

ELEMENTS

Taking the measure of identity is fraught with risk for a visual artist. With this exhibition of portraits, David Datuna explores that challenge in ways that tell us much about his subjects' identity, and at the same time, something about ourselves and our shared narrative of history and culture. From Lincoln to Elvis, from Martin Luther King to Andy Warhol, Datuna has chosen figures that allow him to try his hand at decoding the origins of influence.

Elements, David Datuna's eighth solo show is the artist's first exhibition of new work since his installation *Viewpoint of Billions* at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery drew 23,000 visitors, the largest attendance the museum has seen for a show in more than three decades. *Viewpoint of Billions* was also the first contemporary artwork to integrate the wearable computer Google Glass, creating a rich interactive experience.

The title *Elements* is taken from the centerpiece of the show, a diptych that pairs Albert Einstein with Euclid's *Elements*, the seminal work of mathematics written in the third century BC. Often described as the second most widely published book after the Bible, the book's findings underpin much of logic and modern science. Its influence is immense. Einstein said it kindled his interest in science. Lincoln insisted it was the most influential book of his life.

But beyond its profound importance as a treatise on mathematics, at its core, Euclid's *Elements* is a guidepost for clarity that established the very concept of absolute values. In this exhibition, Datuna's *Elements* probe for similar fixed elements of identity and influence in the modern world. In choosing Euclid as a starting point, the artist has set himself an ambitious creative goal of seeking something in his portraits that is both fundamental and axiomatic. It was Euclid who deduced the axiomatic or self-evident, provable theories. David Datuna looks for a triangle of perspective in these portraits that also has a self-evident quality.

Look at each figure and the point of observation appears to vary with restless energy. Lincoln's familiar, calm gaze seems demonstrably strong and confident, deepened by its dark coloration. It is comfortably familiar to us. But as the veil of optical lenses shift a viewer's perspective, one perceives the nuance of a complex personality that underpinned the legend. This actually forms the substance of these conceptual works: the apparent duality of seeing things differently through a prism of shared experience.

That theme of identity and influence has fascinated David Datuna since he arrived in the United States in the late 1990s. Growing up during the Cold War in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, the artist experienced first-hand a society where creative freedom was constantly under assault. In some ways, Datuna's story meshes with many of his subjects in the show as a tale of aspiration: in his case, a

journey surmounting disillusionment and finding a home where the artist's creative voice can be celebrated.

His conceptual body of work to date has largely explored national identity and culture, re-imagining familiar, potent symbols like flags to create a narrative about nationhood. The new portraits use the artist's unique conceptual device of layered optical lenses to focus and diffuse his distinct visual imagery. Here too, Euclid's influence on the artist is evident as the Greek scholar also authored the first book on optics and the science of vision.

David Datuna has said that optics is his language. The imagery in all the portraits here is comprised of a varying matrix of small dots. Like a semaphore of visual language, they create a sleek iconographic form, at once vivid and textural. These are faces we know, many of them intimately. Yet there is something different, something novel. A century ago, the English writer and critic Clive Bell insisted that capturing the appearance of an artwork's subject was less important than capturing what he called its "significant form," or true inner nature. Datuna is seeking just that inner nature here.

And not in a formalist sense. These works are really the opposite of formalism, mixing media and context. The vivid, almost neon yellow of Andy Warhol as sinister, shadowy form is a tour de force of pop, in your face shock value. Walt Disney is the smiling, mid-century American success story, but the optical shift of the lenses creates a film still caricature the Disney animators might have been proud of.

Though typically employing more traditional elements like collage and paint in past works, David Datuna's new portraits are a multi-dimensional interpretation of the form that mine new, fresh ground for the artist. In the aftermath of his exhibition there, curators at the National Portrait Gallery have suggested his work is an archetype of 21st Century portraiture, groundbreaking in its use of new media and conceptual vision.

The subjects of *Elements* are iconic individuals whose influence resonated in their time. The portraits resonate as well, exploring both the nature of these individuals and how they affected our culture; how we perceive them and in some way, revealing how they perceived the world around them. Datuna's subjects are a movable feast of imagery: the matrix of dots representing the individual, all of his or her world, and for that matter, all of us. The outer veil of lenses challenging us to see these familiar faces with a different view. Looking, perhaps, for that "significant form."

David Datuna lives and works in New York. In addition to his recent showing at the National Portrait Gallery, he mounted dual solo shows in Moscow and Paris titled *Eye to Eye* in October of 2013. His work has been exhibited widely in the United States and internationally, and forms part of a number of important collections worldwide.