

ROGER MALBERT

drawing people

THE HUMAN FIGURE IN CONTEMPORARY ART

With 318 illustrations, 246 in color

JULIO CÉSAR MORALES *Born 1966, Tijuana, Mexico. Lives and works in Tempe, Arizona, USA*

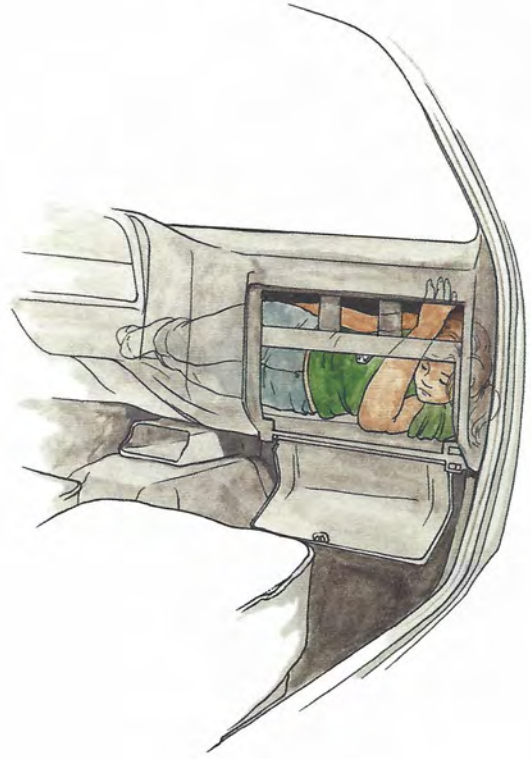
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JULIO CÉSAR MORALES

Julio César Morales is an artist, curator and educator. He was born in Tijuana and grew up in the Mexican border town of San Ysidro. As a child he crossed between Mexico and the United States daily, and much of his work stems from his resulting bicultural identity. Morales works in many media, including photography, video and performance, and has collaborated with architects, sound artists and food anthropologists. His strategic use of watercolour and ink for this particular series, *Undocumented Interventions* (2007-ongoing), is conceptually outstanding and exemplifies how the personal touch of a drawing in what the artist calls 'the softest medium' can subtly communicate something more than can the same image in its original photographic form. In this series, Morales translates into drawings real photographs sourced from a US immigration website that document Mexican citizens' failed attempts at entry to the US. These people hide themselves in vehicles, washing machines, wheels and fuel tanks, and children are concealed inside dolls and other toys. Morales's quiet line and gentle colours enact the self-effacement of the subjects, who are literally pretending not to exist, keeping still, silent and hopefully invisible.





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personal lives

Universal assent is already a quite miraculous and incomprehensible prejudice. Why should anyone claim that the shape of a watch is round – a manifestly false proposition – since it appears in profile as a narrow rectangular construction, elliptic on three sides; and why the devil should one only notice its shape at the moment of looking at the time? Perhaps under the pretext of utility. But a child who draws a watch as a circle will also draw a house as a square, as a facade, without any justification, of course; because, except perhaps in the country, he will rarely see an isolated building, and even in a street the facades have the appearance of very oblique trapezoids.

ALFRED JARRY, *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician*, 2006

We tend to think of the face as an intimate expression of the self – although everyone knows that looks can deceive, that a smile can mask malevolent intent, make-up can disguise blemishes and that the simple addition of a beard or glasses can transform a person's appearance. We assume too that facial characteristics are preserved over a lifetime – albeit with a degree of deterioration as we age – so that it is often possible to recognize the 'same' person at twelve, twenty and fifty. If we look back now at an image of ourselves as a child, for instance in a school photograph, where our own tiny face looks out at us from a sea of similarly distant faces, what is it that convinces us that this is indeed the child we were? Can we be sure that we have not mixed up one person with another, and that on closer inspection we will not discover ourselves several rows further back, squinting distractedly away from the camera and betraying none of the alertness, sensitivity or good humour that we imagine ourselves

possessing at that age? The face is unmistakably our own: the gestalt, even on that miniature scale, adds up exactly to someone, the person we were and continue to be. But while the photograph may supplant memory as the one sure piece of evidence that we were there, it cannot retain the traces of our inner lives and the way that we relate to the world around us.

