

## Portrait of Adelaide

### Owen Hilander

Originally my collection began as a way for me to document the people of Adelaide through candid photography, and to translate that into a collection of portraiture. I would do this by collecting my own references and then translating them through the medium of charcoal. The photographs would be taken on crowded streets, with my subjects unknowingly allowing silent contemplation to fester into expressions which I would then recapture. However, I found that rather than preserving a perfect recreation of my subjects, I was merely projecting myself onto an interaction they had no knowledge of, potentially misrepresenting their emotions.

Upon this realisation I changed my theme to something more emotional, taking greater advantage of the inherent drama and energy of charcoal. My portraiture collection would serve not as a record, but as an example of how we in urban society have a tendency to project emotion on those around us. I felt that because I was providing a report of their emotion that it was completely moral for me to photograph people and reproduce their image within my work to preserve their memory. However, I came to an ethical conundrum when I realised that by redrawing the subjects, my portraits were extensions of my own emotion. Having studied artists like Hyunji Kim who put specific emphasis on the negative effects that emotional projection can have on sitters and viewers ('The contemporary subject has become disenchanted, bored, and fascinated with the image.

These beautiful faces that I have stolen, these young, empty signs, they are just that: empty') it felt selfish, almost as if I had robbed these people of their identity for my own collection. As time went on, however, I became less affected by this. I came to see positivity and felt that the immediate interaction I had with these people was worth preserving.. Each piece felt like a moment frozen in time, each subject representing the weight we place on interactions with others. When people view the portraits I display they themselves will identify with the subjects and emotion I create through rendering, despite their anonymity. This undying humanity is why I love portraiture, this realisation proactively changing my theme in order to represent our human desire for connection. My work takes the most influence from 20th century photographer Walker Evans, in particular his series documenting the New York subway between 1938 and 1941. Through anonymous photography, Evans captures travelers' candid expressions of silent contemplation and guarded gestures while riding the Manhattan subway.

These works create a sense of intimacy between viewer and subject, as we unconsciously project ourselves into the interaction in an attempt to decipher it. I strived to create a similar sense of intimacy, mimicking this interaction between viewer and piece whilst simultaneously adding another layer of emotion and separation by rendering the subject in charcoal. It was Evans' elevation of candid scenes that inspired me to catalogue Adelaide's anonymous faces, focusing on capturing individual expressions and creating a taxonomy of my Adelaide. With each drawing placing a spotlight on the individual, I hope to create an empathetic connection between them and the viewer. I am coming to terms with the weight that my perspective carries, when I attempt to depict another. This work asks the viewer to question how much their own frame of mind narrates the way that they understand others. I looked into the work of Johannes Vermeer and Louis Smith for guidance in appropriate technical rendering in the tonal application and composition of my collection.

Despite the low volume of his work (only 36 oils surviving) and his unconventional subject for the time of ordinary people, Vermeer is one of the most celebrated artists in history. While his technique and style are masterful, what most touched me about his work was the care he took in depicting the people around him, despite their low status. It is because of this that my subjects transitioned from models and celebrities I found online, to the people who moved, lived and loved all around me. His work showed me the value of mundane life, and inspired me to honor and find beauty in the ordinary. Much of the technique I used to express this emotion was derived from the work of Louis Smith, a contemporary freelance portrait artist.

Through shadow blocking Smith is able to elevate simple form in charcoal to a masterful beauty. I replicated a lot of his work with willow in order to improve my own practice, and recreate his delicate treatment of light. By putting willow down as the mid tone before any layering or crosshatching, finer, more delicate transitions between values could be established which allowed me to use more subtle tonal work in my collection. His nuanced use of charcoal showed me the emotional power of this relatively simple medium. Charcoal's gentle aesthetic allowed me to honor my subjects, in a way that wasn't overpowering, its naturalistic energy and fragile nature creating a life-like energy on the page.

Overall, I am very pleased with the collection I produced. I feel that through preserving these interactions, I represent our human desire for connection. In terms of ability, I have grown much more competent in representing the human form, as I have had to work from a variety of facial types and angles, in pictures with relatively low resolution. My charcoal rendering has also greatly improved through long hours of reproduction and self-reflection. I have grown much more familiar with the medium, and I have refined my ability to layer the material to create tonal variation and depth, without confusing the composition. This body of work has helped me explore my relationship with portraiture, highlighting why I find joy in recreating human form, despite the existence of photography.

There is a reason why realistic painting wasn't immediately abolished after the invention of digital cameras. Girl With a Pearl Earring is infinitely fascinating and mysterious, despite the fact there are pixel perfect representations of human form out there. Humans will inherently want to connect with others, the medium of portraiture offers the viewer a relationship with both the subject and the artist.