

Glimpse™

volume 1 issue 1 | the art + science of seeing™

Glimpse is an interdisciplinary journal that examines the functions, processes, and effects of vision and vision's implications for being, knowing, and constructing our world(s). Each theme-focused journal issue features articles, visual spreads, interviews, and reviews spanning the physical sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities.

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Glimpse™

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From the Editor

Vision is arguably our most immediate and mysterious means of receiving information. It is the carrier of great subtleties, can extend or heighten our emotions, override our logic, but can also serve to amplify our reason or intuition. Formally uncodified, vision differs from our more conscious cultural engagement with spoken and written language. It is deeply, biologically embedded in our cognitive framework, but often in ways we do not recognize or understand.

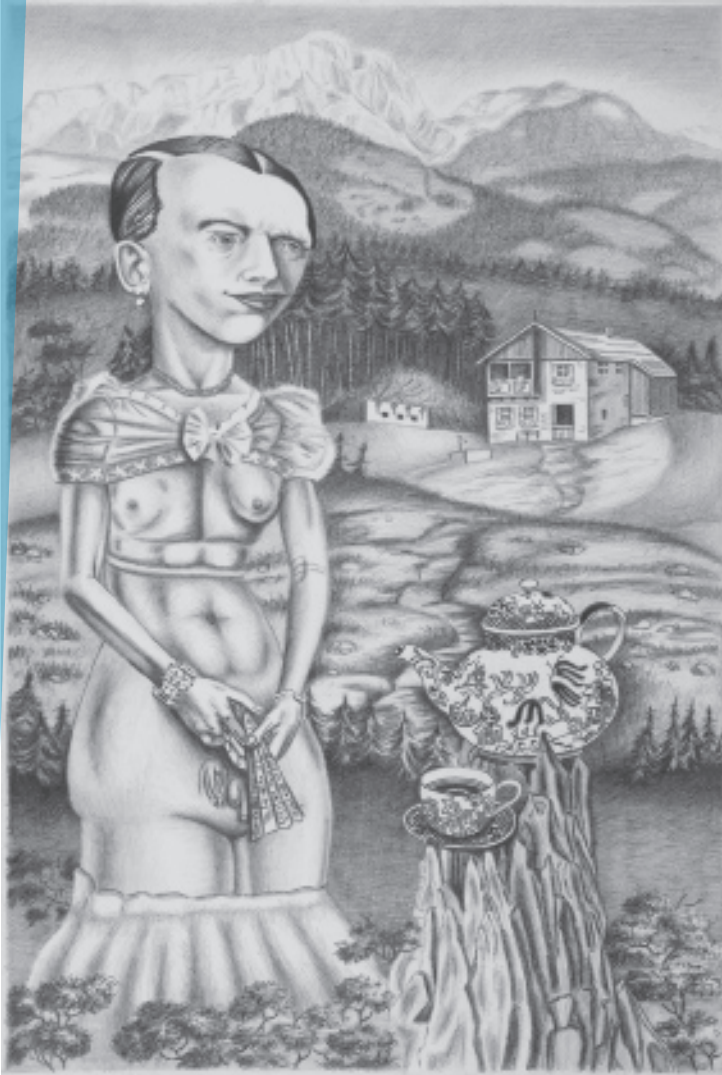
Long thought to reveal the truth, as with the old adage "Seeing is believing," research now reveals vision and memory to be more porous than we may have once understood. Advances in brain imaging indicate further intricacies to the "problem" of vision. How reliable is human vision as it relates to our understanding of the world? Is what we see influenced by more than just our physical sight of that which is before us? Are there things "in plain sight" that we do not see? As we begin to understand more about vision, the brain, and cognition, more complexities are revealed. These advances have implications for societies and cultures as well.

Issue 1 of Glimpse, focuses on the question, "**Is the visual political?**" The obvious answer is "yes". Presented in this issue are many answers to support this thesis, ranging from the persuasiveness of satirical political illustrations to the cognitive processes of political affiliation; to the transmission of sociopolitical information through color, pattern, and form in ancient pottery and contemporary national flags; to the physical logistics of how we participate in democracy through sight. Additional sub-themes emerge among these works relating to the exchange of visual information- the roles of producers and of receivers, and varying levels of consciousness in the construction and receipt of that information.

The front cover for this issue is green, black, and orange—an homage to optical tricks that reveal a red, white, and blue image after staring at a fixed point in the first image for 30 seconds, then shifting one's gaze to a white surface. The American assemblagist Jasper Johns riffed on this phenomenon in the mid-twentieth century. We offer it again here as a reference point for contemplating the emotional and political power and biophysics of what we see, how we see, and how we understand what we see.

