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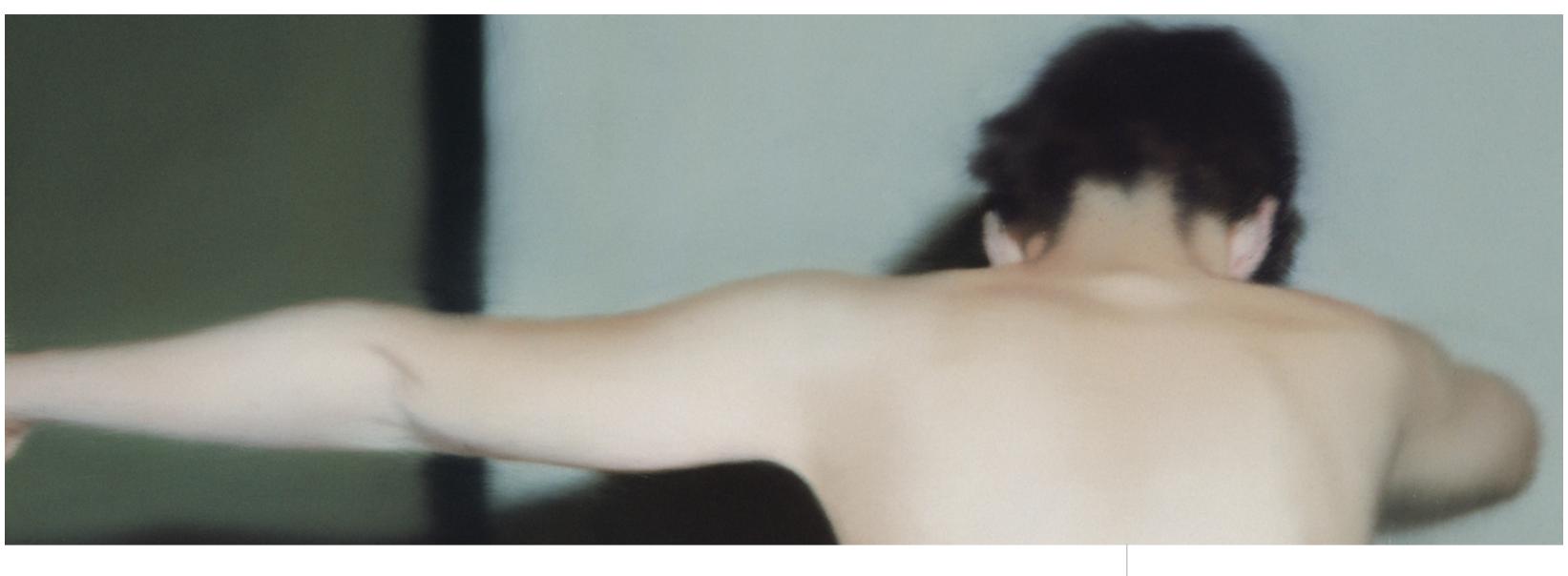
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# Alone Again, Or

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The persistent and enigmatic subject of women turning away



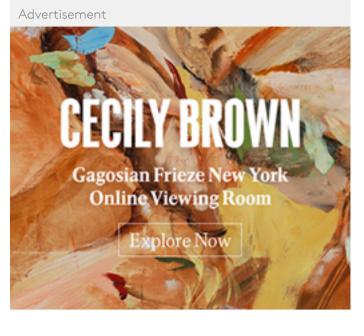
## 'There's so little risk of finding her.' Rosemary Tonks

She turns her back on you; this, it would seem, is her appeal. She's been painted like this for centuries, and, more recently, photographed. Often she is naked, in a bathroom or bedroom, solitary, sleeping or day-dreaming, or at a picnic, momentarily stilled, enveloped in a vague, dark space. The one constant is that her face is obscured. Her identity is fluid, nuanced; it can be elegiac, erotic or sullen, an homage to something lost or never quite gained, a study in both negation and yearning. It's impossible to know whether she - who appears in so many guises - was ever, in the act of being represented, aware that someone was looking at her (the observed is often innocent of the observer). Whether we read the artist's rejection of her face as a reflection of her inner life, or read the focus on her body as an indication of sensual preoccupations, she is ultimately irreducible and as such can be whoever we want to her to be. As Stuart Morgan once wrote: 'Since perception of the human figure is also perception of one person by another, we credit that other with attributes of our own; we use them, to satisfy our needs.'<sup>1</sup>

