



## Finding Shakespeare in Contemporary Portraiture

THE PORTRAIT GENRE has changed dramatically since the seventeenth century when the artist's objective was to make an accurate visual depiction of a person. Today portraits are idiosyncratic, evocative, and broadly open to interpretation by the artist and the viewer alike, rather than literal representations of people. This exhibition of contemporary portraiture presents works by artists from across Canada, revealing the influence of William Shakespeare on contemporary notions of character and serving as a counterpoint to the Sanders seventeenth-century oil-on-panel, considered to be the likeness of the Bard.

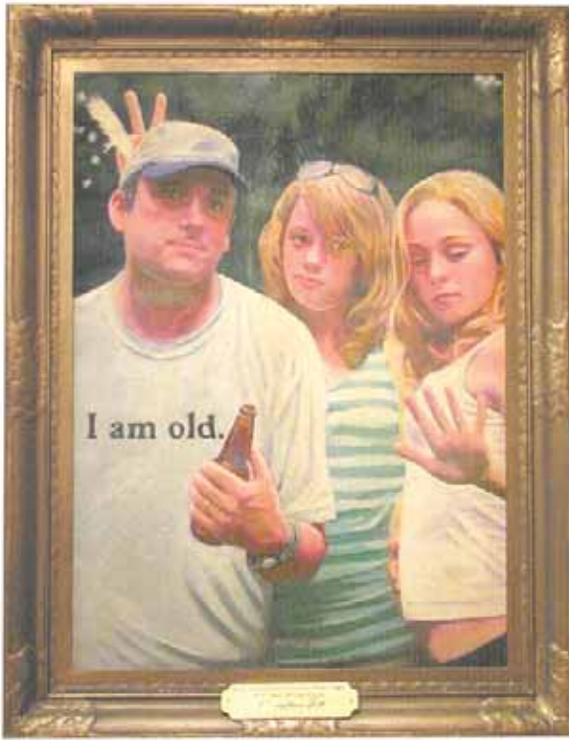
Shakespeare's characters show life as it is. They are as relevant today as they were to his Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences. Shakespeare has influenced our understanding of human frailty and passion through characters like Hamlet, Ophelia, Lear, and Falstaff, types we readily identify within the realm of our own life experiences. Who cannot recognize, in today's world, the overweight, drunken Falstaff: a dishonest braggart, who is somehow still appealing? Artist Verne Harrison's contemporary portrayal incorporates Falstaff's famous quotes: "*Sit on my knee, Doll*"<sup>1</sup>

LEFT Fiona Kinsella

(cake) Patron Saint of England (Feast Day of St. George, April 23rd. Protector against poison.)

Royal icing, pearls, teeth, dirt, seeds, horse hair, skin, silver, morning dew, cloth, armour, hair of a woman, molasses, cup, icon, wild rose, hemlock, hebenon, water, spirits, sword, cuff links, sleep, redpath, fondant icing.

Hamilton, Burlington, Guelph, New Brunswick, Prague, ?, ?, ?.



Verne Harrison,  
*Henry the Fourth, Act II,  
scene 4: "Sit on my knee, Doll,"*  
2006 (digital photograph,  
acrylic, oil, and varnish on  
canvas)

as the title of the work, and "I am old..."<sup>2</sup> printed on his tee-shirt. Teenaged girls look on completely bored. Harrison says, "His lecherousness is fascinating to young people. He's worried that no one finds him interesting anymore, so he's always trying to create the myth of Falstaff." Harrison himself is a master of parody; here, he casts himself as the fallible character in a way that troubles facile depictions of Falstaff as a lovable troublemaker.

