

Monstration:, \mɔ̃s.tʁa.sjɔ̃\ feminine: Act of exposing, showing to public view monstrously beautiful figures resulting from an algorithmic process.

In the series of photographs *Facetune Portraits* - some of which immediately evoke in me the album covers of the electronic duo *Disclosure* from the early 2010s - Gretchen Andrew offers a malicious and clever visual commentary on the algorithms supposed to make us beautiful that populate our phone applications. With the help of her two robots, the artist questions the persistent objectification of bodies by standardized machine learning systems based on the occidental male gaze with brushstrokes line, pushing to the creation of what one could interpret as monstrous, uncanny, or otherwise reimaged algorithmic portraits. The series thus presents bodies and portraits already considered perfect by Western masculine standards, which the machines, themselves influenced by the cultural and aesthetic context of the male gaze, attempt to further perfect, transform, and distort again and again.

These works are part of a long history of portraiture, traversed by tensions between resemblance, idealization and alteration. Gretchen Andrew puts it this way : *“Throughout history, prominent individuals have indeed utilized portraiture as a powerful tool to represent themselves, their status, and their power. Each time has its own values reflected in portrait trends”*. Fidelity was not always the goal of the patron or painter, especially if it brought out flaws which did not align with the values of the day. The painter or the photographer commissioned with the portrait was often asked, whether explicitly or implicitly, to alter the image. This tension is evident across various historical periods: Roman Emperors balanced divine authority with recognizable likenesses on coins, while Ancient Greeks idealized their elite subjects with statues to reflect cultural values of harmony and beauty. Renaissance monarchs commissioned grand, opulent portraits symbolizing wealth and lineage, and 18th-century aristocrats used portraiture to solidify social status, often incorporating symbolic objects. Even in modern times, politicians continue this tradition, as seen in occidental presidential portraits. Some historical figures, like Oliver Cromwell, subverted these conventions by requesting realistic "warts and all" depictions to align with specific values of humbleness. Throughout these eras, the commissioned artist was tasked with navigating the delicate balance between accurate representation and idealized imagery, reflecting the subject's desires and the prevailing cultural norms of their time, as Sylvain Maresca explains in an article on the subject¹. If this embellishment was once the privilege of the elites - from princely courts to the stars of the 2000s with *Photoshop* - the advent of applications like *FaceTune* used by the artist reduces the distance between the general public and the elites in terms of the ability to command one's idealized image. Skin smoothing is no longer the prerogative of Flemish masters and their sfumato technique or a fashion art director and his army of photo retouchers.

¹ Sylvain Maresca. L'art en personne. Pour une histoire sociale du portrait-14. 2020.

In these series, far from embellishing faces and bodies, Gretchen Andrew's artistic process uses today's beautification tools to distort. Gretchen Andrew's *monstration* protocol is as follows: photographic portraits - selfies of the artist, influencers, celebrities - are first printed in oil paint by a robot. Then, guided by the "beautification" application *FaceTune*, a second robot *makes modifications that normally occur seamlessly in pixels into and on top of the wet oil paint* creating what the artist calls "scars" - impastos materializing the passage from the original image to its "AI-enhanced" version. The robot smudges, smears, and moves paint to "beautify" the portrait as directed by the AI and algorithmic beauty standards present in the FaceTune iPhone Application. While the shape and line modifications are determined entirely by the algorithms most popular on TikTok and Instagram, Gretchen, as the painter, retains the painterly decisions around how these marks are implemented in terms traditional mark making, conducting the robot with speed, pressure, direction and brush selection resulting in a variety of abstractly painterly brush marks. The figures are twisted by the physically applied filter where red or white brush strokes create mask effects. The whole thing becomes a sort of bad dream, where we are wrapped in Hugh Hefner's abandoned castle, haunted by the beings whose faces and bodies have been forced into a uniform look. A sort of mise en abyme that makes us slightly dizzy and makes us imagine a disturbing scene where an abstract AI trained beauty would pursue itself in very, very dark endless corridors. But reflecting on that, maybe there is a beauty that lies in these distortions that we are not yet familiar with to discover at the end of the corridor ?

