Mocking the Canon: Irony, Subversion, and Play in Iconoclastic Portraiture

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: *iconoclasm,* *portraiture,* *parody,* *irony,* *subversion*	This qualitative research paper examines how iconoclastic artists use techniques of irony, subversion, and play to undermine the conventions of traditional portraiture. Canonical portraiture aims to convey status and power through dignified representation. Iconoclastic portraiture rebels against this pretense through incongruous, caricatured, and role-reversed depictions designed to mock canonical norms. The paper analyzes selected artworks by Marcel Duchamp, Cindy Sherman, Yue Minjun, and others that exemplify iconoclastic approaches. Visual analysis reveals how incongruity introduces discordant elements to undercut meaning, caricature exaggerates features comically, and role reversal portrays subjects in undignified ways that contravene tradition. The paper interprets these techniques through the lens of postmodern theories of parody, carnivalesque inversion, and deconstruction. Findings demonstrate that by ironically mocking canonical conventions, iconoclastic portraiture destabilizes traditional hierarchies and reimagines portraiture as a critical, subversive art form. The research advances understanding of how iconoclastic artists deploy irony and play to contest establishment orthodoxies. This study elucidates iconoclastic portraiture's aims and significances as a challenge to the canon's pretensions and demonstrates humor and subversion as profound artistic strategies.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background on Traditional Portraiture Conventions and Pretensions toward Status and Power

Throughout art history, portraiture has been closely tied to conveying status, identity, and power. As Woodall (1997) observes, "Portraiture articulated social position; it objectified relations of class and gender" (p.1). Traditional Western portraiture aimed to immortalize the subject in an idealized, heroic manner. Stylistic conventions such as symmetrical, balanced compositions, rich materials, and dignified poses worked to aggrandize the sitter (West, 2004). Portraiture was a status symbol of the aristocracy and upper classes, used to project an image of wealth, sophistication, nobility, and authority.

According to West (2004), traditional portraiture relies on visual symbols and formal techniques to elevate the subject: "The formal grandeur of large scale, lavish materials and settings, poised and dignified poses, all worked to equate the sitter with the highest social and moral values" (p.79). Whether in monumental oil paintings or formal photographic portraits, traditional portraiture aimed to preserve an idealized image for posterity. Conventions such as flattering likenesses and expensive, ornate settings established timeless prestige and legitimacy, affirming the sitter's privileged identity. As a canonized art form, portraiture thus served elite interests by perpetuating pretensions of merit, virtue, status, and power.

1.2. Thesis on How Iconoclastic Portraiture Uses Irony, Subversion and Play to Undermine These Pretensions and Mock the Canon

Iconoclastic artists utilize portraiture in ironic, subversive, and playful ways in order to undermine the pretensions of canonical art and mock the establishment. As Danto (2013) argues, iconoclastic artists "undermine the assumptions their work appears to honor, and thus undermine confidence in the value of the tradition itself" (p. ix). By appropriating and recontextualizing the stylistic tropes of traditional portraiture, iconoclastic artists reveal the inherent artifice and undermine the aura of legitimacy surrounding canonical works. For example, Kehinde Wiley's paintings of contemporary Black men in the grandiose style of classical European portraiture subvert and destabilize racial hierarchies embedded in the Western canon (Coleman, 2018). Likewise, Cindy Sherman's History Portraits series parodies and exposes the artificiality of the canonical through exaggerated stylization and ironic reenactments (Smith, 2006). In this way, iconoclastic portraiture utilizes irony, subversion, and play to undermine pretensions to timelessness and inherent artistic value, challenging and mocking the established canon.

1.3. Techniques to be Analyzed - Incongruity, Caricature, Role Reversal

Iconoclastic artists employ various techniques including incongruity, caricature, and role reversal to undermine canonical art. Incongruity creates irony through the juxtaposition of contradictory stylistic elements, jarring the viewer and subverting expectations (Danto, 2013). For example, Wiley combines classical European portraiture styles with contemporary urban fashion and settings (Coleman, 2018). Caricature exaggerates features or stylistic elements to absurd effect, as seen in Sherman's grotesquely stylized self-portraits (Smith, 2006). Role reversal disrupts power dynamics through appropriation, as marginalized subjects adopt the guise of privilege, such as in Wiley's portraits of Black men in aristocratic poses (Coleman, 2018). Analysis will focus on how these techniques of incongruity, caricature, and role reversal are used to destabilize assumptions and reveal the artificiality of canonical portraiture.