A woman looking away is obviously considered worth looking at; her resistance to our scrutiny must be compelling, pleasurable even. Otherwise, why have men - and it is almost always men - returned to portray her silence, her enigma and her malleability, again and again? Search the collections of London's National Gallery, Tate Modern and Tate Britain and it doesn't take long to come across examples of paintings of women looking away painted by men – from Johannes Vermeer, Diego Velázquez and Pierre Bonnard to Edgar Degas, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Eric Gill, Duncan Grant and Man Ray – and none by women. Even taking into account the historical exclusion of the work of women artists from national collections, this is surprising.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, La Baigneuse, Dite Baigneuse de Valpinçon (The Bather, Called the Bather of Valpinçon), 1808, oil on canvas, 146x97 cm. Courtesy: Musée du Louvre, Paris; photograph: Scala, Florence



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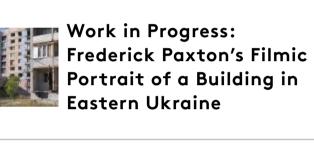
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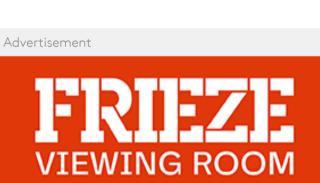
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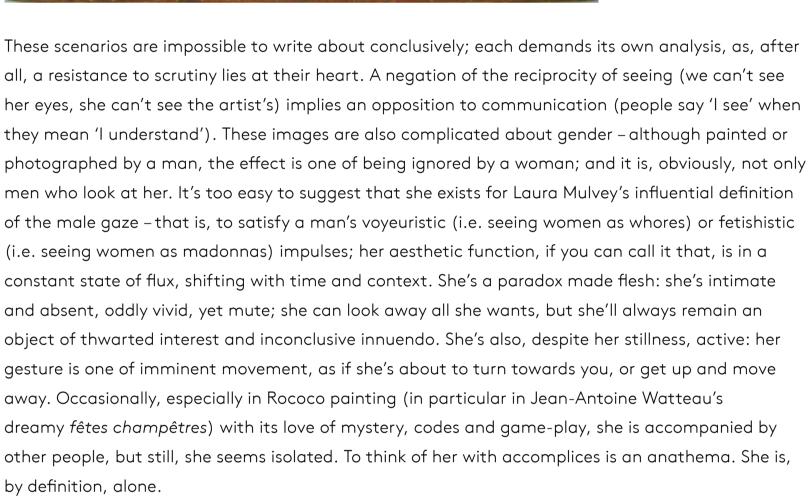
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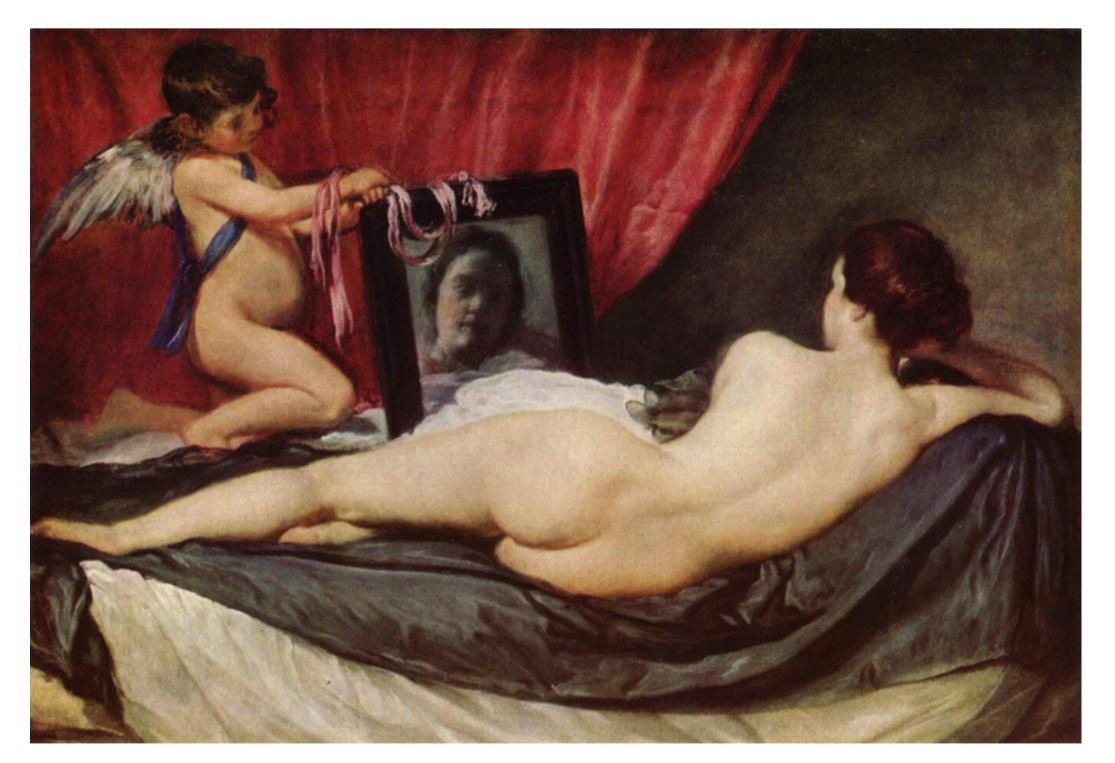


