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Bill Clinton As Never Seen Before

Artist Viviane Silvera's "Praying Hands" at The Cell highlights Bill Clinton in detail.

MARCH 28, 2011

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Photos of President Bill Clinton in 1998, at the height of the Lewinsky scandal, seem to come with an implied, almost subliminal vocabulary: Cigar. Intern. Impeachment. Guilty. Liar. But with politics removed and time gone by, artist Viviane Silvera has translated those images of the president into iconic portrayals of humanity.

With "Praying Hands"—a series of oversize Clinton portraits drawn from news photos and magazine covers on display at [The Cell](#)—Silvera set out to transform specific images from popular culture into a universal idea. The resulting works are timeless portraits of a man rapt in emotion.

With thousands of red and pink pencil marks, Silvera poignantly explores how art distills the immediacy of photography and renders Clinton's face in a timeless, almost anonymous light. Though he is recognizable, Silvera's close-ups are cleverly cropped, the edges blurred—so *Time* magazine's image of Clinton in crisis becomes an image of a man we can relate to first and identify later. What were originally news photos that elicited judgment are now images that beckon empathy.

The six-foot canvases are mesmerizing. One can't help but stare into the deep eyes, imagine the subject's internal dialogue and feel a sense of personal relevance: I've been there, I've felt that. And that is precisely what Silvera set out to do. We spoke with her about her inspiration for "Praying Hands," and the transformative power of art.

Why did you choose Bill Clinton as your subject?

VIVIANE SILVERA: I was interested in people that had invented and projected public identity for themselves. I actually started with Marilyn Monroe—or rather Norma Jean becoming Marilyn. What made her identifiably one over the other—the addition of the false eyelashes, the beauty mark—and I experimented through cropping the more identifiable characteristics to see when she became recognizably Marilyn to the viewer. I was also looking at Princess Di at the time, as well as Clinton, and was working on all three simultaneously. In the end the Clinton images are the ones that stuck because he was the only survivor—whatever happens he just keeps on going—

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and I loved that about him.

What inspired you to explore this transformation?

vs: My art school training is in figurative art, and I spent many years drawing and sculpting from Old Master works. Because of that, I am always looking for the connection between the world I see around me and the world portrayed in great art from the past. To me, the most potent quality in art is its ability to transform: the ordinary into the extraordinary, the ugly into the beautiful, something painful and difficult to look at into something beautiful and wonderful. In any work I do, that element of transformation—in this case in medium (photography into drawing) and in scale (from a magazine to six-foot canvases)—is the key element.

What is the meaning behind the title “Praying Hands”?

vs: It is named after Albrecht Dürer’s 1508 drawing. When I first selected the photos that most interested me from the Picture Collection Library, I noticed that Clinton’s hand gesture in the photo I was working from echoed the iconic Dürer drawing almost exactly. It was at that moment that I realized that all the images I had chosen were about the act of prayer... of course this makes sense, as it is a universal gesture that we all can relate to— hands clasped asking for help, redemption, and forgiveness.

Who and what were your influences for this series?

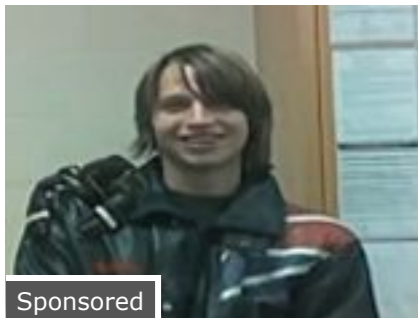
vs: Dürer is the most obvious influence. But even before that came my interest in movie close-ups—which really reveal the face as a landscape. It was in movie close-ups that I noticed the closer you are to the actor’s face, the less identifiable and the more anonymous the face is. I love the overwhelmingly monumental scale that gives you the sensation of being enveloped by the face as landscape, with valleys and hills. I was also interested in the tension between the monumentality of the scale and the intimacy and accessibility of the cinematic image.

What are you working on next?

vs: I am working on a series of paintings about therapy—specifically from scenes in movies and television shows such as *In Treatment* and *Ordinary People*. I’m interested in the body language that reveals the dynamic between therapist and patient. Again, I’m looking to pinpoint universal, iconic gestures, only this time with the whole body rather than a detailed look at the face.

—MICHELE S. BROWN

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Behind the Scenes: Gayle King and Norah O'Donnell

Cover shoot: May/June 2014 issue of *Gotham* magazine.

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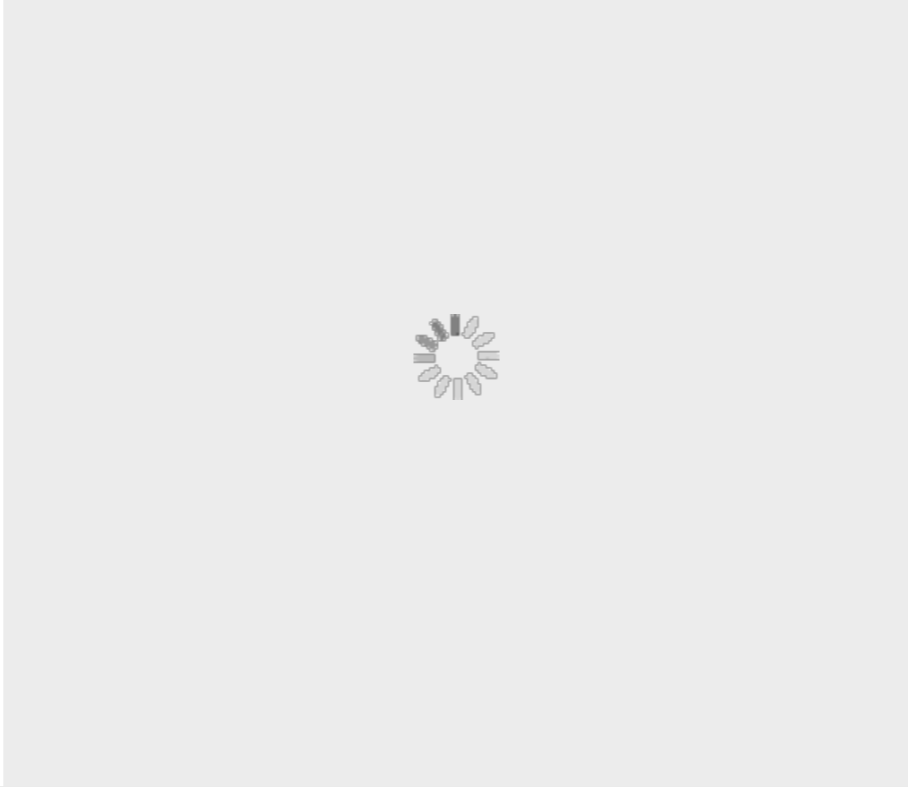


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