

**Enigma and Audience: Exploring Relationships as Consequence of
Subjectivity and Intimacy**

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Contents

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| List of Figures..... | 3 |
| Introduction..... | 6 |
| My Practice..... | 7 |
| Lynette Yiadom-Boakye..... | 11 |
| Jenny Saville..... | 15 |
| Conclusion..... | 18 |
| Reference List..... | 19 |

List of Figures



Figure 1: O'Hara, E. (2023). *Field of Flowers*. [oil on canvas]. In possession of: the author.

'*Field of Flowers*' by the author, oil on canvas, 140cm x 100cm, 2023



Figure 2: O'Hara, E. (2023). *Cogs in Mist*. [oil on canvas]. In possession of: the author.

'*Cogs in Mist*' by the author, oil on canvas, 140cm x 100cm, 2023

Figure 3: Yiadom-Boakye, L. (2013). *The Cream And The Taste*. [oil on canvas]. Available from: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/lynette-yiadom-boakye>. [Accessed 29 April 2023].

'*The Cream And The Taste*' by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, oil on canvas, 50cm x 45cm, 2013

Figure 4: Yiadom-Boakye, L. (2012). *Bracken Or Moss*. [oil on canvas]. Available from: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/look-here-and-bliss-out-on-10-hot-global-gallery-shows-174794>. [Accessed 29 April 2023].

'*Bracken Or Moss*' by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, oil on canvas, 142.6cm x 134cm, 2012

Figure 5: Saville, J. (2002-3). *Reverse*. [oil on canvas]. Available from: <https://www.timeout.com/london/art/five-things-to-know-about-all-too-human>. [Accessed 29 April 2023].

'*Reverse*' by Jenny Saville, oil on canvas, 213.4cm x 243.8cm, 2002-3

Figure 6: Saville, J. (2020). *Rupture*. [oil and acrylic on linen]. Available from: <https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/jenny-saville-at-gagosian/4832>. [Accessed 29 April 2023].

'*Rupture*' by Jenny Saville, oil and acrylic on linen, 200cm x 160cm x 3cm, 2020

Relationships between artworks and audiences have become a prominent discourse in contemporary art whilst the popularity of subjectivity has also increased over time. Portrait painting has moved beyond the objectivity of Renaissance artworks such as *'The Ambassadors'* or the *'Arnolfini Portrait'*, with many artists rejecting representation theories. The dichotomy to this historical denotive subject matter is the polysemic and equivocal character of works that have no stable meaning. Enigma is a device commonly utilised in fiction to keep the audience engaged with the book or film. The same effect can be achieved when explicit meaning is omitted from a painting. In this essay I will examine the ways in which enigmatic portraits are able to engage with their audience, specifically looking at the work of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Jenny Saville and my own practice.

It is the paradox of human nature to desire knowledge but also to conceal truth. "After being and appearance parted company and truth was no longer supposed to appear, to reveal and disclose itself to the mental eye of a beholder, there arose a veritable necessity to hunt for truth behind deceptive appearances." (Arendt, 2018, p.290). The artworks and artists included in this essay play on this idea of hunting for understanding and searching for narrative within portraits that suggest something deeper is occurring under the surface. Subjective art rejects the banking system of education coined by Paulo Freire, where in his book *'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'* he states, "The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable." (Freire, 2000, p.71) whereas the portraits I have included in this essay are alive in a way that prevents them from being defined by a singular or correct interpretation. Some may be frustrated by the absence of a clear narrative; others may find pleasure in the endless possibilities. "Emotion can make our experience of art harder, but it also makes that experience more interesting." (Doyle, 2013, p.4.)

With the vast expanse of art available to the public artists are required to make work that connects to the viewer and stimulates feeling for it to be memorable. This may be achieved through a universal theme, making the piece relatable, imbuing a strong sense of emotion, or removing indicators of narrative to the extent that the vastness of mystery excites or frustrates the viewer. Artworks without a clear reading can act as empty vessels for the audience to project their own experiences and emotions onto, in turn eliminating the sense of alienation that is common when looking at traditional portraiture. Many contemporary artists are seeking to "destroy the secure position of the spectator, to abolish the aesthetic distance – to put the spectator inside the artwork." (Groys, 2014, p.2), contributing to the growing critical discourse of audience relations. The success of artists including Yiadom-Boakye and Saville can be partially attributed to the bond their audiences form to their work, whether it be due to empathy, discomfort, intimacy or purely based on the fact that the open-endedness of the works fuels the mind.