1.4. Significance of Studying Iconoclastic Portraiture

The study of iconoclastic portraiture provides critical insight into the disruptive role of art in questioning structures of power and canonical assumptions. As Danto argues, innovative art reveals "the conventionality in what had seemed to be the unconventional" (2013, p.xxi). Analyzing how iconoclastic artists subvert established styles and techniques illuminates both the inherent artifice of the canon as well as the means by which marginalized identities challenge dominant paradigms. Examining the mocking, ironic critique enacted through iconoclastic portraiture sheds light on how power dynamics of race, gender, and class are reproduced and reinforced through canonical art. This study aims to demonstrate the importance of iconoclastic parody and subversion in revealing and contesting the ideological underpinnings of the artistic canon.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks from Bakhtin, Derrida, Postmodern Theory

Analysis of iconoclastic portraiture can draw on various theoretical frameworks including Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque parody, Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction, and postmodern theories of art. Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque describes a process of inverting social hierarchies through humor and chaos, which relates to the subversive effect of iconoclastic parodic portraiture (Bakhtin, 1984). Derrida's deconstruction, with its questioning of binary oppositions embedded in language, provides a model for how iconoclastic art unravels ingrained assumptions (Derrida, 2016). Postmodern theories argue that art cannot be separated from ideology and that the canon reflects institutional power, thus iconoclastic parody reveals those ideological underpinnings (Heartney, 2001). These frameworks of Bakhtin, Derrida, and postmodernism offer useful lenses to critically analyze how iconoclastic portraiture challenges established artistic conventions and hierarchies.

2.2. Prior Analyses of Irony, Parody, Carnivalesque in Art

Scholars have established critical frameworks analyzing how contemporary iconoclastic art utilizes strategies of irony, parody, and the carnivalesque to challenge established canons. Hutcheon (1989) examines modernist ironic quotation and parody of canonical styles and subjects in painting and photography. Danto (2013) provides a carnivalesque reading of Warhol's pop art parodies of consumer culture as an inversion of artistic conventions. Chaplin (2003) relates Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque to contemporary feminist self-portraiture that subverts stereotypical representations. Smith (2006) gives a postmodern deconstructive analysis of Cindy Sherman's History Portraits, interpreting them as parodies that reveal art historical stereotypes. Dikovitskaya (2005) also applies Bakhtinian frameworks to photographs by Nikki S. Lee, reading them as playful impersonations of identity that reveal its performative nature. These analyses provide key theoretical groundwork for examining iconoclastic portraiture's use of irony, parody, and carnivalesque strategies to challenge the artistic canon and underlying hierarchies it perpetuates.

2.3. Scholarship on Portraiture Traditions and Iconoclastic Challenges to Them

Canonical portraiture, as developed in European traditions since the Renaissance, has entrenched visual and social codes that establish and reinforce hierarchies. As West (2004) surveys, portraiture conventions from the Renaissance through modernism served to represent ideals of beauty, virtue, and social status. However, contemporary iconoclastic artists have challenged these hegemonic representations by subverting established portrait traditions. As Kobena Mercer (1994) analyzes, Black artists like Rotimi Fani-Kayode have asserted self-determination and contested stereotypes through performative self-portraiture. Similarly, as Pollock (2007) discusses, feminist artists like Cindy Sherman have critiqued the male gaze implicit in canonical modes of portraiture. Brilliant's (1991) seminal examination of portraiture as a social transaction elucidates how traditional conventions and contexts uphold status quo power relations. Recent scholarship such as Harris (2013) has documented how Kehinde Wiley disrupts racial power dynamics and hierarchies through his portraits of contemporary Black subjects in classical European poses. In short, recent iconoclastic portraiture strategically challenges the entrenched visual and social codes of the canon through approaches such as parody, role-reversal, and carnivalesque subversion.

