

Why My Figures Lost Their Features

Posted on 02/11/2015 by Gideon Rubin in Art, Essays, Featured



I was visiting New York when the 9/11 atrocities happened in 2001. I was on 8th Street, and I witnessed the destruction first hand—it was the most surreal day ever. By the time I went back to Europe I couldn't paint like I had done before any more, and so I started painting old toys, where one would have a missing leg and another a missing eye. I've always been interested in memory and history, but soon enough I was back to painting portraits. But this time instead of an eye there was only a shadow of an eye or a hint of the nose—and yet everyone could still recognize who they were. I was drawn to the idea that we are defined by our mannerisms, the way we walk, the tilt of the head, as much as by our facial features. There's an entire "lost generation" in my family, so perhaps collecting and painting old photographs is my attempt at reclaiming that part of history.

I was raised freely, which gave me a lot of independence to think for myself, and to develop a great appreciation for art. My grandfather's art was a big influence in my life. He was born in Romania and had twelve siblings, but only three survived the Holocaust by escaping to Israel. This history is in our psyche, it flows in our blood.

I paint from anonymous images, old yearbooks, found photographs, imagery from the internet; black-and-white images of strangers from the mid-twentieth century. I translate these onto canvas and embed the content within the materiality of paint. Recently I have been placing the characters within increasingly abstract, empty and ambiguous landscapes. I try to make the process appear effortless. I want each character to draw the attention of the viewer's eye as well as their imagination.

My works are minimal; often there's not much there. I want the viewer to look at them and focus on the process of painting and the medium itself, as well as on certain details that I provide, such as the posture of a figure, a piece of furniture in the painting's background or a detail like a single flower. It's a more abstract way of looking at a scene.

I started painting after military service, when I was travelling with a friend in South America at the age of twenty-two. Until then, I hadn't found anything I wanted to do or that I was particularly good at, so when I discovered painting, I remember thinking, "I'm not letting this go." It took some years before I could call myself an artist though.