

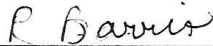
The Range of Emotion

MFA 2018

Emily Bowman



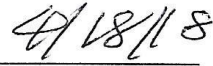
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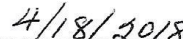
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Introduction

Portraiture and the human form have been explored through art for ages. I have chosen to examine this subject matter with watercolor. I am a shy and introverted person, but despite that, I am interested in getting to know people and having them know me. I chose to convey very subtle emotion, not so much through facial expression, but through my color palette and the vantage point of the model. I decided to pursue this interest during my time at Radford University in order to better learn about and understand others.

With these goals in mind, I moved forward and my work evolved in a slow but sure fashion. I did not altogether dislike my early work, but my current work better communicates my search for a simpler interpretation of the human form and portraiture. The most notable difference between my current work and past work is the use of color. When I began at Radford, I adhered to using predominantly charcoal on white surfaces. While I liked the dramatic statement of charcoal, it felt as though I was using a very limited amount of resources, and it ultimately caused too much frustration to continue in that direction.

I transitioned to working in watercolor and the opportunities created by all the varied colors added a necessary and desirable depth to my pieces. I also came to realize the underrated power of subtlety. I did not like being overly obvious in my portrayal of emotions, so I strove to convey emotion with color instead of relying on facial expressions. By using this methodology and rationale, I was able to create a body of work that encapsulated my passion for people and the subtle emotions that we exhibit.

Ch. 1: Inspiration

My influences are varied and even though my current body of work is done completely in watercolor, I have looked for inspiration from artists that work in other mediums. The work of Käthe Kollwitz (see fig. 1 and fig. 2) has left an impression on me since my first introduction to it. The sorrow that she conveys in many of her works is so palpable. I have so many feelings for this artist, because of how powerful and honest her work is. My earlier work was done almost completely in charcoal because I admired her art that much, and I still try to portray the kind of intensity that embodies her work. Her charcoal pieces are provoking with their stark contrast, and it enhances her portrayal of the complex and myriad versions of grief.

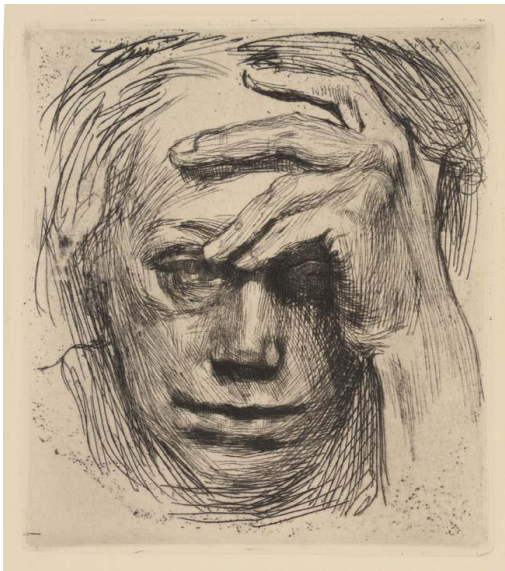


Figure 1: Käthe Kollwitz, *Self portrait, Hand at the Forehead*. Etching and Drypoint, 6 1/16 x 5 1/2 in, 1948



Figure 2: Käthe Kollwitz, *Self portrait*, Black gouache, with brush and gray wash, heightened with white gouache on brown wove paper, 400 x 320 mm, 1891/92



Figure 3: Lucian Freud, *Reflection (Self Portrait)*, oil on canvas, 51.2 x 56.2 cm, 1985



Figure 4: Jenny Saville, *The Mothers*, oil on canvas, 106 5/16 x 86 5/8 in, 2011

Other artists I draw inspiration from are Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville (see fig. 3 and fig. 4). The sculptural quality and intense observation of Freud's subjects are what attracted me to his work. He had such a fascination with the application of paint; one can easily imagine him mixing his paint with both purpose and wonder. Freud painted on a fixed schedule and I truly envy his dedication.

Jenny Saville has a similar quality of intensity, but is much less illustrative than Freud. She has a very active approach to her work and it gives her pieces a great sense of urgency. I much prefer this approach when it comes to art-making because it appears more spontaneous and genuine, qualities that I have done my best to emulate.