2.4. Gap in Research on Specific Techniques of Iconoclastic Portraiture

While scholars have explored the broader aims and impulses of iconoclasm in contemporary art (Danto, 2013; Hutcheon, 1989), there remains a gap in analyzing the specific techniques and strategies employed by iconoclastic artists engaging with portraiture traditions. Though the subversive intent of such art is established, the formal and rhetorical methods used to achieve parody, incongruity, and cultural critique require further elucidation. As Araeen (2000) suggests, "there is a need to go beyond general theoretical discourses" (p. 5) to examine the particular means iconoclastic artists deploy to counter hegemonic representation systems. Through visual and contextual analysis of exemplary iconoclastic portraits, this study aims to address this gap by elucidating how such works challenge established visual and social codes of traditional portraiture.

3. Methodology

3.1. Qualitative Visual Analysis and Interpretation of Selected Artworks

Kehinde Wiley's portrait Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps (2005) depicts a contemporary Black man in urban streetwear sitting heroically atop a rearing white horse (Figure 1). The grand equestrian portrait style echoes Jacques-Louis David's famous Napoleon Crossing the Alps (1801), but Wiley's subject subverts the racial and social power dynamics of traditional portraiture (Harris, 2013). By recasting the bravura portrait tradition with a Black figure in modern dress, Wiley creates an incongruous yet provocative image that comments on exclusion in the canon. Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Still #56 (1980) portrays Sherman in a highly stylized costume and wig against an imagined 1950s street scene. The exaggerated make-up and affected pose reference Hollywood ideals of femininity, but the awkwardly off-kilter framing and facial expression convey psychological tensions under the artificial surface (Smith, 2006). Sherman parodies feminine stereotypes and reveals the performative nature of gender identity embodied in traditional portraiture.

Figure 1. Kehinde Wiley. *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 108×108 in | 274.3×274.3 cm

3.2. Selection Criteria for Artworks

Artworks were selected based on their exemplification of key strategies of subversion and parody within iconoclastic portraiture. The portraits chosen challenge established representational traditions through incongruous juxtapositions, role reversals, or exaggerated stylistic parody (Danto, 2013). Works were included that directly appropriate and recontextualize specific modes of traditional portraiture, such as Kehinde Wiley's restaging of grand equestrian portraits or Cindy Sherman's performance of feminine tropes from art history. Preference was given to works that engage with these canonical modes in order to explicitly contest racial, gendered, or cultural hierarchies embedded within them. The selected contemporary works date from the late 20th or early 21st centuries, as this period saw increased challenges to modernist heroic portraiture by marginalized artists (Hall, 2000). While not exhaustive, the chosen case study artworks productively encapsulate the aims of current iconoclastic approaches to subvert established portrait conventions and reveal their ideological underpinnings.

3.3. Biographical Background on Artists for Context

Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977) is a contemporary African American artist known for his vibrant portraits of Black subjects in poses referencing traditional European portraiture. Wiley aims to "quote historical sources and position young black men within the field of power" (Harris, 2013, p. 26). His paintings subvert racial hierarchies by elevating contemporary Black men through the lens of traditional modes of prestige. Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) is an American artist and photographer best known for her conceptual self-portraits embodied in historical guises and female stereotypes. Her work critically examines "issues of the body, identity, gender, representation and issues of the gaze" (Smith, 2006, p. 552). Sherman assumes dramatic personas in staged photographs to reveal performativity and artificial constructs of femininity. Understanding these artists' backgrounds and creative aims provides insight into how their work intentionally engages and subverts canonical portraiture.

4. Analysis

4.1. Description of Selected Artworks by Duchamp, Sherman, Minjun et al.

Marcel Duchamp's L.H.O.O.Q. (1919) takes a cheap postcard reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa (Figure 2) and draws a mustache and goatee on the figure's face. This humorous defacement of a canonical masterpiece uses parody to undermine revered artistic traditions and question what constitutes art (Tomkins, 1998). Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Still #21 (1978) depicts Sherman posing as a classic 1950s Hollywood ingénue (Figure 3), with her alluring look subtly undercut by the setting and awkward body language. According to Smith (2006), Sherman adopts heightened feminine stereotypes from film to critically examine how gender identity is socially constructed and performed. Yue Minjun's painting Execution (1995) portrays identical laughing figures (Figure 4) in Mao suits facing a firing squad, creating an absurd carnivalesque inversion of morbid subject matter that comments on Chinese political history (Lee, 2003). These selected works demonstrate key iconoclastic techniques of parody, masquerade, and carnivalesque humor to challenge artistic sanctity and sociocultural assumptions.

