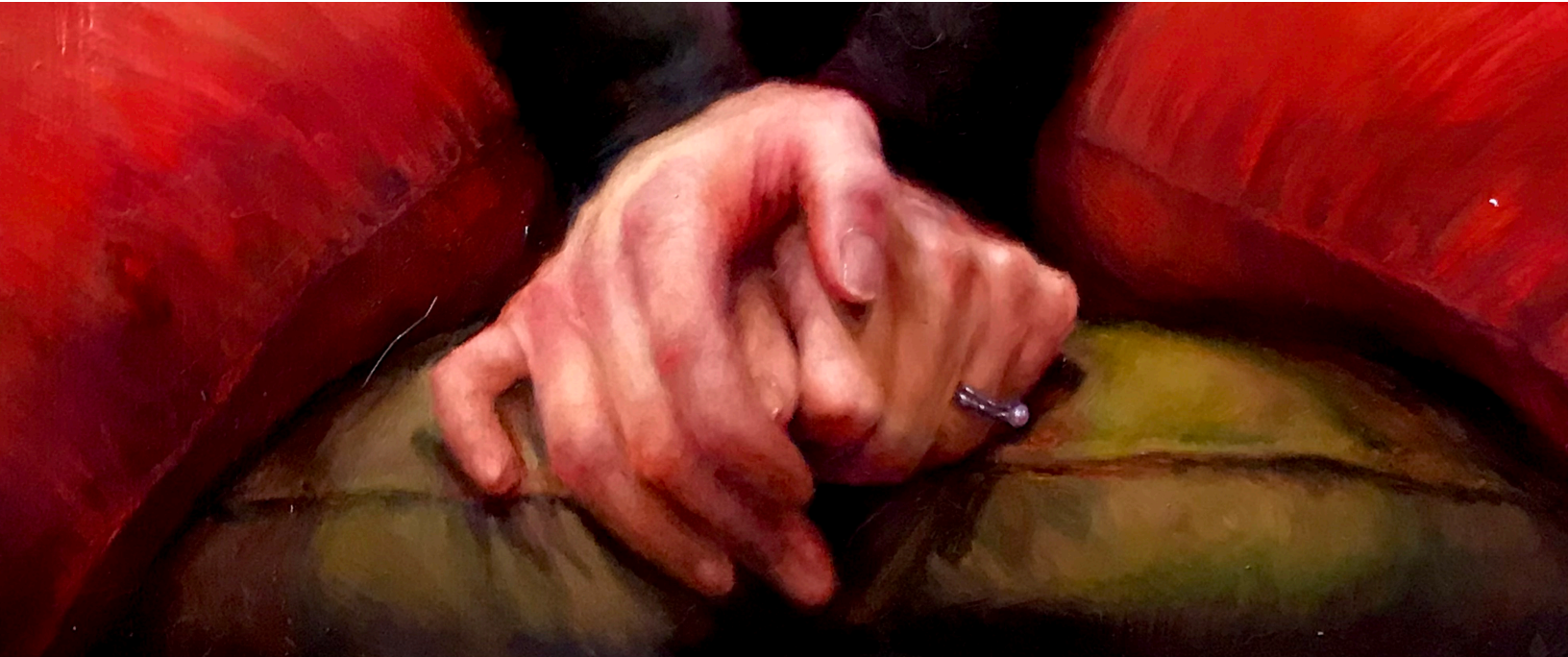


"The gift we possess for seeing similarity is nothing but a feeble vestige of the formerly powerful compulsion to be similar and to behave mimetically" (Benjamin, 2005, p.691).



SCRIPT

Walter Benjamin, the visionary thinker and an expert in the metaphysics of experience, believes that mimesis plays a decisive role in the highest cognitive functions, deeming it a “rudiment of once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically” (Benjamin, 2005, p.720). Alas, this skill and this compulsion grew atavistic in modern time. In ancient time a child was thought to be in full possession of the gift of mimesis that made it “perfectly adapted to the form of cosmic being” (Benjamin, 2005, p.721). With the desire for, and power of mimesis, an ancient child was born to be in resonance with the cosmos that contained all other beings. These children likely grew up to create a resonant and enervated social whole. Benjamin argues that despite the tragic loss of the mimetic power, society retained its final vestige – a system for eliciting meaning from the seemingly non-sensuous patterns of verbal language, also known as the script.

