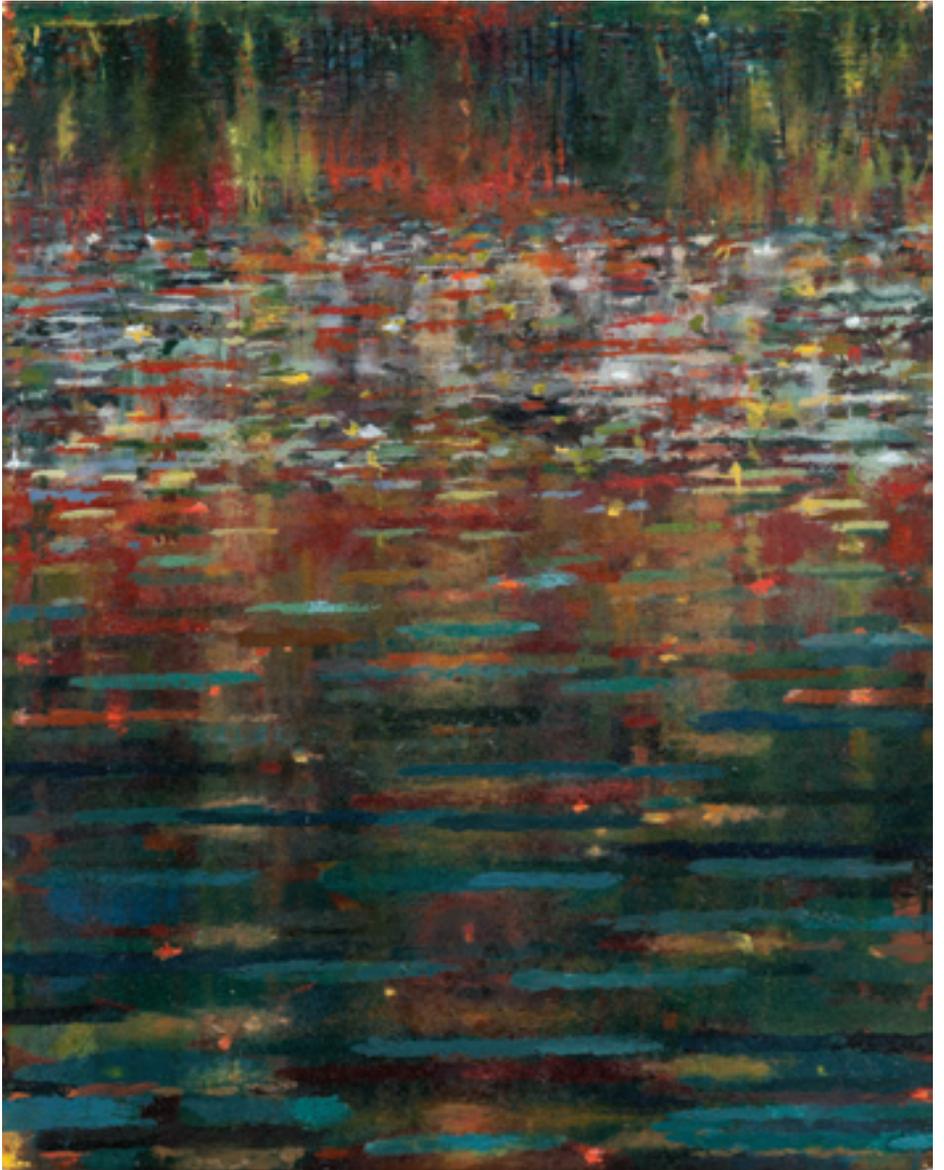


Susanna Coffey



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Susanna Coffey

Elemental

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In Susanna Coffey's new paintings, heads emerge, are found, and fade from perception. Her portraits have always engaged the issue of mortality. The recent paintings, because they shift between being and non-being, address death even more directly. The portraits are not purely beautiful, but neither are they grotesque. They are about negotiating between the two.

In her recent body of work, Coffey used two media: spray painting with stencils, and slower-paced oil paintings. In the spray paintings especially, the heads are just barely visible. Lester Johnson was an influential teacher of Coffey's at Yale, and we recently spent time looking at one of his paintings, a black head carved into troweled-on paint. The shape of the head was more visible from a distance and disappeared into surface texture as one approached it. In Johnson's work, and others of his generation, these shifts and passages signify an investigation of the human condition through the finding of form in a void.

Coffey's work also invokes the problematics of this construct. She titled a recent piece *Apophenia*, which refers to the tendency to perceive patterns in random data, or see faces in inanimate objects. The play between human form emerging and disappearing into abstract space can be a projection, a hallucination.