Here, the artist confronts us with a disturbing reflection: ultimately, can algorithms really make us beautiful? This is the question one can ask oneself while wandering one's gaze over the impasto portraits hanging on the walls of the Avant Galerie booth at Paris Photo. What do we really see in all the magnificent selfies published on Instagram? Do we see people at their best thanks to the array of filters offered? In their best light? Are people really more beautiful once they have "cleaned" their vacation photos of other tourists as shown in the Google phone ad? Or don't we have the impression of navigating in a large gallery of distorting mirrors of our faces alienated by the obligation to be the most beautiful, idealized version of ourselves? Whereas before this idyllic version was reserved for those who had power and finances to commission portraits and stage, we now all seem to be caught in this giant gallery of distorting mirrors. Gretchen's paintings push this cursor so far that the result becomes a clever and intriguing parody of the ideal. These portraits are no longer representations of people, but speculative aberrations born from the unnatural union between photography, traditional painting and beautification algorithms.

For her most recent series Gretchen Andrew investigated the influencer portraiture. She photographed with influencers, familiar with the self-staging pressures of social networks. In Berlin, she invited several of them for a photo portrait session. Throughout the *monstration* by the robots, elements other than the face and body

were the only distinctive details that individualized them surviving the distorting filters a hairdo, a pet, an accessory.

By multiplying the cultural objects of culturally constructed beauty, Andrews confronts us with our contemporary obsessions with generalized aesthetic perfection, where technology amplifies dominant cultural norms. Her work invites us to reflect on how algorithms, supposedly meant to "improve" us, end up oppressing us internally and causing us to fall into a trap. In the end, Gretchen Andrew's approach is neither technophobic nor beautyphobic. She doesn't seem to be inviting us to stop using our phones and to be afraid of *beautification* applications. Nor to tend towards an idealized hyper-naturalness outside of any algorithmic improvement. This dynamic of supposed *beautification* and passage through filter grinders is already there, already in place, there's nothing to do. Her commentary is intriguing and disturbing and rather asks us the question of what we are really doing with our machines while other much more important problems agitate us.

Hugo du Plessix
Paris, 15.10.2024

Reflectivity

Roman Emperors: These leaders often commissioned portraits to showcase their divine authority and emphasize their connection to the gods. Romans often sought a strong resemblance between their portraits and themselves. This was particularly important for public figures whose likenesses appeared on coins. Recognizing the emperor or other officials on currency was crucial for maintaining order and loyalty within the empire. In contrast, the Greeks tended to idealize their subjects, often portraying them as perfect and physically beautiful. This idealization reflected their belief in the importance of harmony, balance, and moderation. Greek statues and busts often featured idealized figures, embodying the highest qualities of humanity.

Renaissance Kings and Queens: Portraits of monarchs during this period were often grand and opulent, symbolizing their wealth, power, and lineage.

18th-Century Aristocracy: Portraits of European nobility were used to solidify social status and reinforce family connections. They used objects such as having lots of letters around to show how busy and successful they were.

Modern-Day Politicians: Even today, politicians often use portraits to project a certain image and connect with their constituents. The first official presidential portrait was commissioned for George Washington, the nation's founding father. Painted by Gilbert Stuart in 1796, this iconic image remains a cornerstone of American art. The tradition continued with subsequent presidents, each seeking to capture their likeness for posterity.

Warhol often focused on popular culture figures, such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and Mao Zedong. His portraits celebrated the cult of celebrity and explored the impact of mass media on society.

For Oliver Cromwell's famous portrait by Sir Peter Lely he is said to have wanted to be painted "warts and all", and the resulting image depicts a realistic, unflattering portrayal of his facial features, including his prominent nose and warts. Cromwell was deliberately seeking to present himself as a humble and honest leader, free from the vanity and artifice often associated with monarchs and aristocrats. This image could have been intended to appeal to the Puritan values of simplicity and sincerity that were prevalent in England during his time.

This often advantageous art of the portraitist was theorized by Boileau in his *Art Poétique*, which advocated a "pleasant embellishment" of the model: "There is no serpent or odious monster - Which, by imitated art, cannot please the eyes"².

² *Art Poétique* (chant III, vv. 1-2) - personal traduction