Painter Shannon Reynolds is role-playing as well—as a stage director in *Dramatis Personae* (2005), her series of stock theatrical character portraits in oil. For this project, she invited stage actors to mimic archetypal character roles: heroes, villains, crones, sages, fools, coquettes, and femmes fatales. In each portrait, she created a tableau with props and encouraged the model to dress

for the part. "I was heartened by the idea that an actor could succeed by simply assuming the posture, dress, and mannerisms of the character without profound psychological insight into the role, and through mere imitation would become the character."<sup>3</sup> The sitters' direct gaze creates a compelling bond with the audience, traversing the artist's frame and the actor's stage. Reynolds' objective is to marry literary influences to ideas about painted portraiture. To enhance the literary underpinnings of each character, she incorporates text scratched and worked into the birch panels. Reynolds explains that "a very patient viewer could piece all the words together."<sup>4</sup> For *The Coquette*, she integrates excerpts from Henry James's *Daisy Miller* with flirting tips culled from Internet sites; *The Lusty Woman's* text is an extract of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Jaclyn Conley's painting *Graces* (2004) is a contemporized version of the enduring classical theme of the three nymphs, representing the virtues of beauty, mirth, and cheer. The virtues are heavily eulogized in Shakespeare's sonnets, in which he propounds themes of love and beauty; however, the sonnets are also laced with criticisms of the frivolity and ephemerality of youth. Conley presents a post-feminist ques-

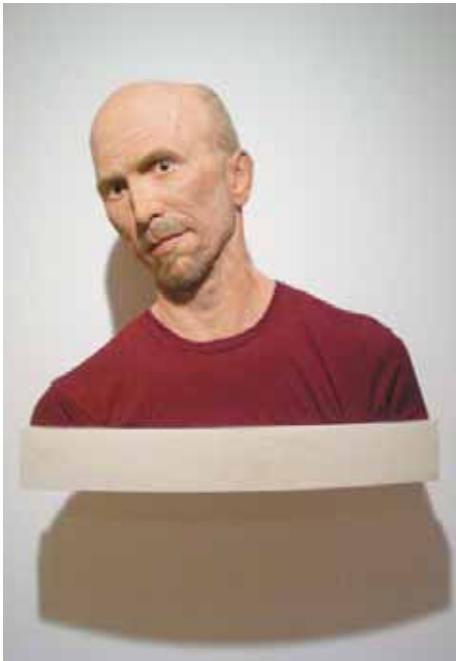
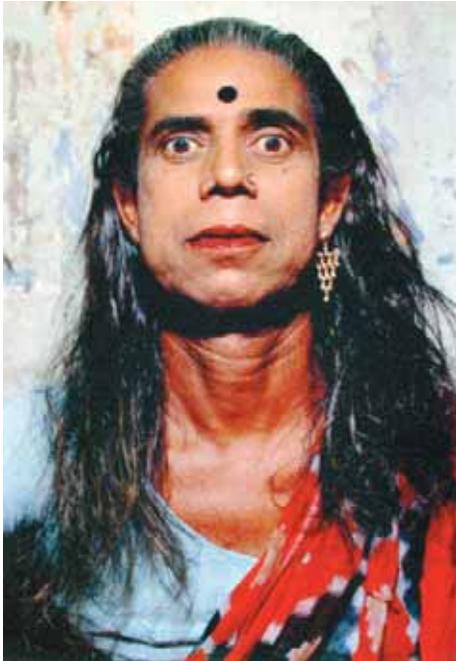
tioning of feminine beauty by painting the nubile female form for the scrutiny of the female gaze, her subjects mimicking the gestures of bathing suit models found in mail order catalogues.

First published in 1577, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* is acknowledged as the source of the plot of *Macbeth*. Shakespeare reimagines Holinshed's nymph-like sisters as demonic supernatural witches, a dark mirroring of the enchanted fairies.<sup>5</sup> In seventeenth-century England, witchcraft was considered a very real threat to a person's well-being, in contrast to contemporary interpretations of witchcraft, known as Wicca or the Old Religion. FASTWÜRMS, the shared authorship of artists Dai Skuse and Kim Kozzi, incorporate Wiccan symbolism into their work. The use of pentagrams and horned composite creatures in their life-sized self-portrait, titled *Wurmhole, Crew Portrait #2 (Security & Horticulture)* (1994), reveals this connection. In the photograph, the artists present themselves in Wiccan regalia with scythes, cat familiars, and moonbeams for nocturnal journeying. They cast themselves in the role of spaceship security officers and gardeners, responsible for nurturing positive growth and for pruning anti-social behaviour. Their hypnotized expressions suggest the power of the spell. *Wurmhole, Crew Portrait #2 (Security & Horticulture)* is from FASTWÜRMS' exhibition WURMHOLE, a room-sized installation created for the Koffler Gallery, North York, in 1994. The entire installation was conceived as a flight deck for a witch's spaceship stylized after the high modernist décor of early *Star Trek* episodes, a parody of Gene Roddenberry's popular television program, which frequently made use of Shakespearean allusion. FASTWÜRMS' work references tropes of witchcraft that originated in Shakespeare's time.