Cousines (The Two Cousins), c.1716, oil on Canvas, See yno Curces annot see is full of possibility. An image of a woman turning away gives you permission to do something denied in life: stare.

> A painting of someone turning away defies portraiture; the backs of these women are as unfathomable as masks. Despite how delicately, even realistically, her hair, her skin, her clothes are rendered, she's an abstraction; a formal exercise in secrecy, her body reduced to plane, volume and colour. Conventionally, her prop is a mirror; tantalizingly, she can look at her face, but we cannot. There are, of course, exceptions. The only surviving nude by Velázquez, The Toilet of Venus, also known as The Rokeby Venus (1647-51), is possibly the most famous one, but even here, in a lookingglass held by her son Cupid, her reflected face is blurred, her expression uncertain. The emphasis, undoubtedly, is on her skin; scrutinizing her is a curiously intimate act despite her very public visibility in London's National Gallery. The sense that this representation of an anonymous woman, has, over the years, been confused for a real woman was made apparent in 1914 when an axewielding suffragette, Mary Richardson, notoriously slashed the painting. The outcry was universal: many newspapers reported the vandalism as if it were attempted murder. The Times, for example, reported that the painting suffered from 'cruel wounds to the neck' and 'incisions to the shoulders and back'.<sup>2</sup> Richardson's statement about her actions was as circular as it was defiant. She declared that 'I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs. Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history.'<sup>3</sup>

Looking away she is, of course, the embodiment of vulnerability – a fact ironically made clear by Richardson's actions. The implicit assumption of voyeurism is the stuff of nightmares for many women, yet the power play here is not straightforward. The artist has asserted his power by creating a likeness of a woman who rejects his gaze in the same instance he renders her eternally immobile. Yet, at the moment that she looks away, so, in a sense, does the artist - it is safe to assume he is in agreement with his subject. Where does that leave you, looking at her?

She makes you look at what she is looking at. Her gaze, the direction of which is only indicated by the angle of the back of her head, directs yours. Often, she is staring at nothing but the innate abstraction of an inky black space.



Diego Velázquez, The Toilet of Venus ('The Rokeby Venus'), 1647-51, oil on canvas, 123x177 cm. Courtesy: The National Gallery London

Jean-Antoine Watteau, Les Deux

A face you cannot see is always full of possibility. An image of a woman turning away gives you permission to do something denied in life: stare. Such demand from a picture - that you look at someone who has been stilled at the moment she might be considering moving - is compelling, a double-bluff - she's not a real woman, she's a real representation. This person, this woman you are looking at is a fragment, hidden behind the veneer of a seemingly straightforward appearance that, despite its apparent clarity, refuses to give anything up. She's in her own world, but it's not of her making. She did not choose to represent her own reality. Usually her identity is obscured; when she's named, the emphasis shifts from seeing her as a type to wondering about her as a person; biography hovers in the wings.



In João Penalva's black and white photograph, Sumiko (2009), a Japanese woman is pictured from behind. Dressed in a modest kimono, all we can see of her, apart from a slim sliver of the side of her face, is her hair, which, elaborately coiffed and coiled, shines like polished wood. It is, in a sense, a conventional image of discreet Japanese womanhood, tinged with the erotic possibilities that such a mix of modesty and anonymity might promise. However, beneath the photograph, a text both complicates and humanises the subject by illuminating the sobering reasons for the obscuring of Sumiko's face. It reads:

'Sumiko worked in the Ginza, in the office of her aunt's modeling agency. She had resigned herself to the fact that she could never be a model, but her aunt thought otherwise. She sent her out one day with Miss Ouchi, the hairdresser, on a hair assignment to Mr Enbutsu's photographic studio in Akasaka. She had made it clear to him that Sumiko was exclusively a hair model and only to be photographed from the back or her left profile. She had a beautiful face, though ruined by a scar off-centre on her chin, thin like a strand of hair curling back on itself. After months of working together, Mr Enbutsu told Sumiko that he would like to do a portrait of her from the front, to show her how he could paint out her scar. As she took the retouched portrait home she wished that life, like photography, had such simple tricks to set things right.'

