

[return to updates](#)

# BOYCOTT THE OUTWIN BOOCHEVER

*by Miles Mathis*

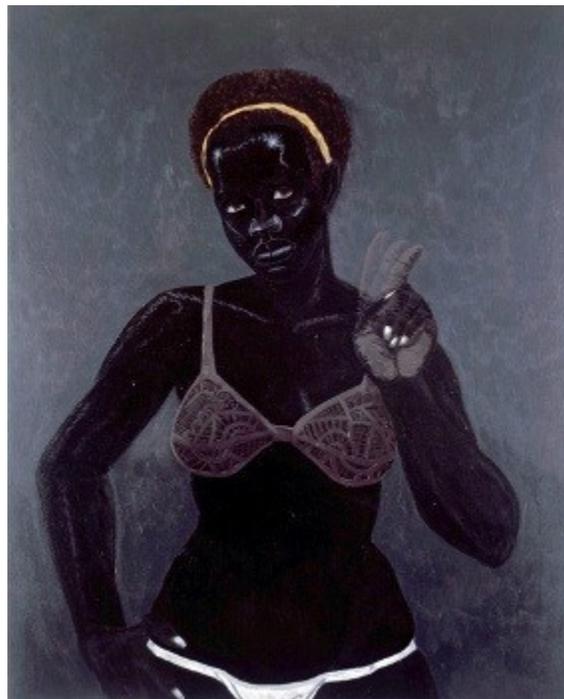


The Outwin Boochever Portrait Prize was initiated in 2006, was given again in 2009, and will be around for a third run in 2013. It is hosted by the National Portrait Gallery, and the call for submissions went out in September of this year. Since I have already written two articles [on the 2006 competition](#) (which I boycotted myself, protested, and started [an open letter](#) which was signed by many top realists including Nelson Shanks, Graydon Parrish, Jeremy Lipking and many others), I will concentrate on the 2009 exhibition here, as well as the jury for the 2013 exhibition.

But first I want to ask you a question: don't you find it strange that our country can find \$25,000 as national art prize only every three or four years, when it can seem to find \$500,000,000,000 for a new war every six months or so?\* Also, don't you find it strange that our taxes pay for these wars, but the *National Portrait Competition* has to be privately funded? That's right, our lovely treasury, which is looted daily by the various entrenched government thieves, can't even cough up a few thousand for an art show. Doing the math, this means that war is about 100,000 times more important to us, as a people, than art. Which may explain why we have such lousy art and such spectacular bloodbaths.

Now let us look first at the jury for the 2009 exhibition, which will tell us why it went so badly. Wanda M. Corn, professor emerita in art history at Stanford University; Kerry James Marshall, artist; Brian O'Doherty, artist and critic; and Peter Schjeldahl, art critic for *The New Yorker*. Jurors from the National Portrait Gallery were Martin E. Sullivan, director; Carolyn K. Carr, deputy director and chief curator; and Brandon Brame Fortune, curator of painting and sculpture. We will pass over the

administrators at the NPG (for now) as fairly logical choices (of themselves). Peter Schjeldahl is probably the worst choice here, since he has proven his levels of malice to all real art over his long career as a litterateur for the propagandizing journals. He has propped up a long line of fakes and phonies, and has never, to my knowledge, spoken two positive words about real art, much less portraiture. He is [still extolling the white canvases of Robert Ryman](#), so we can be sure both his eyes and his brain are not fully functioning. Choosing him to judge here is like choosing Lord Palpatine to judge at the Jedi brunch. Wanda Corn is nearly as bad, since her entire career has been devoted to cheerleading for modernism. In a recent book, she profiles Marcel Duchamp, Gerald Murphy, Joseph Stella, Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler and Georgia O'Keeffe, and she would never have included the realism of O'Keeffe were O'Keeffe not a woman. Likewise, Sheeler would never have been included if he were not a photographer: his subject matter was forbidden to “with it” painters since around 1880. If you want to know why a photographer won the 2009 Outwin Boochever prize, look first to Corn (but more on that later). Kerry James Marshall is another choice from the modern wings, not from realism.



He is represented by an avant garde New York gallery, won a MacArthur “genius” grant, and is married to a well-known actress, so he is a New York insider. Which is to say, he plays by the current rules while pretending to be edgy. There is no chance he was going to be a good judge here, in my opinion. Brian O'Doherty is another big phony pretending to be an artist by hiding behind politics. Here is one of his recent installations:



I am not aware that he has ever painted or sculpted anything, much less a head, but he has written things like “Inside the White Cube,” which we can thank for the stark inaesthetism of the modern gallery space. He also wrote “The Gallery as Gesture,” which any sensible person would know to avoid simply from the title.