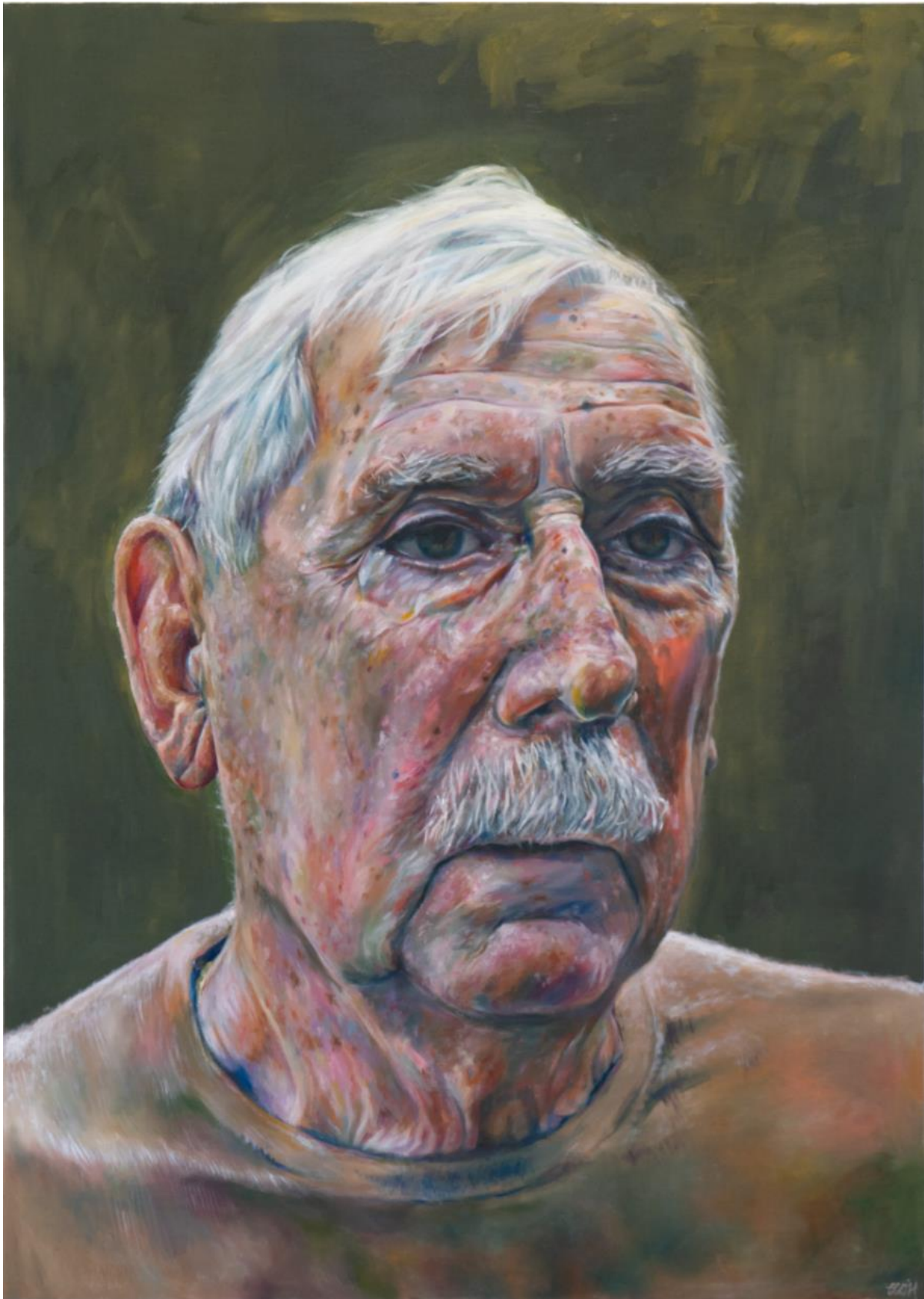


Figure 1: *'Field of Flowers'* by the author, oil on canvas, 140cm x 100cm, 2023

Firstly, I will dictate how enigma is a principal factor and theme in my portrait painting practice and how I encourage a response from the viewer. The predominant area of interest within my practice concerns capturing moments that hint at an internal monologue, moments of disassociation, or overwhelming emotion concealed behind a façade. The construct of our society has dictated what the acceptable manner to portray oneself in public is and what thoughts and feelings should not be disclosed, leaving many with an outer appearance whilst chaotic emotions are brimming silently, experiencing the “painful disappearance of true “being” behind its appearance”. (Canovan, 2018, p.x)

