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Portraiture, time stand still for 'Now'

By Antoine Boessenkool

One way to grasp the concept behind "Now" at the Orange County Museum of Art is to see the works by New York new-media artist R. Luke DuBois as portraits.

These aren't the traditional head-and-shoulders likenesses that we're used to. Far from it. Instead, they're better described as portraits of our times, our culture and our history.

The best way to explain is with an example. DuBois synthesizes what must be piles and piles of data to create "Hindsight Is Always 20/20," from 2008. Using the format of the Snellen chart you find in your eye doctor's office, DuBois boiled down the concerns and the times of each U.S. president from George Washington to George W. Bush.

With software, he analyzed the most-used words in the State of the Union speeches of each president, excluding common words like articles. The results, one framed Snellen chart for each president, make for intriguing representations, or "portraits" according to the exhibit's text, of our history.

For George W. Bush, the most-used word, in big type at the top of the chart, was "terror," followed by "Iraq," "Iraqi," "terrorist" and "al Qaida." For President Harry Truman: "Soviet," "housing" and "atomic." For President John F. Kennedy: "alliance," "recession" and "cold" (also "hopes," "farms" and "Congo"). President George Washington's most-used word in these speeches, according to DuBois, was "gentlemen." President Abraham Lincoln's was "emancipation."

The DuBois work was commissioned by the 2008 Democratic National Convention.

Portraiture and time are the two central ideas DuBois explores in "Now," the artist and musician's first solo museum exhibition on the West Coast.

"Now" opens with "Pop Icon: Britney," a 2010 video work centered on Britney Spears, the pop singer who has lived through scandals and superstardom in the public eye since she was a teenager. Successive images of Spears morph, one into another, with only the eyes remaining a fixed point, giving a kind of halo effect. Spears, DuBois notes, could be said to be the first megacelebrity to exist entirely in the world of AutoTune and Photoshop. Every image of her is edited to make her "perfect," a secular icon replacing the religious icons of the past.

In "Academy," from 2006, DuBois has drastically compacted the full length of each of the best picture winners from the first 75 years of the Academy Awards into a one-minute video, flashing so quickly through scenes that characters are scarcely recognizable. The blur effect is heightened as the films move closer to today, highlighting how cinematography has changed. With the earlier films, it's easier to recognize protagonists, who delivered their lines standing mainly motionless in the foreground during lengthier shots. That changed as movies like "Casablanca" and "All About Eve" gave way to "Braveheart" and "Titanic."

DuBois turns his attention to our search for romance with "A More Perfect Union," from 2010-11. Using the 2010 U.S. Census as a jumping-off point, he charts the personality traits and most common words used by those seeking mates through online dating. DuBois said he joined 21 online dating sites, like match.com, okcupid .com and others, and used the profiles of 19 million single Americans to create his maps.

Some maps show, by degrees of color, the predominance of people describing themselves as "shy," "lonely" or "kinky," for example. Others, zeroing in on major cities like Los Angeles and New York, or individual states, document the words people use most to describe themselves in their profiles. A map of Los Angeles is covered with words like "upscale," "booty" and "stardom." People in Alaska use "outdoorsy," "driveable" and "flannel."