

“Review: Robert Russell examines potency of a name in the Google age”

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“Men Who are Named Robert Russell,” 2013, by Robert Russell. (Gaea Woods)

We’ve all done it. Whether out of paranoia or curiosity, we’ve Googled ourselves. It was only a matter of time before someone made art out of it. After all, the Google Images tab is a ready-made self-portrait machine.

If you have a name and a profession like mine, the results are relatively straightforward: a few portraits, followed by a slew of images accompanying just about everything I’ve written.

If you have a name like Robert Russell, however, the results are more startling: a wall of portraits of men of different ages, from various time periods, mostly white, some black, with a strange preponderance of mug shots. Who then is Robert Russell?

A few years ago, the Los Angeles artist Robert Russell decided to find out. He set himself the project of painting every Robert Russell he could find on Google. The 22 paintings on view at François Ghebaly Gallery are just the beginning of what could presumably be a life-long project. There could be a new Robert Russell born every day.

The project raises intriguing questions about the connections between identity, image and name. When we see a picture of someone we know, usually the first thing we recall (or struggle to recall) is his or her name. Gathering images of all the Robert Russells explodes this one-to-one correspondence.

The name is the proper moniker for any number of faces. Yet a name is not only what people call us; it may also be an indicator of ethnic origins or the tastes of a particular era. So far, Russell’s men are a fairly motley bunch, although, for example, there are no Asians — yet.

“Robert Russell” thus becomes a kind of cultural and historical phenomenon. But perhaps even more interesting is what the project reveals about a relatively new reality — the availability of millions of indexed digital images. We can experience the Robert Russell phenomenon only because we can sort images by a single criterion — a name — allowing new comparisons and connections to emerge. The flip side of this power is of course the danger of connection without context. Do Robert Russells share anything more than a name?

It bears mentioning that the images available via Google (still!) do not represent the total of human experience, and the results are governed by secret algorithms that appear to be based on popularity. Russell’s project is thus perhaps less a self-portrait than a portrait of Google, and the artist intends to use it to his advantage.

As images of his paintings make their way online, they may gradually supplant other Robert Russells in the hierarchy of search results. Russell sees this as taking back his name, although it is accomplished, oddly, with images of other Robert Russells.

Still, the paintings were created by this Russell’s hand: an old technology of brushstrokes impinging (sort of) on a new one of pixels.