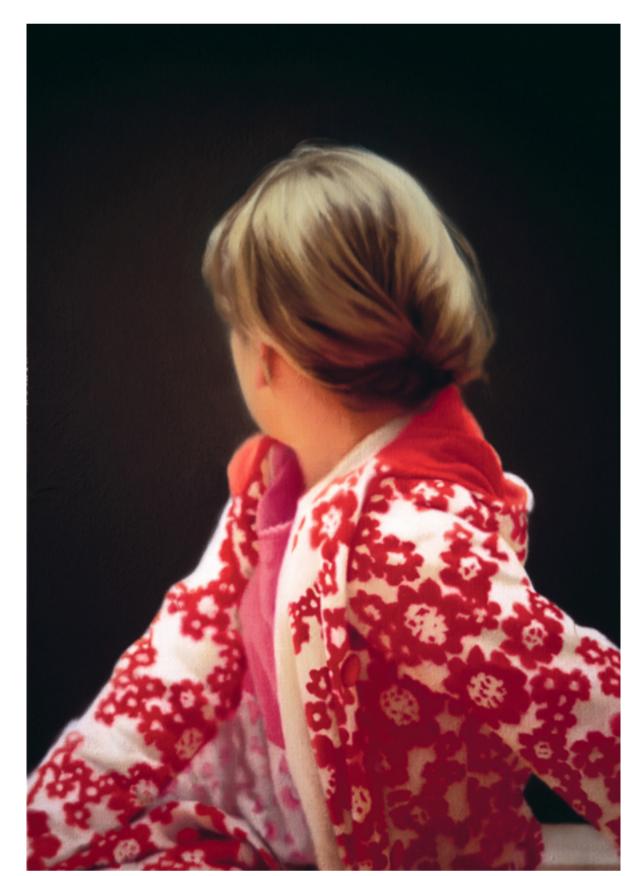


João Penalva, Sumiko, 2009, framed pigment print on paper, 128x81x4 cm. Courtesy: Barbara Gross Galerie, Munich; photograph: Wilfried Petzi

Perhaps this story is a fiction. Perhaps it's not even someone called Sumiko in the photograph. Perhaps all pictures are riddles. The final room in the recent exhibition of portraits by Gerhard Richter at London's National Portrait Gallery reinforced a similar deferral of meaning. It included a mix of paintings of the artist's family and friends - women (wives, lovers, friends), many naked and some with babies, most of whom seem to be emerging from a faint fog. Like a blown-up detail from earlier historical paintings, a large mirror (simply titled Spiegel, Mirror, 2008) was the only work in the room that was not painted – an object that shifted the emphasis in the gallery from people looking at other people, to looking at themselves. Unsurprisingly, most scurried past it. (Richter has written that his interest in mirrors is to do with the 'provocation of the viewer, who sees himself instead of a picture.<sup>4</sup>) Almost everyone in the room was clustered around one of the artist's most popular paintings: Betty from 1988. (Indeed, when frieze ran a survey of over 150 people in the art world in 2001, asking the question: 'What work of art would you like most to live with?', Betty came out third, after Andy Warhol's 'Electric Chairs' series from 1965 and Peter Brueghel the Elder's painting from 1565, Hunters in the Snow.) A lot of people, it would seem, want to live with her, a fact that should - considering how conventional she is, with her youth and gleaming hair, her delicate ear, bright red flowered jacket, remoteness and grace - come as no surprise. Betty is, despite Richter's radical credentials, the kind of image the public is hard-wired to like. With its echoes of past great paintings (especially Ingres' La Baigneuse (The Bather) from 1808, where the woman's back appears carved from light and glass and varnished in pale honey) and its mix of virtuoso skill and inscrutability, Betty is superficially accessible, compelling and undemanding; a picture that was, in a sense, familiar before it was even made. And yet - there is something in this painting that transcends such pat definitions even as it rests comfortably within them. With its near-hallucinogenic relationship to photography, and the dynamic pyramid of its composition; with its high-pitched contrast of realism, abstraction, history painting and the family snap-shot, like a chaste variation of an erotic masterpiece, Betty straddles traditionally conflicting worlds. Perhaps this is her appeal. I don't know. But I do know that I, too, like looking at her. As Richter irascibly declared: 'good paintings are incomprehensible. Creating the incomprehensible has nothing to do with turning out any old bunkum, because bunkum is always comprehensible'.<sup>5</sup>

Opposite Betty, grouped in the corner of the same exhibition, hung three paintings depicting the back of a slim, naked, short-haired woman seen from the waist up: the series 'I.G.' from 1994. In one picture, she stands with her head bowed, her arms limp by her side, as if resigned, defeated or sad; in the second, her head is lowered even further. Her right arm is bent in front of her, while her left is stretched out sideways as if she is punching air with a gesture so urgent her hand has disappeared outside the frame. In the third, in a composition that indicates imminent movement, her head is tilted slightly upwards and to the left; her arms are, once again, hanging by her body. In all three paintings, she faces a wall interrupted by a dark space that hints at, if not a door, then at least a dark passageway: it is hard not to read it as an ominous exit. Contrasted with the golden serenade of Betty, 'I.G.', with its milky, melancholy browns, greens and blacks, is a wintry sonata in three movements.

