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Are Instagram stars the new holy figures? Female fans worship influencers like Kylie Jenner as though they were goddesses. At the same time, male artists are confronted with self-portraiture in the digital age – often attracting the wrath of those women for whom a mirror selfie is much more than a gesture of vanity. Between the fronts: Hamburg's Chris Drange.

Artworks: Courtesy of CHRIS DRANGE Text: ANIKA MEIER

“We Kinda Look Alike”

444–453



Kylie with Beating Heart, 2019
130×130cm
Oil on canvas

RICHARD PRINCE upset countless women when he took their pictures from Instagram and printed them on canvases. Of course, he didn't ask for their consent or what they thought of the slimy comments that he put underneath the images to give the work character. The women only found out that their images were hanging in a museum or gallery when they were mentioned on Instagram by third parties. Some took legal action against him.

Most recently, Prince's **New Portraits** were on view at Gagosian in Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. The works have been sold for up to \$100,000.

VIRAL PARTICIPATION

Images are presumed free in the digital age, they are copied and distributed, they circulate on the internet and in social networks, they are retweeted, reblogged, and regrammed. There are memes and mash-ups, pictures keep reappearing in new contexts, in the best-case scenarios, they go viral. The digital age is about participation. And this is where the buzz surrounding Richard Prince arises – a buzz that keeps his work relevant. Like many others, he uses images that have been shared on Instagram, only he sells them for vast sums under his name as art that has been created with minimal effort. **New Portraits** were shown for the first time in 2014. At that time, there were sweeping discussions as to whether this is art today and if that was a good or bad thing. Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic JERRY SALTZ called Prince's approach "genius trolling." A troll provokes. A troll disrupts. A troll infuriates. That's what Prince does. He, the old white man, uses pictures of young women and writes lewd old man jokes underneath. There is nothing subtle, innovative, or clever about it. He wants to provoke reactions, which works exceptionally well after #metoo.

When ZOË LIGON, the owner of a sex toy shop, found out via Instagram that one of her photos was being shown at the exhibition in Detroit, she responded, "This isn't progressive, this isn't even subversive." She further explained in a statement on Instagram: "I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Part of the reason I take 'sexy selfies' is because I am reclaiming my own sexualized image. To see my image on the walls of MOCAD feels as though a picture I've taken of myself to reclaim my sexual body is being used to violate me all over again. Given that millions of people are sexually assaulted each year, I imagine I'm not the only one who feels this work is a violation of boundaries on a much deeper level." MOCAD director Elysia Borowy-Reeder defended her decision to maintain the exhibition as follows: "The point of the exhibition is to speak about these issues of ownership and ask these questions. This is a very relevant discussion. Is social media empowering people or co-opting artistic production? Where do our expectations and perceptions around privacy and consent lead us when using social media? What are you consenting to when posting? Is all photography exploitive?"

Thanks to smartphones and social media, women finally have the opportunity to show themselves the way they want to be seen, and suddenly the female gaze is often mentioned in photography.

ENDURING THE MALE GAZE

In 1975, British film critic LAURA MULVEY defined the male gaze in an essay. The starting point in films is the male viewer. Men are active: They look at. Women are passive: They are looked at. The man is the giver of the gaze, the woman endures the man's gaze. When women photograph other women or themselves, they become active, they decide how they are looked at. And what does Prince do? He comments with the male gaze, for instance under a photo showing singer Sky Ferreira in the passenger seat of a sports car: "Enjoyed the ride today. Let's do it again. Richard."

Young Hamburg artist CHRIS DRANGE has to contend with comparisons to Richard Prince because he has also worked with influencers' Instagram images for several years. But that's really all that connects Prince and Drange. Because, unlike Prince, Drange doesn't focus on the act of appropriation, quite the opposite: "Appropriation is the basis and not the content of my work," says Drange. He has studied and identified patterns in the accounts of huge influencers and female stars such as Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner, Selena Gomez, Ariana Grande, Miley Cyrus, and Gigi Hadid. The result of his research was published in the 2017 book **RELICS** (Hatje Cantz).

"I WISH TO BE YOU"

His thesis is already hinted at in the title: Influencer and celebrity selfies are worshipped like relics. He explains his thoughts in the preface. The title refers to two phenomena: "First, to a new form of worship, where selfies become the digital objects of adoration and smartphones become 'shrine devices.' And second, to an image of women that exists between the poles of antiquated male fantasies and modern female self-determination." In the book, he juxtaposes the re-photographed selfies of the stars with comments from their followers. "Men want to have these women, girls want to be like them," he says. "We kinda look alike," commented a girl to Selena Gomez. "I wish to be you," writes another under a post by Ariana Grande. Or: "Body Goals!! Kisses." And: "Selfie goals." It would seem, if you follow Kim Kardashian on Instagram, you suddenly have a lot of life goals. Creating selfies like her, having a body like her. Drange has fished out profile pictures from the flood of images in which followers try to look like their star – the hair, the make-up, the pose.

Kylie Jenner, the 21-year-old influencer from the Kardashian clan, is the youngest billionaire in the world, according to Forbes magazine. She made her fortune selling cosmetics. "It's the power of social media." This is how Jenner explains her success – because she promotes her products herself via Instagram. Young women become entrepreneurs and brands, they advertise what brings in advertising money, be it luxury items or detox tea. "Previously, healing was promised to those who worshipped the relics. Today, we no longer have any problems healing, but more a problem of prestige or validity," says Drange.

