

Murray Guy

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Art in America

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"Matthew Buckingham"
Murray Guy
By Brian Boucher



View of Matthew Buckingham's *Likeness*, 2009, 16mm film installation, 12-minute loop; at Murray Guy.

Two film installations (both 2009) in "*Likeness*," Matthew Buckingham's latest show at Murray Guy, explored the nature and limitations of portraiture. The room that housed the 12-minute title work was filled with crates, antique furniture and gilt-framed paintings, many of these items stacked and wrapped in moving blankets. Film and slide projectors were trained on the same spot on the side of a crate, its back to the door, so that the visitor had to circumnavigate some of these furnishings to view the projected image.

The film shows assorted reproductions, varying in color and resolution, of a detail of Velázquez's 1659 portrait of the young Felipe Próspero, Prince of Asturias: a lap dog lying on an upholstered chair, its head resting on the arm, its dark eyes regarding the viewer. The slides superimpose a lengthy text in English, authored by Buckingham, that is simultaneously spoken in Spanish in the film. Addressing the prince ("Your hand rests on the back of a chair in front of you"), the voiceover discusses the history and psychology of portraiture; the gaze, identity and representation; and the temporality of paintings. The monologue is characterized by thoughtful, pithy observations—"Portraiture excludes the most essential human act: speech. Still pictures make us do the talking. Asking who is in the picture and why it was made." Buckingham, for his part, excludes the very person portrayed, as if to imply that portraiture can never truly capture the sitter. In its transitional state, the wrapped up furniture also suggested that a portrait's subject is always (as it were) a moving target, and a concealed one.

In another room was *Caterina van Hemessen Is Twenty Years Old*, which centers on a 1548 self-portrait by the titular Antwerp artist. A film showing black-and-white details of that portrait—never the whole—was projected via a mirror onto a freestanding screen in the middle of the gallery (thus reversing the painting, which itself shows van Hemessen's mirror image). Twelve wall labels, in interior-lit frames, each offered a short historical or interpretive text, printed back-

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ward; small hand-held mirrors were provided. As if to explain the projection of only details, one text points out that though van Hemessen's painting is small, "we cannot look at it all at once....We look at specific points, one at a time." Other labels address retail prices of looking glasses in the artist's day and parse the Latin inscription that appears on the painting (whence Buckingham's title), while acknowledging that some questions are, ultimately, unanswerable: "Where is Caterina van Hemessen? . . . she stands in a pool of infinite blackness." Both works were accompanied by wall labels with extensive and perhaps showy bibliographies. To his credit, Buckingham wears his erudition lightly. Althusser's concept of "hailing," which the philosopher used to illustrate how ideology turns individuals into subjects, shows up in the Likeness slide text: "I not only feel looked at, I feel I'm being hailed. Like a taxi." Buckingham also acknowledges, by revealing his sources, that some of these ideas aren't new. All the same, his synthesis of them is captivating.