Persona

Joanna Norcross Coke

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, jcoke1@lsu.edu

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PERSONA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

Joanna Norcross Coke
B.A. and B.S. University of South Florida, 2002
August, 2005
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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Calina Madden for her consistent patience, gentle demeanor, and personal contribution to help make these images evolve beyond my original interpretations. I thank Rene Fletcher and Kristen Balmer for their technical, conceptual and emotional support to ground me during my painting evolution. Many thanks go to my committee members Denyce Celentano, Leslie Koptcho, Melody Guichet, Kelli Scott Kelley and Darius Spieth for their insight and sincere thoughtfulness. A special thanks is extended to Ed Pramuk for taking his personal time to give me critical feedback during each semester of my masters program.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .............................................................. iii  
List of Figures ................................................................. v  
Abstract ....................................................................... vi  
Persona ................................................................. 1  
Bibliography ................................................................. 9  
Appendix: Images ......................................................... 11  
Vita ................................................................. 14
List of Figures

Peeking ................................................................. 2
Keeping ................................................................. 2
Coexist ................................................................. 3
Couch Perspective .................................................... 3
Sister Talk ............................................................. 4
Gossip ................................................................. 5
Confessions of Kin ................................................... 6
Unguarded ............................................................. 6
Madonna of the Kitchen ............................................ 7
Cell Phone ............................................................ 8
Anticipation of Evening ............................................ 9
Ever After ............................................................. 9
Forego, Forgotten ................................................... 9
I Gaze ................................................................. 9
Kitchen Duty ......................................................... 10
Out Door ............................................................. 10
Prince Charming ..................................................... 10
Waiting to Dance .................................................... 10
We Gaze ............................................................ 11
You Gaze ............................................................ 11
Abstract

The narrative oil paintings in this show illustrate one or two female characters set in domestic interior spaces. The scenes bring with them allusions to suggest that something unusual has just happened or is about to happen by heightening the psychological emotional moments. The subject matter is intimate and painted on small supports to reinforce these feelings. The images go beyond the observed visual aesthetic or representation by shifting the picture plane and using dramatic color palettes and lighting to create deeper interior spaces, adding to the tension.
Persona

The narrative oil paintings created for this thesis show illustrate scenes of one or two female characters set in the privacy of their home. The choreography suggests that something unusual has just happened or is about to. The character’s still poses, simplified compositions, and close-up views of an everyday event give an illusion of timelessness, but a sense of apprehension also exists. Psychologically emotional moments are depicted through the character’s gestures, gazes, color and lighting to imply traits of her personality, her persona. These various characteristics are meant to elicit an emotional response from the viewer so that they can identify with the sitters and yet, experience their own personal reactions.

I have created two basic themes to convey the emotional identities of the characters, the first being scenarios of a single female and the other consisting of two females. I chose key elements to unify the show’s imagery. They consist of using the same female model, an interior domestic space, and a feeling of tension indicated by the gesture, gaze, color and lighting. The last concern was to create narratives alluding to events that had just occurred or are about to occur with an invisible presence, which could sometimes be the viewer. The execution of these elements will be discussed using the two groups of paintings from the exhibition.

For the first group of images, I will refer to four paintings entitled Peeking, Keeping, Coexist, and Couch Perspective. These paintings share the same treatment of elements as mentioned above but with an emphasis on the female nude illustrating the character’s vulnerability and naïveté which could imply her shyness and innocence. These images feature passive poses which are then emotionally charged through the use of the gaze, color and lighting to reinforce the psychological tension of the scenes. The low point of view also contributes to awkwardness of the images and places the settings in an off balance perspective for the viewer.
In the painting *Peeking*, the character’s gesture is very static but her tense muscles illustrate her apprehension. The tension increases through the character’s gaze, which appears in a state of suspense as she slowly peeks around the corner. She looks off to the left referencing an invisible someone or something occurring off the picture plane. The viewer is meant to feel as though he or she is sneaking up on her because the viewpoint is painted from below her center and reinforced in the up-tilted floorboards. The combination of composition, color and lighting adds to the tension. The off-center placement of the figure along with the complementary colors of yellow and purple, and the strong, single-sourced lighting, frame and isolate the figure, emphasizing the character’s nudity and defenselessness. The nude female figure captures a simple fleeting moment through the shift of a shadow and the quick glance of a peripheral movement.