So we see that all the external jurors here are ill-qualified to judge real painting. They have never shown any interest in straight portraiture or old-fashioned painting, so they must be here to continue to prevent it. And we must take this as a poor commentary on the internal jurors at the NPG, who chose these people to be there. This must mean that the administrators at the NPG are also poorly qualified to judge portraiture, painting or sculpture, as well as to judge other judges. Logic tells us to lay the primary blame at their feet, since they could easily have chosen to do things otherwise.

I couldn't find the finalists for the 2009 exhibition. All links are broken and all history of the prize is lost, apparently (which is curious in itself). All I found is a list, and I didn't recognize anyone on the list as coming from realism or portraiture. I know or know of most of the top names in realism and portraiture, so this is also curious. Did all these people take my recommendation to boycott from 2006, or did they just not make the finals? My guess is the latter. A few realists no doubt avoided the competition for their own reasons, but most likely the jury weeded out all the traditional entries, as they were hired to do.

Now we may look at the winner of the 2009 prize, Dave Woody, whose winning photograph is under title above. That's a nice photograph, and I am not here to deny it. Woody has lovely light and that is a good choice of subject. She is full of sadness, which he captures. I am actually surprised to see Woody's work chosen by this jury. I would have thought they would have chosen something much more offensive. That said, I don't think a photograph should ever win the top prize at a National Portrait Competition. I say that [as a photographer](#), a painter, and a sculptor. I know what each takes, and photography cannot and should not compete with painting. It is not that photography is not art, or that it does not take skill. It is that painting takes much more skill, and much more time. A great painting is rarer and more powerful. And it is more artistic, since it requires more manipulation by the artist. I think that is generally understood.

Although these jurors chose a nice photo rather than an offensive one, I still think they chose it to take a piss. I have to believe that this was chosen as a compromise between two factions of the jury. O'Doherty, for instance, probably wanted to give top prize to a photo of a monkey's ass or of a white plate (both of which I am sure were entries), but was prevented by Sullivan or one of the others.

But it doesn't matter. Top prize should not have gone to a photo, no matter how good. The jurors will answer me that it was better than any of the other finalists, and maybe it was. But I bet it wasn't better than all the entries thrown out by the jury, and I *know* it isn't the best portrait produced in 2009, since I have seen better. If this competition had welcomed the best realists and portraitists from the beginning, they would have found themselves with better entries.

To show they haven't learned this lesson, and aren't likely to, we may move on to the 2013 jury. Peter Frank, curator of the Riverside Art Museum and art critic, *Huffington Post*; Richard J. Powell, professor at Duke University; Alec Soth, photographer; Hung Liu, painter; + same internal jury. We will start with Frank. Although he isn't as prominent as Schjeldahl, he is from the same school. Critics don't get hired these days unless they buy in to all the modern fluff. As one example, we may look at the current exhibit at Frank's museum, "Baby Tattooville."



They don't have any real art to put in these museums, so they have "cool" comic book parties instead. I am not really against comic books, anime, or any of the other stuff that goes on here, I just don't like to see it co-opting museum art, which could still exist if they hadn't killed it. Instead of asking me what I have against comic art, you should ask them what they have against old-fashioned museum art. They claim to be in favor of multiculturalism, pluralism, and so on, but apparently that includes everything except high art. All forms of the middle are cool, but upper is forbidden. As they say, "What's with that?" You don't see Eminem trying to outlaw or forbid the work of Joshua Bell or Yo-Yo Ma, or to move those guys out of Carnegie Hall or Avery Fisher Hall so that he can have a rave there instead, do you? So where does the visual art equivalent of Yo-Yo Ma exist in the modern world? Nowhere, that's where.

O.K, moving on to Richard Powell. Not an artist, so not qualified to judge here. He has written a lot of books, all of them with "black" in the title. That's fine, that's necessary work, but it doesn't apply here. The only good work he could do here would be making sure that a great black artist isn't passed over, if he merits a place. Somehow I don't see that happening. Not because there are no black artists of merit, but because things don't work that way now. Nothing works on merit, it works on quotas. We are not color or gender blind, which was the original goal, we are color or gender hypersensitive, all of us, and feel like we have to include a certain percentage of everyone, or we have failed as progressives. But the most progressive progressives would judge paintings without knowing or caring who painted them or why.

