

Portraits with Memory: My Sitters' Testimonies

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The first project I did with portraits and conversations was with prominent people from the cultural world, initially talking about painting and art. My intentions were to focus on an experiment with visual art. In certain way, the surrealist process of “automatic drawings” appealed to me. I wanted to see what kind of portrait I could accomplish under such conditions, with limited time while multitasking, experiencing a particular moment.

Two of my recent projects, *La historia más larga de Bilbao jamás pintada* and my project that includes portraits and testimonies of Holocaust survivors, involve painting, audio, and video. They are painted in oil on canvas in a direct way in front of the sitter. I paint them in a single session lasting about two hours. The entire process is recorded with a still camera; the frame is occupied half by the sitter and half by the canvas. The video can be watched as the sitter talks and the painting evolves from a blank canvas to a completed work in real time (archive mode), with some editing of excerpts and/or in fast-forward mode to show evolution in just a few minutes. While the evolution of the painting is always present on the frame, the video is edited such that there is always a referent to indicate the particular moment of the conversation.

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Portraying Simon Barenbaum
 (“Portraying Memories.” Project with Holocaust survivors)

I do not want to lose the intimacy of just the sitter and me in the room, so I operate the camera, setting up the shot myself. As the camera is always still, once it is in the proper position I just have to turn the camera on at the start of each session. Both of us are focused on two activities at once, the model on not only answering my questions but also maintaining a correct pose, and I on carrying out the interview and painting the portrait. The conversation completes the experience of the moment, the precise time of the execution, in which the painting is undertaken *alla prima*—all at once—in a single session. The portrait will remain however it turns out, without being touched up later.



Portraying Doña Serapia Mirandona
 (“The Longest Story of Bilbao Ever Painted”)

As these two activities belong to different fields, one visual, the other verbal, I felt they complemented each other. My concentration was very intense, as were the testimonies by my sitters. This is what encouraged me to focus my next project on Holocaust survivors, with testimony as an essential component. I realized that my generation would be the last to have the privilege of direct contact with survivors. The format provides a unique opportunity to listen to their testimonies in a particular way. By hearing them, how they express themselves with specific techniques and in this particular situation, we discover how their voices reveal the experience not necessarily in order to fill the time of the interview, but the time I need to complete their portraits. In a letter to Primo Levi (“I sommersi e i salvati”), “Mrs. Hety S.” mentions how important it is for the new generations to describe inhumanity in a human way.

Some of the survivors I have painted participate in lecture programs and have been interviewed for documentaries. So why record their testimonies again? This approach is quite different. As the painting requires a specific amount of very focused time, the sitter doesn’t feel the urge to fill this period that they might feel were they simply in front of a camera. The time is filled not only based on the testimony but because time is needed for the completion of the painting. We talk in a far more relaxed and reflective manner.

I have experienced a very focused concentration leading to unique testimonies. Normally the sitters haven’t asked for any pauses, sitting for more than two hours—sometimes nearly three—until I say the portrait is completed. This happens even though I always explain beforehand that pauses at any time during the process are not a problem. Some sitters have described the experience as therapeutic.



Portraying Don Amador Orio
 (“The Longest Story of Bilbao Ever Painted”)

As Holocaust survivors are always elderly people, I was attracted to their testimonies at this stage of their lives. In *La Historia más larga de Bilbao jamás pintada*, I decided to paint the oldest people I could contact in Bilbao in the short period I spent there. Vanity manifests itself differently in elderly people, and in Bilbao I found stories that almost no one would have told publicly in other moments of their lives. The intensity of the people sitting and giving their testimonies is apparent in the response that these paintings provoke in the public. Paintings, in our culture, are seen as a human struggle to preserve memory against the oblivion of history. And we contemplate them with a particular path and time.

There are different schools of interviewing, and I am more inclined towards those that include as little of my personal opinion as possible. For example, even if I don't agree with what someone is telling me, I only inquire about contradictions, but avoid confrontation and, of course, never react viscerally. My aim is to be impartial as an interviewer, though no one can be completely neutral, as how the questions are formed and selected can influence the final testimony.