Words in different languages sound differently, yet are oriented towards the central idea that remains relatively constant across cultures and times. The script acts as a vehicle for the “nonsensuous similarity,” it is a “the nexus of meaning” that embodies resonances between the idea, the utterance (in a particular language), and its visual form (Benjamin, 2005, p.722). The abstraction of meaning left by the author may be engaged with by the reader through the invocation of the script. The activities of reading and writing, therefore, fuse the semiotic and the mimetic powers of the verbal language allowing one to construct, absorb, and embody, through the vehicle of the non-sensuous symbols, the meaning of the coherent whole (Benjamin, 2005, p.722).

PORTRAIT

The act of painting a portrait, in my experience, is a process of organization of non-sensuous elements of line, edge, value, and color on the flatness of the canvas, in order to inscribe the meaning of another being that was collected by the painter through the mimetic enervation of the body when it engages with this living being. The verb *to paint* (on canvas) is *писать* in Russian and *γράφος* in Greek, meaning to write or script – one scripts a portrait in Greek and Russian.

To script a portrait one allows the non-sensuous visual elements to swim on canvas in the utter chaos, causing confusion not only to any accidental observer but even to the painter who scrambles to construct a semblance of meaningful resemblance through the faculty of visual semiotics and bodily mimesis with the sitter. The painter viscerally engages with the sitter in order to generate the nexus of their meaning, which necessitates discovery of their deep emotional realm. If this mimetic process finds its successful end, the portrait is looking at the viewer in full flesh, in full complexity of being, tacitly raising questions about the sitter's histories, their role in social future and its past.

This visual linguistic mechanism embodies dialectics in its structure, undermining the primacy of reason in its meaning-making process, allowing the rational and the irrational to have congruent levels of importance and happen simultaneously within the construction and interpretation of the whole. It necessitates rational building of composition, proportion, perspective, anatomy, rendering of value, constructing color, while simultaneously calibrating the irrational emotive mimetic coherence of the whole.

This process necessitates the verbal vacuum in order to make room for distinctly different non-verbal kind of language. Perhaps, mimetic portraiture is an extension of the ancient ability to write what was never uttered and "to read what was never written," the loss of which Benjamin laments (Benjamin, 2005, p.722).

Upon its inscription onto the canvas, the wordless meaning is mimetically imparted onto the viewer when the portrait is perceived, causing the dialogue between the sitter and the viewers through the visceral enervation produced by the sense of the suspended disbelief. The painter's goal is similar to that of a writer, to facilitate the dialogue between the meaning and the reader, between the sitter and the viewer, across space and in suspended time.

Benjamin states that the act of painting "starts from nature and moves cumulatively toward form" (Benjamin, 1996, p.51) implying that the form on canvas is sculpted from the substance of meaning collected from the resonance with nature. Through the use of color, painting "goes right to the spiritual heart of the object by isolating the sense of sight. It cancels out the intellectual cross-references of the soul and creates a pure mood" (Benjamin, 1996, p.51). Isolated bouts of painting occur through pure irrational act of seeing. What is perceived is internalizing, and mimetically articulated onto canvas. Within portraiture, these irrational bouts are naturally interrupted by the activity of rational assessment, calibration, and self correction.

Chinese-American geographer and writer Yi-Fu Tuan observes that "intimacy between persons does not require knowing the details of each other's life; it glows in moments of true awareness" (Tuan, p.141). The process of portrait scripting brings true awareness of others

through pure seeing. It leaves the painter no choice, but to intimately connect with their sitter. Hours of long connected observation subtly grow into infatuation. For a moment the infatuated painter falls in love. "We say of young lovers that they dwell in each other's gaze. They are free of attachment to things and to locality; they will abandon their homes and elope" (Tuan p.141). Infatuated painter escapes with, and into, those whom she paints. And "even though, the idea of a human person as "place" or "home" is not immediately acceptable" (Tuan, p.141) the painter dwells, sometimes for years, in her sitters. In return they dwell in her, sometimes they never leave.

