

By Jessica Skwire Routhier

BRUNSWICK, MAINE — There is something about the word “portrait” that, for many art lovers, can trigger the yawn reflex. We think we know, just from that word, what we will encounter, and that we will have encountered it a thousand times before, and that we will find it mostly duplicative of everything that came before or after. We would be wrong in any case, because the history of portraiture is in fact as richly diverse, intellectually challenging and legitimately fascinating as any genre in Western

“Emmett at Twelve Months #3” by Byron Kim, 1994. Egg tempera on panel, 17 by 14½ by ¾ inches. Collection of the Artist, ©the artist / courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai. Each painted square represents a different color observed on the body of the artist’s young son. The diversity of hues challenges pat categorization of race in terms of simple hues like “black” or “white.”





art. But we would be especially wrong in the case of the new exhibition at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, the first exhibition dedicated to “non-mimetic” portraiture in American art. This is portraiture like you have never seen it before, on view through October 23.

It is an odd word. In old French, it is the past participle of the verb *portraire*, to portray. A portrayal, of course, might be literary or dramatic as well as visual, and yet in American English we tend to think of the word “portrait” almost exclusively in visual terms. In its evolution to a noun in both languages, it has retained that association with past action — a thing that has been undertaken and completed and whose significance is forever

“Portrait of Deb from 1988–199?” by L.J. Roberts, 2012–13. Single-strand embroidery on cotton, 28 by 24 inches. Collection of the artist. Jonathan Walz writes that this work “speaks not only to the ‘threads’ of individual human lives and the significant role that women played during the AIDS crisis, but also to the recent resurgence of ‘craft activism’ and to an imagined kinship that stretches through time and space.”

affixed to that moment of creation. But in the visual arts, at least, meaning is more fluid in non-mimetic portraiture — that is to say, portraiture in which the depiction looks nothing like the subject.

The paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures and installations in the Bowdoin show are not abstractions in the true sense of the word, for they all represent something: each in some way is a portrayal of a real person or persons. Some, in fact, are not abstractions at all. Rather, the works on view find means other than facial likeness to reflect their sitters' identities. Through the use of meaningful objects, words,

“Yvonne Rainer” by Eleanor Antin, 1971, exercise bike, mirror, roses, sweatshirt, horn, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist, San Diego, Calif. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City. Antin’s assemblage portraits are all accompanied by semi-absurd texts that relate to their subjects. The text here reads, in part, “She came from a family of Italian anarchists. Carlo Tresca was a relative. Another uncle attended a Bund rally in Yorkville and got so angry he had a heart attack and died.”





unconventional materials, color, gesture and even analytical data, the artists take a broad view of identity as a concept that may evolve over time and can be constructed, manipulated and deconstructed as well as faithfully transcribed.

Anne Goodyear, co-director of the Bowdoin museum and one of the exhibition's three co-curators, dates the genesis of the show to her time at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in Washington, D.C., part of the Smithsonian Institution. It was there that she first came to know Jonathan Walz, who later wrote his dissertation

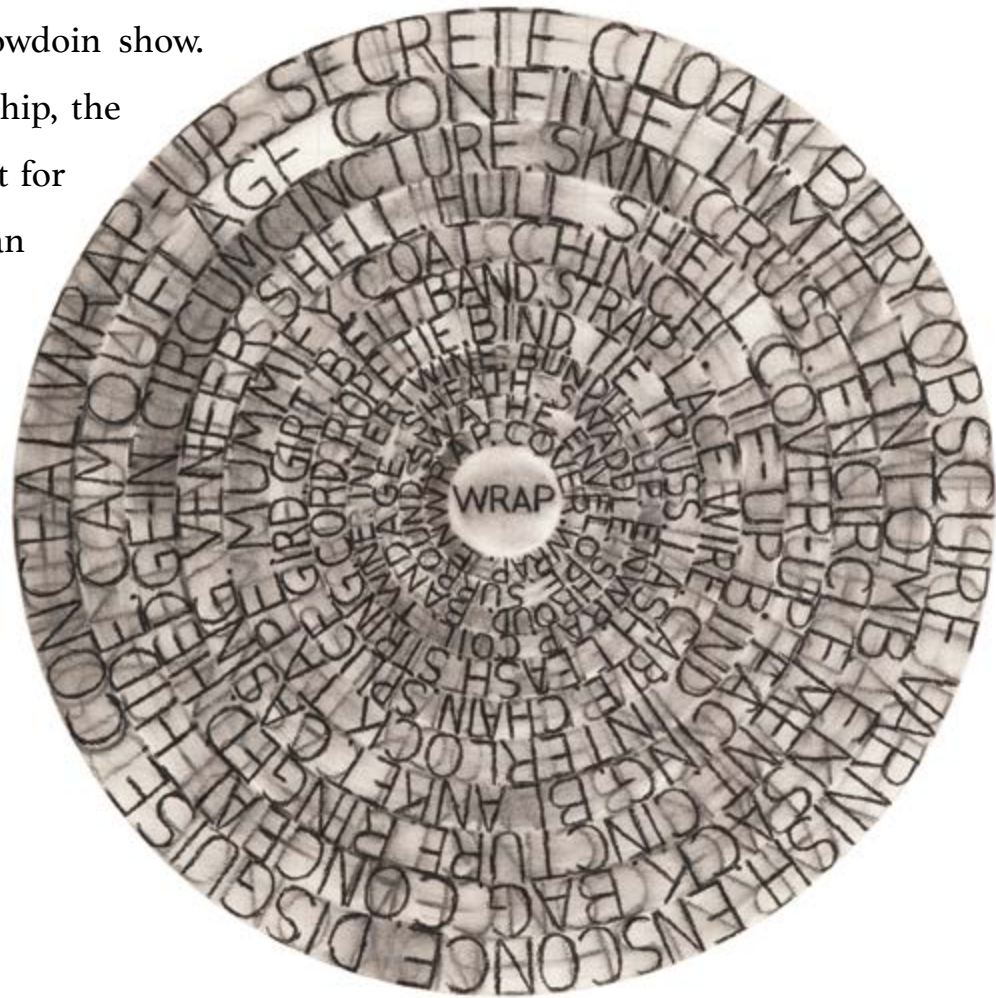
"One Portrait of One Woman" by Marsden Hartley, 1916. Oil on composition board, 30 by 24 inches. Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. An example of Hartley's famous symbolic portraits, this painting incorporates a constellation of symbols to evoke the warm friendship that arose between Hartley and Gertrude Stein during Hartley's time in Europe in the 1910s.

about Charles Demuth, a major presence in the Bowdoin show.

After Walz returned to the Smithsonian for a fellowship, the two began to conceptualize the exhibition as a project for the NPG. Kathleen Campagnolo, another Smithsonian fellow and an expert in Walter De Maria, learned of the project and was quickly “welcomed into the fold,” in her words. When Goodyear, along with her husband, Frank, accepted the position of co-director at the Bowdoin museum, the project went with her, with the NPG’s support.

Both the exhibition and the accompanying catalog are organized into...

(Continued on page 8C inside the E-Edition)



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“Wrap: Portrait of Eva Hesse” by Mel Bochner, 2001. Charcoal and pencil on paper, 25½ inches diameter. Courtesy of Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York City, and Tokyo, Japan. ©Mel Bochner. The coiled shape of this portrait alludes to Hesse’s own artwork of the time.

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