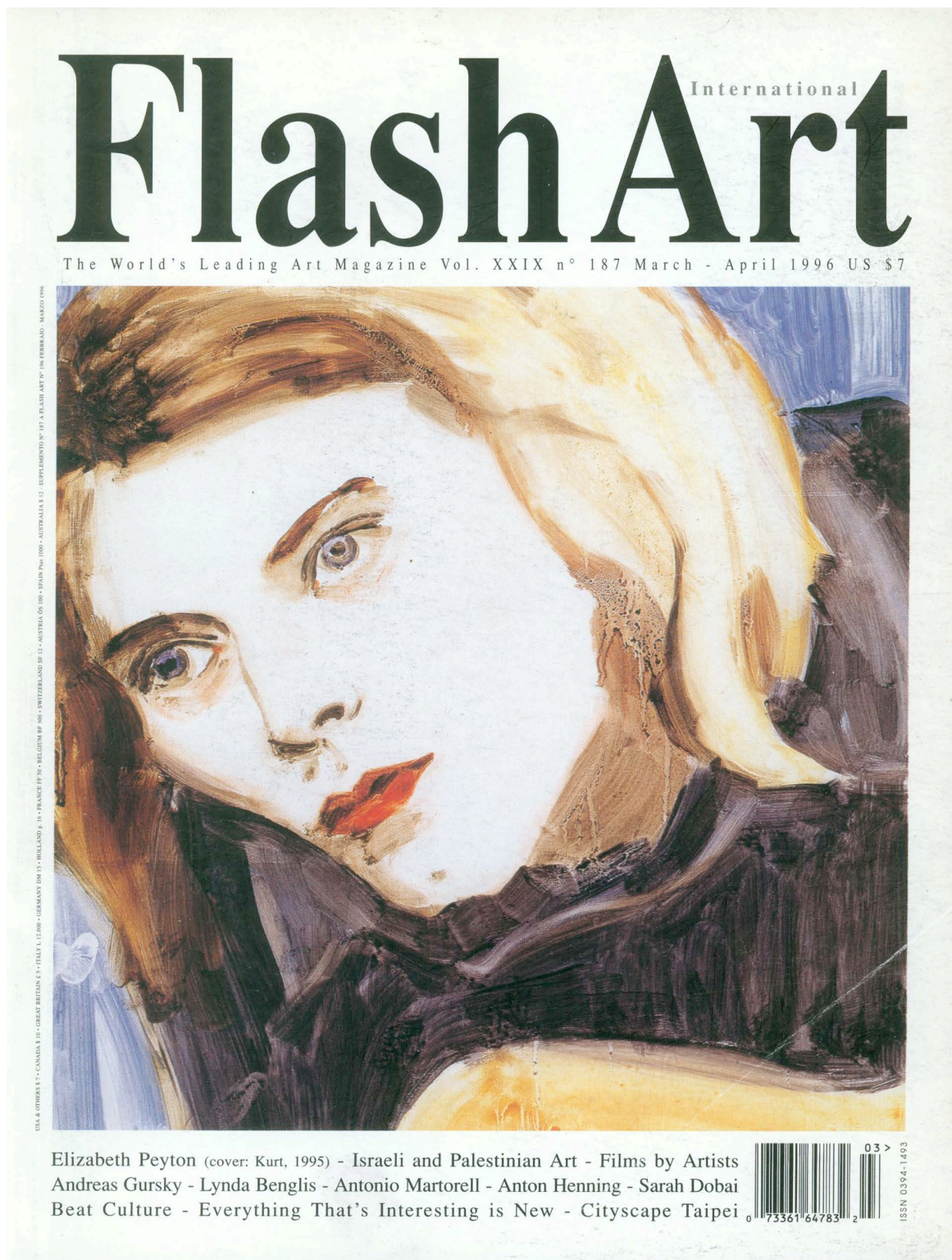


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Francesco Bonami, "We've been looking at images so long that we've forgotten who we are"
Flash Art, April, 1996



ELIZABETH PEYTON

WE'VE BEEN LOOKING AT IMAGES FOR SO LONG THAT WE'VE FORGOTTEN WHO WE ARE

Francesco Bonami

FRANCESCO BONAMI: *YOU are a traditional painter, in the sense that people easily relate to your work because of the medium. They think they know what you are talking about.*

Elizabeth Peyton: I guess I am traditional painter because painting is the way I choose to represent what I am interested in talking about.

FB: *And what you are interested in talking about are personal icons and pop icons, creating an equivalence between the two. That's the most interesting part of your work, I think. We can't see any difference in the way you represent Kurt Cobain or John Lennon and the way you represent some of your friends. Is this equivalence something real or just a matter of "style"?*

EP: There is no separation for me between people I know through their music or photos and somebody I know personally. The way I perceive them is very similar, in that there's no difference between the certain qualities I find inspiring in them. Both give me something magical at the same level.

