Are there any fundamental differences between photographic and painted portraiture?

In this essay I hope to define some of the fundamental differences between the above two methods. I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each as vehicles of portraiture. However, this is a very wide question and though it has great scope for deeper analysis, lack of words and space has prevented me from exploring each point in more detail here.

When addressing this subject, I feel it is very important to recognise that artists have very different objectives when creating a portrait. For some, a portrait may simply be a study of physical likeness whereas for others it may be a study of the sitter's character, their inner personality. This distinction makes it a challenging task to compare photographic and painterly ideas of what a portrait consists of.

I must also draw attention to the fact that photography has been caught up in an everlasting struggle to be recognised as a fine art in its own right. When first discovered, photography threw painted portraits to the sidelines of the art scene because of its obvious technological and economical advantages. Many people at the time thought nothing could exceed these imitations as portrayals of people. However, it was not long before photography was slated badly by many. Artists regarded photographs as mere regurgitations and made clear that '…imagination, rather than imitation is required of art.'[1]

On the contrary it has been said that photography was a new means of pursuing the ends of painting.[2] This is the view that photography was a continuance of painting which took one step further and opened many doors to new innovative ideas which could be applied to portraiture. Gombrich said of photography: 'It has drawn attention to the paradox of capturing life in a still, of freezing the play of features in an arrested moment of which we may never be aware in the flux of events.'[3] Along this train of thought, one can see that photography helped artists achieve something other pictorial media could not. An example of this use of photography can be seen in photorealist

[1] A. Scharf, *Art and Photography,* Penguin Books (1968) p.47
[2] J. Friday, *Aesthetics and Photography,* Ashgate (2002)
[3] E.H.Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye,* Phaidon, Oxford, (1982) p,116

artist, Chuck Close. Close's works are paintings of photographs much more than paintings of the people themselves. He relied on creating an exact copy of the photograph to compose his pictures, including details such as the slightly out of focus edges of the face from the original photograph. He said that, '…likeness was only a by-product of the way he worked,'[4] Woodall accurately sums up: 'They deny us that sense of the person which is perhaps the fundamental requirement of access to the figure through portraiture, and they thus make the assessment of likeness an irrelevance.'[5] In addition, the sheer size of his works abstracts the face and contributes to the de-personalising of his portraits.

This impersonal aspect that photography can arouse has also raised qualms amongst artists, the issue being that we cannot see the artist's mark on a photograph in the same way that we can on a painted portrait. In a painting people like to appreciate and admire the way the painter has applied his/her medium or the way he/she chooses to depict the effects of light. To an extent, this is pre-assigned to the photographer.[6] This is a major difference between the two art forms because it brings to our attention just how much freedom the painter has.

The painter's freedom of expression is utilised in numerous ways, for instance in the size, shape or direction of the brush marks. Bold styles and techniques in mark-making such as the latter can help bring out the character in a sitter. They can give off an impression and reveal sides to a person which are not necessarily visible to the naked eye. Painting can give off an impression of what the sitter's personality is like rather than what they look like. This is something a photograph cannot achieve with ease. It is bound by the restrictions that an exact impression dictates. In addition, the painting can highlight whatever it chooses. For example a painter can highlight their sitter's dress, specific facial features or their surroundings. The painter has complete control over what features are to be or not to be noticed. An interesting example to take note of is that of Picasso's Blue period within which he produced paintings expressing mournful and sorrowful feelings set in a cold environment exposing the harsh aspects of the world. Of course the people he painted were not facially

[4] J. Woodall ed, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject,* Manchester University Press (1997) p.126
[5] Woodall, p.128
[6] This is of course excluding editing, altering and airbrushing which can be applied to a photograph after its completion.

discoloured but Picasso chose to depict them this way to reflect the mood surrounding himself and sometimes the sitter which could not be seen otherwise. Through this predominantly blue palette Picasso was able to express how he felt at the time – another technique photography is deprived of. Despite this, some may argue that the photographer can achieve the same type of effect through sepia or black and white photographs, although it seems more contrived to change the whole effect of the portrait once it is completed rather than from the start.

Due to lack of any conclusive findings in the above paragraphs, the question of what function a portrait must fulfil becomes apparent. West defines: 'A portrait […] serves magically to freeze time and to extend artificially the life of the represented individual.'[7] With this comment brought to attention it appears that photographic portraits are the most technically accurate. The photograph records the sitters face exactly as it was at that precise moment in time, however the painting can often miss tiny details of the face which reveal its age and disposition. The photographic portrait, pre airbrushing and altering, does not omit any blemishes or imperfections. Painted portraits, however, can do this quite easily and the painter had never before had to face this problem of creating an *exact* likeness. There was nothing preceding photography that was any more visually correct than painting or drawing. For this reason many artists were '…found […] in a bewildered and aggressive mood,'[8] after the invention of photography.