The portrait scripting process facilitates embodiment of others. There are job hazards of working with this language. It leads the painter to "exhaust all poisons in himself" keeping their "quintessences" (Rimbaud, A., 2005) through the mimetic housing of sitters, accumulating some of their life wisdoms, some of their tragedies, some of their their hopes, some bitterness of their past.

In this embodied way, mimetic portraiture is an educational process that causes joy of resonance and dialogic unity, expanding the painter's world view through the curriculum of people in whom she dwells and paints.

GRID

If there was a way to succinctly define the expression of modernity it might be most laconic to say that it has refused mimetic portraiture and grew enamored with its opposite – the pattern of the grid. American art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss defines the

phenomenon of the grid (1979) as the pervasive emblem of modernity. It permeates artist's canvases, urban infrastructure, clothing patterns, architectural facades and peoples' minds (Krauss, p.50). Despite having no historical precedent, the grid sweeps the cultural establishment, becoming "ubiquitous in the art of our century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one" (Krauss, p.52). According to Krauss (1979), this domination by the grid pattern is a symptom of the inability to coalesce the rift between the rational urge of materialism and the irrational spiritual quest that goes beyond the desire to possess. The grid embodies the very same dialectical duality of the rational and the irrational that characterizes the language of mimetic portraiture, yet fails to resolve it in a synergetic way. A vertical wall of the irrational superimposed onto the rational horizontal wall, repeated endlessly, without synthesis, is at the heart of the dialectic of the grid.

The grid denies all narrative and language (Krauss, p.50-52), creating a new mythology of para-logical suspension – a kind of schizophrenia of embodied contradiction between the binary of material and spiritual, societal and personal, mind and that which transcends beyond the mind (Krauss, p 52). This schizophrenia of the simultaneous existence of verticals and horizontals that coexist on canvas but never quite mend or heal, forbid the presence of mimetic portraiture. The grid is self referential and hardened against external resonance, unlike portraiture, it is in essence a continuity of "mapping of the space inside the frame onto itself" (Krauss, p.61) that relies on the abolition of mimesis in order to dictate the undefined yet hypnotic meaning of its own. The structure of the grid is the structure of "social consciousness, or rather its unconscious, as something repressed" (Krauss, p.54-55). It may be

that this repressed desire is to fall in love, elope from the domination by the reason, and dwell inside another human being.

KITSCH

Scripting of mimetic portraiture is not welcome on the contemporary art scene due to its refusal to deny the synthesis between emotive and rational. The realist contemporary painter Odd Nerdrum, who employs the language of embodied mimetic resonance as a method in his work, defines his realm of operation as outside of all contemporary art. According to Nerdrum (Nerdrum, p.16), ejected outside of art, mimetic portraiture forms kitsch. Nerdrum's kitsch, even though contemporary, is not art.

Kitsch is textural, sensual, embodied and enervated – it is what has been rejected by the grid. Kitsch is not art, because it refuses to predicate its existence upon any 'reasonable' cause – it does not attempt to facilitate political engagement, critique social issues, or engage with other art. It doesn't look to rationally solve problems in order to absolve society of its tragic past. Kitsch simply happens when the painter allows "light to rip the darkness from the naked bodies" (Nerdrum, p.16) on her canvas, being unconcerned with the social opinion on this act. Kitsch is a document of love. It simply houses enjoyment, horror, pleasure, and sometimes results in pain.

Kitsch, like all "uncontrolled mimesis is proscribed" within a totalitarian society (Adorno, Horkheimer, p.148) – it is tabooed because it damages the infrastructure of the grid with its "disobedient human quest for joy" (Nerdrum. P. 19). It threatens with genuine sense of

human interaction by tossing the “theory and irony aside” (Nerdrum, p. 20). It proves futile the doctrine of hardness, instead rendering in full color the human feelings and exposing vulnerability, distracting and enervating people, making them harder to control.

Kitsch is shocking because in itself it is a product of a mimetic shock. Thus, it is despised by the masters of the capitalist corporate control whose hegemony rests on the social entrancement, which may be easily disturbed by something shocking. Imagine a kitsch painting hanging behind Elon Musk during his launch of the new Tesla truck. Someone exclaims from the crowd, ‘Elon, could you move a little to the left, please? You are blocking this horrifying kitsch.’