Coffey recognizes that portraiture is a way to immortalize. She said:

When you really know that death is irrevocable, people become very fascinating, and very beautiful, because their life-ness is in this—like a flower, this moment—and you'll never have that again. It is about engagement. The paintings are watching life, and in some way, prolonging it, holding onto it, transforming it so it stays a little longer.

Fayum paintings have interested Coffey since the 1970s. Kept in the home or a public space, they were explicitly a way to remember and hold on to the deceased. We read Fayum portraits as highly individualized, but they also feel like someone we might pass on the street today. They are frontal and symmetrical, each feature specific, but also designed and patterned.

Markers of our common genetic makeup run through Coffey's work. Her portraits always have a center, vertical line and core symmetry. In *Headstand* and *B.B.'s Wamp*, this line is made explicit. The painting *New Friends with Old* suggests an X-ray image of a spine and vertebrae. *Streamer* and *Sharon's Potion's Breath*, with their interlocking spirals, are like replicating strands of DNA. In *Green*, the ferns and leaves of the ground are the spinal-forms. This patterned shape reflects all across the face, and is echoed in the eyelashes, gilded wisps of light.

In her spray-painting portraits, the same stencil patterns that are used to form outlines of the heads and faces also become components of the abstract grounds they dissolve into. Coffey uses this kind of repetition on a formal level to suggest the issue on a societal



Oh Day, Verge and Bow

2013
acrylic on panel, 13 x 12 in.



level. The replicating spirals and mirrored patterns signify tacit agreements to mimic, mask, and disappear.

However, these forms might also be residues we conjure. How is seeing a face in the clouds different from Pliny's account of the first portrait: a woman tracing the silhouette of her lover's shadow on the wall before he departed for war? How is the horror-romance of *Frankenstein*—where dead tissue becomes a living, monstrous form—different from the myth of Pygmalion?

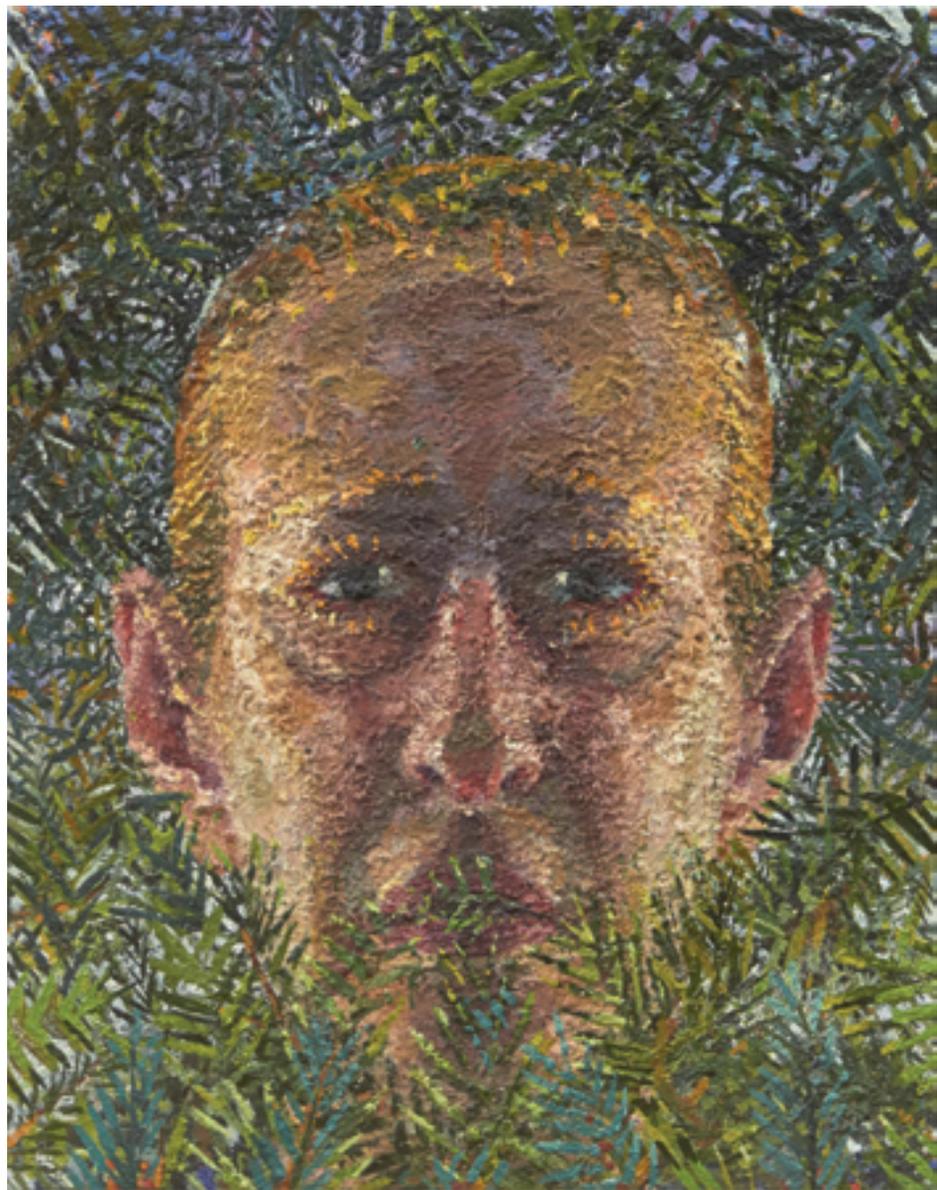
Her work engages a deliberate confusion of what is on the surface, what resides beneath, and what can be unearthed. In this sense it is a contemporary response to Monet's *Waterlilies*, where reflections, water, and flowers merge spatially. (Her painting *Takenaga's Division* is directly related to Monet's *Bridge over Waterlily Pond*.) With her spray painting, Coffey can stamp the heads with abstract forms, which, like masks or make-up, never puncture or penetrate the surface. *Rest Stop*, a blue-black oil painted portrait, is just flecked with light: pink marks on the forehead, blue on the lips, red on the tip of the nose. It feels like a painterly response to her earlier piece, *James's Woman's Skull*. Where the skull painting is palpable, round, and pale, the head in *Rest Stop* deals with darkness and hollows. Yet, with time, our own eyes adjust; where we first saw voids in the sockets of the eyes, we are left with a penetrating gaze.

