temple) and a 'career' devoted to the easier and more traditionally feminine art of Music.

Similarly, Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614), could have concentrated on her musical talents, but did not. Her ability to play the spinet is in addition to her painting talent, referenced by this painting being a self-portrait and by the inclusion of her easel in the background, indicating that this is her studio⁷. Although she plays without sight-reading, looking straight at us, the fact that her maid holds the score open informs us that she is well able to read music. Further illustrating her cultured upbringing and her artistic decision, she adds a Latin text at the top left of the painting, "Lavinia virgo Prosperi Fontanae/Filia ex speculo imaginem/oris svi expresit anno MDLXXVII1577" (Lavinia, the unmarried daughter of Prospero Fontana, took this, her image, from the mirror, 1577). Fontana thus communicates that she is highly educated, and a good catch, for this painting was destined to be shown to her betrothed, Giovanni Paolo Zappi, by her future father-in-law, Severo Zappi, who wrote to his wife; "I have with me two portraits of her own hand, which greatly please me, as you will see when I arrive."⁸

Fontana is centre stage and magnificently attired in red, the traditional colour for Bolognese weddings, the expensive white lace somehow echoing the music script behind her. In terms of the composition; the shapes created by the musical instrument and the receding shape of the room adds a structural formality to the painting. The window at the far back lights the space and connects with the light that illumines her face, hands and garments. The maid is in subsidiary semi-darkness, framed by black. There is a sturdiness to the twenty-five year old Fontana which underpins her confident look, she was the first woman invited to join the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, who bore eleven children and supported her family financially. She is the power base and sits at the centre of the canvas, her maidservant receiving no billing at all; she is nameless, but necessary; a chaperone in paint but also an adjunct underlining the status, breeding and the intellectual capacity of her mistress⁹. Viewing this work in relation to *Hotwire*, it is the power of colour that overwhelms and engulfs our eyes. The red slinking form of the draped body as it slides across the horizontal canvas is transfixing. The sitter gazes directly at us, with the same type of confident challenging stare as Fontana, and her equivalent to Fontana's servant is the figure that bends attentively over her, ignored and unseen by her. This person in blue fades into the blue curtain behind, a morphing that denies personality and reinforces their secondary 'backdrop' nature. There is no communication between either of the subsidiary figures and the main protagonists. Both artists exploit the shape of their canvas to their advantage, the landscape format reinforced by the repeated horizontals and the portrait by the perspectival lines of the sofa arm and the spinet, and by the shadow angle that disappears towards the window with its cross-bars. Both of these women embody poise, confidence and strength, dominating the space of the paintings.

⁶ <http://www.nationaltrustcolltions.org.uk/object/960079>

⁷ See also Hausner's self-portrait, *Nachher*.

⁸ <http://albertis-window.com/2014/10/lavinia-fontana-and-the-female-self-portrait/>

Sitting on the spinet is a piece of coral carved into the shape of a love-knot, a symbol of betrothal. Accessed 28/11/19.

⁹ Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625) also portrays herself with a spinet, 1561. This work is used as the starting point for a series of "Selfies", vignettes written by Sylvie Weil, published by www.lesfugitives.com, 2019

Dynamic duo?

In Hausner's *An Education*, her red-head wears red, whilst in Eisenman's *The Session*, the red on the walls of the analyst's cabinet also demands our attention. Here the red channels our focus towards the ticking clock that sits on the mantelpiece: possibly the most important object in the room as it metes out time (the specified allocation of 50 minutes) in paid ticks. The men are subsidiary in these compositions, placed behind objects; the film reels and the notepad acting as barriers. These objects and the titles of the paintings function as a means of conveying information about the analysand and the woman in red.



Xenia Hausner, *An Education*, 2009



Nicole Eisenman, *The Session*, 2008

The Session suggests all manner of ideas about what happens within the privacy of the patient/therapist room and likewise the ambiguity of *An Education* makes us question who here is being educated? Both men appear larger than life compared to their 'painting partners', with their actual painted heads appearing so. Eisenman relies on what fills the space of the room to reinforce the caricature of the scenario. The penis vase with single drooping daisy (an oblique reference to daisy chain sexual antics?), the obligatory box of tissues at the ready, the bookshelves which include Lacan, Freud and Spinoza and the quasi-Modernist couch on which the 'patient' is abject and prone. In contrast Hausner's subject is clearly in control; the geometry of the circular film reels form a barrier between her and the pensive 'partner'. Although he looms large (his head almost photographically cropped) his gaze is downcast and his expression withdrawn. The monochrome space of the background underpins the calm tone of the work. The colour has the power to convey, translate and reinforce the atmosphere of this puzzling relationship. If red is colour-coded and analysed it represents danger, fire and blood.

While Eisenman's 'take' on the psychoanalyst's couch speaks volumes about her level of humour and ability to poke fun at this intense, claustrophobic relationship, Hausner's story rests on the power and confidence portrayed in the direct gaze of the woman in red (the 'director'?) to carry the truncated narrative of this painted film still.