Colour is one way in which I am able to captivate and perplex audiences. In *'Field of Flowers'* the myriad of colours applied with small brush strokes, in order to capture the agedness of skin, encourages the viewer to encounter the work at a close range, establishing an intimacy between artwork and viewer. The palette I use is usually an exaggeration of tones I see in the figure's skin, however dependent upon the mood of the sitter they can adapt into colder or muted tones for example. Colour semiotics is a notable influence on my work as they enable the connotation of an atmosphere that can be universally understood. For example, the cold and bruised undertones in *'Cogs in Mist'* are suggestive of dejection and exhaustion. However, due to the multitude of colours used and the fact that they do not appear unnatural, these meanings become subtle. Contrasting visual language of cheerful colours against a forlorn expression as in the melancholy *'Field of Flowers'* can however prove confusing and further mystify the viewer. Art in many senses is a response to the world we find around us, which in contemporary society is multifaceted, overwhelming and contains a plethora of challenges. This complexity is mirrored by the innumerable colours in my portraits, as new shades are constantly mixed during the painting process, this array of tones corresponds with the infinite and overwhelming emotions we experience as humans. Subsequently, this makes a definitive emotion hard to classify in my work, leading to enigmas surrounding the narrative.

The figures in my portraits act as a microcosm for more widely experienced emotions allowing the viewer to understand the subject. Real people facing difficult times are used as models so that my practice captures an honest value of truthful emotion instead of a simulacrum. The narrative of these figures is alluded to in their titles, however, the paintings are open to interpretation as there are no specifics that lead to a singular meaning, therefore allowing the viewer to project their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences onto the figures. Dylan Evans writes in his book *'Emotion: a very short introduction'* that “many anthropologists now think that the differences between emotional experiences around the world are minor when compared with the similarities”. (Evans, 2003, p.xv) Through the enigma in the work and melancholy atmosphere, the viewer is positioned to feel compassion and pathos whilst attempting to better understand the subject. Tolstoy's Expression Theory of Art states that art is a means of communicating emotion and the understanding of it underpins the nature of art. He also declares that the success of an artwork depends on the extent to which the emotions encapsulated in the painting are transferred to the viewer. (Parkin, 1969) This theory is utopic in nature as it suggests a unity of

mankind through art. In relation to my work this is an idyllic reading, as the work explores hidden suffering thus if audiences are able to empathise and relate, then the work can be seen to contribute to the increasing dialogue surrounding mental health.



Figure 2: 'Cogs in Mist' by the author, oil on canvas, 140cm x 100cm, 2023

Pierre Bourdieu's philosophy takes an opposing stance to that of Tolstoy as he states that "the inexhaustibility of the 'message' means that the richness of 'reception' (measured, roughly, by its length) depends primarily on the competence of the 'receiver'" (Bourdieu, 1991, p.38). Bourdieu's bourgeoisie position on education and class implies that if the viewer cannot understand the message in the work of art, then they are simply not cultivated and are most likely from a lower socio-economic demographic. Whereas Tolstoy implies that it is the task of the artist to instil their message or emotion to such an extent that the audience can receive it without labour. However, in my practice the enigma is intended to be a freedom for the audience and the amount of time spent in contemplation is not a measure of intelligence but evidence of our human nature that wants to understand others.