The character’s side-glance in the painting entitled *Keeping*, illustrates an odd moment where an invisible presence causes a reaction. She responds to someone or something by covering her breasts signifying concealment or vulnerability. The colors of the yellow-white back lighting on the wall surrounds the figure’s head to bring attention to her gaze. The high contrast of the light and shadow travels down her back to lead the viewer’s eye to her hand gesture covering her breast, which is the emotional focus of the

*Peeking*  
Oil on canvas, 12”w x 19”h

*Keeping*  
Oil on canvas, 11”w x 14”h
image. The painting is meant to be ambiguous in meaning so that the viewer could question why a young female would be sitting in the nude at a table reading. Is the space she is sitting in a common or private space in her home? Is she going about her everyday activities or is someone or something intruding?

The character’s gaze implies other meanings of her mood and personality. For example, in the painting entitled *Coexist*, the female’s gesture and direct gaze signifies someone who is challenging or questioning an invisible person, and in this case it is the viewer. The character’s frontal gazes could express frankness and yet, her nude pose could imply a sense of defenselessness and reserve. The use of color adds to the drama with the strong orange-vertical stripe of the wall contrasting with the deep purples and browns of the figure’s body. The glaring facial light conveyed through broken brush strokes of paint in acidic colors indicate movement and energizes her unusual expression. Does her attitude imply agitation or shyness of an unexpected interruption? Is she confronting the viewer to engage in a conversation or is she pushing them away?

In the painting entitled *Couch Perspective*, the color applications and choices dramatize the internal conflict expressed through the character’s side-glance. Is she withdrawing or expressing her
dissatisfaction of her situation? The color palette is harsh and grating to heighten the inward emotions of an outwardly passive gesture. The paint was applied in thick layers with a palette knife and the brush strokes are not blended as much as the other images in this group to create her uneasy demeanor. The direct, single-light source creates unusual shadows cast across her upper chest with the brightest contrast on the female’s neck and not her face.

The other group of paintings illustrates the dynamics of two female figures interacting in the same setting to express feelings of yearning, alienation and non-communication and to convey a sense of inferiority and seclusion. What separates these paintings from the first group is the use of a few specific objects, and the clothing of some of the characters to signify different meanings to the narratives. Four paintings will be discussed, Sister Talk, Gossip, Confessions of Kin, and Unguarded, to suggest these conditions.

In the image entitled Sister Talk, the aesthetic decisions made in this image were to create a calm atmosphere by rendering smoother transitions of the physical paint across the canvas surface. The subdued color-values of the paint were blended with a brush from area to area to focus on the characters’ gestures and gaze. The floor coloring from the left front corner to the right front corner gradually change in intensity with the brightest area still less subdued than the right figure’s brightly lit skin tones. The figures’ gestures and gazes compositionally move the viewer’s eye through the painting. The right figure engages the viewer with her direct gaze as well as her left leg extending out of the picture plane into liminal
space leading the viewer’s eye into the painting. The females’ back-to-back pose suggests a familial bonding and yet their gestures denote non-attachment and non-communication. The viewer’s eye continues to move to the left into the cooler color shifts of skin tone of the left figure. Her cast shadow on the table pulls the viewer to the left and away from the warmly lit right figure. The left figure’s gaze also points down the table into the empty place setting and chair, implying that someone has just been there with the props indicating the residue of the invisible person. The missing person draws attention to the silence between the other two characters to heighten the mystery of the narrative.

Gesture, gaze, and lighting supports the painting’s meaning in the image entitled *Gossip*. The open pose of the seated figure with her arms extended to her side and leaning forward on the sofa implies that she is controlling the situation. Her physically higher position implies a dominant personality as her gaze looks down upon the other figure. The closed gesture of the figure sitting on the floor wraps her arms around her legs to emotionally protect herself as if she were an inferior persona. The single light source entering from the right diagonally connects the two figures. The added element of a low viewpoint allows the viewer to visually sit on the floor and join in the dialogue occurring in the narrative. This low angle indicates intimacy, but also reinforces the hierarchy of one female controlling the other.