Doubled-up

These school-uniformed young women look out at us in a similarly enigmatic, challenging yet self-contained fashion. They are not twins, but the compression of their pose and their isolation with the 'Coca Cola' stage seems peculiar and almost ominous, bringing to mind twins and sisters as diverse as those painted by Gerstl (1883-1908)¹⁰, Millais (1829-1896)¹¹ and those appearing in Kubrick's (1928-1999) *The Shining* or *Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey, 1967*, photographed by Diane Arbus (1923-1971). The title; *St Francis*, might apply to the name of the school, it depicts youth seated and posed similarly wearing standard school uniform, they are seen in a lusciously coloured yet distinctively drab setting. The Coca-Cola logo is oppressive yet jolly in its redness, as is what appears to be a red cushion held purposefully by the young woman on the right, this too seems to bear a logo: that of the ubiquitous M&M chocolate; these relate to the fashion of youthful trends and fads, while also referring to the branded nature of the drink, the chocolate and their prescriptive uniform.

These two seem mundane when viewed next to the contented repose suggested in the nineteenth century travellers by Egg (1816-1863), their vast pearl-grey skirts the epitome of rich comfort enclosed in the private space of the carriage. At first perhaps a surreal comparison, the juxtaposition permits an appreciation of the importance of the power of red, the use of horizontal backdrop with or without perspectival view, and the power of the inclusion of fragments in a painting of information, such as the tap, the book and the basket. The focus on clothing and what it communicates dominates these works. The portrayal of garments conveys subliminal messages and impinges on our conscious approach to space within these landscape double portraits.

¹⁰ Richard Gerstl, *The Sisters Karoline and Pauline Fey*, 1905, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna.

¹¹ Sir John Everett Millais, *The Twins, Kate and Grace Hoare*, 1876, Fitzwilliam Museum of Art, Cambridge, UK, 153.5 x 113.7 cm



Xenia Hausner, *St. Francis*, 225 x 290 cm



Augustus Leopold Egg, *Travelling Companions*, 1862, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, UK



Marie Louise von Motesiczky, *The Shadow*



Xenia Hausner, *Puppen Körper Automaten*

Instead of Coca-Cola and the landscape framed by the windows, here both sets of figures revolve around the object. In the Marie Louise von Motesiczky painting the illusive shadow portrait of an unknown person (part of the triangular relationship suggested?) or the pink sculpture cum-lamp in that by Hausner. The 'object' (of desire?) in both, dominates the scene and forces the figures into a subsidiary position even though they appear to us to be in the foreground. The story of these works revolves around the question of the shadow and the vessel, or 'dolls body machine' as the translated title of the work might suggest.

Points of View 230

Cage People and *Song of Songs* present us with an unusual perspective – looking down from above onto the figures who are squashed into the space below, forces us to peer downwards to confront the situation of the painting. The cage people are relaxed in their prison; one spread out on cushions while the other perches to eat from a plate balanced on a chair. Their existence seems precarious despite the almost cosy atmosphere. Are these students or disadvantaged workers? The overloaded electrics and wall-mounted fan imply a permanence, but the claustrophobic cupboard-like space allocation is shockingly small for the two women. By contrast Colquhoun's work is set

outside in the open air, the bucolic scene littered with fruit and vegetables. The grappling figures make love between the cupid arrow-like stakes that - in their way - imprison them. Around her neck the woman wears a necklace of oval red gems (echoing her lips, nipples and his thumbnails) and on her feet she retains elegant puce-coloured pumps that in turn relate to the billowing pink ribbon attached to the arrows. The intensity of their embrace illustrates the power of the *Song of Solomon* narrative, Colquhoun referencing this with her title and so encouraging the viewer to acknowledge that ancient story of erotic love. In both works the intensity of the relationship between the sitters is reinforced by their position and pose as depicted within the tight space of the canvas.



Xenia Hausner, *Cage People*
Ithell Colquhoun, *Song of Songs*, 1933, Private Collection.

Masquerade 353

In Hausner's paintings, as viewers we retain a position of suspended disbelief, she offers us an arrested space, the theatricality of the scenario capturing and holding our attention. In *Rosemarie's Baby*, the jackets worn by these astonished masquers not help us to situate them, despite their uniform-like appearance. Are these people regular visitors to this gallery (for the spot background hints at Damien Hirst), is this a gallery or a home?...or are they part of a performance group getting ready for a show? Agar's frieze-like figures are wearing full costume as they confront us apparently frozen within their flat pattern, colour and form. These maskers use their hands as part of a static dance routine and the geometry of the colour splits the surface of the picture plane creating a rhythmic pace to the landscape format. Agar's figures disappear into abstracted space, with coloured pattern invading the figures so that the portraits are punctured and evaporate. Anthony Penrose wrote that these works possessed, 'a magic sense of depth, a vortex of colour which carries the eye with rhythmic motion into a realm which transcends our limited field of observation.'¹² Hausner's work although similarly organised remains formal and 'portrait-like'.

¹² Penrose, Introduction to the exhibition catalogue at the Commonwealth Institute.

However, the masks interfere with our comprehension of the scene and possibilities of empathy with the figures. The viewer here is left recognising and confronting the branded art of the Koon's basketball, suspended in a liquid blue-coloured box. Together with the mysterious title, this work leads us into strange territory where figuration is caught and sandwiched between abstract painting and the conceptual legacy of Duchamp. The filmic reference of the title guides us towards a celluloid memory – if we are familiar with Polanski's (1978-) version, but if not we must again revert to our own imagination. Eventually it is the paintings in their raw state that pretend to satisfy our curiosity, yet they represent an inscrutable world.

To appreciate these mysterious and enigmatic works by Hausner, we are obliged to join the maskers in bewildered astonishment and continue to suspend our disbelief.



Xenia Hausner, *Rosemarie's Baby*,
Eileen Agar, *Figures in a Garden*, 1979-81, Tate, 122.5 x 153 cm © The estate of Eileen Agar