

## Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton

January 28, 2011 - April 18, 2011

### Educator's Guide

#### At the Museum

When you bring a group of students to the museum, a trained docent or museum educator will facilitate an inquiry-based tour for your students based on the discussions introduced in this guide. This guide also includes suggestions for learning activities that can be done before or after a visit to the museum.

Schedule a visit by contacting the Education Department at (314) 935-7918 or [kemper-ed@wustl.edu](mailto:kemper-ed@wustl.edu).

#### Museum Visit Learning Objectives

- Through guided discussion, students will be encouraged to closely examine artworks and consider a range of interpretations and impressions.
- Students will discuss how Peyton's contemporary portraits relate to the history of portraiture and the extent to which they do and do not express the identities of individuals and cultural conditions.
- Students will explore Peyton's use of various printmaking processes and how materials, scale, color, and composition affect meaning.
- Students will discuss historical and contemporary notions of beauty and Peyton's treatment of it in her prints.

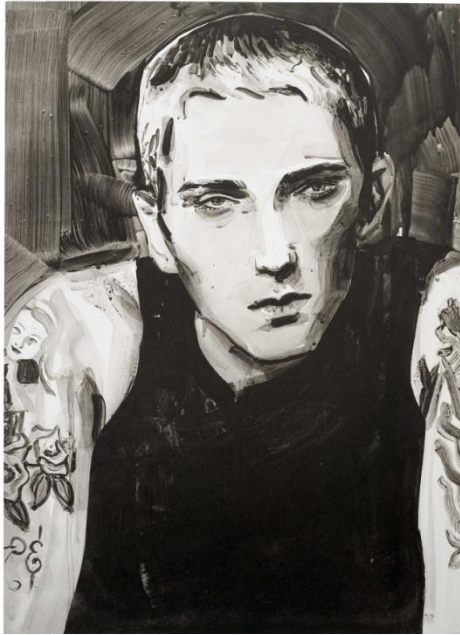
#### About the Artist



*Flower Ben (One), 2002, monotype*

Elizabeth Peyton was born in Connecticut in 1965. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1987. She has exhibited internationally in both solo and group exhibitions since 1993, and she now lives and works in New York.

Elizabeth Peyton is celebrated as one of the most important figure painters of her generation. Since 1998, she has also created numerous monotypes, lithographs, etchings, and woodcuts. *Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton* is the first in-depth museum exhibition to explore the artist as a critical printmaker. Her works on paper provocatively embrace beauty and visual pleasure, and she employs a variety of printmaking techniques and materials. By choosing to depict celebrities, historical figures, artists, friends, and most recently, still lifes, Peyton explores the roles that the traditional genres of portraiture and still life can play in contemporary art.



*Em*, 2002, etching

## What is a portrait?

### Vocabulary

**Commission (v.):** to request and pay for a painting to be made

**Genre (n.):** a particular form or category of art, such as landscape, still life, or portraiture

**Portrait (n.):** a work of art that represents the likeness of an individual and often elements of his or her character

**Sitter (n.):** a person who has his or her portrait made

### Introduction

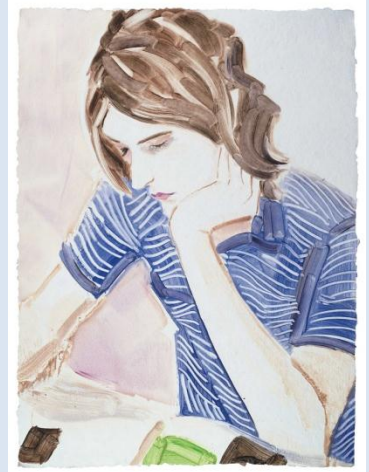
Before the invention of photography, portraiture was the only way to create and preserve the likeness of a person. Often, portraits also represent an individual's character and social stature in addition to their physical appearance through the pose, expression, clothing, and setting chosen by the artist or the sitter. Portrait painting began to emerge as a distinct genre and profession in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, when religious paintings included the likenesses of donors. From the

Renaissance on, individuals with power or wealth commissioned portraits to strengthen their own authority or commemorate another important person. Over the centuries, portraits have served as political tools, as documents recording significant events like marriages and the signing of treaties, as substitutions for those who are absent, and as memorials for those who are deceased. By representing their friends, known cultural figures, and unknown city dwellers, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century artists Honoré Daumier, Edouard Manet, and Edgar Degas helped to extend the genre of portraiture to lower- and middle-class subjects. Today, many artists continue to explore the contemporary relevance of the traditional conventions of portrait-making.