Referring back to West's quote above, the use of the word 'artificial' has negative connotations and this view really only covers a certain type of portraiture. Consider a portrait which does not really resemble the sitter but which is more a symbolic representation, for example Francis Bacon's painting of 'Isobel Rawsthorne in a street in Soho.' (1967) Clearly Bacon is not painting what he sees of the woman's physical features but extracting things from her inner-self which are not visible to the eye: perhaps her angst, sorrow, grief and emotional exhaustion. She is watchful and wary and through her facial expression Bacon achieves a great sense of charactural presence. It is a combination of this and experimentation with technique which creates a portrait so far from the conventional. In this painting Bacon's woman will not age,

[7] S.West, *Portraiture* Oxford University Press (2004) p.1
[8] Gombrich, p.115

and will not become outdated because what he has chosen to include is this portrait are things which will not change over time. There is nothing artificial about this portrait – Through Bacon's eyes this is the real Isobel. It for this reason that one might consider photography to be fundamentally flawed. Photographs are memories and what is included in them is something of the past that will never exist in the exact same way again. The photographic portrait is essentially the presence of the absent, whereas the painted portrait can possess the essence of a person for eternity.

In her book 'Portraiture: Facing the Subject,' Woodall is in agreement of the above statement. She suggests that portraits have two referents: the body, material form and the 'unique authenticity'[9], the essence of the sitter. She explains that more often than not, portraits are judged on the latter rather than their appearance and she summarises her views by stating: '…the essential quality of the sitter can only be caught by the artist, not the camera.'[10] Although I am in agreement with Woodall's concepts, it would be wrong to completely deny photography of any means of characterisation whatsoever. Alfred Stieglitz's portrait series of Georgia O'Keeffe is proof that photography can accurately describe the sitter's character and personality as well as their visual appearance. Stieglitz built up a series of pictures of O'Keefe, viewing her from different angles and in different lights, in different positions, clothed and unclothed and over many years. Sure enough, these pictures, when looked at together, give us a great sense of what the woman might have been like; they visually piece together the different parts of her personality so that we ultimately arrive at an idea of a whole person. Gombrich promotes this view, 'We have not one face but a thousand different faces.'[11] Whilst this method is very different from the painterly approach to characterisation, it is just as, if not more effective than the painter's methods.

My final differentiation between the two techniques is the talent required initially to produce a one or the other. Someone who has never held a camera before could take an interesting photograph, even by chance a successful artistic photo, but on the contrary, someone who has never held a paintbrush before will have difficulty producing something of value. A small child could, by fluke, take the perfect picture

[9] Woodall, p.240
[10] Woodall, p.240
[11] Gombrich, P.106-7

but when asked to draw or paint the same subject we would be presented with a page of squiggles. This point has been analysed: 'Inexperience in photography would appear to be different from inexperience in painting. The flat, undifferentiated tonal areas, hard lines, and nonnaturalistic light in naïve painting have long connoted innocence of craft. But in photography, even in early photography, the production of any image requires some illusionism.'[12] Consider a painting that it so accurate that it can be mistaken for a photograph. The painter has had the task of making the facial features agree with each other; if the mouth smiles, the eyes must close, the cheeks must swell and the eyebrows must widen.[13] If these features do not match, the face will look unnatural. Surely this is a work of skill and genius taking into account the time, effort and precision involved in comparison to a photo shot which was created in a matter of minutes as the result of pressing a button.

From what has been noted above, it has become evident that no sound comparison can be made between the two techniques. It is probable that many people are of the view that photography is a completely independent art form and exists on an entirely different plain to that of painting. To these people it is highly inappropriate to compare photographs with paintings in the first place. Furthermore, the arguments for and against the two methods seem empty and inconclusive considering that the function of the portrait is extremely variable. They are not always made to be displayed as works of art and often serve a broader function.[14] They can act as emblems or reminders of people rather than images of exactly what that person's facial features were like –For example, on our currency. They can act as representations of a certain mood and a certain type of person, or indeed as a mere regurgitation of the sitter. They can also act simply as a way through which the artist can express him/herself. In any case, the different objectives artists strive for make it almost impossible to compare the two techniques. They are not on level ground.

To summarise my findings over the course of writing this essay I would have to conclude that there are no fundamental differences between the two art forms but many differing advantages and disadvantages of one over the other and vice versa.

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[12] M.W.Marien *Photography and Its Critics: A Cultural History 1839-1900* Cambridge University Press (1997) p.97
[13] Gombrich, p.118
[14] West p.48

Essentially, however, photographs are the most true depictions of ourselves whereas paintings are an imitation or copy of a real thing.

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