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## At the Mattress Factory, artists explore new realms of portraiture.

BY CURT RIEGELNEGG



The right profile: Tony Oursler's "Vampiric Battle."

In the past century and change, portraiture has offered artists of all media a trusty mainstay -- one they could disregard, subvert, re-establish and re-contextualize as they chose. In the exhibition *Likeness*, at the Mattress Factory, a diverse group of seven artists takes new liberties with the old stand-by.

In the ample visitor's guide, curator Elaine King cites Warhol as a "cornerstone" of the show. It's tough to travel in the Pittsburgh art scene and not be a little tired of that name, godfather of post-modernism or not, but here it's legitimately applicable. As King writes, "In his work the subject acquired mythical and incredible proportions -- his mechanically produced portraits left no room for the illusion of the unique self of the portrayer." Warhol shifted the paradigm to a type of portraiture that is impersonal and thematically evasive. That's not an umbrella concept for *Likeness*, but rather a historical marker from which these artists create their own tangents.

Jim Campbell's "Liz Walking, 2009" is among the show's most eye-catching and accessible pieces. As he has done for years, Campbell uses complex circuit-building and impeccable lighting savvy to suggest figuration in unexpected ways. Made up of LED strands hung at various intervals, the piece's pulsing diodes paint what appears at moments as light randomly reflected, as if by water. At the far end of the room, the strands tighten to articulate a disabled person walking, the broken familiarity of her motion picked up gradually by the eye. Contained and ethereal, the otherworldliness of the environment is playfully contradicted by the instinctive associations evoked by the form on the wall.

Nearby, situated in a dark corridor, is Paul DeMarinis' "Dust." A fitting complement to "Liz Walking," "Dust" draws the viewer in with its modest arrangement: twin pedestals with mounds of arbitrarily distributed sand, receiving projected images from above. The piece then holds an observer's curiosity with its arcane operations: I

felt like I was watching a diorama-sized rendition of a stealth bomber's targeting, in aerial night vision, a location on an Afghan mountain range, followed by the projection of hazy-looking photographs -- maybe of civilian casualties -- which precedes a hidden bass amp's vibratory alteration of the granular terrain.

King's text mentions nothing like this, so maybe I've spent too many hours watching war coverage. Evidently, the portraits projected after the grid disappears are based on mail ads for missing children. And the erosion and reformation of the projection surface thereby assumes time's degradation of human memory. It seems that my own "seismic and palpable" is another's "ungrounded and abstract."

Jonn Herschend's work is the furthest toss from the show's theme, and maybe the most challenging. "Self-Portrait as a PowerPoint Proposal for an Amusement Park Ride" is just what it claims, with one sordid addition. In three parts, a bare, text-only PowerPoint plods through the tale of a drunk-driving accident, describing it in cringe-worthy detail, and dryly outlining the specifics for its construction as a ride. It's improbable that this recollection of miserable events, or its proposed use as entertainment, could ever adequately depict a human being; the artist's doomed attempt to make it so is both jarring and a little funny. The somewhat alienating effect is mitigated by an added janitor's closet, inside which is projected footage of Herschend's daughter enjoying a classic amusement-park ride, from start to finish.

Additionally, Tony Oursler has converted the basement to a schizophrenic sensory overload with his giant, pre-recorded, projected talking heads, each obliquely or plainly considering cosmetic surgery. Nikki Lee appropriates her own likeness, as rendered by several nameless street portraitists. Joseph Mannino allows others to weigh the symmetry of their faces against the unevenness of their words in large-scale, viewer-created ink-jet prints. And digital-photo prints by Greta Pratt expose the tattered but self-possessed individuals behind the absurd promotional Statue of Liberty costumes of the Liberty Tax Service.

*Likeness* continues through March 21. Mattress Factory, 500 Sampsonia Way, North Side. 412-231-3169 or [www.mattress.org](http://www.mattress.org)