

Elizabeth MacKenzie:

Unlikeness

List of works, exhibition text, interview, and
bibliography

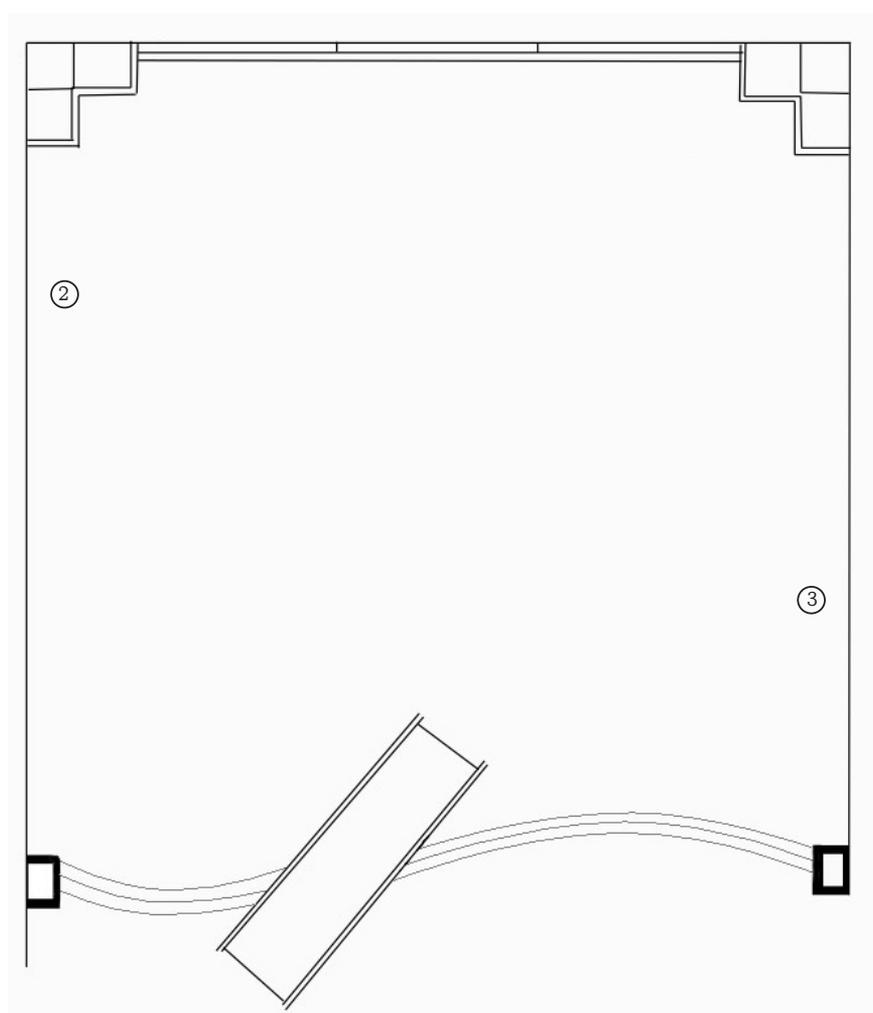
AUG 31, 2020 - APR 25, 2021

TECK GALLERY

List of Works

1. Elizabeth MacKenzie
From the *Unlikeness* series, 2020
digital print on watercolour paper
Courtesy the artist
2. Elizabeth MacKenzie
From the *Unlikeness* series, 2020
digital print on watercolour paper
Courtesy the artist
3. Elizabeth MacKenzie
From the *Unlikeness* series, 2020
digital print on watercolour paper
Courtesy the artist

Exhibition Map



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Exhibition Text

Unlikeness, a new installation by Elizabeth MacKenzie, emerges from her ongoing drawing series of the same name. Representations of human faces, produced through experiments with drawing materials and techniques, are key to MacKenzie's art practice of the past two decades.

Within these drawings, MacKenzie uses a brush to animate graphite pigment as it floats upon small sheets of stone paper (a paper-like material made from calcium carbonate bonded with resin), creating numerous ambiguous images that evoke human faces. As she pushes and pulls the brush, the artist conjures features that appear and disappear, playing with the tension between mark making and the illusion it creates. The face-like images created through this particular method are ambiguous, but call to mind a range of races, genders, ages, and expressions.

For this exhibition, MacKenzie has transformed her drawings into large-scale, high resolution prints that recast the original drawings, which are small and intimate, as enormous surreal presences. At this new, beyond-human scale, her works confront and disturb the viewer, inviting them to face their inner selves. These images depend on pareidolia, the psychological phenomenon that describes our human tendency to interpret a range of vague stimuli as something familiar, such as seeing shapes in clouds or faces in inanimate objects, or hearing hidden messages in music.

Unlikeness challenges us to consider the complexity of recognition through images that float between the familiar and the strange. How much do we project onto the images we encounter, and from where do these projections arise, especially in this strange time of being physically distanced from each other?