Our personal lives – our daily experiences, thoughts and encounters – constitute what we consider to be our essential condition of being-in-the-world, and artistic representations of the face and body often bear the key to this inner existence. Photographs can offer a superficial substitute, albeit one that endures. What happens, though, when the face is expunged from the photographic record? The Saudi artist Jowhara AlSaud makes subversive play with the conventions of image censorship prevalent in her country by eliminating all features in her snapshots of young people, friends and acquaintances

Who could blame someone for wanting to get away from impossible circumstances at any cost? The artist Julio César Morales grew up in a Mexican border town, and based his series of drawings *Undocumented Interventions* (2007–ongoing) on US Government Immigration website photographs of unsuccessful attempts to smuggle people across the border. These are poignant memorials to individuals who are heroes, in a sense: they have taken a risk, and the fact of their failure somehow makes them all the more worthy of sympathy.

Morales is an activist as well as an artist, and these drawings are intended to raise awareness and contribute to the debate about illegal immigration and the marginalized status of Latino communities in the US. By translating the official x-ray photos exposing the immigrants' subterfuge into the gentle, timeless medium of watercolour, the artist softens the images, just as a traditional war artist might humanize the image of soldiers, conveying their vulnerability and dignity. The intimacy of a drawing can thus subvert the meaning of what was intended to be a harshly factual piece of documentary evidence. This helps to explain why certain artists devote long hours to painstakingly rendering and altering pre-existing photographs (or, in AlSaud's case, negatives) by hand. It is a minor act of personal resistance to the ruthless hegemony of the machine, a declaration of independence from definitions imposed from above.

Richard Forster addresses what he calls the 'persuasive power' of the photograph as an index to the real. How to unsettle that authority, that implicit claim to an unambiguous and stable meaning? Forster's drawings are based on photographs from his extensive archive of visual documents and reflect his 'experience of site/place and my research into particular social/political contexts and histories'. His initial photographic exercises are buttressed by second-hand research involving images from the internet, books and magazines. 'These "ethnographic studies" I begin to internalize through the slow, concentrated effort of drawing.' One instance of his preoccupation with ethnography – specifically modernist design and social experiment – can be seen in the work *Two Girls Dancing, East Germany* (2012), for which he uses a photograph of two girls dancing in East Germany in the 1980s. The German Democratic Republic was a totalitarian state with one of the most extensive secret police networks in the world, equivalent to contemporary Saudi Arabia in the extent that it reached into the personal lives of its citizens – although this was an intrusion based on altogether different principles. Like AlSaud's images of young people socializing and Talbot's

remembrances of her early life, Forster's image is drenched in nostalgic detail: hairstyles and clothes that evoke a moment in history. And like AlSaud he intervenes – by cropping out the boys with whom these girls were dancing. 'Somehow the image became purer with only the two girls dancing, and this was an informed but ultimately subjective personal response to the notion of *ostalgie* [the German term for nostalgia for aspects of life in the former DDR].' Through this subjective act, Forster destroys the documentary validity of the image but simultaneously reminds us that it was already subjectively cropped by the photographer: it was never a neutral record of an objectively perceived event.

An artist who draws with equally astonishing verisimilitude but with quite different motives is David Haines, who constructs his compositions from multiple photographic sources, some found on the internet and others taken himself. In his recent drawings, Haines has been less interested in the fetish subcultures that have been his subject in the past, and more in the possibility of private spiritual epiphany. In the 2013 work *Boy with a Laptop*, for instance, the religious symbols surrounding the boy lend a metaphysical significance to the light emanating from the computer screen. Perhaps this quasi-mystical dimension was always implicit in this artist's work: earthly degradation aspiring to transcendence, being-in-the-world as a drop-off point for heaven. Nonetheless, as a fellow perfectionist Haines would doubtless agree with Forster's observation that 'the digital age has consolidated the interiority of the obsessive and intimate bedroom practice' of slow, extended-time drawing. The recluse can now access the world electronically without the inconvenience and embarrassment of having to go out and meet other people. The social sphere, the very ground of the encounter between self and other, is in flux and possibly shrinking, leaving increased space for the personal sphere. And this personal sphere – by no means a new subject in art – is the constant preoccupation of many contemporary figurative artists as it shifts and is constantly redefined in the modern age.

socializing. 'I tried to apply the language of the censors to my personal photographs. I began by making line drawings, omitting faces and skin. Keeping only the essentials allowed me to circumvent, and comment on, some of the cultural taboos associated with photography. Namely the stigma attached to bringing the "personal portrait", commonly reserved for the private domestic space, into the public sphere. It became a game of how much you can tell with how little. When reduced to sketches, the images achieved enough distance from the original photographs that neither subjects nor censors could find them objectionable. For me, they became autonomous, relatable, pared down narratives.'