And so, with a generous group of contributors from diverse disciplines, and a talented and resourceful volunteer staff, we launch Glimpse. We extend an open invitation to scholars, researchers, learners, and the generally curious to use Glimpse as a sandbox and a soapbox for their questions, experiences, discoveries, and theories about seeing, and vision's many implications for being, understanding, and constructing our world(s).

Megan Hurst



One Body Naturally Considered

MUSINGS ON A MASTER RACE: THE DRAWINGS OF HANNAH BARRETT

Carolyn Arcabascio

A series of faces peer out, defying the confines of their two-dimensional surfaces. Their eyes connect two worlds, but bespeak bemusement and skepticism. These are standoffish and wary characters, but unmistakably curious ones. About us. About the strange, judgmental creatures we are. I imagine their expressions mirrored my own as I took in the confused and disjointed bodies, anatomies exposed in bizarre, fantastical landscapes. Everything foreign and new, save for the familiar furrowed brows, lined lips, and spots of mustache that I recognized as the borrowed and mingling features of Queen Elizabeth and Adolf Hitler.

"I THINK IN IMAGES," Hannah Barrett explained, sorting through drawers of collaged "digital sketches." So the image of Queen Elizabeth, for whom the Boston-based artist admits a strong affinity and fondness, offered a steadfast starting point for a new body of work. The monarch fixed herself, poised and patient, in Barrett's mind and waited for her male counterpart whose features would ultimately meld with her own. This process of selection and juxtaposition is one that Barrett knows well. Just take a look at the work that spans her career and you'll become witness to a parade of hybrids – a ragtag array of eccentricity and sexual ambiguity. The new series at hand would follow suit, but it had to do more than just satisfy previously established, radical criteria. And for Barrett, every candidate for combination was falling flat. They were too small, there was no tension, none were commanding enough to share a body with the Queen. Until Hitler's face entered the spectrum of potentials. He was certainly big enough, recognizable enough, detestable enough to serve as the perfect visual and conceptual foil. But Barrett met the notion of working with the dictator's visage with justifiable reluctance, and her extensive academic background and personal interest in German studies and culture only magnified her discomfort. Still, the image remained. Nagging, expectant.

While perusing an old Christie's catalog, a frequent source of reference material and inspiration, the artist found *HIM* – Maurizio Cattelan's photorealistic sculpture of a miniature Hitler, kneeling in prayer. The thing is provocative, of course, recalling atrocity and inciting pain that generations of time haven't dulled. Yet the scale is shifted, the gesture vulnerable, and the dynamic between us and it—changed. Barrett re-approached her hybrid, suspended mid-thought, with new resolve. By continuing to shy away in her considerable distaste, she'd be "honoring these taboos by scrupulously avoiding them." So she executed the inconsistent idea—several times over—and manifested a **Hermaphrodite Master Race**.

One member of the new breed sits regally on horseback, clothed in a dictator's getup and accessorized with a monarch's jewels. The figure looks past us, imparting a misdirected royal wave. Barrett places the new and improbable person in her rendition of Erastus Salisbury Field's Garden of Eden – humanity's biblical birthplace where God breathed life into Adam's nostrils and made Eve, the divine afterthought, to assuage his loneliness. Now, the loaded sequence of humankind's creation is subverted, beaten by a body both man and woman. Our gender-directed prejudices lie dead and irrelevant somewhere. Craving direction, we appeal to our

values, that stubborn system of compartmentalized principles. Perhaps here we'll find guidance on how to feel. Disapproving? Acceptant? But our archetypes of virtuous and villainous are all but inapplicable – in the hybrid we find the image of fairness and the face of evil singularly embodied.

With the convergence of dictator (male, loathsome, past) and queen (female, good, current) comes a total collapse of boundaries – of our dear categories. Forced to surrender the biases that inform our gender roles and goad our self-righteousness, we're left with no choice but to **look at these figures without pretense**. They boast anatomical landscapes, dubious and rare. So entrenched in the present reality on this side of the picture plane, our thoughts wander to a counterculture of bodies and orientations, the likes of which are largely inconspicuous on the mainstream cultural horizon. But Barrett takes this new figure, crowns it, and so thrusts it to the forefront of our sociological and political awareness. The artist illuminates these modern taboos that perhaps a later, more sophisticated era will greet with amity and honesty.