I intentionally create a lack of a setting or one that has few distracting elements so that the focus is on the face of the subject. This exclusion of detail permits audiences to create hypothetical narratives. Each wrinkle, blemish or shift in tone is given time and attention, I rarely apply paint to the face in a rash manner, instead I paint with care as if I were trying to comfort them. This tender style of paint application positions the viewer to feel empathy for the subject, perhaps due to formal elements such as soft, glowing edges or the fact that from a distance, the dashes of paint weave together to form a realistic image. My work occupies a place between abstraction and realism as I utilise colour semiotics, the behaviour of paint and brushstrokes that can be considered expressionist, however I want the image to be identifiable as an individual that lives among us. The detail I give to features allows the audience to recognise the figure as a real person which again plays on our human nature as we feel for people but would not assign the same emotional response to a cartoon or robot. The scale of my work permits me to include this detail but also demands attention from the viewer, drawing them into an intimate space where the enigmas can be unravelled. These enigmas are deepened by the averted gaze like those in the two paintings above. Because they are withdrawn it makes it increasingly difficult to understand the narrative, therefore the viewer must gather analysis from different formal elements and draw on their own experiences to piece together a reading that may be entirely different to that of another viewer.

Enigma lies at the centre of work by British-Ghanaian artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (born 1977, London) as a consequence of how she constructs compositions and other formal considerations. The artist forms the subjects of her paintings in her imagination, inspired by a multitude of sources to create fictional figures that could be real individuals yet feel as though they are representative of wider society due to their ambiguity. The emptiness allows the work to “hint at more universal human experiences.” (Schlieker, 2020, p.9) Despite being painted without vast amounts of detail, these figures have anatomical accuracy, body language and distant gazes that viewers can identify with and therefore feel true to life. Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings hold “the pretence of three-dimensional human life on what was, in truth, an inert, two-dimensional surface.” (Smith, 2017). The atmosphere in these portraits such as *‘The Cream And The Taste’* (Figure 3) are heavy with a feeling that is commonly understood yet has no word. Yiadom-Boakye’s work can be analysed in relation to the critical theory of affect, as her paintings evoke atmospheres and sensations that cannot be explained or put into words, especially upon first encounter. The artist has frequently stated “I write about things I can’t paint and paint the things I can’t write about.” (Smith, 2017) These paintings may appear simple in their visual language but encapsulate something much deeper about humanity that cannot be described in a lexis. “Subtleties of human personality it might take thousands of words to establish are here articulated by way of a few confident brushstrokes.” (Ibid)

Similarly to my own paintings, it is perhaps the eerily absent gaze that is the most human characteristic. The bold white of the eyes in comparison to the other tones in Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings draws the viewer into the centre of the subject’s face, inciting an intimate connection between the audience and mysterious figure. *‘Bracken Or Moss’* is an excellent example of this as there is an extraordinary contrast between the overall darkness and the luminous white eyes. “In art history, the gaze has long been a subject of concern and analysis, from the idea of the eyes as the windows to the soul, to the direct gaze as a mirroring effect that includes the viewer in the framework of the painting” (Gad, 2015, p.25). The artist may have wanted to draw attention to these features since eyes are known for their inability to gatekeep truth, therefore leaving the viewer fixed on them, in an expedition to discover their concealed thoughts. As Hannah Arendt states in her book *‘The Human Condition’* we are predisposed to the desire to see past the façade of blank faces such as those painted by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. The enigmatic and bold gazes inform the viewer that the image is not to be taken at face-value, that instead there is an underlying narrative for them to uncover. This contemplation requires the viewer to look at the figure for a length of time, staring into the eyes, thus creating a relationship between them. As art critic, theorist and philosopher Boris Groys has deliberated, contemporary art is challenging the distance previously instated between an artwork and the viewer. (Groys, 2014) However, after much deliberation it is impossible for the narrative to be uncovered, “What seems straightforward or matter of fact becomes ever more complex and enigmatic.” (Schlieker, 2020, p.9), instead the images allow the audience to project their own experiences onto the artwork and create stories of their own.

The mystery in her paintings is heightened by the absence of scenery, objects, and simplicity of clothing, which restricts the viewer from identifying the subjects as existing in a particular time or place, thus making it difficult to define a particular narrative. "This uncertainty is important to the way Yiadom-Boakye works, and requires the viewer to use their curiosity, invention and imagination to interpret the artist's paintings." (Tate, 2023) For example, in *'The Cream And The Taste'* the compositional crop eliminates any suggestive surrounding and in *'Bracken Or Moss'* (Figure 4) the figure appears to exist in a dark realm that the audience cannot begin to decipher, intensifying the enigmatic visual language. Lack of detail means that Yiadom-Boakye's portraits can be representative of intersecting oppressions and a much vaster population as there are no signs of socio-economic demographic (unlike historical Western paintings), only race. This emptiness acts as a blank canvas to the viewer for them create their own narratives. Allusive titles with semantic fields that do not link to the imagery are further sources of confusion. Yiadom-Boakye is also a writer of poetry and short stories, which correlates with her ability to create fictional images and titles.