### Visual Exploration

Explore the choices that Elizabeth Peyton made when depicting *Em*, 2002, (above); and *Ben*, 2002 (right).

- Who are the subjects of these portraits? What do they have in common?
- How are the individuals posed? Where are they looking?
- How much of their bodies can we see? What are they wearing?
- What emotions do their expressions show?
- Why might Elizabeth Peyton have chosen to represent these particular individuals?



*Ben*, 2002, monotype

### Exploring Meaning

Elizabeth Peyton creates portraits of people she knows well—her friends, fellow artists, her art dealers—and people she has never met, including historical figures, celebrities, and politicians. She chooses her subjects carefully, and she frequently depicts them as young adults in the moment before they became prominent or famous. Peyton treats all of these individuals equally in her art by depicting them with similar introspective

expressions, and free from their political, social, and economical contexts. By representing these diverse subjects as equals, Peyton creates a democratized form of portraiture.<sup>1</sup>

- Peyton has said that she makes “pictures of people” rather than portraits. What might be the difference between these terms?<sup>2</sup>
- Peyton describes her interest in portraiture by saying, “The surface is a reflection of what lies below.... I am really interested in individuals in particular, their humanness—that somebody’s eye looks different than another’s, or their nose—because I feel like it’s all a reflection of them, of their individuality.”<sup>3</sup>
  - Do you agree that a person’s individuality and personality are reflected in their appearance? Why, or why not? How, and how not?

### Cultural Connections

Portraiture is one of the thematic categories of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum’s permanent collection installation. The 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century portraits currently on display offer a range of styles, some of which adhere to traditional conventions of portraiture, while others challenge these conventions. Thomas Eakins’s *Portrait of Professor W. D. Marks* (1886) depicts the professor seated at his desk next to his invention, the chronograph, and surrounded by books. His distant gaze shares an introspective quality with the facial expressions of Peyton’s subjects. In contrast, Marsden Hartley’s *The Iron Cross* (1915) is an abstract painting containing symbolic references to two of the artist’s friends who were German soldiers in World War I. These symbols, such as a medal, flags, and military insignia, do not represent the likeness of his friends, but they do provide biographical information in a way some of Peyton’s images do not.

#### At Home or in the Classroom

Choose an author, artist, or musician who inspires you, and find a portrait or photograph of him or her. Does the image you found reveal anything about the kind of writing, art, or music that the person creates? If you were to recreate the image you found as a painting, drawing, or print, what changes would you make? What colors would you use, and why?

### Additional Resources

- *Elizabeth Peyton*. New York: Rizzoli, 2005.
- *Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag; St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum; Rüsselsheim: Opelvillen, 2011.
- *Live Forever: Elizabeth Peyton*. London: Phaidon, 2008.
- Tomkins, Calvin. “The Artist of the Portrait: The Deliverance of Elizabeth Peyton.” *The New Yorker*. October 6, 2008.
- West, Shearer. *Portraiture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>1</sup> For more on this democratic approach, see Sabine Eckmann, “Daystar” in *Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag; St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum; Rüsselsheim: Opelvillen, 2011), 147-51.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this topic, see Calvin Tomkins, “The Artist of the Portrait: The Deliverance of Elizabeth Peyton,” *The New Yorker*, October 6, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Peyton, “Ghost Impressions: An Interview with Elizabeth Peyton,” conducted by Beate Kemfert in *Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag; St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum; Rüsselsheim: Opelvillen, 2011), 113.

# What is a print?

## Vocabulary<sup>4</sup>

**Etching (n.):** a printing technique in which an artist uses an etching needle to draw through a waxy, acid-resistant ground that has been applied to a metal plate. The plate is then placed in an acid bath and the acid “bites,” or etches, the image into the metal. The ground is removed and the plate is inked and then wiped so that only the etched lines hold any ink. When paper is placed on the plate and run through a printing press, the pressure forces the paper into the etched lines and it picks up the ink.

**Ghost (n.):** an image left behind on a plate that has already been printed. Monotype plates often yield a succession of ever-fainter ghosts, which artists can use as departure points for further work.