FB: *You say, very compellingly, that the faces on the covers of those magazines you have piled up here on your studio floor, are no less real than a person you are going to meet for lunch. The music you listen to and the coffee you drink shape your life on the same level.*

EP: I think about how influential some people are in others' lives. So it doesn't matter who they are or how famous they are but rather how beautiful is the way they live their lives and how inspiring they are for others. And I find this in people I see frequently as much as in people I never met. Or in people I read about in books, like Ludwig or Napoleon.

FB: *Why is Ludwig of Bavaria important for you?*

EP: If I say what I think I am going to lose something of the person. I feel silly, but anyway... Somebody took me to Visconti's movie — six hours, and wow! It showed an incredibly fancy world, not in that it was luxurious but because Ludwig was an enormously creative person who couldn't deal with his time, he made his own world in

which to live. As with other people I like, he was able to create something beautiful in spite of the circumstances.

FB: *You portray those people that in one way or another go against the grain of life, producing some kind of vision, like Kurt Cobain. People who create beauty beyond their personal awkwardness.*

EP: I can relate to that experience and through painting I can get closer to it.

FB: *To which historical figure do you relate the most?*

EP: I like Balzac a lot, or Louis XIV, who had this incredible vision of the world.

FB: *You were producing mostly drawings before.*

EP: It was due to the circumstances, I didn't have so much time. But I always painted, even if I didn't show the paintings.

FB: *But then you had the show at Gavin Brown with Kurt Cobain's portraits which was a kind of breakthrough, a shift in your subjects too.*

EP: Kurt was such a revelation. He was my age in my time. It was so great to walk down the street and see his face in the window of a record shop. You don't see Louis XIV in a record shop. And now with the Beatles back again it's quite fantastic.

FB: *You choose to portray John Lennon, the most complex figure of the four.*

EP: I'm not interested in the other ones. He was special, his way of going against the odds was great.

FB: *Painting serves the subject for you, while most people are still thinking in terms of good painting or bad painting. In your case it's hard to discuss it in those terms because of the subjects.*

EP: I don't have much perspective on that, I guess people look at paintings in general as objects.

FB: *You work mostly from photographs; they are the live models.*

EP: I work also from video and from real life, which is often a disaster because you don't have time to look at the person, the way

he/she moves or talks or smiles. You can do it with a video, looking at it over and over.

FB: *But we can't see much difference between those portraits you did from photos or videos and those you did from a sitting.*

EP: Not really. Though those from the photos sometimes have a better composition. I can get a shirt from one image and a smile from another and the eyebrows from yet another, to reach the idea I have of the person.

FB: *Are you paying a tribute to the people you represent?*

EP: Sure, they are kind of heroes. They help me.

FB: *In what sense do they help you?*

EP: You know, when you have a problem you think: what would Napoleon have done in this case? Or I can think of some stories about John Lennon. You read how he wrote his songs — he didn't know how to write music and he didn't want to know. That's really inspiring, it makes me think I am OK.

FB: *There is usually, in most of the people you portray, some kind of failure, a failure to achieve their dreams.*

EP: They are not the easiest people, they are not the nicest people. They maybe failed in some things, but what they actually did is much more important and great.

FB: *With a few rare exceptions, all of your subjects are men.*

EP: I guess so, I can't really answer why, I don't think about it. A lot of people think the portraits of men are women. I wonder if I was a man if I could get away with painting only nice women.

