

Deception of Perception

By Kevin Yee

My eyes deceive me! That much was certain as I stepped into the *Face: Portraits by Valentin Popov* exhibit at the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University. Photos all over the wall! But as I approached the wall covered with the faces of Popov's colleagues and inspirations, what seemed to be real was suddenly perverted with brush strokes and splotches of color. It felt as if I had crossed an invisible barrier between reality and art that I could traverse at my convenience. I mean reality in the sense that what I saw before my eyes was indistinguishably akin to the depth and detail that I perceive in the faces of my fellow human beings, a feat only photographs have perfected. Yet Popov has brought art into reality, equaling the accuracy of digital cameras of our technological age. The exhibit will be on display from April 12, 2013 until June 30, 2013, and no one should pass up this admission free shock and awe experience. Questions and second guesses will reoccur like an obsession over and over again. Is it a photograph, or is it a painting? Is it really man-made? Is this reality, or is this art?

I can say with great enthusiasm that Popov's paintings are not photos, though it is shocking how strikingly realistic they look. The seventy-two portraits on display are all made with oil on canvas and incorporate a unique technique of printing large scale photos then painting on top of them. Though the pictures provide an outline, there is no doubt that it took a great amount of skill and technique to capture all the features and expressions of the human face. Popov has great success mastering the colors of skin tones, complexities of complexion, consistency of shadows, life-filled eyes, and hair flowing as if each strand had found its rightful place atop the head of its subject. What captures the viewer's eye is the instantaneous question: is it a photo? This tension draws us closer and closer to answer that question. No, it's not a photo. But then you step back, and you start second guessing yourself.

In Popov's painting *Emily Savidge*, we see the face of a young woman outside on a sunny day with green foliage filling the background. The light of the sun caresses the right side of her face while conforming to her contours, which casts shadows across Emily's freckled cheeks. There is even a shadow for Emily's eyelashes. Each shadow has its own depth of darkness so that the face can also exhibit a three dimensional form. The brown hair, made up of orange, red, purple, green, etc. cannot be perceived as painted strokes from a distance as they all come together to create a photo-sharp, cohesive hair piece that naturally cascades around a face conceiving happiness, but one that has not yet smiled. Who would not smile on such a nice, sunny day? Capturing that anticipation is a great achievement for Popov. *Emily Savidge* is alive. Her face is filled with a color palette of tanned, sun-kissed skin and red blush from the blood coursing within. Though the background lacks discerning details in the splashes of green, blue, yellow, and red as compared to the highly detailed foreground, this mimics the effect of digital cameras that auto-focus on faces, which continues to make the viewer second guess what he or she is looking at.

Popov does not exclusively paint faces. *Jill Ritchie* is a woman who has had some tough times. A look of fatigue plagues her face as bags form under her eyes from what can only be interpreted as a lack of sleep. Sitting in a defensive, in-turned position on the floor, Jill holds a knife and large fork in her right hand, two potential tools of violence and protection. In addition, she wears only a white dress shirt with bare legs which adds to a sense of vulnerability that justifies her poise. Jill's gaze turns upward, not staring straight back at the viewer, but sharply fixated on whoever looks down upon her from above. Just like in the portrait *Emily Savidge*, Popov uses a number of techniques to great effect

to tell a story. His technique and ability to create photo-like paintings are already aesthetically amazing. But what shines in *Jill Ritchie* is the expression of her story that is truly told in her body and most of all, her face. Facial expressions are an important aspect of human interactions. We read faces like books, looking for the story behind upturned lips, teary eyes, and glaring gazes. Disdain and fatigue are easily read on Jill's face. Popov captures mankind in the moment, like a photo, which can only be accomplished by a very skilled and precise artist.

Popov has blurred the line between reality and art with an adept manipulation of proximity and perspective. The best way to experience *Face: Portraits by Valentin Popov* is by starting at a distance, slowly moving closer to the portraits and realizing the deception of your perception. Once you are close enough to notice the finer details that distinguish these paintings from photos, take a step back and watch as the portraits warp back into reality. Our eyes deceive us, as Valentin Popov shows. You cannot simply look at pictures on the Internet or in a magazine to experience his art. You must have a first-hand, face to face interaction with Popov's art. Dance with the art, move close, separate, sway back and forth, turn away, turn back, and face *Face!*