

GROUP EXHIBITION

HOLDING STILL: Psychology and Portraiture

14. 03 . 19 – 19 . 04 . 19

JOHANNESBURG



Holding Still: Psychology and Portraiture
Installation View
2019

SMAC Gallery is pleased to present **HOLDING STILL: Psychology and Portraiture**, a group exhibition of artworks by various artists.

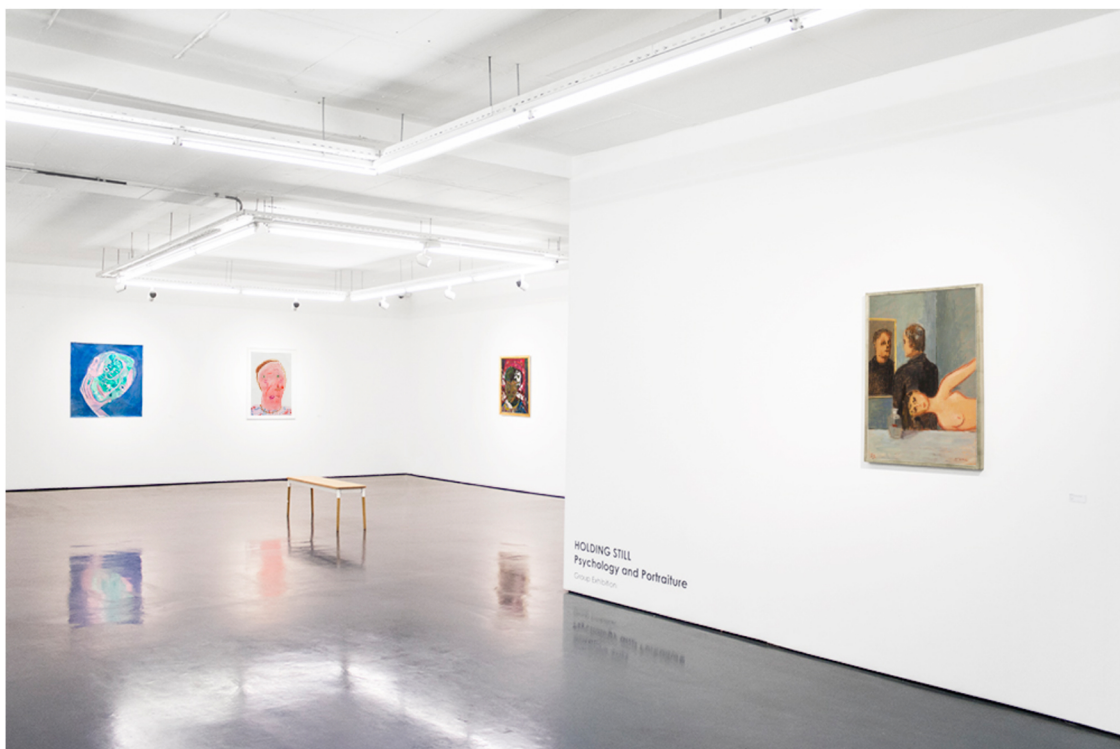
Participating artists include:

Albert Adams
Peter Clarke
Christo Coetzee
Gareth Nyandoro
Kate Gottgens
Georgina Gratrix
Braam Kruger
Johann Louw
Mostaff Muchawaya
John Murray
Alexis Preller
Gerard Sekoto
Marlene Steyn
Simon Stone

By focusing on South African artists who grapple with ideas surrounding the self and its mental workings, this exhibition explores the idea of portraiture as a tool for charting the psychological make-up of the human subject. Be it as paintings or drawings, the work that forms part of this exhibition reflects on the intimate relationship that portraiture provides between artist and subject. This relationship has proven to be fertile ground for those forms of portraiture that aim to dwell on and under the surface of the human skin – forms of representation that are largely preoccupied with the human as a thinking, feeling entity.

Psychology – as the study of conscious and unconscious behaviour and thought – speaks of a profound desire to understand the human mind and its sophisticated intellectual processes. At its core, psychology fosters a better understanding of the human as an integrated entity, comprising of mental functions, social behaviours and intricate physiological mechanisms. Even today, psychology still speaks of its ancient Greek roots – of the *psychē* (the breath, spirit or soul) and the *logia* (the study of, or research into) – and it remains a vital field of enquiry into the human mind and its functions.

To speak of a close connection between psychology and art is therefore quite understandable, for both have at their centre a profound desire to trace the contours of the human mind and its desires, follies and fears. For example, the psychology of art – an interdisciplinary field that studies art as productive of particular perceptions and thoughts – emerged in the early twentieth century, with German psychologist Theodor Lipps being an early proponent of this field of study. Lipps is famed for his application of the term *Einfühlung*, or empathy, with which he referred to a specific aesthetic experience or emotional involvement that art can facilitate. For Lipps, *Einfühlung* is a form of “feeling-into”, as it speaks of the artist projecting themselves onto the object of perception in such a way that their gaze penetrates and moves beyond the exterior. Portraiture is one such way of grappling with the human exterior (of grazing the surface of the body and to translate the traces of emotion into marks on canvas or a piece of paper), whilst also delving deeper, trying to peel away the layers of the human subject to explore its inner workings.



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In the context of portraiture, the very fact that an artist labours over their own or another subject's likeness also speaks of an investment, be it in time, energy and patience. Above all, it reflects a deep desire to know that likeness better. For this reason, portraiture can best be described as a means to investigate, reflect and probe by observing, tracing or interpreting. The process of laboriously transforming a human face or figure into a portrait, of using paint and charcoal to translate it into some visual form, is an act of devotion. It demonstrates an attachment to, a temporary fixation with a given likeness, and a desire to lay that likeness down in a more durable format. In the body of work that this exhibition comprises of, one can easily imagine each piece being created by the repetitive stroke of the hand that, much in the same way as it would touch a face, lays down pigment on the surface of a canvas or a piece of paper. That which the eye sees is relayed by the hand, and it becomes a gesture that leaves a mark there where it imagines the body to be. Hence, the resultant artwork can be regarded as a semiotic representation of observational and psychological processes – it is a way of making marks about that which is seen and felt.

This gaze is, of course, not neutral, and the portraits on display reveal as much about their subjects as the artists who created them. These works might be reflective of a desire to gaze into the mind of another human being, but they also speak of the mental states of both subject and artist. Here, Lipps' idea of the mind of the human as a mirror to both itself and society resounds strongly within the genre of portraiture, insofar as the very desire to gaze into the mind of another necessitates an awareness of the mind of the self. That which the artist craves to expose and understand becomes entangled with that which is painted or drawn, hence we cannot look at the portrait without also seeing some reflection of the artist. Portraiture exposes the artist as much as the subject.

Thus, the meaning of any given portrait lies not solely in the artwork, but also in the process of reception. For Lipps and his contemporaries, art facilitates dialogue between human subjects; one that is communicated conceptually (in terms of content and thematic concerns) and formally (as lines, textures, marks and colours all contribute to the complex messages that images convey). Perhaps the most salient aspect of this viewpoint is the emphasis it places on looking as a productive act. While seeing quite often denotes passivity, looking activates the human as a viewer who physically engages with their surroundings. In the context of portraiture, the act of looking is of great significance, as the artist purposefully engage the eye, mind and hand to represent the human form. And the result of this engagement, like the paintings and drawings showcased in this exhibition, testify of a desire to linger on the face and body of the human being, to look at it (again and again) and to imagine its vast emotional interiority. Ultimately, these works speak of the longing to feel-into that space that we call human.

Written by Dr. Ernst van der Wal