Stephen Livick's *Hijra with Black Bindi* and *Costumed Hijra* (both 1987) are part of a larger series of gum bichromate prints exploring the cultural fabric of Calcutta's inner city. Livick used an unwieldy large box camera to make street portraits illuminated by intense sunlight. This complicated nineteenth-century process, also known as photo aquatint, produces exquisitely coloured prints, a perfect medium for depicting the splendour of the saris and jewels and the heightened level of theatricality and performativity governing the daily lives of Livick's subjects.



Shannon Reynolds,  
*The Lusty Woman*, 2005  
(oil on birch panel)



His images are remarkable for their intensity and for the emotional bond he attained with his subjects, allowing them to reveal the fragility and the vulnerability of their existence. *Hijra* is a Hindi term describing the “third sex,” the male-to-female, transgendered, and intersexed persons in the culture of the Indian subcontinent. The culture and identity of *hijra* is an ancient and accepted part of Indian culture. Livick’s portraits evoke complex questions of gender and of how the gaze of the subject mediates cultural difference. Is the lesson to be learned from Livick’s *Hijras* comparable to what Shakespeare’s plays teach us about gendered identities and performativity through both the characters who cross-dress and the actors of his day, all male, who played female roles?

Evan Penny questions our idea of what is real in his *Self-Portrait* (2003) made from silicone, pigment, hair, and fabric. This extraordinarily “realistic” object reinforces representation as a construct. The anamorphic, skewed portrait, which appears life-like from a frontal perspective and dramatically distorted from an oblique angle, challenges the nature of “looking” and our ability to interpret reality. In the time of Shakespeare, artists experimented with anamorphism, the mathematical distortion of an image that is visually incomprehensible from one perspective, yet clearly visible from another. Penny’s *Self-Portrait* leads us to question how any portrait can be a true likeness since it is always based on an artist’s construction of the image (and affected by technique, medium, aesthetics, philosophy, cultural context, and so forth). The question of how an original image is mediated by and through the artist’s envisioning is worth bearing in mind anytime a viewer observes a portrait.

Hollywood mythologizing is introduced into the exhibition with Andrew Harwood’s *Flower Rider* (2006), a digitized photograph that depicts Peter Fonda in the 1969 film *Easy Rider*. Bedecked with sequins, this image is from Harwood’s ongoing series exploring transportation and the “subversion of pop culture masculine identities.”<sup>6</sup> The easy rider fancies himself introspective and psychologically complex, a seeker of truth and a breaker of convention. Harwood’s easy rider is an urban nomad, as flippant in his affectations as Shakespeare’s Hamlet is to Ophelia, who waits in vain for the prince to show her signs of affection.

Stephen Livick, *Hijra in Black Bindi and Costumed Hijra*, both 1987 (gum bichromate)

Evan Penny, *Self-Portrait* (frontal and oblique views), 2003 (silicone, pigment, hair, fabric)



Jean-Paul Tousseignant,  
*Nathan*, 2002 and *Erin*, 2003  
(both liquid photo emulsion  
and graphite on Arches)

RIGHT Cheryl Ruddock,  
*Recovered Kelp, Lost Dress*,  
2006 (mixed media on Japanese  
gampi paper)

The vulnerability expressed in Jean-Paul Tousseignant's portraits *Nathan* (2002) and *Erin* (2003) is reflected in the sitters' eyes, which engage the viewer; their quotidian jottings scrawled across the surface of the photographs are like a page from a diary. The pairing of *Nathan* and *Erin* is filled with sensuous tension, suggestive of a more complicated relationship: Shakespeare's young lovers Romeo and Juliet.