**Portraying Doña Vicenta González
("The Longest Story of Bilbao Ever Painted")**

I usually begin with an open question, such as where sitters are from, where they were born, or what their family and home environment was like when they were growing up. In both the Bilbao and the survivor projects, since the subjects are elderly people who have lived long lives, the

transmission of their experiences and memories takes up a large portion of the testimony. If that phase is completed, then there is time left to ask questions that solicit personal opinions. For example, I can ask about their current religious beliefs, as well as how these have evolved in relation to their traumatic experiences (the war, concentrations camps, for example). I might also ask whether the sitters continue studying, reading, or seeing movies or documentaries about these events, and what their reactions to and opinions on these products are. In any case, my objectivity could be questioned by the assumption that, in the case of the survivors, one will feel an initial sympathy toward them. Even though I try to be a neutral, I imagine that the interviews would have been very different if I were a denier, to give a crude example. In addition, in the world of painting, a portrait painter traditionally tries to create the most flattering image possible of the model because the portrait has been commissioned by the model himself or by someone who wants to pay him homage.

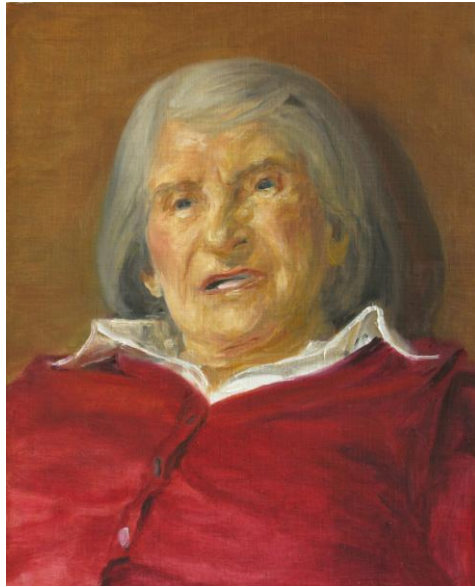
To continue with the example of the denier, but from a different perspective, in a normal interview (sans portrait painting), it is legitimate to interview anyone, including an assassin, an abuser, or a terrorist, for example. In my case, though, when you include a portrait as well, would it be ethical to paint the portrait of a Nazi, for example? Were that to happen, would I be able to carry out an interview at the same level? Would my attitude be reflected in the painting? Perhaps adding a portrait inevitably suggests some unspoken implication about the testimony, connoting an apparent intention to praise, honor, or pay homage to the person portrayed. Possibly a professional bias prevents me from being completely aware of this connotation. When I paint architectural structures, for example, I can focus my attention with equal intensity on a prominent building such as Fallingwater, which was the subject of a large project for me, and on an abandoned trailer. The trailer might be depressing to look at, but indeed I worked on a long series on that subject concurrently with the Fallingwater paintings. Let's posit that every person can have dignity, and that is what you try to portray, just as Velázquez did—whether he painted the king or the jesters. In some projects, I have portrayed people who seemed unpleasant to me, and not as commissioned works, but of my own volition. What an experience! My wife says you can see when I don't like someone in the finished painting, but I am not aware of this.

I remember that during the conference on human rights at Minnesota, Professor Patrick McNamara stated that "history is not the past, but rather a metaphor for the past," a variation on the famous quote from Borges in "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal" that "it may be that universal history is the history of a handful of metaphors" (224). According to Jacques Derrida, all discourse inevitably passes through metaphor. The metaphor as a rhetorical device presupposes an aesthetic component, just as is presupposed in painting. What interests me is the discovery of a parallel between the

impossibility of an eidetic memory—and, of course, the trickiness of memory—with the impossibility of capturing complete reality in a painting. Without getting tangled up in philosophical concepts, you could consider the parallel between the limits of memory and the limits of representation from an epistemological point of view. There is a contrast between the reproduction of a distant past and the reproduction of the present through an immediate memory, the tenths of a second that it takes to look from the model to the palette, to the canvas, and back to the model again. On the other hand, Deleuze refers to four roots of representation: identity, analogy, opposition, and resemblance. He states that the recognition of humanity is in the face.

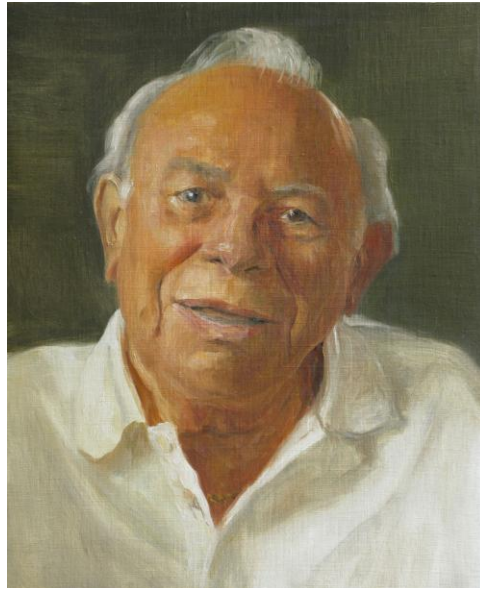
I still do not have a final title, though I have sometimes used “Portraying History” to define the Holocaust survivors project. Although I try to be as “objective” as possible, given my technical and temporal limitations, I can only render a semblance that is more or less faithful, but the painting always comes out of the need to synthesize and to sacrifice part of the total information that I see in that time period of two hours. There may indeed be an intention to represent a reality, but it emerges from the impossibility of creating a faithful representation, because you can’t paint what you see. Everything you see is already gone when you paint. That is why the terms “realist painting” or “realism”—not to mention “hyperrealism”—seem dangerous to me as a way to describe the type of painting I do.

