



**Rachel Portesi: *Hair Portraits***  
24 Oct. 2020 – 14 Feb. 2021  
Brattleboro Museum & Art Center  
Downtown Brattleboro, Vermont

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## A solo museum exhibition explores the complex relationship that women and femme-identifying individuals have with their hair

*Utilizing the early photographic process of tintype and featuring femme-identifying models of varied ages and ethnicities, Rachel Portesi's *Hair Portraits* addresses fertility, sexuality, aging and mortality, vulnerability, and intergenerational trauma—as well as harmony and discord with nature.*

**Brattleboro, VT — Fall 2020** — The Brattleboro Museum & Art Center (BMAC) is pleased to present Rachel Portesi (b. 1971, Boston)'s *Hair Portraits*, a series of tintype photographs of female and femme-identifying models of varied ages and ethnicities who consider hair to be a large part of their identity.



All wet plate collodion tintype. From left: *My Grandmother* (2017), 10 x 10" • *Graft* (2018), 10 x 10" • *Practice Death* (2017), 10 x 10" • *May* (2018), 14 x 14" • *Imogen* (2018), 14 x 14"

*Hair Portraits*, organized by BMAC Chief Curator Mara Williams, reflects on the fact that since the beginning of human history, hair has held symbolic significance. Although meanings and rites vary from culture to culture, most relate to key life events. Hair's inextricable link to identity is rooted in the fact that it is one of the only aspects of an individual's appearance over which they can have near-full control. It can be dyed, cut, braided, worn in the form of a wig or extensions, concealed, shaven off, or styled endlessly. In the context of *Hair Portraits*, this notion of control takes on an exaggerated visual form, in that models' hair is literally pinned to a wall for an effect that often appears, in the tintypes' final state, to defy physics.

Each tintype photograph in *Hair Portraits* is the culmination of hours Portesi spends making a collaborative 'hair sculpture' with the model as the model stands against a wall. The subject's hair is fastened to the wall itself with push pins, intricately intertwined with symbolic objects such as fresh flowers, twigs, large plant fronds, family heirlooms and mementos, and additional flora from Portesi's garden in Vermont and a nearby flower farm. Several of the 'hair sculptures' also use ceiling-suspended fishing line for additional volume.

Many of the objects have historical connections to fertility and femininity, like Portesi's frequent incorporation of braids and in-bloom flowers. In other photographs, the integrated objects have personal resonance to Portesi or the model. In *Abuela*, for instance, a confidently posed, bare-breasted woman wears an antique lace bridal collar, the hair on her head geometrically hand-sewn by Portesi into the lace. The lace collar belonged to Portesi's grandmother but was selected by the model for its tactile resemblance to her childhood memory of her grandmother's lace tablecloth.

The selection of *Hair Portraits* on view at BMAC includes 17 tintype works of three dimensions, which

collectively depict the hair of three models. The exhibition will also feature a film piece comprising 'hair sculpture' process footage shot on a combination of three devices: a hand-crank 16mm film camera from 1948, a Super 8 film camera from 1978, and an iPhone 6 from 2014.

Portesi's representation of multiple ethnicities and sexual identities, while not deliberate (her model pool for the particular *Hair Portraits* on view at BMAC was "three friends who were excited about the project"), speaks to hair-related identity as a universal construct, but one that is unique to the lived experiences of the individual.

*Hair Portraits* came about when Portesi was experiencing a complex form of grief as the result of an identity shift that occurred around 2013, when her children became older. Coinciding with an artist residency at the Vermont Studio Center, she began researching grief as a concept and became engrossed by historical practices of mourning; specifically, how so many encompassed hair. During her initial experimentation with *Hair Portraits* during the residency, Portesi set out to make self-portraits. The direction the process took turned out to make self-portraiture impossible, so she began to enlist other women with whom she had existing close relationships.

Portesi explains that her interactivity with each model during the process varies – some prefer to check out and be on their phones while Portesi sculpts, while others are full creative collaborators. One of the models has hair that is similar to Portesi's, and the duo's process mirrors one of self-portraiture on the part of Portesi.

After the deliberate, hours-long 'hair sculpture' process, the tintypes themselves are taken over a 26-second exposure.

"Because the exposure is long, and the chemistry of my homemade solvent is finicky, there is no certainty of the outcome," said Portesi. "My attraction to 'instant photography' began when I started shooting on 1970s Polaroid Land Cameras in 1995. When my beloved Polaroid 667 black and white film was discontinued in 2008, I took up the archaic medium of tintype, which offered a similar appeal in its lack of control; each shot is one-and-done, a final product with imperfections and all. There is nothing quite like the mystery and gradual satisfaction of the final image slowly emerging before your eyes. It feels like a magic trick."

