ine Koh, *Self-portrait*, ongoing since / en cours depuis 1994 (cat. 119)

The Bigger Picture: Portraits from Ottawa
(Ottawa: Ottawa Art Gallery, 2004)

THE BIGGER PICTURE
PORTAITS FROM OTTAWA

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Artists have portrayed themselves and their fellows since the beginnings of human representation. The advent of the camera in the 19th century augmented portraiture's accessibility with enormous rapidity and variation, both for those who wished to be portrayed and those who were impelled to depict. Twentieth century life — in particular the latter fifty-year period, with its dramatic high-tech transformations and post-modern attitudes toward how we understand the world — has drastically changed the ways in which we make and interpret a portrait.

The representation of a human being is complex, both for the artist and for the receiver of the artist's work. The image-maker may intend an accurate depiction of physical characteristics, or seek the innermost personality of the sitter. Since the 17th century, we have taken as commonplace the notion that a portrait can have a 'speaking likeness' — the illusion of a breathing presence so strong the subject is on the verge of conversing with the viewer. We also know that artists have used the opposite strategy: the subject's gaze can be turned away from the viewer to emphasize an absence of communication, a lack of power, or the depths of private thought. Additionally, artists may utilize the portrait genre to say something about the individual's relationship to his or her social or political environment; to study the boundaries between the specific and the archetypal (for instance as an exploration of human emotion); or to determine the delicate balance between theatricality and intimacy. Some work questions the ability of a portrait to uncover anything at all

which is relevant or "real" about the evolving and pliable nature of identity.

The Bigger Picture: Portraits from Ottawa is intended to present and address many of these considerations. Not a formal history of portraiture or a history of Ottawa, the material in the exhibition is organized thematically rather than chronologically in order to juxtapose and offer comparisons between works from different decades and to present a wide range of questions about how we understand the idea of a portrait. Illuminating the local as well as the national identities of Ottawa, the artworks were organized into five broadly conceived thematic sections: *Family, Youth and Community*, an area which includes a reference to the nature/culture debate and the shaping of identity; *Art and Life*, and the intersection between the two; *The Street and Public Life*, which includes representations of the development of political consciousness and an area on activism; *Work and Play*, and how they can be intertwined or even reversed; and finally, an area on *The Self*. Inevitably, many works reach across these broad categories, relating in multifaceted ways to a range of themes.

Ultimately, this is an exhibition about some of the ways in which the genre of portraiture has been manifest in Ottawa over the past fifty years and therefore is also about the resident and transient population of this city. It addresses the idea of the individual — *the unprecedented self* — as well as the histories and relationships between individuals, and the communities they comprise. The fifty-year period selected as a chronological base for the show is approximate and intentionally provides a sizeable historical context and resource to draw upon. The contemporary artists featured within it include those who previously or now live in Ottawa, as well as some 'from away' who have undertaken projects about Ottawa people.

In *Family, Youth and Community*, Jennifer Dickson's 1950s self-portrait line drawing, made when she was 14 years old, is hung adjacent to several works, including a painting of a teenage girl from the late 1940s by Alma Duncan, a very recent painting representing a young woman by Eliza Griffiths, and a black and white photograph by David Barbour of a teenager displaying a gregarious 'punk rock' fashion sense (p. 20). Displayed in close proximity, these works prompt thoughts about the hazardous and delicate condition of adolescence and seem to be absolutely about the painful business of 'becoming':

Donigan Cumming, *Nettie and Albert on Site/ Nettie et Al*
sur le site futur du MCPC, February 4 février, 1989 (cat. 4

the sorting out of self awareness and one's place in the social fabric of the day. Although intended to represent generally the condition of hormonally charged youthfulness, Eliza Griffith's subjects do occasionally take on her own visage. About this Griffith's has said, "When I am painting the characters I pivot back and forth between inhabiting them, male and female — and desiring them, debating with them, activating them. I don't presume a male or female, gay or straight viewer, but all of the above at once. My gaze is an attempt to destabilize a passive viewing experience." Indeed, destabilizing our expectations is a common intention of contemporary art, one not always apparent in portraits from, for instance, the Fifties. Evergon's *The Artist and His Mother* (p. 2), is a mother/son portrait that continues this destabilization, relating to the project's other representations of the family and familial relations. This photographic work is also a re-enactment of a Flemish painting and is typical of Evergon's interest in the practice and history of fine art portraiture (in this case of a particular sub-genre) and the interplay between painting and photography.

Larissa Fassler and Barbara Prokop's colour photography series, *A Dinner Party for Sarah Smith*, presents bold, frontal, colour portraits (p. 11). All eight individuals, each of whom answer to the name of Sarah Smith and who range in age from a few months to perhaps thirty-five, responded to the artists' request to attend a dinner in their honour. The invitation was extended to all those living in Ottawa with the name of 'Sarah Smith' which, it turns out, is the most commonly used female name in the city. With the use of performance and public action the artists offer the experience of art to members of the 'unconverted' public, "giving the viewer intimate access and transforming him/her from mere spectator into participant" (the artists). In an innovative and (quite literally) entertaining manner, Fassler and Prokop create a dialogue about identity and community and conceptualize the notion of an unconventional and temporal 'family'.