Figure 2. Marcel Duchamp, L.H.O.O.Q., 1919. Rectified readymade: reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa, to which Duchamp added mustache, goatee, and title in pencil, 7-3/4 x 4-7/8 inches (19.7 x 12.4 cm). Wikimedia Commons

Figure 3. Cindy Sherman *Untitled Film Still #21* 1978

Figure 4. The Execution, 1995, oil on canvas (Photo © Yue Minjun)

4.2. Artist Employs Techniques of Incongruity, Caricature, Role Reversal

Kehinde Wiley's portrait of a Black man on horseback in Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps (2005) uses stark incongruity to challenge traditional equestrian portraiture of white aristocrats. This ironic juxtaposition "actively engages with discourses of inclusion, exclusion, and art history" (Harris, 2013, p.26). In Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Still #56 (1980), the artist caricatures feminine beauty tropes by exaggerating makeup, hairstyle, and awkward posing. As Smith (2006) notes, Sherman adopts extreme stylization to parody 1950s starlet stereotypes and reveal their artificial performativity. Yue Minjun populates Execution (1995) with identical laughing figures, creating an unsettlingly jovial inversion of the grim firing squad scene. This carnivalesque role reversal using dark humor "displaces the spectre of death" from Chinese revolutionary history (Lee, 2003, p.16). Each artist strategically wields incongruity, exaggeration, and reversal to subvert canonical modes of portraiture and challenge sociocultural assumptions.

4.3. Impact of These Techniques in Challenging Traditions

By utilizing incongruous juxtapositions, parodic exaggeration, and carnivalesque inversions, these iconoclastic artists undermine the legitimacy of revered portrait traditions to challenge social hierarchies and cultural assumptions embedded within them. As Danto (2013) argues, such subversive citation of canonical forms exposes their inherent artifice and "subverts confidence in the value of the tradition itself" (p.ix). Wiley's restaging of traditional equestrian portraiture with contemporary Black subjects creates dissonance that counters exclusionary notions of prestige and dignity. Sherman's exaggerated stereotypes reveal the performative, artificial nature of feminine beauty constructs perpetuated through art history. Minjun's sardonic images dissipate solemn revolutionary narratives through dark humor and chaos. In destabilizing canonical modes of portraiture, these iconoclastic works contest ingrained social hierarchies of race, gender, and cultural identity. Their subversive techniques demonstrate art's potential as social critique to challenge entrenched systems of power and oppression.

5. Discussion

The iconoclastic portraits examined demonstrate strategic recontextualization of established styles and subjects to subvert traditional hierarchies and assumptions. Kehinde Wiley's restaging of grand portraiture with contemporary Black subjects calls out exclusionary racism within canonical art (Harris, 2013). Cindy Sherman's parodic self-portraits in exaggerated feminine guises reveal the performative nature of gender identity constructs (Smith, 2006). Yue Minjun's carnivalesque inversions inject absurdist humor to dispel solemn nationalist narratives in Chinese history (Lee, 2003). Despite their diversity of approaches, these artists share a common iconoclastic impulse to destabilize and undermine revered portrait traditions through incongruous juxtaposition, caricatured exaggeration, and role reversal. By playing with the stylistic and rhetorical modes of canonical portraiture, they expose latent ideologies and artificial artifice. Their ironic subversions suggest the emancipatory potential of art to challenge oppressive hierarchies and assumptions.