In the meantime, we wrestle with our preconceptions, trying to rebuild our comfortable and illusory barriers. And all the while, horsebacked hermaphrodite and friends go about their business. They water flowers and contemplate (something) over tea, in spite of us. But the chronic uncertainty of this paradoxical place is unshakable and frustrating and I demand to know: What kind of leadership can be offered here and where do my stereotypes apply? What of the aggression of masculine leadership, the diplomacy of feminine? Where are the absolutes to shape my ethical character and how can an entity of opposites keep from self-destructing? A representative of the master race looks out (eye-contact this time) from Barrett's imitation Hitler watercolor. Folded hands rest on an ornate table, decorated with the Queen's Fabergé egg, nudged conscientiously to the corner.

Perhaps s/he can answer my questions.



Fidi Defensor

TALKING (SEXUAL) HYBRIDS

Carolyn Arcabascio (CA): Why are you so drawn to the concepts of hybridization and distortion?

Hannah Barrett (HB): Well, let's start with the hybridization. I'm trying to show a new figure that I feel is there, and I know is there in a way. People are changing their bodies and you can get plastic surgery. I come from a queer community with a lot of people going trans. So I wanted to show these new things that are going on. Not just the surgery, but also how people are thinking about themselves as not necessarily so polarized male or female. But I needed to do it in a way that was **symbolic and explicit** and that would come out of the materials. Like, if I went and drew a trans person, I don't think it would mean anything in a way, because it would just look like a man or a woman. So the hybridization allows me to make this really overt connection of a combination of male and female. And then as I went along, I started experimenting with it. I found that how people respond to it varies and is broader than if I just showed something that broke boundaries – a trans person, or an old woman and a young man having sex or something like that. When I first started, I was doing hybrids of my parents, so people started to relate to them from the point of view of marriage, which wasn't anything I even thought about. I've been thinking of things like **people coming out of each other**. That starts to happen whether you're in a really close relationship, or even a working relationship. You can have issues of somebody who's dominant or somebody who's more passive and people sort of come out of other people. So I felt that the hybrid portrait had potential to show this whole new gender that was happening, and it's also an encapsulated narrative. You can suggest a whole story about a person that's not like a straight-ahead portrait.

The distortion is related to the hybridization because that's just a natural bi-product. And I always want it to be clear that it's a new person that comes out of sources. The whole point for me is for it to not look like a real person. It takes a lot to maintain that seam – that sense that it's a collage.

CA: The sexual ambiguity in your work has been described as bizarre, and by some, even unsettling at times. What do you think is so visually powerful about this breakdown in sexual categorizations?

HB: It's hard to do anything these days that's disturbing to begin with. Not that that's the point where I start from, but there aren't that many images out there that show that. And this is a really contemporary idea. Maybe this is the first point when things have been as open as they are. I don't understand why more people aren't doing it because it's a frontier, an opportunity, in a world that's constantly bombarded with images. And everything is so tired and has been done. This is something that is totally relevant, is totally contemporary, but it's not really being done. So for me it's like, why wouldn't I do it? I guess some people could say it's unsettling.

CA: How has your own personal perception of gender influenced your work?

HB: Well, I might not notice these things that are going on if I was not immediately affected by them, if they weren't in my immediate vicinity. And it's sort of been a part of my art education as well. When I was in art school in the 80s, and I was trying to learn to paint, to draw, I was studying with this old man, Barney Rubinstein at the Museum School. All my friends were in video and photography. There were no queer people trying to learn how to paint - they were all doing new media, photo, performance. And so I've always been really aware of how these worlds are really separate, and that my point of view is a little different. I live in the queer community in Boston, so I see things differently from, for example, the housewives that I was painting with Barney Rubinstein. I've gone to dinner parties where **I'm the only woman there who hasn't had a sex change.** So for me, that's my reality.

CA: What role does humor play in your work?

HB: When you do collage, humor is kind of inherent. You almost have to watch out for things becoming too slapstick with collage. And with the distortion, it's funny because things have big noses or they have little hands or whatever. I could eliminate all of that. They could have a totally different look, and I could make them

Garden of his Heavenly Will



more conventionally beautiful, but then to me, what would be the point? So the humor I think is partly the collage, and partly just how my personality runs. It also brings them to life in a way. If there's no humor, then there's a distance.

CA: The humor makes it accessible.

HB: It's an involuntary thing, laughter. If people feel like they can laugh and spend time with something, then this mix of stuff will start to permeate. That's how I look at things. So even though my work is really overt and literal, it's still ambiguous on a certain level. But if people have something that they want to look at and that they feel engaged in because of the humor, because of the detail, that's what I'm trying to do.

CA: Do you consider yourself a satirist?