Figure 5: Maurice Prendergast, *Sunlight on the Piazzetta*, Watercolor over graphite, 12 ½ x 20 5/8 in., 1888-89



Figure 6: John Singer Sargent, *Mountain Stream*, Watercolor over graphite on paper, 13 11/16 x 21 in, 1912-14

Some watercolor artists I have researched are Maurice Prendergast and John Singer Sargent. Sargent was a watercolor master who seriously utilized the transparency of the medium. His piece, *Mountain Stream*, is a striking example of how one can use a vast palette of color (see Figure 6). The way he paints the human form in the upper right corner is exquisite; her bare legs gleam in the light of the sun while her backside is in the softest of shadows. Sargent could just as easily have chosen not to paint a figure at all, but the fact that he did so demonstrates an acceptance of challenge and a level of bravery that I aspire to incorporate in my own work.

Ch. 2: Process and Progression

When I began my course of study at Radford University, I did not have a very clear idea of where I wanted to go with my work. I knew what I was good at, and while I was open to experimenting, I was not sure what direction I should take. Thankfully, all the teachers I met were openly excited about their field and interests, and I realized that I had not been exposed to that to such a degree at my undergraduate institution. I worked a lot with Mr. Webb, who was the first professor I had that encouraged me to pursue my own interests even if he himself was not interested in the same thing. Pursuing art at an adult level did not have to be grueling and tiresome; it could even be fun.

My early work consisted of much more experimentation as I tried to find my main focus. These pieces were done in charcoal on white surfaces, either paper or gessoed. I had always been attracted to the dramatic nature of charcoal paired against a stark white. I worked from the human form, but I found it difficult to explore a wide range of human emotion with the medium. Charcoal often seems harshly cold and somewhat depressing to me, and while I still like the aesthetic of it, I needed a more conducive way to convey various emotions.

I experimented with black ink on white paper and ink wash, but I continued to feel limited. I began to realize that even though I was interested in a wide range of emotions, I was reluctant to experiment much with color because I felt it created too many variables. There simply was less for me to consider and prepare for when it came to mediums that were black and white.

I took my first watercolor class and it was liberating. I had not watched anyone approach watercolor before and had not seen any videos about the process. I came in almost

completely new to the subject. Where many people loathe attempting anything like watercolor, I threw myself in and figured I would simply adapt to it. I had faith in my intuition and did my best not to second-guess the marks I made.

Around the end of my second year, I began to work very closely with Professor Feng and I found his philosophy of art comforting. It was much easier for me to relate to his methodology and the rationale behind it was relieving. Art did not have to be complicated to be significant; it did not have to be mired in conceptual nuances. I came to realize that many of my early teachers were more concerned with the mental side of art, whereas I was more concerned with the emotional and personal side of art.

My technique with watercolor grew, and whenever I felt I was lacking, I simply moved forward and hoped for the best. I liked painting people, but that was not much to stand on, and as a result I really had to analyze *why* I liked that kind of subject. People relate to people; the human form has been a constant interest for artists in history. Painting people and portraits was my way of connecting with others. I have a talent for observation and it gave me an opportunity to train that skill. Still-lives were too static; I needed to paint subjects that were alive to feel any kind of excitement.

I like drawing the complete human form, but it quite simply takes longer and there is more to consider anatomically. In my opinion, the face is the most diverse and personal part of the human body, so that was what I chose to focus on. For some reason, even though portraits have been a staple of art throughout history, I sometimes encountered a bias when I let others know my focus. The train of thought seemed to be that since so many artists have made portraits, the endeavor was only worthwhile if one made them in an extremely different way.

My work might not pass the bar when it comes to something people have never seen before, but I am avidly moving in that direction and I believe the work I created demonstrates that.

I developed a process of working wet on wet, where the watercolor is applied to a wet surface. I often created pools of water where the color would spread, instead of lightly applying a layer of water to the paper. This method allowed for variations of a watermark that felt thrilling and spontaneous. I also experimented with my use of color, choosing to incorporate an arbitrary palette that communicates emotion rather than adhering strictly to the natural colors of the subject. Of course not every piece was a “success,” but I learned from every piece and I reveled in the element of surprise and the unpredictable; I could not always tell what the final result would look like.

Ch. 3 Emotional Expression

I explored subtle emotion in my body of work through portraiture, utilizing color and viewpoint of the model as a means to convey those emotions. Instead of displaying very obvious emotions, I chose to portray them in a soft and subtle manner. If each emotion had been dramatic or extremely exaggerated, it would have been easy to identify and move on. I wanted to give the viewer a chance to consider a range of emotions that were not so easy to pinpoint.