Also informing *Hair Portraits* is Portesi's fascination with the cross-cultural presence of hair in historic memorialization and mourning practices. During the Victorian era—which coincided with the rise of tintype photography—wreaths, art, and sculpture were often made using the deceased's hair as the primary medium, especially among families that couldn't afford photography. In the Ndebele culture of Zimbabwe and northeastern South Africa (among other ethnic groups), it is customary for family members of all sexes to shave their head during the mourning period, unless the deceased relative willed them exempt prior to passing. Religious sculptures from first-century China have been found to contain human hair in their hollow recesses. And in present-day Western culture, it is not unusual for a parent to save a lock of hair to memorialize their child's first haircut.

In an additional historical parallel of *Hair Portraits*, early photographic processes like the tintype medium played an important role in memorializing the dead—most directly through the haunting, Victorian-era practice of *memento mori* photography, where the deceased were posed in 'lifelike' positions surrounded by their living relatives. Because photographs were expensive and often processed offsite, poses couldn't be constructively adjusted between shots to account for making the person look less 'dead.' Consequently, in *memento mori* photographs, faces and poses were highly varied in their lifelikeness, often bordering on grotesque. In all of the photos, though, the corpse's hair was flawlessly groomed, serving as the only convincing remnant of life.

In her larger body of *Hair Portraits*, including those not on view as part of the BMAC exhibition, Portesi captures models of varying ages. In doing so, the work also represents how identity metamorphosis is

reflected in one's natural hair; a Caucasian person, for instance, might have silky blond hair as a child, then brown curly hair as a teenager, then straw-like, salt-and-pepper hair as an adult, followed by rough gray hair in late life.

"I use hair to both honor and say goodbye to past parts of myself. These images address fertility, sexuality, creativity, nurturement, and harmony and discord with nature. Above all, these images—photographs of elaborate, pinned hair sculptures constructed in the studio with the input of their subjects—are a testament to change. In my case, that change is a record of metamorphosis from a past fractured self to an integrated, confident, self-actualized woman."

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With the museum building's past life as a train station constructed in 1916, the gallery in which *Hair Portraits* is on view served as the train station's storied smoking lounge from 1916 until the space's conversion to a museum in 1972. The original signs signifying the smoking lounge and other locations—like the baggage claim, ticketing kiosk, and ladies' waiting room—remain intact.

Demonstrating the museum's curatorial breadth (BMAC stages approximately 15-20 shows each year across its six galleries), among the other shows on view during *Hair Portraits* is *Figuration Never Died: New York Painterly Painting, 1950-1970*, guest curated by Karen Wilkin. In another gallery, Andy Yoder's *Overboard* presents over 160 sculptural replicas of Nike Air Jordan 5s, addressing themes including consumerism and environmentalism in response to 'The Great Shoe Spill of 1990' (an incident in which a cargo ship carrying more than 61,000 Nike Air Jordan 5s encountered a storm and spilled its serial-numbered contents overboard, which enabled scientists to track ocean currents as the manmade objects continued to wash up on far-apart beaches for years following the spill).

## **ABOUT THE BRATTLEBORO MUSEUM & ART CENTER**

The Brattleboro Museum & Art Center (BMAC) was founded in 1972 by two groups of Brattleboro citizens committed to saving their town's historic train station, Union Station, from demolition. One group wished to transform the building into a museum of local history, the other into a center for art classes and exhibitions. At the behest of the Brattleboro selectboard, they agreed to work together, and BMAC was born.

Following months of laborious cleaning and renovation done by scores of volunteers, the newly fledged institution opened its doors to the public on September 10, 1972. One side of the former train station lobby contained display cases featuring historical artifacts, the other an exhibition of new artwork by Wolf Kahn, David Rohn, and other artists with local ties. The legendary Vermont folk musician Margaret MacArthur sang and played lap dulcimer.

Fast forward nearly 50 years, and BMAC is today a non-collecting contemporary art museum focused on the work of living artists. (The historical artifacts from the early days were eventually donated to the Brattleboro Historical Society.) An anchor of Brattleboro's vibrant cultural life, BMAC seeks to bring notable art and artists to Brattleboro, and to provide a prestigious showcase for the region's own artistic riches.

The Museum contains six galleries. It rotates exhibitions roughly every 3–4 months, resulting in a total of about 15–20 exhibitions per year. BMAC borrows the work it exhibits from collectors, galleries, other institutions, and often directly from the artists themselves.

In addition to presenting contemporary art exhibitions, BMAC offers 50–60 cultural and educational events each year. These include artist talks, workshops, performances, film screenings, studio tours, and an eclectic assortment of events aimed at serving families who do not necessarily see themselves as contemporary art museum-goers — for example, an annual LEGO contest and exhibit, the world's longest-running domino-toppling event, and monthly art- and food-making collaborations with the Brattleboro Food Co-op.

Rounding out BMAC's activities is a rich array of education programs serving thousands of children of all ages from Windham County, Vermont, and the surrounding area. In collaboration with Brattleboro's Early Education Services, BMAC sends professional artists into local Head Start classrooms to work with at-risk infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. For students in grades K-6, BMAC offers numerous opportunities to engage with art both at the Museum and at school. And for middle and high school students, BMAC administers the prestigious Scholastic Art & Writing Awards for the state of Vermont.