In the painting entitled *Confessions of Kin*, the use of color and light has a direct correlation to the meaning of the painting. The characters’ back-to-back poses illustrate non-

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*Gossip*
Oil on canvas, 20” w x 16”h
communication and alienation to suggest personas of seclusion. The color combinations reinforce these feelings with the front character’s body and face brightly lit in vibrant hot colors as compared to the background figure rendered in cooler, muted colors. The change in scale of the characters as well as the composition contributes to their isolation. The sofa shape encases the reclining figure, separating her from the back character. The shift in light alludes to the division between the two. The low-angled, horizontal light intensely illuminates the front figure highlighting feelings of estrangement. The back lighting moves vertically through the window and silhouettes this character in muted hues, conveying feelings of aloofness. The two females also contrast each other in their garments and gaze. One is clothed, the other nude. One faces the viewer and the other turns away. Lastly, the unusual low perspective and the reflections in the front figure’s eyes pulls the viewer into the uncomfortable position of the character on the sofa.

In the painting entitled *Unguarded*, the figure’s closed legs, arms, and back curved into a fetal position, and her hidden face, illustrate her isolation and alienation. Her back is totally exposed and vulnerable. The choice of color and lighting emphasizes this with her buttocks painted in hot yellow-orange skin tones, contrasting sharply with the lurking foreground...
figure rendered in a deep blue-purple silhouette. This juxtaposition of color-values in lighting sets up an emotional tension giving the scene sexual and dangerous connotations of the uncertainty of the moment.

The scenarios created for this exhibition illustrate the human drama of the mundane. I experimented with different ways of expressing that tension through the use of emotive gestures and gazes, unusual color palettes and dramatic single-source lighting to portray intimate emotional moments that hint at the character’s personas. I tried to go beyond the observed visual aesthetic or representation of the scenes by manipulating these elements to create deeper interior spaces and maintaining intimate moments, adding to the psychological tension. I found working on small picture planes helped to reinforce the intimacy of the subject matter with the changes of the figure’s scale adding interest to the overall visual rhythm of the exhibition.

Utilizing gesture, gaze, color, and light, I emphasized these elements differently in each painting to create various moods and meanings. This is not to say I did not incorporate all of these elements in each image but I placed an importance on one or two as the deciding force. Some of these decisions can be seen in the following examples. I found that gesture and gaze indicated a level of apprehension more than color in the image entitled Gossip. I found that color and lighting created more uneasiness than gesture in the picture entitled Confessions of Kin. I found that nudity and color conveyed modesty more than lighting in the painting entitled Madonna of the Kitchen, while the clothed figure and lighting solidified the feelings of

Madonna of the Kitchen
Oil on canvas, 15 _”w x 17”h
dominance more than nudity in the image entitled

*Cell Phone.* In the end, I utilized these elements to unify
the paintings to express emotional experiences of
commonplace events with an undertone of apprehension
to trigger and engage the viewer’s personal meanings of
the narratives.

*Cell Phone*
Oil on canvas, 16”w x 16”h
Bibliography


Appendix: Images

Anticipation of Evening
Oil on canvas, 13” w x 21”h

Ever After
Oil on canvas, 17”w x 15 _”h

Forego, Forgotten
Oil on canvas, 14”w x 14”h

I Gaze
Oil on canvas, 14”w x 11”h
**Kitchen Duty**  
Oil on canvas, 15”w x 17”h

**Out Door**  
Oil on canvas, 20”w x 20”h

**Waiting to Dance**  
Oil on board, 16”w x 20”h

**Prince Charming**  
Oil on board, 16”w x 20”h
We Gaze
Oil on canvas, 14”w x 11”h

You Gaze
Oil on canvas, 14”w x 11”h


Vita

Joanna Norcross Coke was born in Harvard, Massachusetts. Her father was a Captain in the U.S. Navy resulting in being reared in many locations; San Juan, Puerto Rico, Miami, Florida and Harvard, Massachusetts. Her mother, Muse Kotenev, was an interior decorator, a graduate of New York School of Interior Design, and an author of children stories and an autobiography. Joanna received her Associate in Arts degree from Harvard University in 1985. While living in Massachusetts, she worked as a senior graphic designer for a large computer firm until 1990. She returned to school and received her fashion certificate from the School of Fashion Design in Boston and then worked for an international fashion design and manufacturing company until 1998. Joanna continued her educational pursuits at the University of South Florida and in 2002 received two degrees, Bachelor of Science in Art Education and Bachelor of Arts in Fine Arts, both Magna Cum Laude. She began her graduate studies at Louisiana State University and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree, Summa Cum Laude, in 2005. She currently lives in Baton Rouge with her partner, David Storlie.