MACHINE LEARNING MANUFACTURE

Drange plays with authorship and originality. For this is the daily game played by social media influencers, and Drange continues it in the medium of painting. Where there is no longer an original, painting becomes a fake and a copy. Drange selects photos of influencers like Kylie and Kendall Jenner on Instagram. He produces a simplified and, at the same time, precise composition on his computer, which is enlarged 1:1 to the final size by a computer in a machine learning company in Lithuania. This file is used by a painting factory in China as the blueprint for an oil painting, which is completed in consultation with Drange, and sent to him in Germany. Through this approach, photorealistic paintings, some of which are monumental, are created for exhibitions. The paintings are littered with kitschy emojis such as hearts, butterflies, stars, and unicorns, which refer to the digital origin of the works.

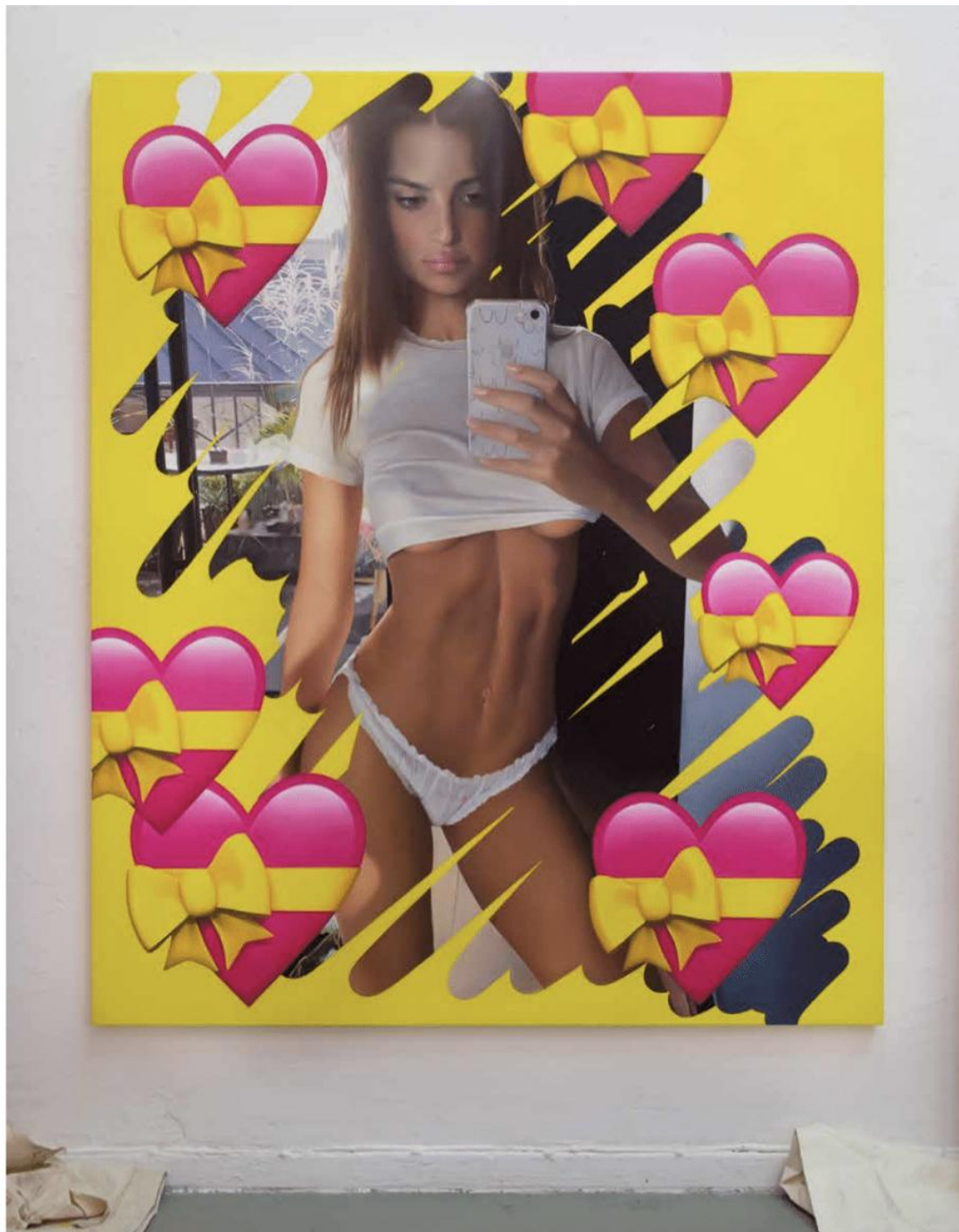
The reference to the history of portrait painting is essential to Drange. He sees his works as allegories of youth and beauty, but also of transience. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, suddenly, it was no longer only saints and kings that were worthy of portrayal – ordinary citizens who could afford it commissioned artists to paint their portraits as well. Even then, the portrait had to project a certain image and make the sitter look better than IRL. The portrait ensured a form of presence and permanence; to have your likeness captured was a way to survive beyond death. While Richard Prince instrumentalized the influencers' selfies for his purposes, Drange exaggerates them in the medium of painting. And all this without any commission.

"WE KINDA LOOK ALIKE"

Loren with Hearts, 2019
Details
100×75cm
Oil on canvas



"MEN ARE ACTIVE: THEY LOOK AT. WOMEN ARE PASSIVE: THEY ARE LOOKED AT."





Kylie with Green Heart, 2019
Detail
135×135cm
Oil on canvas

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Loren with Stars, 2019
100×75cm
Oil on canvas

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