*Recovered Kelp, Lost Dress* (2006), Cheryl Ruddock's two-metre long drawing on diaphanous Japanese gampi paper, recalls Shakespeare's Ophelia. Ruddock's hand-stitched drawing of a dress caught among kelp fronds and seed pods is tissue-like as it hangs on the wall, the transparency of its surface like a lake in the thin light of day. "Everything is there but the body. The work is about our lives, finding something horrible or tender in the water is what we live with everyday."<sup>7</sup> Ruddock uses touches of red, suggestive of Ophelia's suicide.

Mohawk artist Shelly Niro takes a poetic approach to personal history in *Ghost* (2005): "People pass and become mythologized. They become ghost-like and paths for the oral history of a family, a community, and a country. The man is the embodiment of the spirits."<sup>8</sup> The man



Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule,  
*La Mujer de Agua en su  
Hamaca de Esmeraldas (or The  
Water Woman in her Emerald  
Hammock)*, 2006  
(acrylic on canvas)

Mary Aski-Piyewiskwew  
Longman, *Elk Man Waiting For  
Love*, 1996  
(Matrix G, elk antlers,  
cd soundtrack)

depicted in *Ghost* is in a dream state, with his psychic double hovering at his shoulder. This mysterious image is from the series *Ghosts, Girls, and Grandmas* (2005), in which Niro explores storytelling and mythmaking through portraiture that includes images of her mother and daughter, together with images of rocks and trees that appear to have their own transformational presence. For Niro, *Ghost* is a signifier of sacred Iroquois stories and ancient histories that are forever fluid in their telling and beyond written definition in a Western sense. This boundless narrative energy perhaps links Shakespearean storytelling in all its adaptive signifying richness to other storytelling traditions, equally rich and suggestive. Niro uses a frame made from wampum, comprising belts of dark and light shells, as a significant cultural reference symbolizing the Iroquois community. In so doing, she extends the traditional purpose of wampum as a healing conduit, as a symbolic agreement between nations, and as an historical record representing the continuation and vitality of Iroquois culture.

Kuna artist Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule, who was born in Ustupu, Kuna Yala, Panama, and is now based in London, Ontario, also draws on his traditional religion and mythology to create powerful contemporary statements about life, death, and societal and environmental concerns. “I use the ancestral symbolism of my people, present in our daily lives as an intimate language of communication between myself, my work, and the observer.”<sup>9</sup> His painting *La Mujer de Agua en su Hamaca de Esmeraldas (or The Water Woman in her Emerald Hammock)* (2006) is a profound expression of the intimate and essential linkage between humans and nature. The female progenitor in his painting is at once the tree of life and the blood of the earth, as her veins unite with the sea. Kantule’s figure can be likened to Shakespeare’s wood sprites that appear in forest scenes, often at night and by moonlight. The characters of Puck, Oberon, and Titania from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are forest fairies, both miraculous and mad, who yield transformative powers.

Saulteau artist Mary Aski-Piyewiskwew Longman presents a contemporary depiction of an ancient Plains story in her sculpture, *Elk Man Waiting for Love* (1996). Longman, who is a member of the Gordon First Nation located near Punnichy, Saskatchewan, explains that “First Nation stories communicate the experience of life and metaphors of life, and it is within these stories that we learn the history and lessons



This present *Monday*, being the 23<sup>d</sup> of *MAY*,  
Will be presented a TRAGEDY, call'd

# ROMEO and JULIET.

Romeo by Mr BARRY

Capulet by Mr SPARKS

Montague by Mr. R. AN

Eskau by Mr. ANDERSON, } Pa WHITE,

Benvolio by Mr. GIBSON, } Le BARRINGTON.

Fryar Laurence by M. OOUT,

Tibalt by Mr. C. N G,

Gregory by Mr BENNET, } Abran by Mr. DUNSTALL.

Sampson by Mr. COLLINS, } Balbazar by Mr.

Mercutio by Mr. DYER

Nurse by Mrs. PITT,

Juliet by Miss NOSSITER.

With a MINUET

By Mr. POITIER and Mad CAPDEVILLE

And a MASQUERADE DANCE

proper to the PLAY.

