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Search

To search, type and hit ↵

- [Home](#)
- [Interviews](#)
- [Artist Proof](#)
- [Galleries](#)
 - [Alameda](#)
 - [Berkeley](#)
 - [Downtown](#)
 - [East Lake](#)
 - [Fruitvale](#)
 - [Jack London Square](#)
 - [Lake Merritt](#)
 - [North Oakland](#)
 - [Old Oakland](#)
 - [Piedmont](#)
 - [Richmond](#)
 - [Rockridge](#)
 - [Temescal](#)
 - [Uptown](#)
 - [Walnut Creek](#)
 - [West Oakland](#)
- [info for artists](#)
- [Art Murmur](#)
- [Photos](#)
- [Art Events](#)
- [Museums](#)
 - [Berkeley Art Museum](#)
 - [Mills College Art Museum](#)
 - [Oakland Museum of California](#)
- [Calendar](#)

‘Portraits’ at Vessel Gallery

by admin on July 14, 2011

Two eyes, a nose and a mouth: at first glance, an ensemble of somewhat banal elements that together make up what we deem the seat of our unique identity: the face. Yet, exhibits like “Portraits” at Vessel Gallery, featuring art by [Tino Rodriguez](#), [Virgo Paraiso](#), [Sanjay Vora](#) and Walter James Mansfield, sculpture by [Cyrus Tilton](#), and video installation by [Sohyung Choi](#) further engages viewers in the ongoing artistic dialogue of the relationships between visual characteristics, and the ‘persona’ or ‘identity.’

Artist Sohyung Choi’s “Notes on a Self-Portrait” is an overwhelming set of multi-layered portraits in a grid-like pattern. By Choi’s careful arrangement, the artwork achieves in overpowering the initial intention of the portrait pose. Akin to photo ID cards with the face taking over the entire picture plane, the photos aim to bring to the fore the sitter’s identity, but the arrangement of the photos, creating multiple layers, and the vibrant light flashes from behind blur the identity of the sitter into a conglomeration of the others as they morph to the other from left to right. The face’s individuality is brought into question when Choi arranges all the sitter’s “unique” aspects together; they begin to look uncannily similar.

Upstairs in the gallery’s beautiful open-air loft space, Cyrus Tilton’s humorous face artwork/game of turning noses, eyes, and grimacing open and closed mouths, “Mixed Emotions” playfully invites the viewer to make connections with the game’s finite variations of facial characteristics and its assemblage in multiple ways to create copious identities with our own. Throughout this fun exercise, viewers may be asked to think of relationships between physical characteristics and their roles in illustrating personas and identities.

Exploring pertinent, but disparate issues of the genre, artist Walter James Mansfield’s paintings simply entitled “Heads” are a highlight of the group exhibit because the subject matter engages so dynamically into the conversation by stripping portraiture bare. The paintings, especially in their fractured and abstracted state, seize that vital and truly contemporary task in investigating the head image’s place in these conversations about identity and the physical characteristics of the face in the genre of Portraiture.

The pioneering gallery on 25th St. which is now a firmly established place for fine arts in Oakland, Vessel Gallery is located in a beautiful two-story reclaimed renovated loft style space, staying true to its past with accents of its former use (see photos!). I only hope this review is not too late for those of you who haven't seen it yet to have a chance!

Portraits runs through July 23 Vessel-Gallery.com