One of many intentions in *The Bigger Picture* project was a desire to highlight the wealth of image resources present in Ottawa — the numerous municipal and national institutions that collect art, and also those local image banks most communities have, but which are often essentially unknown to much of

the population, such as the City of Ottawa Archives housed in the former City Hall building on Sussex Drive. The show assembles dozens of photographs that originated from commercial studios, Ottawa news media, anc national image banks — many of which are now housed in national and munic-ipal archives. Among other resources at the National Gallery of Canada, fo instance, every card catalogue for its art photography collection and hundred of photo print files held in its Library and Archives (a resource that contain staff photos and event documentation) were reviewed.

These photo print files include the distinctive images of Duncan Cameron who was a member and then the President of Capital Press in Ottawa fron 1956 to 1976, and during much of that period was also a contract photogra pher with *Time Life*. From 1976 to 1985 he was the Photo Custodian of th National Photography Collection at the Public Archives of Canada. In addi tion to the photographs of National Gallery events (p. 31), which include th opening of the Gallery in the Lorne building by Prime Minister Diefenbake in 1960, the exhibition also includes Cameron's photos of important politica personalities and events, such as the arrival at Ottawa Airport of Presiden Sukarno of Indonesia, greeted by the Governor General Vincent Massey; th beautific portraits of Pierre Trudeau's key advisors, Keith Davey (who late became a Senator) and Jim Coutts; and the refreshingly direct, casual portrai of Pierre Trudeau holding one of Cameron's cameras (p. 44).

What can these portraits tell us? Can an image reveal something about a pe son's emotional realities, and the connections or disconnections in their da to-day lives? What can we learn of the image-maker's imaginary life or the relationship to the sitter? Perhaps some of these portraits are astonishin fictions while others are illustrations of the notion that 'truth is stranger tha fiction'. Can a gathering of 222 Ottawa portraits by 78 image-makers promo a respect for and accommodation of difference and a heightened curiosi about the human condition? At the very least it might accentuate our conne tions to the not-too-distant past: to those, among the many persons depict here, who strove for an active family life or a dry place to sleep; who too pride in their work at the café, the laundromat or the embassy; who master

a new bicycle or a destructive fire; or who aspired to a world without war, acid rain or cultural discrimination.

Jeff Thomas' photographic portraits explore the role of Aboriginal peoples in North American historical narratives. His attention has focused in part on the presence of 'Indian' stereotypes in monuments and, in particular, at the Samuel de Champlain monument on Ottawa's Nepean Point. Until recently an almost-naked, full-sized stone carving of an Indian Scout was positioned below Champlain's grand statue. Protests by the Assembly of First Nations resulted in the removal of this figure in 1999 to Major's Hill Park, where it sits alone and without any contextual explanation, leaving behind the now-empty platform at its former locale. It is to this latter place, where the Scout once kneeled and the history of those decisions resides, that Thomas invites colleagues and family members to pose for his camera. Cynthia Hammond wrote of the experience: "I thought about the stain on the stone platform, and how this stain 'speaks' of what was once there. The colour and marks on the surface can be read as the trace of racist practices in Canada, and of the decision to ignore and thus silence that history. Jeff's project demonstrates how we can ask monuments, and public history as a whole, to speak about the past in conclusive and critical ways, even after whitewashing has taken place. I thought . . . that what a monument says about history all depends on how one listens to it. So I listened. I held the sun-warmed stone in my hands, and I listen. . . ." (cover)

Presenting the question of whether press photos and commercial photos of events can be considered portraits, *The Bigger Picture* also includes photojournalism images of people in the midst of what they do for their work or entertainment, to support their belief systems, for solitary contemplation, and much more: teenagers demonstrating about the problem of acid rain on Parliament Hill in 1981 (Chris Mikula, front cover flap); Michel Aube, a 22-year old Ottawa University political science student who was the first area resident to be arrested under the War Measures Act during the October Crisis in 1970, outside the Hull Jail; three elderly women performing in a musical band in 1975 (Andrew Clark, back cover flap); and Mayor Charlotte Whitton attending a fire which gutted the Dominion Chalmers United Church

in 1961. Such images can imply quite a lot about the individuals they depict, sometimes considerably more than what a formal portrait might offer. Attempting an interpretation of the image, we read the signs and imagine the protagonist's most passionate concerns. One must be wary of assumption, however, and understand that the viewer's projection—of their own bias, desires and knowledge—can lead to mis-readings.

