PROFILE

On portraiture

As a photographer, capturing someone else is scary. I talked to portraitist Seoyoon Kim to find out how she does it.

// BY MARTIN PERALTA



PHOTO COURTESY OF SEOYOON KIM

I have always found it unusual to ask someone if I can take pictures of their face. Surely, I cannot expect to ask someone, "Hey, can I take a photo of you, from the shoulders up, and can you, you know, keep the facial expression you have right now?" and for them to give an honest reaction — or any reaction at all.

That is my fear: that I will not be able to capture someone in a way that they will appreciate. Especially once they have some stake in the way they look in the image.

But people do love candid photographs. Not the kind of candid where a friend is asked, "Hey, will you take a candid photo of me?" Real candids. There comes an implicit request when you ask someone to take a photo of their face: Try to look different. Switch up your face and pose so that I can take a picture where you look exactly as I want you to.

Once the subject is an active participant in the photograph, their reaction becomes unpredictable. I can take a picture of someone and find it visually appealing, but they might not feel great about how they look. Take away the pressure of trying to look a certain way, and people find joy in seeing themselves.

These are some of the millions of considerations I have running through my head about portraits, because photography seems to me to be more unpredictable. I am, therefore, in awe of anyone who can silence this cacophony of worry and simply manipulate a face in all of its detail. Portraitists are the most fearless artists of all.

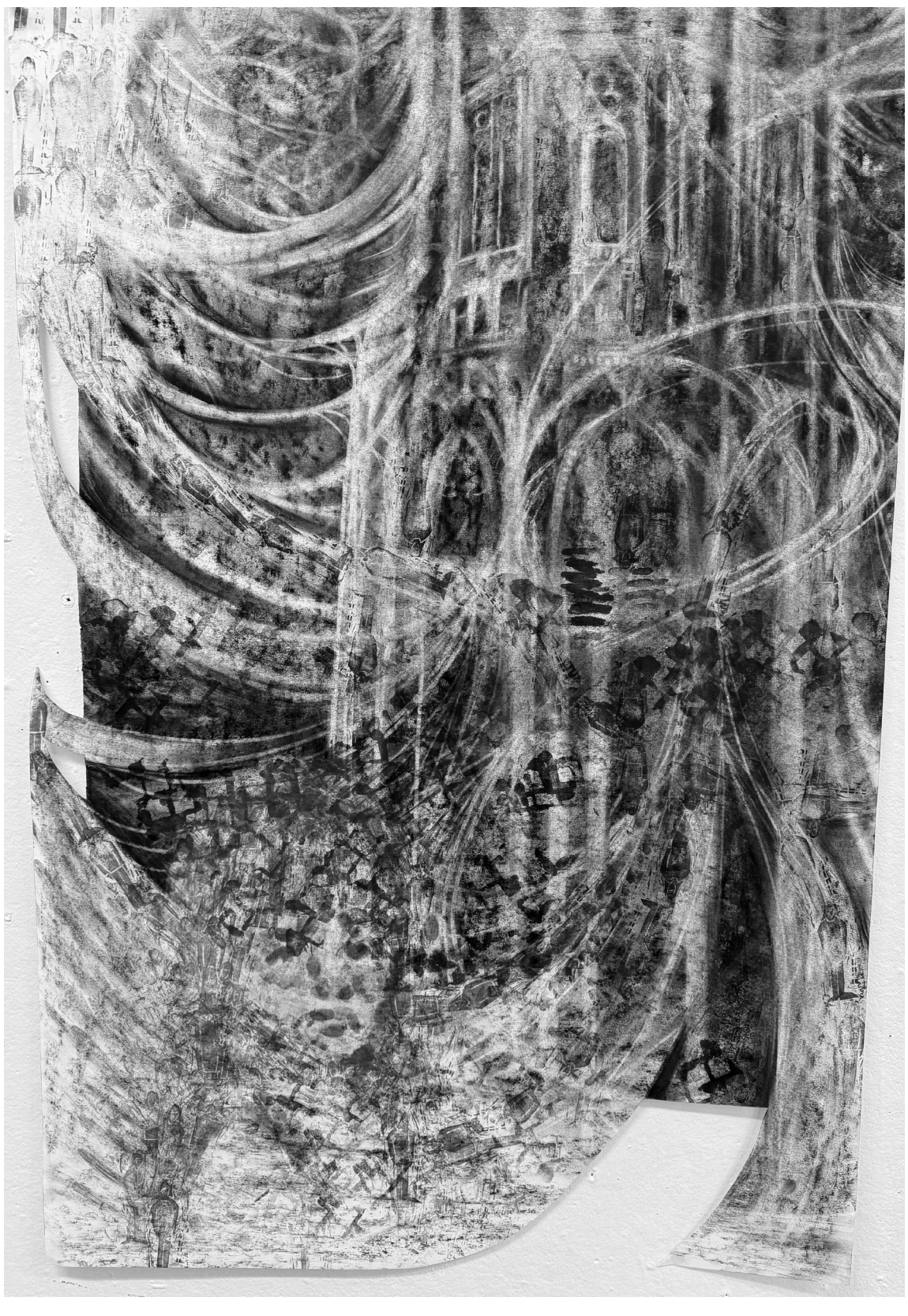
What reason could one have to paint a portrait?