We might say that these images are drained of emotion, of the inner lives of their subjects. Few signs remain in these animated but anonymous figures of the exuberance and conviviality, sadness and passion that were evidently experienced at the time. Without smiling faces, telling glances, affectionate kisses or tearful embraces, the gestures speak only of an absence, a moment that has been wiped from the records. The images are frozen as if under an officious and all-seeing eye, one that denies personal (and especially sexual) liberty in the name of moral rectitude – a rectitude enforced in Saudi Arabia through the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. The thought is paralyzing. It bears on the activity of drawing, which we hold to be a free zone, and which is deployed by AlSaud to parody government prohibitions. Tracing in outline these intimate personal encounters, the artist celebrates forbidden pleasures just as artists have done throughout history. There is irony in the fact that the censor also draws, emphatically with a black fibre pen, thereby signifying at the same time as erasing. And there is further irony in the fact that her images are likely more graphically vivacious and luxuriously evocative with the faces removed than were the relatively banal originals. What is taken away also adds to their poetic resonance, conveying both a sense of loss and the universality of the poses.

The early modernists often omitted or abbreviated facial features in their paintings, regarding such particularities as an irrelevant distraction from the formal unity of the artwork as a whole. This might also apply to Amy Sillman's series of wash drawings of couples lying around together on sofas, with arms and legs affectionately intertwined. These final pieces were not drawn directly from life, but abstracted later from more literal sketches made at the time. They are vigorous analytical drawings in which space is organized and shapes defined as if in preparation for a painting. There is no trace of nostalgia or

sentimentality, yet we have a strong impression of the sitters' personal lives, and when one considers Sillman's practice as a whole, including her cartoons, it is evident that personality is at the forefront of her attention. 'My work is always psychological, whether I want it to be or not. The shapes that I am interested in looking at and drawing always turn into forms that have some kind of psychological narrative. Even if it's in the sense of formal predicament, that a shape is at the edge of another.... There is some kind of discomfort or complexity that makes the object troubled in a way. The object is endangered, its stability is imperilled in some way; it's tipping over, or you can see through it. Or it is abject.'

Emma Talbot's characters are similarly anonymous, their faces blank or averted. As a formal device, this enables the artist to summarize figures briefly in space without becoming enmeshed in incidental detail. But it surely serves another purpose: Talbot describes her comic-strip sequences as 'psychological stories'. Her emphasis is on the everyday events that might happen to anyone, and it seems natural that the facial features are omitted because the figures are depicted subjectively, from within, as though they are dreaming or remembering a dream. When Talbot presents two or more individuals interacting in the same image they are all equivalently abstracted. With this technique, she touches on how the mind actually operates when we recall a situation, or when we dream about someone known and loved. Certainly, in recalling our own past we are familiar with the protagonist and there is no necessity for us to fill in every detail, and we likewise feel no need to visualize ourselves as we would appear to an onlooker. The faces of those closest to us may be a blur, their presence felt emotionally without being precisely pictured.

Disappearance, self-effacement and invisibility are themes in many artists' work, a counter-current to the seemingly universal compulsion to self-publicize that the internet inspires. Reasons for withdrawing from the public gaze and into personal life may be psychological, political or socio-theological. The specific conditions in Saudi Arabia may not necessarily be replicated elsewhere – except of course that they are, wherever repressive societies lay down the law about personal relations, and especially for certain groups such as gay people, who are harassed and oppressed in half the world. Hiding from the eye of the authorities is bound to induce a state of mind that is instinctively averse to the camera and to other potentially incriminating forms of documentary evidence. Illegal immigration is, in moral terms, a mild offense