If the grid is an opioid of the capitalist trance that subjugates and corrupts the social autonomy, then kitsch is the Narcan. If the grid is a figment of the infinite repeated flatness of the instrumental reason, that “extends, in all directions, to infinity” (Krauss, p. 60), subsuming space and “crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface” (Krauss, p.50), than kitsch is “the open trustful face,” “the sensual skin” and “longing for eternity” (Nerdrum, p.21). Kitsch breaks through the superstructure of the grid.

AUTONOMY

The theorist of anti-fascist education Theodore Adorno (Adorno, Becker, 1999) believes that the main social goal after 1945 is to reinsure that Auschwitz never happens again. Adorno believes that this goal may not be achieved through appeals to universal

values or social bonds, rather the success of this task depends singularly of education. The kind of education that has the power to prevent Auschwitz is tasked with reinsuring the act of self and societal reflection, which leads to individual autonomy.

Adorno did not consider kitsch to have the power of anti-fascist education in his writings because he equated it with mass-mentality, yet it may be argued that according to the definition suggested by Odd Nerdrum, kitsch may have a role in reinsuring that Auschwitz will never repeat.

What if portraiture is a valid educational tool? Energated by mimetic engagement with their sitters, the students become the connoisseurs of otherness of others – their diversity of values, traditions, customs, histories, desires, beauties, pains. Embodying another people for the purposes of painting causes self reflection, because when others leave the painter's embodied body, the painter is not quite able to remain the same. Part of those people stay forever inside the painter, who is in turn forever challenged to mend someone else's pain and self reflect. This painting process leads to sensitivity. Living through the pain of others makes it difficult to be hardened against pain – it makes causing pain problematic by undermining the ability to remain indifferent. It inoculates against fascism which thrives on the insensitivity to pain.

DESIRE

Kitsch can be defined as a form of social research in the framework of desire, I believe it may be more precise to call it a desire driven kitsch based research. This research stands in

opposition to the “desire to colonize” through categorization, measurement, and control (Rolling, 2013, p.14) relying instead on an emotive dialogical meaning making process and the yearning to connect. It shifts the researcher’s goal away from “obtain[ing] particular political or material gain” (Tuck, 2009, p. 413) because it operates outside of the value judgement, portraying the participants as dignified beings who withstood the hardship of their past. Kitsch based research allows the researcher to shift away from the desire to pathologize the subjects (Tuck, 2009, p.414). It shields the participants from the projection and misplacement of the researcher’s guilt (Olick, & Perrin, 2010, p. 115) because the painter/ researcher embodies the subjects and studies their damage within the self, contrary to the common practice of focusing on something external as a damaged cite.

This methodology of research is uncomfortable, because the researcher becomes the enervated embodiment of the participants’ contradictions. Yet, this research is objective in its subjectivity – all sitters or participants are human, and thus equally valuable in the eyes of a kitsch painter who indiscriminately employs same faculties of line, shape, edge, value, anatomy, and color as tools of their visual script.

