

A Succession of Little Areas of Varying Brilliance¹: Pixels, Portraits, People and the Paintings of Christopher Friesen

Pete Smith

“With the popularity and rise in real-time text-based communications, such as Facebook, Twitter, instant messaging, e-mail, Internet and online gaming services, chat rooms, discussion boards and mobile phone text messaging (SMS), came the emergence of a new language tailored to the immediacy and compactness of these new communication media.”

From: *Text Messaging and Chat Abbreviations: A Guide to Understanding Text Messages, Chat Abbreviations, and Twitter Messages*²

Brittany Johnson my heart stops when you look at me.
3 people like this.

The term “pixel” emerged as a computer industry standard at some point in the mid-1960s as an updated expression for the older television term “picture element”.³ Mathematically plotted according to specific coordinates, a pixel is the smallest unit of a digital picture that can be controlled. It is a singular point in a larger, image-making grid. In the early 21st century, technology improves daily, pixels become smaller and grids less pronounced, a nearly imperceptible structure of dots and cubes, x’s and y’s that seamlessly plot the ebb and flow of human activity. My 94 year-old Grandfather is a retired electrical engineer. He enjoys seeing new technologies, even though he hasn’t owned anything since the CD player. When I showed him my new Mac Book, I ran him through a few programs and applications. We watched a video clip from my sons first birthday. “Can you believe it?” he said. “You can do all of that with math.”

RT @crossdaboss Sleep doesn't matter much when all you think about is chasing dreams.

25 minutes ago via twidroid

The grid has a pivotal importance in the history of Western art as well, especially in the history of Modernism. As a compositional structure, it challenged the older models at work since the Renaissance: the window and the mirror. The idea of the picture frame as a window is historically linked to both landscape and history painting. The notion of the canvas as a mirror is related to portraiture. Part of the strength of Christopher Friesen’s works comes from his hybridization of the

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Modernist grid and the Renaissance mirror: a recognition of how these historicized structural motifs have been absorbed and consumed into the mainstream of contemporary image culture, changing the way we experience the image, the way we experience others and the way we understand ourselves.

Melanie commented on [Brad Jackson's status](#).
[2 people](#) like this.

Portraiture is one of arts oldest tasks, maybe the oldest. Since artists first started scratching sticks onto walls, we have been attempting to describe the varied intricacies of the human form and through that, the human experience. Historically mediated by the artist but commissioned and executed to the specifications of the sitter, the portrait constructs an image of individuals as they would see themselves or have themselves seen by others. Traditionally connected to social class, the portrait was a sign of luxury. The populist spread of portraiture was necessarily facilitated by the invention of photography in the 19th Century, yet these early photographic portraits maintained most of the conventions inherited from painting. It wasn't until the mid-20th Century, when the camera moved from the hands of the scientist to the artist and ultimately to the people, that photography started to change the conventions of painting as well.

Sandra Davies on hold with the bank 15 min now. Why doesn't anyone answer the phone anymore?

2 hours ago · [Comment](#) · [Like](#)

Mark Smith People giving up saves money while maintaining the illusion of corporate responsibility.

about an hour ago · [Like](#) · [Delete](#)

Mark Zuckerberg was a 23 year-old psychology major at Harvard University when he founded Facebook in 2004⁴. Within it's first 24 hours, 1,200 students had signed up. By the end of it's first month, more than half of the student population at Harvard had registered for a profile. It quickly spread throughout American universities and by late 2005 had become an international phenomenon⁵. Facebook now has more than 500 million active users worldwide⁶. Even my mom has an account. The Facebook profile picture is a specific type of portrait, a series of coded representations that have become thoroughly conventionalized at mind-bending speed. Like the historical portraits to which they tangentially refer, these are highly

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constructed images that emphatically project the varied ways that individuals see themselves or would have themselves seen by others. Like an art historian unpacking “The Arnolfini Wedding”, Facebook users interpret the vast network of signs and signifiers at play in this new language of representation.

