Polly Shindler: Adventures Close to Home

Polly Shindler is one of those great, atypical artists who authentically communicate a sense of their social milieu. In art historical terms—that is, the halls and corridors of museums—this achievement is typically reserved for portrait artists. One thinks of John Singer Sargent, for example, whose portraits of nobility give us a clear-eyed picture of Edwardian luxury. In a more contemporary time, Warhol's screen tests functioned like windows onto his environs, using the technological aesthetics of the cinema to frame the comings and goings of various characters with whom he'd come in contact. Shindler, of course, while doing something similar to both of these artists, holds her own by neither glorifying the independence of her subjects, nor reducing them to symbols of some cultural moment. In her paintings and sculptures, she speaks to the ineluctable intimacy we develop with the world around us.

Fascinated by the prospect of the everyday, Shindler's works are artifacts of how people live now, how they look, and the mind-forged manacles which deftly hold them in chains. When the aliens descend on earth long after humanity has destroyed itself, Shindler's vision will carry the cultural import of hieroglyphs found in a pharaoh's tomb. She gives an exacting portrayal of how we actually experience each other—as individuals, groups, families—through the mystifying scrim of diplomacy that both shapes and dissolves our co-existence with others.

For Shindler, politics is one with our habitual ways of seeing. By *political*, of course, I don't mean any kind of electoral process, but the felt associations we have with a world shaped by our own identity and the identities of others. Visibility is key to this awareness. So then we have the contemporary phenomenon of the mask that we all must wear. Without *politicizing* this fact, or taking sides, Shindler simply recreates the current moment where, yes, people with any sort of social responsibility do wear a mask. Yet this doesn't (as conservatives might argue) make us any less visible. And it's to Shindler's credit as an artist that she makes it possible for us to talk about being seen even when it seems we are hidden.

Let's consider Shindler's painting *Kelly*, which is, like the artist's other mask portraits, modeled on a selfie taken by someone she knows personally. True to how paintings always seem to abstract from experience, certain details are left out of Shindler's painting that were present in the original photo. Houseplants in the background, for example, have been replaced with a monochromatic backdrop. But this is exactly to the point. The object of Shindler's portrait is to hone in on one person, to establish the dreamlike unreality of connecting with others despite social distancing, despite the fear of disease and the need to wear a mask.

A mask, in Shindler's work, externalizes the conscience of the sitter. In this respect, a challenge to portraiture as typically conceived becomes a conceptual boon. Along with being a symbol of the dignity of conscience, there's the presence of the eyes peeking out above the mask. This

simple juxtaposition of eyes / mask highlights what I'm referring to as *political*: a kind of ineluctable sociability that seeks mutuality and acknowledgement even in the least propitious circumstances.

Encouragement of connectivity even in the face of crisis becomes equally apparent in Shindler's sculptural works. Jeeps, busses, RVs, mail trucks—these stalwart objects of our collective landscape are rarely isolated and reconstructed with such verisimilitude and appeal. There's a kind of winsome abandon about these sculptures, which undercuts the frailty of the actual things they recreate. A *Jeep*, for example, in Shindler's hands, is not an iconic universal, it's not a brand so much as a particular vehicle, probably owned by someone the artist knows personally, or modeled after a vehicle she has regularly encountered. Similarly, her sculptural recreation of a *Mailbox* seems weighted with both hope and melancholy. It's as though Shindler has given tactile shape to this socially immersive object, which has sometimes betrayed her, and at other times brought her gifts.

Regarding Shindler's sense of art as a memorializing activity, I don't think I've ever quite received so strong an impression of an artist's pet as I have in her work. John Singer Seargent, it is true, painted pets, as well as their owners; but just like his depiction of the high society of his day, one sees more the universal character of the animals than their particularity. But Shindler's dog has a name: Owen. In works like *Owen Looking Out the Window*, or *Owen Looking at the Neighbors*, one can almost hear the interior monologue running through the dog's mind. The intuitive sympathy a pet owner has with his or her pet is rarely achieved in art. Animals, like people, too often become types—an upshot of bourgeois romanticism and its tendency to view ordinary life as representative of some timeless acheatype.

Shindler, through her willingness to discover emotional intimacy in the teeth of adversity, paints her dog the same way she paints her father or a line at her local Stop and Shop. None of these persons or events refer to anything beyond themselves; they're not allegories for some moral lesson, and they don't need to be. The abundance of our interactions with others is truth enough, even as a nation suffers pervasive tragedy.

Lastly, Shindler's depictions of rooms, like *Office with Yellow Chair and View* and *Twin Loungers*, demonstrate the potentials of our world as we currently face it. These views are so American, so very of the moment we find ourselves in as a people. Are these prospects good? Are they undesirable? There's probably more than a wink of irony in the fact that these chairs, as Shindler paints them, sit unused. Where has everybody gone? Are these works the afterimage of some blinding explosion? Or do these unpeopled rooms demarcate everything we can hope for in the way of luxury, comfort, and security?