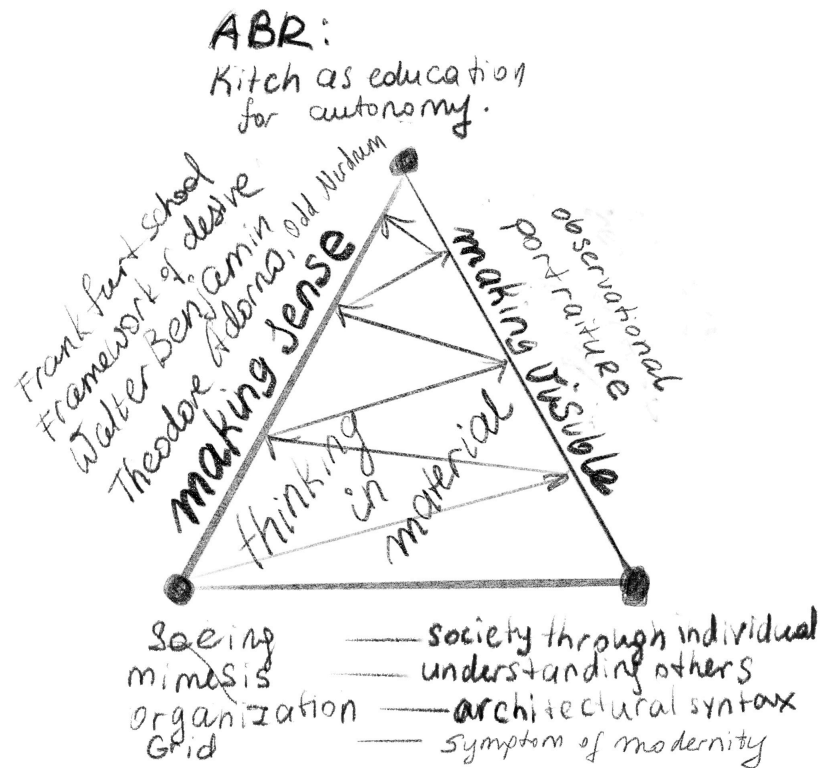
Portraiture causes the continuum of the mimetic resonance to travel from the subject to the viewer through the painter rendering all three as one collective whole bound by one enervated wordless script. Kitsch stands in opposition to the western individualistic paradigm that sets the participant and the researcher, the painter and the viewer, the writer and the reader far apart (Tuck, 2009, p.420). It makes room for the “complex personhood” with its internal contradictions facilitating the “collective balance” (Tuck, 2009, p.421), where these

contradictions are allowed to exist. Thus, kitsch which does not aim to ask ethical, political, or social questions answers them in a silent and embodied sort of way.

RESEARCH

I propose to employ kitsch painting as an element of arts based research methodology that provides a “both/and hybridity” between the rational and the irrational (Rolling, 2013, p.70). This research architecture is guided and inspired by James Rolling writing (Rolling, 2013, p.70), where he perceives the researcher more as a painter, then a scientist, who employs rational and the irrational faculties synergistically. This perception suspends the male-centric, rationally driven, individualistic gaze, offering instead a female-centric model, where the researcher generates knowledge in a way that does not prioritize the rational over the irrational, the compartmentalized over the whole (Collins, 2002, p.281). This approach acknowledges the emotive engagement as a valid meaning making apparatus, contrary to the established positivist-inspired qualitative paradigms (Rolling, 2013, p.20).

The “analytic portico” (Rolling, 2013, p.69) of this research architecture that bridges the polarizing binary of the traditional meaning-making turf has a triangular form in its structure:



This research is focused on employing embodied mimetic portraiture, or kitsch, in the medium of oil paint as an instrument of synergetic social research. The rationally driven medium of architectural drafting, on the other hand, is employed to embody the societal structures that surround the individual in order to test whether they stand in opposition to their personhood.

The data internalized by the researcher is made visible through the medium of painting and architectural drafting. The medium of oil is chosen due to its malleability and suitability for embodying the substance of human character. Drafting is chosen as a medium well suited for the articulation of the societal patterns through the syntax and grammar of architectural language. The study of the personhood in oil and the societal systems in drafting on the flatness of a single canvas is anticipated to make visible the dialectical opposition present within a phenomena of a social being.

The vehicles for interpretation of the data are the Frankfurt school theories, Walter Benjamin's writings, contributions of Odd Nerdrum school, and personal reflection.

PS

I am aware that I might be suspected of romanticism. But a romantic is just a harlequin, an anachronistic thinker, a professional mourner, or a maker of kitsch. Besides it takes one to judge one and commonly the Romantics don't live long enough to judge or to be properly judged. Is Benjamin not a Romantic? Based on the fact that he died from overly high levels of pain in his bloodstream to avoid the hands of totalitarian thinkers, I judge that he is. Rimbaud died even younger, also due to the job hazards of poetry. Being quite a connoisseur of beauty and an excellent researcher of pain, Rimbaud has imparted a pedagogical lesson that is largely ignored by modernity, I suppose because it embodies the kitsch:

"romanticism has never been carefully judged. Who would have judged it? The critics! The Romantics? who prove so obviously that a song is so seldom a work, that is to say, a thought sung and understood by the singer" (Rimbaud, 2005).



Wall (Portrait of Dr. Balkans who rides a unicycle). 48x48". Oil on panel.

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