Mike changed his profile picture. Monday at 4:27am ·
[Comment](#) · [Like](#)

In the exhibition “In Medias Res”⁷, the paintings of Christopher Friesen focus implicitly on the genre of portraiture, and how the conventionalization of this language has shifted and swayed in the age of real-time, digital social media. Seemingly anonymous⁸ Facebook profile pictures are juxtaposed with representations of classical art historical sculptural busts and transformed into geometric renderings of colourful cubes plotted within a picture-making grid. Viewed at a distance, these images are fantastically naturalistic. But as one ventures closer, the image begins to dissolve into a checkerboard mosaic of fleshy hued swatches.

[Leanne Newton](#) and 2 other friends shared a link.
[Can this Onion Ring get more fans than Stephen Harper?](#)

In “Madison” (2010), Friesen presents a tightly cropped image of a young, twenty-something. American Apparel-looking, blonde woman. Her highly sexualized facial expression, mediated via soft-core pornography and pop-culture eroticism, tells the viewer that she is available. Her provocative, down-the-barrel gaze is channeled through centuries of art historical rendering and masculine objectification. She is Vermeer’s “Pearl Earing”. She is Manet’s “Olympia”. She is Warhol’s “Marilyn”. She is Hefner’s “Miss July”. But Madison doesn’t need a man to transform her into image. She does it to herself:

This is my sex. I want you to want me. You belong to my gaze.

[Red Armstrong](#) > [Melanie Authier](#): Yeah!
10 hours ago · [Comment](#) · [Like](#) · [See Wall-to-Wall](#)

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⁸ These are, however, pictures of “real” people. So they aren’t anonymous to everybody.

Friesen's portrait of "David" (2010) brings his contemplation of the digital mediation of portraiture into a different discourse. Sharing the same tight facial cropping as the other works on display, there is an aspect of this work that makes me cringe. Charting the course from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"⁹ through to the work of art in the age of viral, digital media, this painting demonstrates the entropic slide of the "masterpiece" through innovation to conventionalization to cliché. Regardless of whether we've been to Italy, we've seen this image a million times. "David" used to be a marvel of human accomplishment¹⁰. Now he sells us underwear, cell phones and exercise equipment.

Ellie Bolton Stay with me. Share all your secrets.

Tuesday at 11:36pm via Facebook for iPhone · [Comment](#) · [Like](#)

The subject of "Mirror Mirror" (2010) is once again a twenty-something woman, but the unmistakable gaze of this subject is that of the snap shot. Maybe she's at a party. Maybe she's at Marine Land. The edge of the frame will not reveal these secrets. She says "cheese" as she smiles for the camera. It is a look that has been rehearsed since infancy, through 21 birthday parties, Christmas dinners and family excursions. This is a particular kind of staging, the wholesomeness of the Judeo-Christian family transformed into a falsified, auto-smile:

We are living the American dream. There is no sadness, hardship or misfortune stuck between these orthodontally straightened teeth. Of course we're happy. We're on vacation.

Dave Bradford Don't be scared. I've done this before. You won't feel a thing.

July 13 at 11:39am via Facebook for iPhone · [Comment](#) · [Like](#) · [View Feedback \(2\)](#)

One of the most profound art experiences comes from visiting the antiquities section at a museum. The old busts from Rome, Greece and Egypt provide a compelling glimpse into an inconceivably distant past. Viewing these artifacts creates a triangular link between the viewer, the subject and the maker. We admire

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the skill, artifice and labour that went into their modeling. We relate to the subtlety of the artist's decisions. Who were these women and men? Were they considered important artists? Were the subjects important people? Sometimes a placard gives us answers to some of these questions. Often they don't. How many people throughout time have looked into these stone eyes and wondered these same questions? There is immortality in their afterlife. But all we have is what's survived: scattered remnants of worlds long departed, fragments of a haphazardly recorded memory. In the 21st Century, however, memory is never lost. The searchable, surface Internet contains less than 1% of all the information that is actually available¹¹. Information can be "deleted" from this structure but never truly erased. Every message sent and received leaves its trace in this system, buried deeper in the incomprehensible chasms of virtual memory: every email, every profile picture, every status update, living forever in this exponentially expanding algorithmic abyss. The paintings of Christopher Friesen troll these nebulous depths.