*An Additional Scene will be introduc d, rep*

## The Funeral ProcoSSION of JULIET

Which will be accompanied with

### A SOLEMN DIRGE

The Vocal Parts by Mr. Hrsard, Mr. Leog, Mr. Baker, Mr. Roberts,  
Mr. Lampe, Mrs. Chambers, Miss Young, and Others.

To which will be added a Pantomime Entertainment, call'd

## HARLEQUIN SORCERER:



of life and learn to make meaning of life itself.”<sup>10</sup> In her sculpture, a kneeling young man sprouts the head and antlers of an elk. The elk man holds two stones intertwined with the tresses of his desired love. “He hopes his love medicine will entice her to accept his love. Out of his mouth is the powerful sound of the elk calling with urgency and longing.”<sup>11</sup> The baying is audible by means of a hidden audiotape. In this work, Longman depicts a Plains courting ritual creating a poignant image of unrequited love. This image at once references the sorrowful, star-crossed lovers from *Romeo and Juliet*, and the magical transformation of Nick Bottom as he metamorphoses from man into animal in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Bottom, an Athenian weaver and one of Shakespeare’s greatest comic figures, fancies himself irresistible to women, even when Puck miraculously transforms his head into that of an ass without his knowledge. In his obliviousness, Bottom thinks that the fairy princess Titania is madly in love with him. In one scene, Puck sprinkles a love potion over Titania’s eyelids and she believes herself to be in love with the ass-headed Bottom. Artist Ryan Price has created an extraordinary *Bottom Head*, a theatrical mask of a donkey’s head, displayed in the Possible Worlds installation curated by Pat Flood. This eerie, wearable mask deflates pomposity and challenges any reductive assumptions about human nature. Which, after all, is the mask: the human face or the animal face?

In *The Hobby Horse*, Montreal artist Lyne Lapointe creates a portrait of Shakespeare as a child’s toy hobby horse, a stuffed horse’s head at the end of a long stick. The framed miniature portrait is mounted on a large production poster that, in Old English, announces the cast of *Romeo and Juliet*, each letter meticulously hand-painted by Lapointe to appear aged and worn. Lapointe identifies the hobby horse as a contemporary symbol of gay culture, as she is interested in the proposition that Shakespeare may have been homosexual. In Shakespeare’s early sonnets, he writes about his great love of a young man, exemplified by “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”<sup>12</sup>—arguably the best known and most admired of his 154 poems. It was not uncommon in Shakespeare’s time for men to demonstrate deep affection for other men, and the Bard’s use of gender-switching, such as in *Twelfth Night*, is well-documented. The linguistic term “hobby horse” is found in Shakespeare’s texts, but for other purposes that belie the origin of our modern usage

Lyne Lapointe,  
*The Hobby Horse*, 2006  
(wood, paper, oil paint, metal,  
pearl, printed photograph)



Susan Bozic, *Invitation*, 2003  
(silver print photograph)

of the word: as a reference to long-lost folk culture in *Hamlet*, “For, O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot”<sup>13</sup>; and to obsessive behaviour in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, “Callest thou my love ‘hobby-horse?’”<sup>14</sup>

In her decadent still-life photograph titled *Invitation* (2003), Susan Bozic creates a tableau at the centre of which is a great black bear surrounded by props and drapery as if on a proscenium stage, the curtain opened to reveal the bear at sup. We are unsure whether the image is a taxidermist’s tour-de-force or a live bear with its paws elegantly placed on soup bowls. Bozic conflates the animal image as a trophy rug elevated to the head of the table with the bear as a potential endangered species honoured with a celebratory feast. Her portrait of the bear as dinner host is in sharp contrast to Shakespearean times when bear-baiting was as much popular entertainment as were Shakespeare’s plays at the Globe Theatre in London.

Animal references are also found in Fiona Kinsella’s sculpture titled (*cake*) *Patron Saint of England (Feast Day of St. George, April 23rd. Protector against poison.)* (2006). Kinsella’s cake is displayed on an upholstered base in celebration of April 23, the feast day of St. George. “During the past year, I have been working on a series of cakes referencing religious relics and the phenomenon of the incorruptible bodies of the saints.