HB: I never thought of that. Maybe. I can think of people who are more satirical. There's a kind of formality to satire; offhand I can think of people who have satirical elements to their work, but I can't really think of somebody I would call a satirist. It's a really interesting question, because visually I think it's kind of out of fashion. I don't think it's out of fashion in writing, or in theater. But it has to do with how people read visual imagery now. I don't think people read it in a way where satire really operates anymore. When I think of contemporary images today, and I think of people who work with very overt and specific imagery like I do, or people much more famous than myself like Neo Rauch or Dana Schutz, **there's always ambiguity there**. So even if something seems like it's being satirized, it's

still general. For example, in Neo Rausch's work there's all these people doing inane things - digging up weird objects and holding them up. On the one hand, you could say that's because this is from East Germany and this is what they were doing for years. They had a fake gross national product for fifty years and then in 1989 everybody woke up and discovered, oh, actually, all these factories and all these things that we thought we were doing - it's just play. So you could say it means that - that's what these things symbolize. On the other hand, somebody wouldn't even have to know anything about East Germany and could just see them as something that goes on with everybody - you're looking for something, and you come up with this thing, and it's an absurdity. I think his work would lose a lot if it were more related to a specifically East German idea. And it's important that it can mean something broader than that.

Current events are happening so fast now, I think it's hard to keep up with something that's relevant. That's probably part of it too - how people read imagery now. By the time you're done with the thing, the news has changed.

CA: Most of your work deals with the manipulation of the historical image - whether you're working from a collaged family portrait, historical photographs, photos of political figures. What is the importance of the alteration of history in the context of your work?

HB: I went into painting because I'm very attracted to the craft, and as my sensibility, I'm a very craftsman-like person. So I'm really interested in the old crafts and old paintings - studying these things, practicing them. But at the same time, I'm a very contemporary person. So for me there's always a weird split that goes on. I'll be poring over all the auction magazines from Christie's for old master paintings, and they're all **incredibly religious** paintings, **incredibly misogynist**. I don't see myself in that. So I'm attracted to the craftsmanship, the beauty, the color, the surface of those things, but because of what they stand for, there's always something that reminds me that I can't have that. I'm interested in how those things look and feel, and that's why I go back to them. If something's far enough away, it's a sort of realm of rediscovery because you don't know about it any more than you know about what hasn't happened yet.

CA: Since you mostly see these images as fragments while you work, and since that's the nature of the kind of image that you generally work with, does this influence the way you see things in everyday life? Do you pick things apart and fragmentize?

HB: I know that how people optically perceive things in the world is directly linked to how they work. You know, people who have a broader vision stand back farther, use big brushes. I guess I do tend to see things in a more detailed way than some people.

CA: Do you feel that, in general, people interpret visual information as political in one way or another?

HB: Yeah. They do. I think lay people politicize two-dimensional work much more than artists do just because art's not in the schools anymore, people don't do it, don't practice it. When my grandparents went to school in this country, everybody did drawing. My grandparents could do pretty good drawings - that was sort of average. Now nobody does it and I feel like, people think today, you have to have a really good reason that you're going to do a drawing. And I don't feel that way. I feel like you can just draw to draw. And people also feel like everything has to mean something because they don't understand visual meaning. You know, they're trying to match something that they see, instead of looking at it in terms of it's own language, because they don't know that language. So the farther people get from knowing visual language, I think the more politicized it becomes. □



Joyous Entry

Swastika (Nazi Party)

Before it was made infamous as the banner of the Third Reich, the swastika was a common symbol, dating back to ancient Greek and Hindi societies. No one is sure exactly of the symbol's origin, but scholars have confirmed that the name derives from Sanskrit and signifies a lucky object. One such scholar, P.R. Sarkar, went further in examining the word's etymology and interpreted it to mean "good existence". On Navajo and Druidic artifacts, in French cathedrals and symbols of the Chinese Tang Dynasty, the swastika seems to have been a widely recognized image and was incorporated in positive and spiritual ways that seem surprising now.

Specific graphical differences between the Nazi style of swastika and the ancient icon have been noted by scholars so as to distinguish them and avoid confusion. Sarkar has also been sure to point out the significance of the swastika's positioning: when the line at the top points to the right, it is a positive expression, representing ultimate victory. When reversed, it indicates destruction and extinction.

As inseparable as this symbol is from the evils of World War II and the Holocaust, there are still cultures today that recognize the original values of the swastika. A website, www.reclaimtheswastika.com is currently leading a campaign to promote the positive values of the symbol and separate it from its political associations.

