

## The Question

"Do you have faith in my work?" Riva Lehrer asked me this, as we sat in her kitchen, discussing her paintings. That kitchen is small and colorful like Riva and the rest of her apartment, including her tiny studio. My left elbow rubbed against her kitchen window which displayed an extraordinary sunset; that was the evening Chicago had a massive lightning storm and two rainbows. To myself, I chewed on her question, thinking *oh no... do I even have faith in my own work?* So I dodged it, saying, "Who do I have faith in? Rembrandt?" But in retrospect, Riva was getting to the heart of what she does, asking the thing you don't ask (do you believe in me?) while making vulnerability visible.

Riva's start was more vulnerable than most. Born with spina bifida, doctors pronounced her profoundly disabled and recommended she be institutionalized. Fortunately, her parents disagreed. Intellectually razor sharp, Riva flourished, despite the physical and social dilemmas a malformed spine imposed on her.



Riva Lehrer, *At 54*, 2013, dimensional mixed media collage, 15 x 12 x .5"

Much can be summed up through her shoes. These are boots: lace-up black asymmetrical chunks, resembling fun-house platform Doc Martens. Every six weeks they must be reshaped, as her body continually shifts. Without them, she can't walk. Last year, while driving, her right leg suddenly froze. She couldn't brake and slammed into the car in front of her. She assumed she'd lost neurological control, but then realized the misshapen block of her boot was wedged between the gas and brake pedals. Those shoes were always unwieldy. As a child, she self-consciously tried to hide them, but in young adulthood she literally stepped out. Now, they're her signature—feet sculptures. She decorates them with neon laces and wears short skirts and leggings to show them off. They work perfectly with the streak in her hair. Stand with her at openings, and you'll hear young artists exclaim "I LOVE your shoes!"

The decision to not hide—to become visible—was hard won and ties directly to Riva's work, particularly her engagement with portraiture. Riva discusses the evolution of her own visibility by describing a contradiction, that she was both stared at and ignored. Because she was different, people stared. She would pretend not to notice, but would also stare back. She became fascinated by staring which led to a fascination with portraits, and she became aware that people like her were not in them. This was made painfully clear to her in art school, when she began making self-portraits and was told to stop, that "bodies like yours are not acceptable subject matter for art."<sup>1</sup> It took ten years for her to shake that off, but meanwhile she contemplated who was portrayed, who wasn't, and why.



Hans Holben the Younger  
*Portrait of Henry, VIII*, 1540,  
oil on panel, 34.8 x 29.3



John Singer Sargent, *Ena and Betty, Daughters of Asher and Mrs. Weithermer*, 1901,  
oil on canvas, 73 x 51.5"



Diego Velázquez, *The Dwarf Francesca Lezcano*, called "El Nino de Vallecas," 1642-45,  
oil on canvas, 42 x 32.5"

In the historic portrait, power resides with the sitter—the affluent, powerful and beautiful, those deemed worthy, as Riva puts it, of being "the stars of their own life on canvas."<sup>2</sup> Not only are their likenesses memorialized in paint, but they could dictate and redesign their image. The most celebrated portraitist was their servant. Thus John Singer Sargent's frustration when he defined a portrait as a painting "with a little something wrong about the mouth."<sup>3</sup> The artist was expected to produce a certain caliber of work while also enhancing the subject: a woman would be beautified, a man would be dignified, and each would have the attributes appropriate to their stature and role in the world. Who wasn't worthy? The poor, the powerless, the unlovely, unsightly and deformed. The rare exceptions were entertainers and servants of the court. The patron controlled who was depicted and who was remembered, and in so doing controlled the role of the artist and their place in history.

In the 20th century this power dynamic shifts. As photography assumes the role of depiction, painting is released from that requirement. Description is a choice. Likeness is undone. A classic example is Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein. Stein describes this painting as taking over 90 sittings, Picasso repeatedly wiping out the face while refusing to allow her to see it. Finally, he declared it done and invited her to look. Stein then said, "But it doesn't look like me." Picasso's response, "It will." This has been interpreted as a sign of Picasso's prescience, that he had somehow painted the future Stein, but it was much more arrogant. If you've seen this painting in the flesh, close your eyes. Imagine Stein. What you see is the painting. Picasso owns her likeness. It has eclipsed every photograph ever taken of her, even for Stein, who wrote, "For me it is I, and it is the only reproduction of me which is always I...."<sup>4</sup> Thus the power of her image in history belongs to him. In this context the portrait in painting is redefined. It's now more about the painter than the painted.



Pablo Picasso, *Gertrude Stein*, 1905-06, oil on canvas, 39.4 x 32"

Riva's work pushes against both historic and modern versions of portraiture. For more than 20 years, she has been painting the anti-normal—the disabled, the misfits, those who have been missing from the history of portrayal. She occupies overlapping underdog communities: she is part of disability or "crip" culture—she's an advocate for recognition and visibility for the disabled—and she is also a gay feminist woman artist and part of those circles as well. She selects her own subjects, does not work on commission, and is acutely aware of the power-play existing between painter and subject.

Riva also pushes aside the contemporary dictum that she make us aware of her inventing hand. Riva does not redesign. She doesn't edit, simplify, compress or redact. More isn't simply more. More is everything. Her labor of description becomes an ethical stance—she owes it to her sitters to present them in exquisite detail. By subjugating design to information she cedes the power of image and likeness to the sitter. She says, your facts matter more than my invention. This work becomes populist. Anyone can access these images. Anyone can understand what they're seeing. And, especially important, there will be no confusing the non-normative body of the sitter with an artists' expressive whim. The sitter's visibility is more important than the artist's aesthetic.