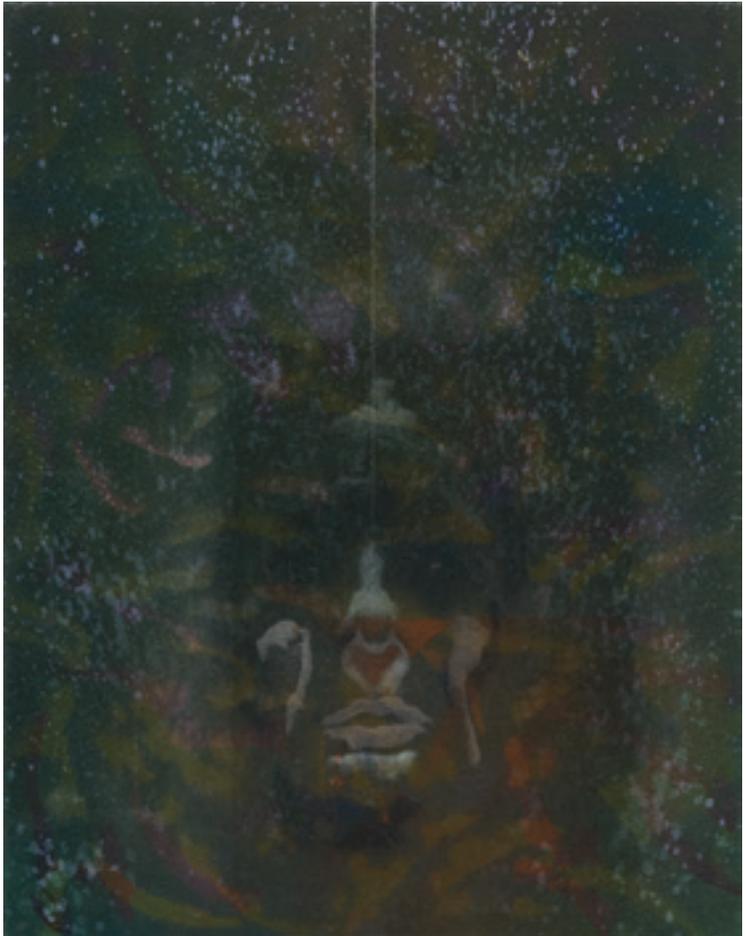
—Jennifer Samet

New Friends with Old

2013

acrylic on panel, 36 x 29 in.





B.B.s Wamp

2012
acrylic on panel, 15 x 12 in.

LEFT:
LEFT:

Green

2013
oil on panel, 15 x 12 in.



Merciful he/she

2013

acrylic on paper, 13 x 12 in.

Headstand

2011

oil on panel, 15 x 12 in.





Look Out

2013

acrylic on panel, 13 x 12 in.



James's Woman's Skull

2011

oil on panel, 13 x 12 in.

Sharon's Potion's Breath

2011

oil on panel, 15 x 12 in.

FRONT COVER:

Streamer (detail)

2012

gouache on paper, 14 x 12 in.

INSIDE FRONT COVER:

Takenaga's Division

2011

oil on panel, 15 x 12 in.

BACK COVER:

Rest Stop

2013

oil on canvas, 14 x 12 in.



