

DEATH AND THE AGING FACE IN SUSAN BENSON'S *OBSERVATIONS*

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(see images after text)

Observations (2005) by Susan Benson (b.1942) (fig. 1), drawn with graphite pencil on wove paper, is a portrait of the artist's facial features only, without a trace of her facial outline. Benson signed her name below where her right ear would be, and underneath, centered, are the words:

Bags under eyes, eyes go, lines around

mouth, the teeth fall out, hearing

starts to go, hair thins, lines, lines

start to look like my mother and

my grandmother, sagging muscles

tracing of lines - observations of dying”

The artist, however, is very much alive at the age of 69 years old—she was 63 when she drew this self-portrait. Benson, born in England in 1942, came to Canada with her family in 1966. She had worked in wardrobe at the BBC and quickly entered the same field when she arrived in Vancouver. Benson rose to prominence as a costume and set designer in Canadian theatre, going on to be head of design at the Stratford Festival and winning a lifetime achievement award from the Canadian Institute of Theatre Technology in 2001. She has also been regularly showing her paintings and drawings since the 1970s, and in 2005 retired from theatre to concentrate on her art.¹

Benson's first work to be acquired by the National Portrait Gallery of Canada was her acrylic portrait of Eric Donkin (1929-1998) dressed as Ko-Ko in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (fig. 2). From 1982 through to 1984, Benson was the set and costume designer for the production of this play at the Stratford Festival; the cloth dragon belt that Donkin is shown wearing in the portrait was donated to the National Portrait Gallery along with the painting. This portrait reveals the artist's deep involvement with, and devotion to, theatrical production, as well as her attention to detail.

In *Observations* the focus is placed on the physical changes that occur with aging. The attention to the intricate lines in the artist's face and the potent description she gives to the effects of physical aging through the words she writes are evidence of this intense preoccupation. Benson's words are evocative of decay and helplessness. Her physical self is changing and there is nothing she can do about it, just as the same process happened to her mother and grandmother before her.

The title, *Observations*, underscores a sense of self-contemplation and subjectivity. The emphasis, however, is mostly on the physical, and neglects the emotional and mental side of the aging process, which can often be quite positive. Erik Erikson (1902-1994), a developmental psychologist, outlined eight stages of psychosocial development, picking up from where Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) had concentrated on the development of children and teenagers. In Erikson's eighth stage, "the mature acceptance of old age," subjects 65 years or older reflect on the life they have lived, and, if they have encountered

no major psychological roadblocks in adulthood, achieve a sense of perspective and acceptance.² Benson's words, concerned as they are with the present nature of her physical self, suggest that her facial changes are making her unable to enter this eighth stage. *Observations* seems to have more in common with Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Felix Guattari's (1930-1992) description of the perception of aging: "If there is aging on this [supple] line, it is not of the same kind: when you age on this line you do not feel it on the other [rigid] line, you don't notice it until after 'it' has already happened on this [supple] line."³ For the two authors, aging is something that sneaks up on a person, of which they are unaware until it is too late. Benson's words speak of an involuntary relinquishing of control that reflects this experience. Her words imply a passive position wherein she is simply "tracing [the] lines" that are already there, and making "observations of dying."

The more negative and uneasy elements of Susan Benson's self-portrait recall Kathe Kollwitz's (1867-1945) *The Hand of Death* (1934), alternatively known as her self-portrait (fig. 3). The dour expression on the subject's face, the prevalence of dark areas, the tired eyes, and the multitude of lines come together to create a sense of total fatigue. The significant changes that occur in old age, both internal (physical) and external seem to be exercising themselves through the weathering of Kollwitz's visage. The accumulation of lines also suggests the accumulation of life experience. The choice to portray just the face, as in *Observations*, attests to each artist's focus on certain elements of aging. "Artistic representation of the aged requires either conscious or unconscious choice of some aspects of aging as more worthy of attention than others."⁴ Through this

selection of elements we get an idea of what the artist's attitude towards aging is. Each artist focuses not on the mental or emotional effects of aging, but how facial aging can signify a proximity to death.

From another perspective, however, perhaps the choice of representing only the face does in fact take it away its physicality. The presence of the full, aging body would present a whole other set of quandaries about representations of women and sexuality. Without the infirm body present, the aging face transcends the physical body and presents itself as an emblem of experience lived.

The way each artist creates a connection between the transformation of the face with death also relates to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of defacialization from *A Thousand Plateaus*: "if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, clandestine, not by returning to animality, nor even by returning to the head, but by spiritual and special becomings."⁵ Though the aging face signifies the proximity of death, its association with spirituality is also the transcendence of the aging face.

Despite the focus on the imminence of death in *Observations*, another sense that we get from the self-portrait is one of reflection. The peaceful expression on Benson's face in the drawing, the delicate composition of the lines, and the ability of the artist to comment on her own physical decay indicates acceptance. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) describes this in *The Ages of Life* (1904):

The first forty years furnish the text of life, while the remaining thirty supply the commentary; without the commentary we are unable to understand the true sense and coherence of the text, together with the moral it contains and all the subtleties which it admits.⁶

Benson's recognition that the same aging process happened to her mother and grandmother relates to this idea of commentary and looking back. It speaks to a more complete picture of how aging plays a role in an entire lifespan, and creates connections between generations through this shared experience.

Benson shows a much more positive portrayal of aging and the elderly that reflects Schopenhauer's idea in her series *1575 Years of Accumulated Wisdom* (fig. 4). In these drawings, Benson captures every wrinkle on each subject's face with the intricate yet sketchy quality of her drawn lines. The title refers to the approximate cumulative age of her subjects in the series. Her goal in this project was to "show the beauty in old age, which is not often seen."⁷ This is also reflected in her series of drawings from Spruce Lodge, a nursing home (fig. 5 and 6). Her portrayal of these subjects gives them a sense of recognition and dignity.