The homogeneousness of portrait painting throughout history could be said to have alienated audiences from thinking in depth and identifying with the subjects of portraits. In the past, portraits contained elaborate scenery, objects, and clothing in order to connote social status and wealth, without the need to read further into the narrative. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye references traditional stylistic elements of historical Western portraiture which highlights the exclusion of black figures from the canon of art history. By eliminating the majority of mise-en-scene Yiadom-Boakye is "divesting her subjects of some of the weight of Western figurative painting, with its reliance on context" (Als, 2015, p.101). Her paintings are not iconoclastic in nature, instead utilises the historical context and formal considerations of western portrait painting to reform what demographics are usually represented in portraiture. Yiadom-Boakye's most significant influences include Degas, Manet and Walter Sickert, all of whom being white Western males, so we can see how she has taken their traditional visual language and used it as a basis for her own work, whereby changing the race of figures creates an entirely new stance and reading. "The power of a painting may reside in the way in which it configures a new relation to the viewer and, thereby, transforms the viewer's relation to other images. The powerful painting may work, to quote Yuri Tynyanov, 'as a semantic demolition', which transforms the viewer's perception, not just of other images, but an entire system of meaning." (Reade, 2012) It is plausible that the repetition of imagery in the endless number of traditional portrait paintings in spaces such as The National Gallery has created the predisposition for audiences to disregard these works as their indifference is no longer interesting. The reformed yet still traditional portraits of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye offer an alternative image that is new and exciting, hence providing new material that is more stimulating for audiences.

Jenny Saville (born 1970, Cambridge) is an artist known for her paintings that capture the attention of viewers through their shocking and disturbing imagery and explore the aesthetic potential of the body. The artist's close-up portraits are her most enigmatic works, often with a lack of scenery, clothing, or objects, with gazes comparable to the aforesaid artworks. The figures in these works are charged with mystery, we do not know where these figures are situated, who they are nor what their story is.

The artist's subject matter is an unsettling yet tender rendering of the acceptance of suffering. "Saville celebrates life beyond suffering, and nihilism, life in the knowledge of death, that inevitable destiny that makes us human, anguished, heroic in despair and generous in compassion." (Risaliti, 2021) Catharsis is therefore a theme that could be assigned to her work. Although there is no way that we can be certain of what has caused this despair, it does not prevent us from wanting to understand, or at least feel for them due to the gracefulness of composition. The harshly applied red tones in *'Reverse'* (Figure 5) for example give the impression of pain, however the woman is not shown to be in agony or asking for sympathy. Instead, the work plays the role of a catalyst for a more thought-provoking reading. Saville's portraits have been described as "tragic at heart but overflowing with grace and tenderness." (Ibid) The realistic rendering of features allows the audience to identify with the figures, we can recognise a sense of subtle defeat and fragility that makes us human. The universality of this subtle emotion in these anonymous figures imbues that they are a representation of mankind not individuals.

Completed on a large scale, these portraits are hard to ignore, aided by their direct gaze as demonstrated in *'Rupture'* (Figure 6) and *'Reverse'* demanding attention and locking eye contact with the viewer. As with my own work and that of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye it is the eyes that we are drawn to, perhaps because they are one of the more detailed elements of the paintings, especially in *'Rupture'*, or because of their association with the soul. Saville's characters stare at us as if they are trying to communicate with us, they have a strange confidence that almost forces the viewer to stare back and unravel their mysteries. "The seeing eyes of those who would encompass all reality with their last look. Eyes that look at you from the canvas, that capture you and drag you into the vortex of a tale in which there is no longer any intimacy or bashfulness." (Escher, 2005, p.35). However, this confidence does not prevent feelings of empathy from arising as a result of the intimacy and their quietness does not stop us from knowing there is an ulterior narrative. Saville "used paint to re-create the place where, for Emmanuel Levinas, ethics begin: 'The face', he wrote in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), 'is a living presence [...] The Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me.' *Rupture* makes a woman's face strange; reading it becomes a demand." (Revely-Calder, 2021) They connect to us through the shared gaze that occurs when a viewer is stood directly in front of them, they ask us to look at them but at the same time the figures stare back at us as though they can see into our souls. This position provokes a mutual understanding and therefore it could be argued that from another position, where the eyes are averted, the enigma is much more powerful.

