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Boo RITSON paints people. Literally. In a wry take on the artistic process, she daubs their bodies and clothes in paint, then photographs them. Her latest victims are models in new-season Jil Sander - the fashion purist's choice. Postmodern or what?

Becky Poostchi: It was fascinating to watch you work. It seems you really focus on identity in your portraits - you paint people's identity onto them.

Boo Ritson: It's a surface that determines the thing underneath. It's a mask; it interrupts our vision of what we are or what the thing is, and it co-opts its meaning so that it becomes something else. It's not like a painting of a person, where there is some idea of a looking for inferiority or an identity. It's a surface that rejects that sense of inferiority. It's completely exterior, and it has absolutely nothing to do with the individual underneath, except for the fact that they are providing a structure, like a canvas.

BP: Do you think about the historical reference of portraiture while you work? Do you see your subject as important?

BR: I feel the opposite. I define importance in a different way. Historically, portraiture has largely been to do with patronage, and all kinds of other things that needed to be communicated about people to other people. But these are people I know, friends of people I know, who are much more comfortable for me to be around. The important thing is that I have someone I'm comfortable with and who has an interesting face. I wonder if those artists were able to animate those choices back in the day. Probably not.

I'm not interested, necessarily, in the status and power of the individual as a vehicle in the portrait; it's more the everyday. Beauty helps. Good bone structure helps. Some faces collapse under the mask and some pop forward. Those are my criteria for choosing - then I make decisions about whether I go with that bone structure, that sort of topography, or whether I fight it in some way.

BP: Tell me more about the negative space.

BR: Obviously there are lots of unfinished portraits and paintings in the world. They have always interested me because it's a way of finding out about that process of painting, but beyond that it became a way to define parts of the action that were important. Color stood in for the thing I wanted to look at. The white space was the thing that needed to be there to complete the story, but it didn't need to be prioritized. So in a sense, it's kind of like the eye traveling around the image, but in a different way. It's deliberate negation of space.

BP: How did you find reworking the Jil Sander collection?

BR: If the masks I normally paint are somewhere more than make-up, but somewhere less than metamorphosis, then clothes and fashion are kind of the same thing. They are signifiers of what we believe in, what we aspire to be, what we can afford, all the things that, for me, the mask stands in for. Using the fashion felt quite easy and quite seamless. With Jil Sander, as in my whited-out pieces, there is a sense of structure, blocking and form, and a sense of identity within those garments that deals with various spaces in various ways. That's how I perceive Raf Simons' work. It felt like a really good fit. The whited-out areas were so that I could concentrate on the parts of that blocking that I thought were important.

BOO RITSON IS SHOWING AT BRAVINLEE, NEW YORK FROM OCTOBER 20 - NOVEMBER 24.