**Lithography (n.):** a printing technique in which an image is drawn with lithographic crayons on a polished slab of limestone. The stone is then treated with chemicals and dampened with water so that the oil-based printing ink, when rolled on, will adhere only where the drawing was done.

**Monotype (n.):** a unique print made by painting or drawing on a smooth, unincised metal or glass plate that is then run through a press.

**Ukiyo-e woodcut (n.):** a relief print made from shaped blocks of wood that are inked and then fit together. They are printed with water-based rather than oil-based inks, and by careful hand-rubbing, rather than with a press. The result is a delicate, translucent image often deceptively akin to watercolors.



Julian, 2006, Ukiyo-e woodcut

## Introduction

Printmaking encompasses a variety of techniques and has served both artistic and nonartistic functions. Prints, traditionally characterized by their reproducibility, are typically produced by transferring an image from one object onto the surface of another. The number of reproductions made depends on the technique used and the number of editions an artist wishes to create. Each printmaking method has unique characteristics, so an artist may choose one technique or combine methods depending on the result he or she wishes to achieve.

## Visual Exploration

Explore the differences between the lines and colors of *Julian*, 2006 (above); and *Marc (Lavender)*, 2004 (right).

- Can you tell which processes were used to make each one?
- Compare the sizes of each print when you visit the museum. How does the scale of the image impact our impression of the person depicted?



Marc (Lavender), 2004, etching

<sup>4</sup> The definitions given here are adapted from the Museum of Modern Art’s online interactive project, “What Is a Print?” (<http://www.moma.org/interactives/projects/2001/whatisaprint/>), and from Susan Tallman, *The Contemporary Print: from Pre-Pop to Postmodern* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

## Exploring Meaning

Over the past ten years, Elizabeth Peyton has increasingly turned to various methods of printmaking to produce portraits, and since 2002 she has created all of her prints at Two Palms Press in New York. This exhibition is the first major museum exhibition to exclusively display prints, and it includes four different types – etchings, lithographs, woodcuts, and monotypes. Different printing techniques require very different amounts of time and labor. Ukiyo-e woodcuts, for example, require a specialist and often fifty or more plates, while monotypes are made quickly in only a few hours or a day. Peyton says she was drawn to printmaking for multiple reasons, including its fundamental ability to produce multiple images, the challenge of working in a new medium, and the speed at which she can make prints (compared to paintings).<sup>5</sup>

- Why might an artist want to make multiple prints of the same person? How does the reproducibility of images like *Marc* affect their role as portraits?
- Why might an artist want to rework the same subject using different techniques, as Elizabeth Peyton does with the monotype *Julian* from 2004 and the Ukiyo-e woodcut *Julian* from 2006?

## Cultural Connections

Edgar Degas is often credited for reviving the art of monotype printing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like Peyton, Degas was drawn to the monotype as a flexible and expressive way of working with ink. He frequently used monotype prints as foundations under his pastel sketches and gouache paintings of ballet dancers, singers, French nightlife, and acquaintances. He also produced over sixty etchings and lithographs, including a series of etched studies of family members and friends. Though Peyton's portraits often have a timeless quality, both Peyton and Degas have recorded the details of contemporary life through their sitters' clothing, poses, locations, and expressions.

### At Home or in the Classroom

Try making easy monotype prints by painting with printing ink or paint on a plate of durable glass or another nonporous material, and then pressing a clean, damp piece of printing paper over the inked surface.

## Additional Resources

- Desmet, Anne & Jim Anderson. *Handmade Prints: An Introduction to Creative Printmaking Without a Press*. London: A & C Black, 2000.
- Grabowski, Beth and Bill Fick. *Printmaking: A Complete Guide to Materials & Processes*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2009.
- Janis, Eugenia Parry. *Degas Monotypes: Essay, Catalogue & Checklist*. Fogg Art Museum, 1968.
- Reed, Sue Welsh and Barbar Stern Shapiro. *Edgar Degas: The Artist as Printmaker*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984.
- Tallman, Susan. *The Contemporary Print: from Pre-Pop to Postmodern*. London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996.
- "Ukiyo-e Techniques." Davidson Art Center, Wesleyan University. <http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/blockprinting/>.
- "What Is a Print?" Interactive Online Project. The Museum of Modern Art. <http://www.moma.org/interactives/projects/2001/whatisaprint/>.

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<sup>5</sup>See Peyton, "Ghost Impressions: An Interview with Elizabeth Peyton," 111-113.