Curated by Makiko Hara

Images produced with the support of Rachel Topham Photography and Scott August Art Reproduction Services

Interview: Makiko Hara in Dialogue
with Elizabeth MacKenzie

Makiko Hara: You have been drawing faces for a long time, using many different styles. I am curious when it started, why you draw faces and how the methods of drawing you use have come about.

Elizabeth MacKenzie: I began focusing on faces within a project I began in 2001. *Reunion* (2001 – 2004) was a response to the 10th anniversary of my mother's death. Over a period of two years I produced hundreds of drawings of her face. This slow, meditative process allowed me to think about her in the here and now, particularly as I aged and became increasingly aware of my own mortality.

Since then I've returned, time and time again, to the subject of the face, a genre typically called portraiture, but in my practice now disassociated from the traditional goal of likeness. My drawings of faces represent a desire to know and understand someone else, as well as an acknowledgement of the impossibility of doing so. The face of another must remain ambiguous, it can never be completely understood.

My drawings of faces represent both engagement with and alienation from an other. The materials and processes I use interrupt representation and create tension between a gesture and the illusion it creates. Rather than pursuing the idea of a portrait as a fixed and singular image, I represent the face as an ambiguous, shifting field of interaction and interpretation.

I believe that any encounter with a face prompts a spontaneous, ethical response. Like French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906 – 1995), I am convinced that the face represents the mortal and vulnerable other toward whom we have a social responsibility.

I've developed a relationship to a wide range of drawing materials over the years: pencils, graphite powder, ink, watercolour, and watercolour graphite. I often work with the same materials over extended periods of time to better understand their tendencies. I develop methodologies that encourage the physical qualities of the materials to be evident within the images I produce. I want the materials to interact and interfere with the images I draw. My drawings work best when I discover an affinity between the image, my gesture and the materials.

The images of faces within the *Unlikeness* series were developed through the exploration of new and old materials. In this case, watercolour graphite and Terraskin (or stone paper), which is made of mineral powder and resin.

I push the materiality of my drawings so that they move beyond my control. I'm guided by what the material does, what it tends to do, so that what emerges is not about my mastery and instrumentalization of the materials, but what feminist theorist Karen Barad describes as an intra-action through my

engagement with the materials, the subject and my own body. Barad replaces the term “interaction” with “intra-action” as a way to describe how entities come into being through their interactions.

Up until 2012, the drawings of faces I produced had been predicated on known and specific faces. Since then, most of the faces I draw are an amalgam of found images, rendered through an exploration of the physical properties and characteristics of the materials used to produce them.

MH: Recently, you’ve developed a technique where you produce high-resolution digital images of your original drawings to create large-scale digital prints on watercolour paper. What makes you interested in this process and how has it changed your ideas about what drawing is?

EM: I’ve always been interested in exploring scale within my drawing practice. Scale refers to the size of something (in this case an artwork) in relation to something else. That something else is usually the human body. When we describe something as “life-size,” “miniature” or “gigantic,” the human body is the implied reference.

In the 1980s, I created room-sized installations by drawing directly on gallery walls. The images were based on photographic references and utilized projected images for rendering the large-scale wall drawings. This movement between the reference, the hand-drawn image, the projected image, and the bodily gestures required to produce the wall drawings are of great interest to me. Something is both lost and gained in these translations.

Drawings can be adamant about their scale. The combination of various materials and techniques often lend themselves to a particular size. The drawings I’ve used in the *Unlikeness* series start out as very small drawings on paper, each approximately 3 x 2 inches. High resolution photography enables me to reproduce them as large-scale digital prints on heavy-weight paper.

The large-scale prints depend on a series of intra-actions: between the original drawing (an analogue process) and the digital rendering; between clarity and ambiguity; between small and large scales; between wet and dry materials; between deliberate and accidental processes.

The final prints reference the material processes of drawing. Before I paste the print to the wall, I tear it out from the larger sheet of paper. This insistent manipulation of the paper allows me to handle the image once again, recovering an aspect of its materiality.

The activity of drawing has always been important to me. Drawings are

traditionally seen as preparation for larger, more permanent works. By their very nature drawings represent what is provisional and transitory. Drawing is also about being committed to the here-and-now, staying attentive to the process of the hand as it moves across the paper. The process of drawing, the act of creating a mark on a surface, is as important as the outcome.

MH: *Unlikeness* is an evocative title. Please tell me more about the ideas behind this series name.

EM: The images within the *Unlikeness* series are not based on particular faces, but I hope they evoke recognition. The images depend on our human proclivity for discerning faces and paying attention to them. I'm interested in the vertiginous shock of recognition when an image coalesces into a face. The organization of features invariably creates a likeness within the mind of the viewer. What other people see is always different from what I see. These images are, in fact, not faces. They are drawings, that have become digital prints, that suggest faces. They are unlikenesses.