Although formally this type of portrait can be more imperfect or less accurate than if it had been painted in a more controlled situation, this limitation lends the work greater emotional intensity. In fact, the way I approach the blank canvas, as you can see in each video, beginning my portraits without any previous sketch, is called painting *a sentimento*. Over and above the historical facts that can be taken from these conversations, in the testimonies, just as in the paintings, expression and form of communication are essential.



Portrait of Margrit Rustov
 (“Portraying Memories.” Project with Holocaust survivors)

The restriction to a single session allows me access to some of the sitters who are unable to give me more sessions or a larger amount of time. If I had more time, the result would be different but not necessarily better, because the session tightly fits to a certain intensity of the story. Indeed, sometimes a session has lasted more than three hours—not just because of me but because the sitter has prolonged his testimony of his own accord. Therefore, the two hours can be a suggested and subjective time period. The model is not always aware of how much time has passed. That is why the way he expresses himself, how he tells his story, connects to a portrait that seeks to achieve a certain evocative quality. Because my subjects are communicating very emotional experiences to me, even more so when their stories come out of a desire and a genuine effort to transmit and preserve memories, there will be points at which a historian or academic might find an inaccurate or incorrect fact. Nevertheless, as in the portrait, there is recognition, a similarity. Even when someone tells me, “You nailed it,” it’s dubious praise. How can you capture the past in an instant? The portrait is a metaphor for the sitter.



Portrait of Robert Mendler
 (“Portraying Memories.” Project with Holocaust survivors)

In keeping with my earlier point about what portraits imply in our culture, there is an element of preservation. By capturing the image of a person of a certain age, with the marks that time has etched on that face, there is an intention to preserve that existence—you portray it as it is seen now. From that present, that face presents a landscape, a landscape that a geologist can explore and see the various strata that offer testimony on the past. When I choose people for my projects who have been involved in historical events, such as the Holocaust or the Spanish Civil War, it is in order to explore those events from their personal point of view. This is not the most objective point of view from which to judge those events because the testimonies are charged with emotion and lack the aseptic nature imbued by historical distance. From our perspective, though, perhaps we can better understand and be better judges by listening to the witnesses or protagonists of those events, when human rights are seen through statements that each one tries to explain in an individual way.

In these projects, I have concentrated on the perspectives of the victims, of those who have suffered injustices in their lives, such as a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp or a member of the Spanish Republic imprisoned by the Franco regime. Oddly, though, I also have wanted, for example, to interview the abbot of San Isidro. He was a priest and a sympathizer of the uprising against the Second Republic, and he still justifies his position and

the uprising itself. He told me his version of how he lived through the assassinations of his fellow priests. In an essay about the Spanish Civil War published in *El País*, Javier Cercas tried to differentiate between what “wrong” is from a moral viewpoint and from a political viewpoint. It is a topic that still stirs debate to this day. To continue with the example of the abbot: I recently showed that video in a church in León, at a collective exhibition. An eight-minute cut was made in which he justifies the uprising. I showed that same cut at the human rights conference in Minnesota. There, however, I compared it with two other positions: the Republican position and that of a person who shifted between the two sides according to necessity. This latter position is one that is not often mentioned, yet apolitical people comprise a significant portion of the population in every conflict. Nevertheless, perhaps there is a certain danger that the public who saw the video of the abbot in the church, taken out of context, might think that I am glorifying and implicitly supporting the abbot’s point of view, justifying the Franco period—merely because a portrait of him was painted. In other words, I’m not sure that the act of doing a portrait of someone doesn’t imply that I am necessarily glorifying him.

In any case, to preserve a memory is to pay homage to that existence. Above all else, you don’t want to lapse into a caricature. In some way, these portraits are anti-caricature. There is no attempt to take pleasure in the exaggeration of certain features. You seek to capture light and a moment that manifests itself now, in the present, by tracing a past, a past through which human experience is transmitted to us.

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