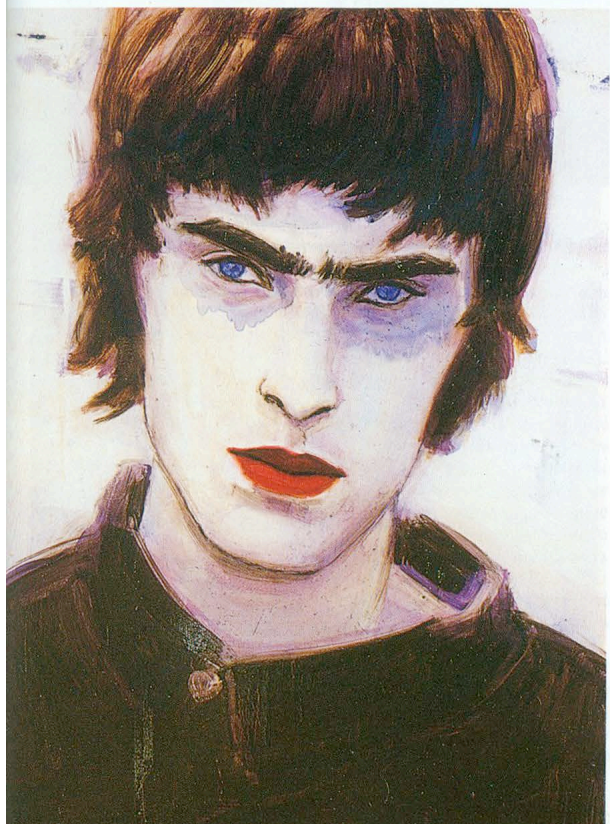
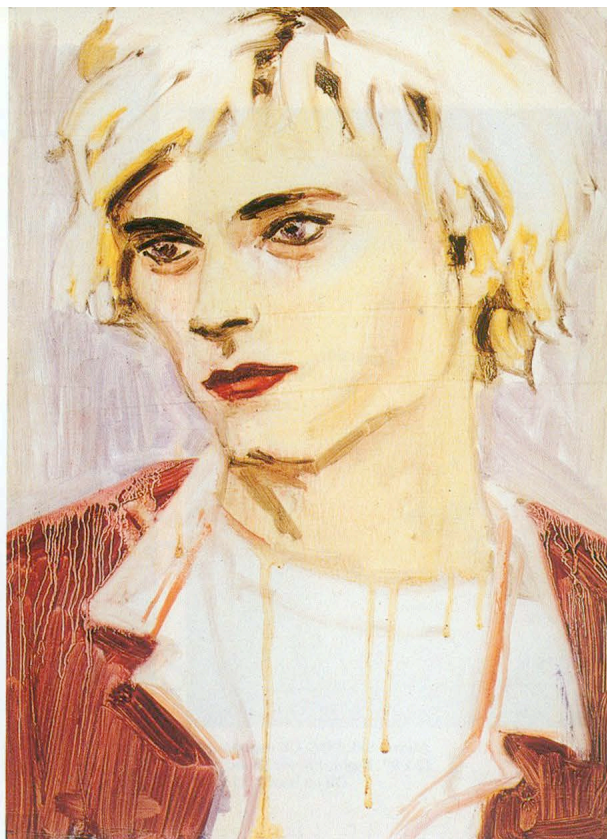
FB: *Your people are represented mostly in private circumstances, down to earth.*

EP: I don't look at adulation. I like private portraits because it makes the subjects more human.

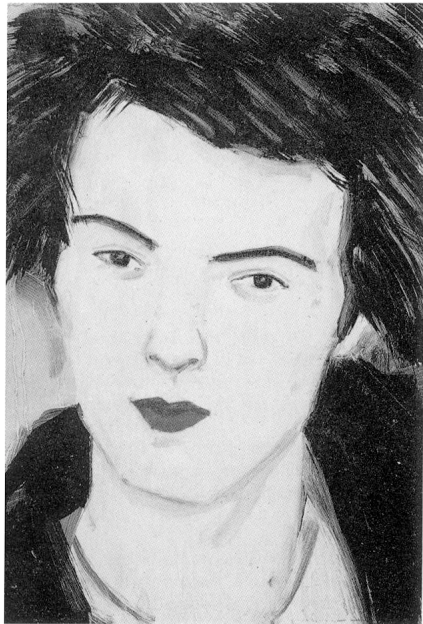
FB: *A mixture of power and failure.*

Facing page: clockwise from top left: Sharon (Berlin), 1995. Oil on board, 10 x 8". Courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York; Zoe's Kurt, 1995. Oil on masonite, 14 x 11"; Hotel, 1995. Oil on board, 17 x 14"; Blue Liam, 1995. Oil on board, 17 x 14".