These images are uncanny — they are both familiar and strange, engaging and disturbing. It's possible that viewers will find these images difficult. They may unlike them.

MH: The images within the *Unlikeness* series might evoke different interpretations in relation to age, race and gender, as well as addressing the psychological phenomenon of pareidolia, which causes people to see patterns (like faces) in random stimuli. Tell me more about your interest in examining faces and face perception through your practice as an artist.

EM: Humans have an inherent willingness to see and imagine faces, even where none exist. How far can a face be abstracted and still remain a face?

Based on my research I understand that two types of information are crucial for face processing and recognition. The first is featural information, which are those aspects of a face that can be considered in isolation from each other (for example, eyes, nose and mouth). The second type of information needed is configural, based on an assessment of the spatial relationships between the features of a face (such as the distance between the eyes, nose, and mouth). The combination of featural and configural information creates a holistic image an integrated and unified whole — the facial gestalt.

Within these drawings I interrupt a gestalt reading of the face because the featural and configural information is disorganized. The image is both in and out of focus. In this exhibition, I also present an inverted image of a face. How much

ambiguity can be introduced within an image and still engage and maintain the viewer's interest?

Our inclination to read another person's face and presume their age, gender, race, and personality is almost instantaneous. We focus on what we think we understand, and what matches our idea of how other people look and behave. When we encounter a face that's not easy to categorize, we may respond with confusion, irritation or interest. The images in *Unlikeness* are predicated on this uncertainty and ambiguity.

MH: Can you share some of the ideas behind this installation at Teck Gallery?

EM: When I first visited Teck Gallery, I noticed how the space is used by students and others who work in this building. People tend to set up provisional work stations and interact with their screens, rather than each other. Although there's a marvelous view outside the huge window, it rarely seems to be contemplated.

This space invites interiority by offering comfortable chairs and carpeting that muffles sound. Although it seems unlikely that people will fail to notice a couple of huge heads floating on the walls beside them, I expect this to happen. This installation is for people to notice and not notice. It offers a moment for uncertainty and ambiguity and, perhaps, recognition and identification.

Now, many months into the pandemic, I'm curious to see how this space will be used, once it becomes available to the public again. Our physical relationship to others, especially unknown others, has changed deeply and significantly. Our safety, the safety of the ones who depend on us, requires consideration and caution. What does it mean to evaluate every physical encounter in the world outside our homes?

MH: How have you been during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, and how has that experience affected or inspired your art making?

EM: It's difficult to comprehend how deeply the Covid-19 pandemic has affected our lives. I cannot untangle the effect of the pandemic from the cancer diagnosis I received in May, as well as the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd later that month.

The mass public response to the police brutality against Black people that followed Floyd's death galvanized an ongoing mass public reckoning with the ideology of white supremacy, and its far-reaching, destructive effect on BIPOC people in the United States, Canada and elsewhere.

The combination of these extraordinary circumstances has knocked me sideways. My cancer diagnosis and ongoing treatment hold much space in my life, but this is layered with the lockdown and its attendant isolation and preoccupation with the daily news cycle. Inextricably linked, they deepen my consideration of my place in the world and my relationship to others.

The web of connection we participate in has been severely tested. Who we are in relation to and what we owe each other — following countless histories of exclusion and injustice — needs to be fully acknowledged.

The ideas I've been exploring within my work, ideas that consider how we respond to and interact with uncertainty and difference, will be tested and interrogated in the days ahead.

Moving forward, the desperate social inequalities this pandemic has brought into focus must be addressed within my work as an artist and as a citizen.

The interview was conducted in December 2019 and revised in August 2020.

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Artist and Curator Biographies Exhibition Acknowledgements

Elizabeth MacKenzie is a Vancouver based artist whose current work in drawing interrogates portraiture as an ambiguous, shifting field of interaction and interpretation. Her works have been presented in numerous screenings and exhibitions across Canada, the United States and Europe. She maintains an ongoing commitment to collaborative and community-base art practices, critical writing and teaching.

Makiko Hara is an independent curator, born in Tokyo, Japan, who lives and works in Vancouver. Hara was the chief curator at Centre A: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art from 2007 – 2013. Her curatorial practice aims to create platforms for dialogue and exchange across the Pacific Ocean. Her ongoing, long-term research project considers the transformation of women artists' art practices as they age with wisdom.

The artist thanks those who supported this exhibition: Makiko Hara; Rachel Topham Photography; Scott August Art Reproduction & Photo Services; the SFU Galleries team (past and present): Melanie O'Brian, cheyanne turions, Christopher Lacroix, Kara Ditte Hansen, Jean Brazeau and Kimberly Phillips; and dear family and friends: Bruce Grenville, Alice MacKenzie, Lucy MacKenzie, Cyndy Chwelos, Jin-me Yoon, and Lyse Lemieux.



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