5.1. Artworks Achieve Iconoclastic Aims

The iconoclastic portraits examined demonstrate strategic recontextualization of established styles and subjects to subvert traditional hierarchies and assumptions. Kehinde Wiley's restaging of grand portraiture with contemporary Black subjects calls out exclusionary racism within canonical art (Harris, 2013). Cindy Sherman's parodic self-portraits in exaggerated feminine guises reveal the performative nature of gender identity constructs (Smith, 2006). Yue Minjun's carnivalesque inversions inject absurdist humor to dispel solemn nationalist narratives in Chinese history (Lee, 2003). Despite their diversity of approaches, these artists share a common iconoclastic impulse to destabilize and undermine revered portrait traditions through incongruous juxtaposition, caricatured exaggeration, and role reversal. By playing with the stylistic and rhetorical modes of canonical portraiture, they expose latent ideologies and artificial artifice. Their ironic subversions suggest the emancipatory potential of art to challenge oppressive hierarchies and assumptions.

5.2. Assessment of Effectiveness as Ironic Commentary and Subversion of Canon

The iconoclastic portraits analyzed effectively harness irony and subversive parody to critique entrenched hierarchies and assumptions within traditional portraiture. Wiley's incongruous recasting of aristocratic equestrian portraiture incisively comments on the exclusion of Black subjects from that canon of prestige (Harris, 2013). Sherman's exaggerated stereotypes compellingly reveal the artificial construction of feminine beauty and identity in art history, as argued by Smith (2006). Minjun's darkly humorous reversals work to thoroughly deflate official nationalist historical narratives, as Lee (2003) discusses. While their individual approaches differ, each artist successfully leverages ironic or parodic recontextualization of canonical forms to expose and undermine the power relations embedded within traditional portraiture. These case studies demonstrate iconoclasm's potency as a critical strategy that uses the rhetorical modes of established art against itself in order to challenge ingrained social hierarchies and dominant cultural paradigms.

5.3. Implications for Understanding Portraiture, Irony, Subversion in Art

This examination of iconoclastic portraiture reveals how artists strategically employ irony, incongruity, and parody to challenge established representational traditions and unmask their ideological underpinnings. The analysis provides insight into how subversive citation can be used to critique and dismantle oppressive hierarchies perpetuated through canonical art forms

(Danto, 2013). Studying iconoclastic engagement with portraiture illuminates both the sociocultural codes embedded in traditional modes of representation as well as the emancipatory potential of art that self-reflexively interrogates its own rhetorical construction. Furthermore, the techniques examined here—juxtaposition, masquerade, carnivalesque—have broader applicability as strategies within art, literature, and other cultural forms to counter dominant paradigms from a marginalized position (Hutcheon, 1989). This study demonstrates the potency of iconoclasm as a means of contesting naturalized assumptions and achieving ruptures in ideological power systems.

5.4. Limitations and Ideas for Further Research

This examination focused on a limited selection of contemporary iconoclastic portraits, suggesting further avenues to expand the scope. More diverse artworks could be analyzed, such as those challenging Western art canons from non-Western perspectives (Araeen, 2000). Comparing iconoclastic portraiture across different cultural and historical contexts could illuminate distinctions in how hierarchies are subverted based on specific sociopolitical conditions. Further research could also go beyond deconstructive parody to examine how contemporary portraiture attempts to reconstruct identities and narratives beyond dominant paradigms. As Schneider (1996) notes, there are limitations to postmodern parody, raising questions of how iconoclasm can move beyond irony into more holistic representation. Nonetheless, this study provides a productive model for critically analyzing portraiture through the lens of subversion and revealing ingrained ideological assumptions within artistic tradition.

6. Conclusion

This examination of iconoclastic portraiture demonstrates how contemporary artists strategically employ subversive techniques of irony, incongruity, and parody to challenge established representational traditions and unmask their ideological assumptions. The analysis reveals how Wiley, Sherman, Minjun and others effectively harness juxtaposition, masquerade, and carnivalesque inversion to critique exclusionary hierarchies of race, gender, and cultural narratives embedded in canonical modes of portraiture. Their playful yet incisive subversions point to the emancipatory potential of art that self-reflexively interrogates its own rhetorical power. Ultimately, the iconoclastic impulse represents a profound form of social critique through creative forms. By destabilizing and reimagining conventional artistic languages, iconoclastic portraiture provokes critical reflection on the very paradigms by which we view and depict identity, ideology, and social relations.

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