Figure 7: Emily Bowman, *Woman in Hat*, Watercolor on paper, 28 x 32 in, 2017

Thoughtfulness is a characteristic that I deeply appreciate, so I incorporated that trait into my work. Each portrait subject has an air of contemplation, even the model in *Woman in Hat* (fig. 7). She looks forward with a steely stare, seemingly focusing on something in the distance. Purple is a mixture of red and blue, red often signifying ferocity and blue calmness,

which adds to the intense stare of the subject. For this reason, others colors are used, but purple is the dominant color.



Figure 8: Emily Bowman, *Woman with Blue Eyes*, Watercolor on paper, 28 x 32 in, 2018

Purple is also a dominant color in *Woman with Blue Eyes* (fig. 8). This piece has a much more serious mood. The eyes glance up in a cautious manner, and the contrast of the soft, warm tones of the face against the blue and purple of the background and hair creates a somewhat anxious push and pull between calm and confusion. This piece in particular creates a similar atmosphere to the aforementioned work by Kollwitz (see fig. 1.) Kollwitz's *Self Portrait* also does not exhibit a strong, obvious facial expression, but its emotional impact is no less intense. There is a sense of quiet anxiety and introspection by the model. Both works have an

emotional potency, but while Kollwitz looks haggard in her self-portrait, *Woman with Blue Eyes* (fig. 8) has a high-key energy that was predominantly attained through the use of color.



Figure 9: Emily Bowman, *Woman in Pink Shirt*, Watercolor on paper, size, 2017

Woman in Pink Shirt (fig. 9) has a slightly similar mood of caution, but is warmer with tones of pink and orange. The blue and green found in portions of the negative space emit a sad calm, along with translucent blue that lines the eyes. The warmer tones in the face and shirt allow for an interpretation of conflicting emotions. The pink in the face is soft and rosy, with watermarked edges that create rich blooms of color. The expression of the model is quiet, but the use of fierce reds and golds gives an impression of strength and confidence.



Figure 10: Emily Bowman, *Woman Stealing a Glance*, Watercolor on paper, size, 2018

Woman Stealing a Glance (fig. 10) shares some similar elements. The model has her back to us, her face angled downwards in ruminative thought, composed of mostly reds and oranges. Normally the downward turn of the face would convey sadness, but the intense red of the shoulder and face help to give the impression of emotional depth and strength from within. On the surface, the subject is in no form of emotional turmoil, but the intensity of the reds and oranges leads one to believe that much more is happening underneath.



Figure 11: Emily Bowman, 4 Woman Glancing Upward, Watercolor on paper, size, 2018

Woman Glancing Upward (fig. 11) moves in a more positive direction. It is the only piece that involves the subject looking up and creates a sense of hopefulness. The translucency of gold and pink in the face adds to this. As opposed to the bolder application of reds in the two aforementioned pieces, *Woman Glancing Upward* (fig. 11) is made up of muted tones of pink, gold, and green. One can see the subject glancing toward something hopeful in the soft light, mouth turned upward in a slight smile. Dark shadows against light create a dramatic effect, but I chose not to create a mass of stark shadows as I felt it would detract from the overall positive feeling.



Figure 12: Emily Bowman, *Woman with Dark Hair*, Watercolor on paper, size, 2018

Similar to *Woman Stealing a Glance* (fig. 10), *Woman with Dark Hair* (fig. 12) also portrays the model with her face mostly turned away from the viewer. An air of mystery is conveyed as she stares off against the translucent green and blue of the negative space. Her hair takes up most of the piece, applied with an under layer of light blue and top layers painted with loose strokes of violet, black, and Prussian blue. Blue is often perceived as a calm color, which lends to the mood of this piece. That calm color is only amplified when placed next to the rich ochre tones that make up the model's skin tone.

Ch. 4 Conclusion

In my time at Radford University, I endeavored to create a body of work that communicated a varied visual language of subtle emotion through portraiture that incorporated a somewhat unrealistic color palette. In my personal opinion, I believe I succeeded in that mission. I was introduced to watercolor and became very competent in the medium, then used those skills to make a series of work that aptly conveyed what I intended.

I plan to continue working with watercolor, and while I still like portraiture, I would also be open to working with more of the figure. My next goal is to make a living as a working artist, and to hopefully have an art-related job to support that.

When I started at Radford in 2014, I was fairly aimless, but the faculty and atmosphere of the department encouraged me forward to create work and consider thoughts and feelings I might never have explored otherwise. It gave me the opportunity to seriously think about what I wanted to do with my present time and my future, for which I will always be grateful.

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Figures

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