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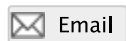
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## Face Time at Vessel Gallery

Six local artists get physiognomical.

By *DeWitt Cheng*



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Even if John Singer Sargent ungraciously saw making "paughtraits" as "a pimp's profession," the capturing of likeness and personality remains an open question for artists even in the digital age, with its controversies over identity and representation. Six local artists take on the challenge.

Sohyung Choi's "Notes on a Self-Portrait" features several hundred ID-style mug shots that appear to be superimposed combinations of a few people — virtual cousins, perhaps. This Warholian array, brought to simulated life by Choi's flickering projections, suggests that individuality may be accidental; Nancy Burson's computerized imaginary composite persons (e.g., Hillary and Obama recently morphed together) come to mind, as do the photo shrines of Christian Boltanski. The painters Walter James Mansfield and Sanjay Vora have previously balanced the human presence with the physicality of their almost topographic paint surfaces, Mansfield using poured paint to construct imaginary faces, and Vora using furrowed fields of oil paint to obscure his low-contrast images from family photos. While some of Mansfield's striking earlier works are here ("Forebear," "Refracted Instance"), his new works ("Seven Portraits," "Architectural Head") suggest a more analytical, slower approach, with the heads coalescing from layers of over-painted geometric units. Vora now concentrates on his photographic imagery, having abandoned the textured paint, and his inky paintings ("Having a Snack," "Reaction Shot") suggest subtractive monoprints with light areas erased from a pervasive darkness.

Virgo Paraiso and Tino Rodriguez pursue an elegant magic realism with elements of Symbolism and Surrealism. In Paraiso's "Don't Go Back to Sleep," the decapitated yet conscious head of a young man, tattooed and

bleeding as beautifully as a Beardsley John the Baptist, rises into the evening gloom supported by blue butterflies. Similar narratives of decadent or operatic enchantment are portrayed in "Love Poem," with its human-cockatoo kiss, and "Spirit of the Forest," with its avian-vegetal faun. Rodriguez depicts a similar world of magic and masquerade, but with less narrative intent; "Invocation," "Serenity," "Epiphany," "Blue Moon Child," and "Portrait with Swallow" read as portraits of individuals, albeit naked but for bird and butterfly masks. Finally, Cyrus Tilton is showing mythological drawings used for planning his sculptures and "Mixed Emotions," a simulated portrait painting nestled inside a deep, ornate frame. The egglike head, however, is sculpted and divided into horizontal bands that pivot on a neck rod beneath a domelike red cardinal's skullcap, allowing viewers to rotate the features, crating new expressions and persons — creepy, funny, and unforgettable. *Portraits* runs through July 26 at Vessel Gallery (471 25th St., Oakland). 510-893-8800 or Vessel-Gallery.com


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471 25th St. **OAKLAND-DOWNTOWN**

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