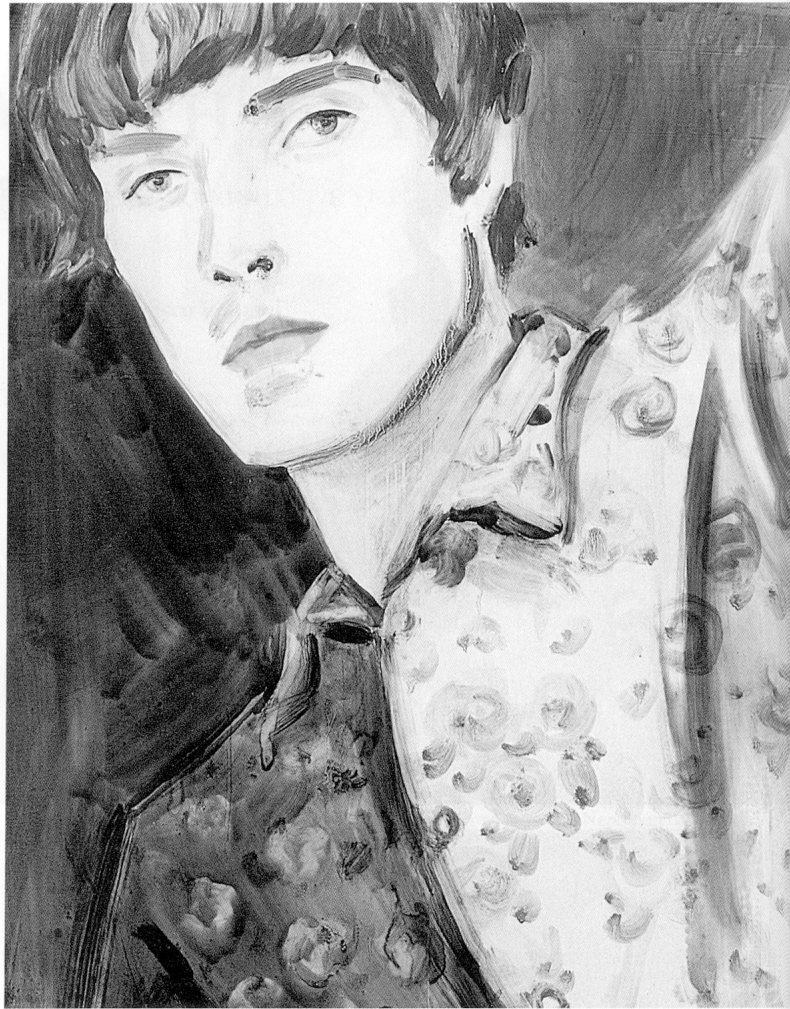
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Above: Sid, 1995. Oil on masonite, 12 x 9". Right: Flower Liam, 1995. Oil on board, 17 x 14".



EP: Maybe, but mostly those moments preserve those special qualities I think are so inspiring for me.

FB: Do you identify yourself as an artist with those people, your career with theirs?

EP: No that's the thing I find quite tragic at a personal level. The things surrounding me are not really going to affect people as a song could. People don't have access to art as I have access to records and books. I don't think there's a twelve years old kid out there who is going to be transformed by hearing about the art of one of my friends, but I'm sure he can be transformed by listening to the music of Nirvana.

That's what Elizabeth Peyton and I discussed in her tiny studio the day New York was paralyzed by the blizzard that transformed the city into a small village. We talked with the sound-track of the Beatles singing I'm a loser, which I think was quite appropriate, not because we felt that way but because looking at Peyton's paintings

you cannot avoid thinking: "Kurt Cobain blew his head off, John Lennon was going through a miserable time when he was shot by a loony, Napoleon ended up alone dying of cancer on a lost island in the Indian Ocean, quite different from the empire he once had, and poor Ludwig drowned himself in a lake." Yet all these people added something marvelous to our culture and the simple way these paintings and drawings express it is quite astonishing, because they succeed in showing both sides of those individuals at the same time not rhetorically or sappy. And the fact that painting appears to be today a kind of lost cause of contemporary art gives to the work a kind of unpredictable depth.

These paintings are, dare I say, independent and unpolluted by the aesthetic surface of the screen. Elizabeth Peyton surpasses the show-business filter which distances us from our models, she gets closer to a kind of feeling that makes paintings and people, no matter who they are or how they lost their spirit and life, extremely alive.

The core of the matter is the generational approach through painting and art to the ideal highland of History, where Louis IV, Kurt Cobain and your beer pal sit side by side and you with them. The content then lies in this unconditional need to redress power relations via a perspective that is very personal. Finally, painting as a loser can reflect a symbolic revenge by a history-deprived generation. ■

Francesco Bonami is a critic based in New York. He heads the Flash Art U.S. Editorial desk.

Elizabeth Peyton was born in 1965 in Danbury (CT). She lives and works in New York.
Selected solo shows: 1987: Althea Viafore, New York; 1992 : Water Closet, Novocento, New York; 1993: Hotel Chelsea, Rm 828, New York; 1995: Cabinet at The Prince Albert, London; Burkhard Riemschneider, Cologne; Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York; 1996: Il Capricorno, Venice.
Selected group shows: 1993: "Okay Behaviour," 303, New York; "Little Thing," Randolph St Gallery, Chicago; 1994: "Don't Postpone Joy of Collecting Can Be Fun," Austrian Cultural Institute, New York; 1995: "Campo," Venice Biennale; "Space Odyssey," Korencou, Athens; 1996: "Wunderbar," Kunstervieren Hamburg.