Many of the older images in *The Bigger Picture* come from photographic archives. These repositories generally hold an astonishingly large number of historic images—prints and negatives from private homes, commercial studios and now-deceased newspapers or other organizations. A particularly broad-reaching, informative source is the Andrews-Newton Collection of negatives at the City of Ottawa Archives, an assemblage of some 200,000 images taken in Ottawa from the 1940s to the 1990s. The Andrews Newton photo studio went through many permutations over the decades, changing the scale of operations, the partners and the company name. The principles were photographers Andy Andrews and Bill Newton who explored, mostly by commission, seemingly every nook and cranny of the city's public and semi-public life.

Among the Andrews/Newton images are portraits of the young boy, Robert Hudon, foregrounded on his new bicycle before a drop-dead gorgeous, wispy summer sky; a series of family portrait sittings at a Coca-Cola Christmas Party (p. 10); Mrs. Armstrong, the President of the Charlotte Whitton Committee, with her fabric patterns moving in contrary directions (p. 50); Mrs. Baig, wife of the Pakistani ambassador (p. 50); the internationally famous clothing retailer Joe Feller gazing at the sky; and three suit-clad gentleman standing next to a large bush at a St. Jean Baptiste Day celebration in Cartier Park, each wielding a lengthy fire torch.

Why are the Andrews/Newton photographs of strangers from former decades so compelling? Many seem profoundly *contemporary* in æsthetic, so present and relevant in their style and candor. Perhaps it is because they are portrayals of our fellow human beings "with all their needs hanging out,"[1] like our own, and because the photographers (like other artists in the show), through a persistent, years-long endeavour, have achieved a facility and understanding that exposes human grace, *fully*, in all its mundane, earnest and absurd detail.

The images also provide miniature social contexts, hints about the environment in which the subjects reside, their preoccupations and desires. Details become isolated, strange and wondrous through the heightened drama of the photographic moment. Yet they also resonate with the particulars of our own lives.

Donigan Cumming's *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*, a three-part series of photographs made in 1986, was a remarkably provocative trigger in the debate about 'truth' in the documentary image. Working with a small cast of characters who were seemingly from society's disenfranchised corners, Cumming created acutely disturbing and puzzling, usually-domestic narratives. They were hard to look at. Nettie and Albert, who appear in the portrait situated (anomalously) in the Ottawa construction site of the then-forthcoming Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, had been the artist's star performers (p. 9). With his other regular subjects, they "play at being terribly true to character and, whilst being distanced actors of their own lives, their voices, their faces . . . are exposed to the extreme."[2] Endlessly curious in the detail of its scenario and 'attributes', striking in its compositional choices, this initially gloomy portrait by Cumming achieves an acknowledgement and celebration of human resourcefulness and dignity and, perhaps surprisingly, a sense of great beauty.

Recent art practice in Ottawa and in Canada reveals an abundance of self portraiture. Germaine Koh, who worked at the National Gallery of Canada for many years, is an artist of unique conceptual innovation. Her *Self Portrait* project, an ongoing oil on panel, is periodically altered by the artist with the application of an updated image quite directly onto the existing canvas. It is presented with an adjacent 'flip book' accumulation of photographs of previous states recording Koh's self-representations over a period of (so far) ten years. The painting itself contains the past, quite literally. Koh questions the validity and usefulness of the static portrait and speculates on the malleability and allusiveness of identity (p. 6).

A portrait can be understood as an evolving accumulation of performative acts, a notion possibly most effectively conveyed by the media (or 'moving') arts. *X (trace), studies for a self-portrait* is described by artist Phil Rose as a "motion painting" (p. 61). Inspired by British painter Francis Bacon and his famously

Mark Marsters, *Rucksack of My Redemption*, early 1990s/début des années 1990 (cat.

expressive self portraits, Rose experiments with the filmic distortions and transformations possible in hand processing. The title which we read as "times trace" combines with the images to suggest "a multiplication of small instances, an accumulation of traces of the subject, resulting in . . . an evolving and fluid subject" (the artist). The physical facts of Rose's face elude us; instead we begin to perceive a complex amalgam of psychic states.

The Bigger Picture: Portraits from Ottawa is only one of many possible investigations into the "face", its capacity for meaning, and whether or not the body's representation can stand for cultural identity. Hopefully it will emphatically support the idea of the unprecedented self.

Max Dean's electronic work, *So, this is it*, offers the perfect metaphor for the transitory nature of the human condition (p. 58). It is about the viewer, the *individual viewer*, very directly, and about the community in which it is presented no matter where the exhibition happens to take place. As you walk up to the wall-mounted piece, which functions continuously as a clock, the sound and movement sensors pick up your presence and instruct the camera to take a black and white video grab of your face—suddenly you see yourself on the screen. But the hands of the clock are still working and the second hand begins to drag a white space as it moves forward. *In sixty seconds you are gone.*

[1] Max Kozloff, *Social Graces: Photographs by Larry Fink* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2001)

[2] *Visions du Réel : Festival international de cinéma à Nyons* (Nyons, France: 2002)