In making this artwork, I was struck by the discrete parallels between St. George and William Shakespeare.”<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, and died on April 23, 1616. By the fifteenth century, St. George’s Day was as important as Christmas Day. The saint’s popularity, based on his mythical profile as a dragon slayer, continues to present times as he is the patron saint of both England and Canada. (Incidentally, the city of Guelph was founded on St. George’s Day in 1827 by the novelist John Galt.) Kinsella’s intriguing visual metaphors link St. George, as a protector against poisons, to Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*: “this pearl is thine”<sup>16</sup>—the cup of poison that was the cause of Gertrude’s demise. The jaws in the artwork represent the dragon and the fondant roses signify the wild rose, the English symbol for the feast day. Kinsella’s relic cake is a rich metaphor linking St. George to England, to Shakespeare, to Canada, and, in a way quite unintended, to Guelph.

The artists selected for this exhibition extend our ideas of what constitutes a portrait with evocative and intriguing works that explore characterization and human nature, while also commenting on social and environmental issues. They do so in ways that reference Shakespeare—sometimes unconsciously. They also engage us with how portraiture provides an important medium for articulating issues of identity, and how that identity is constructed through the narrative of the portrait as both a historical and an allegorical object. Their metaphorically rich literary and historical references engage us in an ongoing enquiry into the role of portraiture in contemporary visual culture.



Fiona Kinsella

(cake) Patron Saint of England (Feast Day of St. George, April 23rd. Protector against poison.)

Royal icing, pearls, teeth, dirt, seeds, horse hair, skin, silver, morning dew, cloth, armour, hair of a woman, molasses, cup, icon, wild rose, hemlock, hebenon, water, spirits, sword, cuff links, sleep, redpath, fondant icing.

Hamilton, Burlington, Guelph, New Brunswick, Prague, ?, ?, ?

ENDNOTES

- 1 William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry VI*, ed. Norman N. Holland and Sylvan Barnet (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 93, 6.2.231. References are to act, scene, and line.
- 2 William Shakespeare. *The Second Part of King Henry VI*, ed. Norman N. Holland and Sylvan Barnet (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 95, 6.2.278. References are to act, scene, and line.
- 3 “The Play’s the Thing: Confessions from Behind the Scenes,” *The New Quarterly: Canadian Writers & Writing* 95 (Summer 2005): 159.

- 4 Derek Weiler, "Director's Cut: A Conversation with Shannon Reynolds." *The New Quarterly: Canadian Writers & Writing* 95 (Summer 2005): 175.
- 5 Amanda Mabillard, "An Analysis of Shakespeare's Sources for *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Online* (2000), <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/playanalysis/macbethsources.html> (accessed November 29, 2006).
- 6 Paul Petro Contemporary Art, "Trucker," (2004), <http://www.paulpetro.com/harwood/2004.shtml> (accessed September 28, 2006).
- 7 Judith Nasby, interview with the artist, 2006.
- 8 Judith Nasby, interview with the artist, 2006.
- 9 Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule, "Artist's Statement," <http://deleonkantule.tripod.com/statement.htm> (accessed March 19, 2006).
- 10 Mary Longman, "Autobiographical Statement," <http://www.maryloman.com/statement.html> (accessed June 12, 2006).
- 11 Patricia Deadman, *Mary Aski-Piyesiwiskwew Longman* (Regina: Mackenzie Art Gallery, 2005), 35.
- 12 Amanda Mabillard, "An Analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18," *Shakespeare Online* (2000), <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/18detail.html> (accessed December 7, 2006).
- 13 William Shakespeare. *Hamlet, in Four Tragedies*, ed. David Bevington, et al. (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 97, 3.2.133. References are to act, scene, and line.
- 14 William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. Richard David, et al. (London: Methuen Co. Ltd., 1966), Page, 3.1.29. References are to act, scene, and line.
- 15 Judith Nasby, correspondence with the artist, 2006.
- 16 William Shakespeare, *Four Tragedies*, ed. David Bevington (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 167, 5.2.283. References are to act, scene, and line.

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