# What is beauty?

## Vocabulary

**Beauty (n.):** a visual quality that gives pleasure to the senses and the mind

**Aesthetics (n.):** a branch of philosophy dealing with the value of art as a singular and independent field of human experience, with the creation and appreciation of beauty, and with the judgment of taste

**Androgynous (adj.):** neither specifically feminine nor masculine

**Contemporary (adj.):** of the present time

## Introduction

The concept of beauty in art and culture is one that constantly changes. Today, popular media and advertisements often define what is considered beautiful. Historically, beauty was typically associated with nature, femininity, goodness, truth, and divinity. Though beauty has traditionally been considered a characteristic of fine art, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of artists and critics associated beauty with elitism and political power and thus rejected it as a universal value. The role of beauty in contemporary aesthetics may be changing, however, as more artists like Elizabeth Peyton embrace visual pleasure in their work.



*Flowers and Actaeon, January 2009, 2009, monotype*



*Silver Bosie, 1998, lithograph*

## Visual Exploration

Compare *Flowers and Actaeon, January 2009, 2009* (above); with *Silver Bosie, 1998*, (left).

- What qualities of the *people or subject matter* could be considered beautiful?
- What qualities of the *prints* could be considered beautiful?

## Exploring Meaning

Rather than conforming to contemporary standards of beauty determined by popular media, Peyton depicts her subjects with a timeless, androgynous quality that is free from social and political implications. Recently, Peyton has produced an increasing number of still lifes and portraits that border on abstraction. It is not necessarily the people and objects she portrays that are beautiful, but rather "the brushstrokes, colors, and linear treatment through which she portrays them, and through which she reveals her compassion for them."<sup>6</sup> This compassion and respect that Peyton has for all her subjects is essential to her art. As she explains, "I really

<sup>6</sup> Eckmann, "Daystar," 149.

love the people I paint. I believe in them, I'm happy they're in the world."<sup>7</sup> Through portraiture, Peyton seeks to explore the humanness of individuals, or the qualities that differentiate her subjects beyond their physical appearances.

- Is there a print in the exhibition that you feel particularly expresses Peyton's compassion for the person depicted? What qualities do you see that suggest the artist's emotional investment?

### Cultural Connections

Many of the artists that Peyton chooses to represent engage with the notion of beauty in their own work, particularly the relationship of beauty and gender. For example, many of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs reanimate the classical canon of beauty by depicting male models in the poses of ancient statues. Frida Kahlo, another artist that Peyton depicts, is known for her honest self-portraits that bring her gender and Mexican heritage to the forefront, disguising neither her disability nor the physical and emotional pain it caused her.

#### At Home or in the Classroom

Write a definition of "beauty" in a single sentence, and find an example of a work of art that you think is beautiful. What qualities of the work of art appeal to you? Share your definition and example with someone else. How are your definitions different? What do these differences reveal about the nature of beauty in relation to art?

### Additional Resources

- Beech, Dave, ed. *Beauty*. London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.
- Prettejohn, Elizabeth. *Beauty & Art 1750-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Gaskell, Ivan. "Beauty" in *Critical Terms for Art History*. Edited by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

### Image Credits (in order of appearance)

*Flower Ben (One)*, 2002. Monotype with hand painting on Twinrocker handmade paper, 12 ¼ x 8 ¾". Private collection.

*Em*, 2002. Etching with aquatint, ed. 30, 26 ¾ x 20 ¼" (sheet). Courtesy of Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

*Ben*, 2002. Monotype on Twinrocker handmade paper, 30 x 22". Collection of Laura Steinberg and B. Nadal-Ginard, Massachusetts.

*Julian*, 2006. 55-color handprinted Ukiyo-e woodcut, ed. 45, 17 x 12 7/8". Courtesy of Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

*Marc (Lavender)*, 2004. Etching on lavender paper, ed. 10, 22 x 17 ¾" (sheet). Courtesy of Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

*Flowers and Actaeon, January 2009*, 2009. Monotype on Twinrocker handmade paper, 13 1/8 x 11 ¼". Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg.

*Silver Bosie*, 1998. Lithograph, ed. 45, 29 ½ x 22 ½". Collection of Jerome and Judith Levy.

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<sup>7</sup>Peyton, quoted in Tomkins, "The Artist of the Portrait: The Deliverance of Elizabeth Peyton."