In an effort to investigate this question, I interviewed my friend Seoyoon Kim '29 because I knew about her art and wanted to look into her thought process. I found her outside the Silliman Courtyard wearing red Onitsuka Tigers shoes that she got from Korea, a green-and-pink skirt with a tie-die-like pattern, a beach top, a green sweater and a lot of jewelry from thrift stores. I wanted to ask her about this fearlessness that I believe portrait artists have, and I wanted to know what it means to create a face of one's own as opposed to capturing one exactly as it is.

I was coming out of a critique of my own photography, where I got a much-needed wake-up call about creating context. Essentially, I was told by a mentor that the way I put the subject in focus should communicate the context of my thought process prior to pressing the shutter button. I think I am improving at planning out a shot beforehand.

The same thought is involved in Seoyoon's painting. She makes a note to put specific features into focus. If you want to capture someone's happy moment in time, there are certain symbols that should enter the mind. A warm smile or eyes that are wide open.

"You don't have to capture every detail, just the important things," she told me. "Or just like capturing the essence of the person, especially if you know that person better, there are things that you know you can bring out by drawing faces."



I had to ask Seoyoon about what she considers in the curation of drawing facial expressions, because her work consists of a lot of faces. Her ancestry heavily impacted her ethos.

"I think Korean culture is so critical of how you look, and I just think growing up in that environment made me aware of it," she said, "not as in an evaluating way, but in appreciating the different features everyone has."

Her portrait art is powerful in its celebration of many features, and it purposefully rejects the idea of perfection or cultural norms and beauty standards of how one should look. Maybe when one person feels like they are undesirable, they can take a look at the portraits of people who look like them and feel comfort in their traits being reflected.

I believe that in the same way people can draw and reflect people's unique traits, there is a similar reason why people like candid pictures. Even if they weren't focused on being perfect, they still like the way they look. They are happy to catch a glimpse into their authenticity.

What experiences influence the art?

I take pictures because I am in a place and it occurs to me to take a picture of that place. The story behind the image is grounded in that moment in time. I have a picture of a building on Valencia Street in San Francisco that I took while helping my sister move out of her apartment, and I remember the distinct beauty of the buildings that form the streets in the Bay Area. The extremity of the environment helped me sympathize with my sister as she undertook a move to the East Coast to continue school, not knowing that a year later I would make the same transition. She never had me take her picture as she moved. Maybe, as I have told myself since, that's because she was trying to avoid looking back.

Ideas and "existential debates in high school" are what motivate Seoyoon to create. Seoyoon shows me her art, and I see the ideas that inspired her.

"It came a lot from the things I read, and the classes I took," she told me as she described her work. "I really am fueled a lot by discussion, and I didn't want to be in a place where people are only into art, and here, there's a diverse range of people you can gain inspiration from."

Three months ago, I had never had access to so many discussions or viewpoints about something like portraiture or storytelling. There are so many people I get to talk to here at Yale, and I have discovered areas where my life and interests intersect with theirs. As I begin to look back, pictures of my friends here together mean so much more to me than a simple reminder that we once met.

My own critique of my photos is that my reasoning is only visible to me; the experience is hidden from everyone else.

Wanting to find a photo of my sister right before she moved, I searched and found in my camera roll a picture of her looking down and petting our dog. I usually get photos of her looking away, but I interpret her gaze in this particular photo as ambiguous. Perhaps she looks forward to changes in her life, or maybe she really didn't want to look back. Maybe if I had taken the time to capture her face at the moment she left, I would have an image that assured me that moving across the country was a decision I was also ready for. The missing detail in the face reminds me that life is different for everyone, and I make my own experience.

What comes next?

One of Seoyoon's most recent projects was for a studio art class called Visual Thinking, where artists were tasked to make prints using solely mark-making with mediums like charcoal and eraser.

At the time of the assignment, she was "feeling particularly homesick," she said. She drew Harkness Tower on a sheet of paper covered in charcoal, using an eraser to mark the people in it. She recognizes "the process of familiarizing yourself with a new environment and how uncomfortable that could be," through the techniques of the painting, starting by completely changing the canvas, to slowly "marking out" different people and experiences.

"It's very subtractive," she said.

I have never shot a profile in my life. But there is something about the curating facial detail — it is a responsibility that falls to those who wield pens, or brushes or whatever form of capturing that is around.

On Thanksgiving, it will be just my sister and me in Atlanta. She loves riding her bike in Piedmont Park, going out to shows and hanging out with people she cares about. Now that we are both situated, far from home, maybe I will take her picture.

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