Doing this exposes Riva to two perils. Because she's so descriptive, she risks being dismissed as illustrative and minor—an activist who paints. And because she's so explicit, she risks reducing her subjects to rubber-neck spectacles. It's these two issues that led to her question about faith. She's most concerned with spectacle as that, of course, dogs her in life as well as art. She considers it a failure of empathy in the viewer, that we non-crips are unable to see ourselves in the bodies of the disabled. We stare because we see no protagonist, only objects of pity and fascination.

However, in my opinion, that may be the reason we stare at her, but it doesn't apply to her work. I believe the greater danger is the reduction of art to its subject matter and intent. Riva primarily discusses her work in terms of her subjects and her mission, which leads to its meaning being defined in those terms. So, let's look again, with a different agenda.

First, are these really portraits? Riva's figures walk, wade, crouch, recline. They exist in action, as actors. Their primary interaction is not with us, but with the fictitious worlds they occupy. This contradicts the fundamental dialogue that defines portraiture—the intense one-to-one connection between the person in the painting and the viewer. The key is the gaze. In a portrait, the gaze is a primary compositional thrust. In a great portrait, it's magnetically charged, and contributes to the attraction and mesmerization that we experience. In Riva's paintings, the gaze is another gesture, on par with the movement of a hand, the curve of a back, the posture of the body, and the other elements or props within the space. Even looking straight at us, her figures still exist on stage. They are specific and identifiable, as are all actors—we know they have names and live in the real world—but they also transform into characters. Riva's paintings tell stories. They are narrative allegories.



*Circle Stories #8: Brian Zimmerman*, 2000, charcoal on paper, 30 x 44"



*Alison Bechdel*, 2008, charcoal, acrylic and dimensional collage on paper and board, 30 x 44"

So, Riva's portrait of naked Brian Zimmerman, surrounded by cats in action, becomes a wry odalisque, his "feline" sensuality held in check by his Jewish intellectual hair and his daintily posed prosthetic shin. And of course, there's that pun—a strategically placed gender flipping tabby. And her portrait of graphic novelist Alison Bechdel becomes the myth of Pygmalion. The artist drawing the artist drawing the silhouette and shadow of her mother as herself, bringing all to life—a feminist creation myth.

Next, we must discuss how these are made. If all that were needed were detail and depicted fact, Riva would be a photographer. Instead, she draws. Make no mistake, whatever her material, everything she does is drawing; and that drawing converses with antique tradition—she draws like Dürer. No one does that today. The ability to make a slow tactile mark, to investigate three dimensional human form through the sensation of touch, to persuade us that something is worth seeing not through aspirations of beauty or eye catching design or gratuitous fact (sex, violence, and yes, deformity) but through the sheer luxury of sensual tactility—this is an extraordinary thing. The craft of her hand-labor is hypnotic. This is beyond rendering and is at the heart of the humanity in Riva’s work. The viewer is perceptually engaged. Touch touches us. We feel it.



Albrecht Dürer, *Praying Hands*, 1508  
brush and gray wash heightened  
with white on blue prepared  
paper, 11.5 x 7.75"



Riva Lehrer, detail, *Totems and Familiars:  
Mat Fraser (II)*, 2006, charcoal on paper,  
30 x 44"

This tactile old-world drawing is juxtaposed against experimental ideas and processes. Riva approaches each body of work as a concept derived from her mission to derail power. She uses of-the-moment artistic forms such as installation, performance, collage and collaboration. The results are surprising. For example, in her Risk Portrait series, she leaves her work in the middle—actually leaving the room—to allow the sitter to do what they will with it. This generates a back and forth range of marks, imagery and design that can be quite startling. It also leaves each piece vulnerable to ruin. In this respect, their risk is mutual. The sitter risks the impact of Riva’s description of them, while

Riva’s concern is unfounded: her explicit description of disability does not eclipse the humanity of her subjects. Her figures exist as living actors in allegorical theater, functioning symbolically and metaphorically to tell stories larger than themselves about mortality, heroism, love, pain, effort and humor. Through the power of her drawing, they are sensual tangible human beings that we connect to through touch. Through the risk of experimentation, the work is made fresh. We relate to her subjects both as protagonist heroes and unique individuals.

So, Riva’s challenge lies outside the work. Can she allow her art to be discovered and experienced as art, rather than discussed primarily as activism? The work deserves this. When seen as multi-layered rather than single purposed, it becomes vivid and human and more effective on all levels, from personal to artistic to political.

## Faith

As a child, the poet Jonathan Aldrich had a job, which was to take daily walks with his next door neighbor, who happened to be Robert Frost. One day Frost said to Aldrich:

*To be a poet, you must believe in something so hard, it would break your heart if it wasn't true.*

So, Riva, do I have faith in your work? Well, I have faith in you. I have faith in your ability to transcend your subject matter and your intentions, whether or not you mean to. I have faith in your story telling, in your crafts-woman obsessiveness, in your political passion, sense of justice and insistence on doing what you do, even if you feel invisible doing it. And I have faith that you will continue to ask me uncomfortable questions.

"Do you have faith in my work?" Of course that prods the nerve that every mid-career artist desperately tries to bury. Do we continue to believe? Are our hearts breaking? What happens when our earnest beginning is over? Those are my questions for you.

--Anne Harris, curator

<sup>1</sup>Riva Lehrer, "Valuable Bodies," TEDxGrandRapids, June 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjAzDqDRyK4>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Douglas Rees, *The Janus Gate: An Encounter with John Singer Sargent* (New York: Watson-Guption, 2006), 160.

<sup>4</sup>Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 8.