Portraits of America In the Selfie Age

A year ago, the Whitney Museum of American Art inaugurated its new downtown home with a permanent-collection showcase called “America Is Hard to See.” Its successor, the even more immediately engaging “Human Interest: Portraits From the Whitney’s Collection,” is now on view. Astutely geared to the selfie age, it might well have been subtitled “Americans Are Strange to Look At,” which, in the 250 images here, we sure are: funny-strange, beautiful-strange, crazy-strange, dangerous-strange, inscrutable-

**Human Interest, with Rudolf Stingel’s “Untitled (After Sam)” at the Whitney Museum.**

**Paul Robeson In Focus**

Roberta Smith on a Whitney “Open Plan” offering by Steve McQueen, Page 26.

strange.

Spread over two floors, the display of paintings, photographs and drawings reconfirms the richness — and the geographical limitations — of the Whitney’s holdings. And while pointing up the built-in unwieldiness of big shows on broad themes, it demonstrates the ways in which skillful curators — in this case, Scott Rothkopf and Dana Miller, working with Mia Curran, Jennie Goldstein and Sasha Nicholas — can organize work in porous modules that have a

Continued on Page 28
In a gallery about the American culture of violence, four of Robert Beck’s “Thirteen Shooters,” teenagers convicted in school killings, and, foreground, Mike Kelley’s “Educational Complex.”

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From Weekend Page 19

manageable logic of their own. Right off the seventh-floor elevator, you get a sense of the variety to come. Henry Taylor’s near-life-size 2007 painting of Huey P. Newton, a Black Panther leader seated in militant majesty, hangs near Laurie Simmons’s fantastical photograph of a camera with dancer’s legs, a 1997 tribute to a treasured fellow artist, Jimmy DeSana. The suave, white-suited man named Steve in Balthus’s 1963 painting of that name, radiates every bit as much star-power as Elvis Presley does in a double-panel Warhol homage, and he’s treated with a lot more respect than is the busty, grinning title figure in Willem de Kooning’s “Woman and Bicycle” from the early 1950s.

The de Kooning is a tophat that the seventh-floor show’s older material, with a concentration of it inside the first gallery. Robert Henri’s 1916 painting of a lounging—but-alert Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the museum’s founder, is here, as is a later-1920s self-portrait by Edward Hopper; one of the museum’s foundational artists, looking rakish in a battered fedora and a shirt that matches his azure eyes.

He seems far less chipper wrapped in the embrace of his wife, Josephine, in a 1933 photo by Louis Dahl-Wolfe, one of dozens of small works in this space, most hung salon-style on a central wall. Cecilia Beaux’s 1902 charcoal sketch of the matronly, indelicate Jan Rubidik is one of the earliest and finds its match in refined, smoldering arbor in Paul Cadmus’s 1937 ink likeness of the ballet dancer José Martínez.

And for sheer theatricality, though not of 1929, Toyo Miyatake photographed the Japanese dancer-choreographer Michio Ito, staring balefully from behind long bangs, stands out. It gains particular intensity when it is remembered that Ito, who had a successful career in the United States, would be arrested within 24 hours of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, falsely accused of espionage, and interned for two years before being shipped back to Japan.

Celebrity couldn’t prevent this artist’s downfall, though it has elevated far lesser talents and is enough of an American obsession to warrant including two galleries devoted to it in this exhibition. The one on the seventh floor presents the phenomenon in formation, notably in Edward Steichen’s movie-star close-ups of Marlene Dietrich and Dolores del Rio, and Carl Van Vechten’s 1934 studio shots of the African-American performers — all, interestingly, unnamed — from the cast of the Gertrude Stein-Virgil Thomson opera “Four Saints in Three Acts.”

Downstairs on the sixth floor, in a gallery labeled “Price of Fame,” glam-oriented work starts to run underground, with everyone wearing and living some version of drug from the trans-ender performer Candy Darling, dying of cancer and ambulance in a hospital bed for Peter Hujar’s camera in 1975, to a defiant Amy Winehouse in Rashid Johnson’s posthumous 2012 colored-pencil drawings. An extraordinary 2013 figurative sculpture called “Ne’er-Do-Well” by the young New York artist Stewart Doo, self-portrait as Billie Holiday; Yvonne Rainer’s video of a ballet performed entirely by her right hand; Saul Leiter’s 1950s photograph of a shoe-shine boy’s worn-down shoes; and Nicole Eisenman’s mocking self-portrait drawing titled “You’re Only 1/2 the Artist You Could Be! And a Little Less Than 1/2 as Weird as you Think You Are!”

Clockwise from above left, Toyo Miyatake photograph of the Black Panthers, in a 2007 painting by Henry Taylor; Michio Ito, a Japanese dancer-choreographer, by Toyo Miyatake; “Puzzle Bottle,” by Charles Ray.

includes bizarre portraits and portrait-like images of vulnerability and mortality dating from the A-bomb era of the early 1950s and painted by artists now too-old to look at: John D. Graham, Stephen Greene and John Wilde. The concluding section on six, “Institutional Complex,” is about an American culture of violence in the present.

This is directly addressed in Robert Bork’s poster-size photographs of teenage mass killers and, indirectly, by Gary Simmons’s now-classic 1993 sculpture of a police lineup platform equipped with a row of gold-plated basketball shoes. (More of Mr. Simmons’s work is in the not-to-be-missed group show “March Madness,” organized by Hank Willis Thomas and on view through Sunday at a new gallery, Fort Gansevoort, nearby at 5 Ninth Avenue.)

Finally, the Beck and Simmons works surround a 1986 sculpture by Mike Kelley, a tabletop architectural model that combines features of every educational institution — kindergartens, through art school — that he ever attended. He implies that he considered himself the product of this vast prison-like complex, and the show pushes his reasoning further to suggest that the cultural impulse to violence is institutionally inculcated, nurtured and encouraged.

That’s my reading of the installation, anyway. You’ll have your own, just as you’ll have your favorite images from this cornucopian exhibition. Mine include Lyle Ashton Harris’s sublime