FIGURES

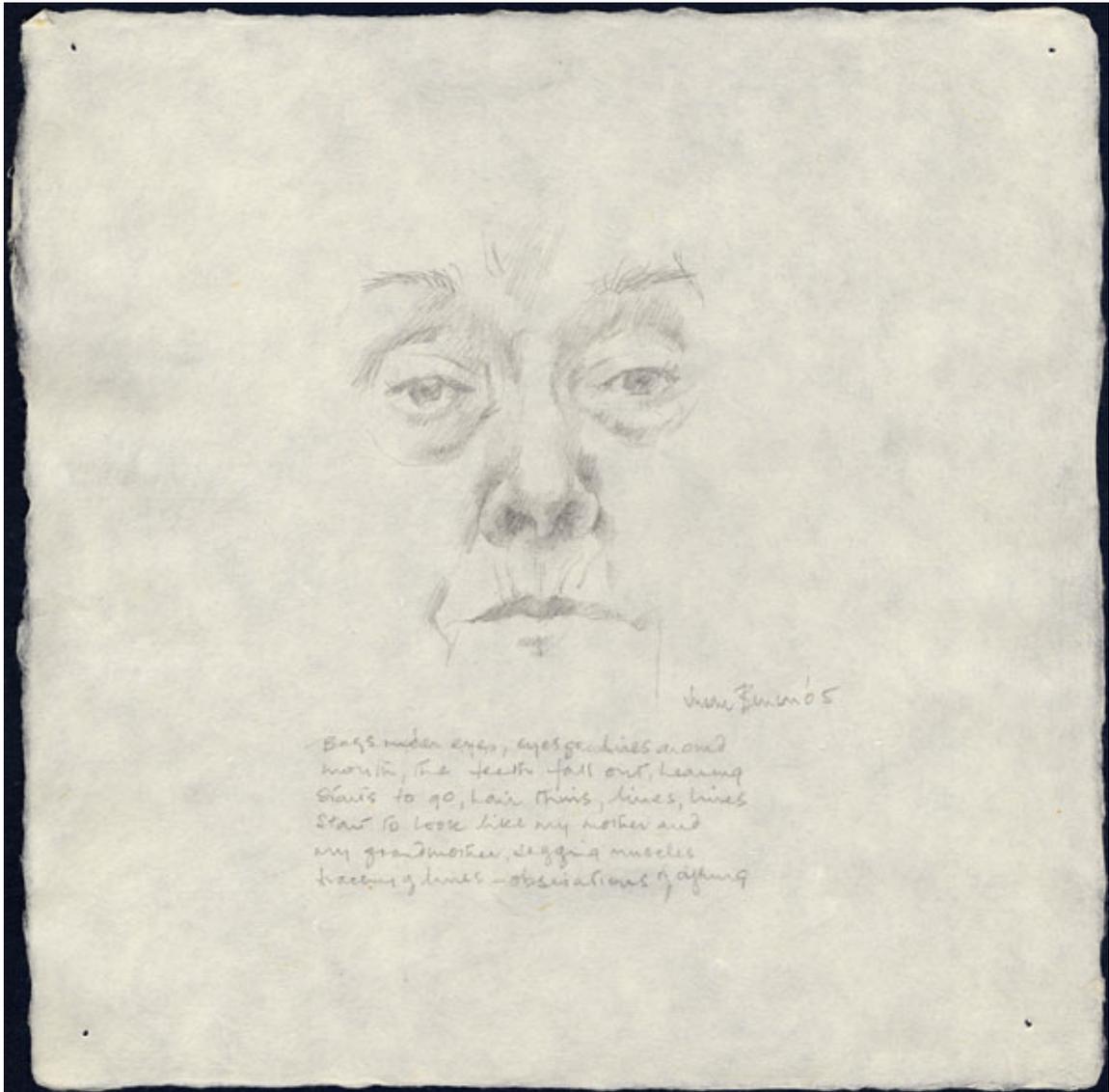


Fig. 1

Observations

Susan Benson, 2005

Graphite pencil on wove paper 24.3 x 24.6cm

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 3689060

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3689060



Fig. 2

Eric Donkin as Ko-ko in the Mikado

Susan Benson, 1984

Acrylic on canvas, 18" x 24" in.

National Portrait Gallery of Canada / MIKAN 3018912

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3018912&rec_nbr_list=3018912



Fig. 3
The Hand of Death
Kathe Kollwitz, 1934
The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.
The Art of Aging: A Celebration of Old Age in Western Art.
By Heta Kauppinen and Patrick McKee. New York: Insight Books, 1987. Plate 3.



Fig. 4
1575 Years of Accumulated Knowledge #1
Susan Benson
Oil Pencil, 4 1/4" x 4 1/2"
<http://www.susanbensonart.com>



Fig. 5
Spruce Lodge #3
Susan Benson
Oil Pencil, 4 1/4" x 4 1/2"
<http://www.susanbensonart.com>



Fig. 6
Spruce Lodge #2
Susan Benson
Oil Pencil, 4 1/4" x 4 1/2"
<http://www.susanbensonart.com>

NOTES

¹ Benson.

² Erikson.

³ Qtd. in Stivale 116.

⁴ Kauppinen & McKee 17.

⁵ Qtd. in O'Sullivan 60.

⁶ Qtd. in Kauppinen & McKee 35.

⁷ Benson.

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