

Looking at You Looking at Me Reflections on *Art of Our Time: Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art*

—Emily Stamey, Ulrich Museum Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

The works of art in *Art of Our Time: Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art* generate myriad lively discussions. Within this exhibition of highlights from Wichita State University's campus museum are examples of key artistic styles and movements—realism, cubism, surrealism, abstract expressionism, pop, minimalism, and postmodernism. Viewers can study these artworks chronologically as a telling of the canonical story of western art history since the late 19th century. Museum-goers can also, however, find surprising groupings of artworks—stylistically dissimilar and historically distant—that inspire engaging dialogues around specific themes within that larger narrative.

One such unexpected, yet meaningful, connection is found among Robert Henri's *Gregorita with the Santa Clara Bowl* (1917), Diane Arbus's *Lady Bartender at Home with a Souvenir Dog, New Orleans* (1964), and Dana Schutz's *Missing Link Finds Superman* (2006). Considering them in conversation with one another reveals a range of distinct, yet overlapping, perspectives on how artists engage with their subjects when those subjects are other people.

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The modernist portrait painter Robert Henri consciously sought to capture his personal interactions with his sitters. In a letter to his students at New York's Art Students League, he admonished:

Realize that your sitter has a state of being, that this state of being manifests itself to you through form, color and gesture . . . that your work will be the statement of what have been your emotions.¹

Henri frequently painted bust-length portraits dominated by a single sitter. Using dense strokes of paint, he eschewed fine details and focused on the subject's facial expression. *Gregorita with the Santa Clara Bowl* carefully pieces together four distinct areas of color: the ochre wall, white drape, black bowl, and blue dress. These areas of minimal detail draw attention to Gregorita's serious countenance—lips gently pursed and eyes unflinchingly looking out at the viewer.

Henri sought out new subjects as an early modernist. Street urchins were his models in New York in the first years of the new century. Later, he broadened his scope and depicted representatives of different ethnic groups such as Japanese Americans, Mexican Americans, and American Indians. The white painter insisted that he did not “sentimentalize over them . . . I am looking at each individual with the eager hope of finding there something of the dignity of life.”² His genuine respect and empathy, however, were not without romanticism. In his images of Indian children such as Gregorita, Henri frequently depicted them with an object—such as a blanket or shawl around their shoulders—that both identified them with their particular tribe and created a sense of their vulnerability. Gregorita holds tight to a large bowl that sits

between her and the viewer, acting as a sort of protective barrier. Although she meets the viewer's gaze, she appears not entirely confident.

Like Henri, 1960s photographer Diane Arbus was keenly self-conscious of her relationship to the people in her pictures. Likewise, she took an interest in people from backgrounds different than her own—transvestites, midgets, nudists, the mentally retarded, and others frequently shunned as outcasts. Of her encounters, she noted:

*If I were just curious, it would be very hard to say to someone, 'I want to come to your house and have you talk to me.' . . . But the camera is a kind of license. A lot of people, they want to be paid that much attention and that's a reasonable kind of attention to be paid.*³

In contrast to Henri's minimal backgrounds and carefully selected props, Arbus allowed her subjects to compose themselves within their own environments and frequently captured them in full-length shots. "I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself."⁴ For *Lady Bartender at Home with a Souvenir Dog, New Orleans*, Arbus arranged herself such that her lens took in the uncanny resemblance between the woman's piled-high, bleached-blond hair and the round cellophane toy poodle on her shelf. Decidedly free of the sentimental overtones in Henri's painting, the image reveals the stark, unabashed scrutiny that was Arbus's hallmark.

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Unlike Henri and Arbus, contemporary painter Dana Schutz renders her figures not from life, but from her imagination. Nonetheless, she speaks about a meaningful relationship with them: "I feel that my subjects are aware that they are in the picture. They are not completely disinterested. I think of them as social, like real people."⁵ Schutz first made a name for herself in the art world with a series of paintings called *Frank from Observation*, premised on the idea that she and Frank were the only two people remaining on earth—she the last painter and he the last human subject. *Missing Link Finds Superman* recalls the subtle pathos and isolation that were part of that earlier project. A man, his head too large for his slight body and dressed awkwardly in a Superman costume, stands in what looks like an apocalyptic wasteland.

This figure holds a pair of leggings, the bottom half of his heroic costume. Has he just taken them off, or is he about to put them on? Is he transforming from or into heroic form? Schutz underscores this idea of ambiguous transformation in the painting's title with "missing link," a phrase used to describe a transitional, evolutionary form. Unlike Henri and Arbus's images, where key objects—the Santa Clara bowl or the souvenir dog—suggested something about the figure's personality, Schutz works metaphorically. In this trio of artworks, hers rings with the decidedly contemporary notion that—despite the ages-old and continuing quest to know one another—our identities remain unfixed.

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Gregorita, the lady bartender, and *Missing Link* make an unusual trio. How Henri or Arbus might respond to Schutz's work can never be known. Schutz's contemplation of this specific pair of images by her predecessors is unlikely. The unexpected opportunity to consider these three artworks together is one of the treats of an exhibition such as *Art of Our Time*. In bringing

together the recognized gems of a collection, it offers occasion to discover, reflect on, and enjoy previously unnoticed relationships among them.

Emily Stamey received her MA and PhD in art history from The University of Kansas and her BA in art history from Grinnell College.

¹ Robert Henri, "Letter to the Class, Art Students League, 1915," reprinted in Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (1923; repr., Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1960), 26.

² Robert Henri, "'My People': By Robert Henri," *The Craftsman* 26, no.5 (February 1915) quoted in Valerie Ann Leeds, *My People: The Portraits of Robert Henri* (Orlando, FL: Orlando Museum of Art, 1994), 33.

³ Diane Arbus, quoted in Doon Arbus, *Diane Arbus* (Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1972), 1.

⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

⁵ Dana Schutz, "Conversation Between Raphaela Platow and Dana Schutz, September 2005," in Raphaela Platow, *Dana Schutz: Paintings, 2002–2005* (Waltham, MA: The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 2006), 91. An exhibition catalogue.