Unlike Ingres' painting, whose subject remains anonymous – as do most historical paintings of naked women – Richter has chosen to identify his subjects. His attitude to portraiture is twofold. On the one hand, he has expressed straightforwardly sentimental reasons for making them: 'Everyone has produced his own "devotional pictures": these are the likenesses of family and friends, preserved in remembrance of them'.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he is quick to reiterate the essential mystery of his subjects and the fallibility of portraiture as a genre, declaring that 'images (and ideas and ideals) are static, superficial, unachievable and are to be doubted' and that 'I don't think the painter need either see or know the sitter. A portrait must not express anything of the sitter's "soul", essence or character. Nor must a painter "see" a sitter in any specific, personal way.'<sup>7</sup> As is well known, Betty is a portrait of Richter's 22-year-old daughter, and 'IG' a study of his ex-wife, the artist Isa Genzken, whom Richter chose to portray soon after their relationship had ended. (How anyone could possibly represent either a daughter or wife without 'seeing' them in a particular way, is, I must say, beyond me.) In 1977, Richter also painted two other portraits of Betty. One is a fogged image of her face, the other a small portrait of her head and shoulders, animated by the bright contrast between her milky skin and vivid red sweater. She is seen from above, as if the artist is looking down at her. Her expression is blank, her youth evident. However, despite the fact that in this painting we see her face clearly, compared to the later, faceless *Betty*, this earlier picture is both highly descriptive, yet lacklustre; a good illustration, perhaps of Richter's statement: 'I want pictorial content without sentiment, but I want it as human as possible.'<sup>8</sup>



Gerhard Richter, Betty, 1988, oil on canvas, 102x72 cm. Courtesy: Saint Louis Art Museum

Soon after I visited the Richter exhibition I traveled across London to see Genzken's solo show, 'Open, Sesame!', at the Whitechapel Gallery. I have never done this before: moved, quite literally, from looking at images of someone to then seeing their own art works. Walking into the gallery, I was greeted by Ohr (Ear, 1980), a blown-up photograph of a delicate ear, sculptural in its detail and brushed with silvery-gold strands of wind-blown hair. As if waiting for a confession, the photograph immediately hints at an interior world of secrets and whispers. It is part of a series of the same name that Genzken created by stopping women on the streets of New York to ask if she could photograph their ear. According to the artist: 'not a single woman said no. Because I didn't ask for their face, but for something largely anonymous [...] everyone thought that was a nice experience [...] Of course, I did work with some light and hair shining in the sun [...] I tried to make the situation nice for the ear.'<sup>9</sup>

Ohr pre-dates Betty by eight years, and in many ways, shares certain qualities with it, but with one major difference. Both images are dependent on photography, lit dramatically, delight in the intimations of anonymity and intimacy, and in the complicated zones that demarcate divisions between what is public and what is private (both in art and life) yet in Genzken's image - a woman by a woman - the body is cast away. Surreal in its dislocation, the ear hovers alone, like a memorial to secrecy, its fleshy structure the support for a passageway that leads not to a corridor or the room of a house but into the woman's head - the place where her thoughts reside. In a gallery sight is privileged; here Genzken has shifted the focus to a different form of communication: listening and, by association, thinking, which will always remain, in its purest form, invisible.

#### JENNIFER HIGGIE

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<sup>1</sup>What the Butler Saw, Selected Writings of Stuart Morgan, Ian Hunt (ed.), Durian Publications, 1996, London p.243

<sup>2</sup> Lynda Nead, The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality, 1992, Routledge, New York, p. 35

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Richter: The Daily Practice of Painting, Hans Ulrich Obrist (ed.), Thames and Hudson, Anthony D'Offay Gallery, London, 1995, p. 99

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> National Portrait Gallery

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Op. Cit. Daily Practice of Painting, p.97

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Tillmans interviews Iza Genzken, Camera Austria, No. 81, 2003, pp. 7–18

First published in Issue 124 Jun - Aug 2009

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