Analysing the artists more recent paintings can be likened the endeavour towards understanding a work of abstract expressionism, attempting to assign meaning to particular colours and marks to piece together a narrative. Her recent artworks were made as a reaction to the pandemic, where the artist, just as the rest of the world, was denied access to the faces of others. This lack of interaction provides evidence as to why the features in '*Rupture*' for example appear disjointed as though Saville is attempting to remember a face through painting. The face is disrupted by abstract shapes and lines that make it difficult to distinguish the face from the background and prevent the viewer from wholly understanding the figure. Picasso is a notable influence on Saville's practice alongside Lucian Freud who both abstracted the human figure to different extents. Therefore, the application of the medium is equally as responsible as the composition in depicting the atmosphere. "Rupture is about recognition, which in paint is faith: the belief we have, and need to hold, in the medium's capacity to show emotional states." (Revely-Calder, 2021) In her earlier and most well-known works Saville applied paint heavily, embracing the medium's qualities, and used red undertones to give the impression of blemished and mutilated tactile flesh. Saville herself stated in an interview "Art reflects life, and our lives are full of algorithms, so a lot of people are going to want to make art that's like an algorithm. But my language is painting, and painting is the opposite of that. There's something primal about it. It's innate, the need to make marks. That's why, when you're a child, you scribble." (Cooke, 2012) Whilst allowing the artist a certain freedom, and having the ability to embody feeling, abstraction can be a fundamental method of withholding information thus opening the door to more personal interpretations. An evolution of stylistic considerations has occurred in newer pieces by Saville, such as a focus on mark making and colour that is completely abstract, still the constant remains the cryptic and melancholy expressions that are disturbing yet evoke compassion.

In conclusion, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Jenny Saville and myself play on human instinct to ask questions when presented with enigmas and connect to others. With discourse surrounding mental health more widespread than ever before, we recognise that appearances can be deceiving, thus the blank pensiveness of expression that relates these artworks provoke us to deeper analyse the image. We recognise ourselves within the paintings as they resonate with our experiences, embodying key characteristics of human nature. These works may be portraits of individuals but feel to be representative of society.

Zadie Smith argues that the most successful paintings are those that focus on "the essential living communication between artwork and viewer, a relationship that Yiadom-Boakye reminds us is indeed vicarious, voyeuristic, ambivalent, and fundamentally uncontrollable." (Smith, 2017) Although she uses Yiadom-Boakye as her example, Smith's claim can be more widely applied as without captions or exhibition texts the meanings derived from contemporary paintings can be endless. Subjectivity can prove confusing or frustrating, however as these artworks depict figures the subject matter is not inconceivable which assists in making sure audiences are not overwhelmed or alienated. This links to critical discourses on the approachability of the art world to the public, regardless of art education. There is no

way in which the artist can control how their work is perceived, or the conclusion, if any, that the viewer arrives at due to these infinite and inherently idiosyncratic. The viewer's relationship to the artwork can therefore only be defined by the viewer themselves however aided by the artists tactics. As a consequence of this relationship, it can be said that the works can be appreciated on a greater scale, contributing to the success of artists such as Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Jenny Saville.

The artists in this essay encourage a relationship between their artworks and viewers, primarily by way of intimacy, incited by scale and gaze, then continue to capture the mind through enigma created by absence of mise-en-scene. Subjectivity in portrait paintings allows for in depth contemplation and open interpretation, causing viewers to spend more time with the piece thus forming a connection to the artwork as Boris Groys theorised. Art galleries today are transcending the boundaries between spectator and spectacle as increasing numbers of artworks similar to Saville's and Yiadom-Boakye's are filling the spaces. "Thus, the contemporary museum realizes the modernist dream of a theatre in which there is no clear boundary between the stage and the space for the audience". (Groys, 2014, p.10) This could evidence the fact that a shift is occurring in the role and reception of art in society, as the way in which audiences interact with the piece becomes integral to the artist's practice. Therefore, the viewer is becoming more involved in the art world than ever before, at the same time as it is becoming rarer to find new artworks that are purely objective. The correlation between these two phenomena is contributing to the definition of the contemporary art world.

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