

## You + Me

*You, Me & They Portraying Us* at the José Drudis-Biada Art Gallery on the campus of Mount Saint Mary's University Los Angeles (October 25-November 26, 2020) employs curatorial activism as a mode of inquiry to challenge the assumptions and erasures of voices in hegemonic narratives. In this exhibition, artists included portray their multifaceted identities, sometimes interwoven with their psychological struggles and further complicated by public perceptions of who they are, should be, or



James Shawn Crum  
*Melancholy*, 2019  
Acrylic on Canvas  
60" x 48"



Xarabyte  
*Sprayings 1 & 2 (State of Affairs)*, 2020  
Recycled Cotton on Fiberglass Screen with Embroidery Thread  
40" x 60"

could be. Working across the mediums of painting, social media, performance, sculpture, papermaking, and crafting, their work questions portraiture constructs as a restricted intellectual idea and mode of portrayal. It posits the concept of portraiture as a dynamic and performative self to query how one sees and represents oneself, the subjectivity of perceiving others, and what results from the relationship between these two modes of reflection.

To facilitate the imaginative transformation process as he painted the self-portraits included in the exhibition, James Shawn Crum intertwines narratives from Classical mythology describing individual private and socio-cultural public transitions with African legends warning of feuding brothers' misadventures and demise. These interlaced stories are painfully evident in Crum's compositions on exhibit, none more so than *Melancholy*, 2019. He painted a psychological portrait of himself where his feelings of otherness are palpable in the image's beleaguered expression. His simultaneous desire and fear of being seen are underscored by depicting himself with one eye boarded shut while pleading with spectators to see and consequently value his humanity as a black man living in America. A sentiment shared by Xarabyte in their red and black diptych *Sprayings 1 & 2 (State of Affairs)* reminiscent of the antifascist flag associated with Antifa, a loose movement of activists who demonstrate against authoritarian, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, and othered communities. Xarabyte shredded clothing to create a paper pulp, which produced an activated surface in their handmade paper panels. This visceral quality, coupled with the

handstitched "ANTI" in red thread on the left black panel and "FASCIST" in black thread on the right red panel, expresses Xarabyte's desire for human equality.

Mark Batongmalaque challenges himself to represent beauty, death, and the ephemeralness of their coexistence. The profile skeleton staring into the eyes of a figure in *The Painful Path of Empathy*, 2019, conveys humanities shared experiences of grasping at these moments as they slip through our fingers fading into memory, and our struggles to understand someone else’s pain. Dressed in a royal purple robe with folds of drapery framing its smiling chipped tooth grinning face accentuate the bedazzled floral crown and neck cuff worn by the skeleton in *We Only Matter to Us*, 2020. This painting and the portrait of a skeleton in *All that Remains*, 2020, dressed as a knight wearing armor designed with Art Nouveau flair and framed by a dazzling Baroque sort of halo, evoke seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas theme paintings. Yet, Batongmalaque’s absurdist humor juxtaposing the underbelly of vanity symbolized by skeletons with fanciful pop culture interpretations of art historical imagery ingratiates viewers and encourages us to reflect on the brevity of life, like the Dutch painters intended.

Megan Koth followed posts suggested by her Instagram feed, and the Google image results from searching her name to formulate a wormhole linking more and more disparate content the further she burrowed. She appropriated these mediated photos of herself, her paintings, her friends, and then unrelated imagery seemingly inexplicitly associated with her name as self-portraits in her *Interface*, 2020, paintings. The



Mark Batongmalaque  
*All That Remains*, 2020  
 Acrylic on Canvas  
 47" x 47"



Megan Koth  
*Interface II: Google Images Detail*, 2020  
 Oil on Canvas  
 15" x 70"

resulting scrolls of diminutive portraits read like a visual diagram. The process of working in her studio to paint a mediated detail of her paintings, the actual compositions stored a few feet away, creates a dynamic self-referential relationship both in her

creative process and spectatorship. In the detail image of *Interface 2*, 2020, notice an earlier version of her self-care paintings foreshadowing *Pull*, 2020, included in *You, Me & They Portraying Us*, itself a mediated exhibition because of the gallery’s temporary closure due to pandemic related health concerns.