I have nothing cutting to say about Alec Soth, who I tend to like, although most of his subject matter

seems a little late-Avedon to me. I prefer the classical Clarence White look myself. But I doubt he will agree with me about photography versus painting. I will wait to see what he does as a juror, although it will of course be hard to separate his actions from those of his fellow jurors, unless he writes me afterwards and confirms what phonies they are (which is possible).

I have mixed feelings about Hung Liu. On the one hand, she paints heads and her politics seems to come from a real place. On the other, she is overrated technically, the drips are annoying, and I am certain her renown comes, in muddy channels, from US/China relations. Meaning that, like Mia Farrow and so many others, her creations and opinions are given more airplay because they fit into the mainstream effort to propagandize against China. Farrow and her kids now keep their names above water by writing about China's human rights abuses in Africa. This is rich, since, although it is true, China's human rights abuses worldwide pale in comparison to our own. Although Liu's politics is much more genuine and consistent than that (I hope), she is used in the same way. Artists are allowed to be political about China or the Holocaust or race or gender, but they aren't allowed to be political about the Federal Reserve or the banks or the wars in Libya/Afghanistan/Iraq/Palestine/Syria/Pakistan/Yemen/etc. China may be an evil empire, that is to say, but it is an evil empire that spends about 1/10th what we do on evil.

This all goes to say that it doesn't look good for Outwin Boochever 2013, and I am calling for a boycott again. No real artist should bother to enter, because they see you coming. You aren't welcome. If the staff at the National Portrait Gallery wanted the best painters, sculptors, and portraitists to enter, they would include at least one juror that made that clear. We don't see Ronald Sherr, Jamie Wyeth, Yuqi Wang, Nelson Shanks, Jacob Collins, Graydon Parrish, Aaron Shikler, John Sanden, or someone like that on the jury. Remember that the Paris salons were judged by members of the Royal Academy, all of whom were top artists. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, no one would have thought of having critics or art history professors or curators or magazine editors on art juries. It is a sign of the times, and it is a sign to stay away. It is also a sign to petition the National Portrait Gallery to quit bowing to the avant garde, which isn't its audience anyway. Its natural audience is the Daniel Barenboim, Yo-Yo Ma, Nadja Solerno-Sonnenberg crowd, which would bother to go to a stodgy old museum if it had something to show. The "with it" crowd won't show up for portraits at the Smithsonian, no matter what you do. They will be at Baby Tattooville parties wearing tiger costumes and snorting various new powders.

Addendum, October 27, 2011: a figurative artist by the name of Sharon Knettell recently became involved in this boycott after reading this paper, and has sent several letters to Martin Sullivan, the director at the NPG. In one reply, Sullivan drops on us a bit of information that at first appears to be on his side, but that on closer inspection just damns him more. That information is that Mrs. Boochever liked "cutting edge" portraiture and wanted to encourage it. I think this is what Jacob Collins feared: it is why he refused to sign my petition back in 2007. I assumed that Boochever wanted to encourage art like ours, and said so in my petition. I was wrong, but as I told Jacob at the time, it didn't matter and doesn't matter. It actually makes our position *stronger*. Here is how (this is what I replied to Ms. Knettell):

I did learn something from his letter, which is that Boochever wanted to encourage new forms of portraiture. I had not anticipated that, and it is too bad. We need patrons more than anything else, and when portraiture finally gets a patron it is a dingy old docent like Boochever.

I suggest we turn our focus a bit, based on that knowledge. A *National* Portrait Competition held at the Smithsonian should be based on quality, period. It should not be based on the desires of one rich lady, no matter what they are. Organizations with the name National should not be factionalized. It may be a matter of equal

access or something like that. A government entity is forbidden by various charters from kowtowing to special interests, and what we have here is a special interest. All the government bodies in a Republic are meant to serve the public interest, not to serve the wishes of rich individuals. Imagine if this happened in another field: say that a rich old lady (or man) wanted to fund a National Museum of Scientology. We wouldn't just say, "Hey it is her money, she gets to decide how to spend it!" and then go ahead with the project. No, we would tell her to fund a private venture. Same thing here. The fact that the NPG is allowing this show to be defined by the wishes of one individual (or hiding behind that) makes the whole thing even worse than it was before we knew that.

Sullivan's answer is just misdirection. It appears to pass the responsibility for the form of the show to Boochever, and that is great because she is dead. We can't attack her. But the fact is these living people accepted the terms of Boochever, and embraced them, because they wanted to go that direction anyway. As you say in your reply, art history has been treating skill and beauty as outmoded ideas for a century at least, and that is why these administrators can get away with something people in the 19th century would have found shocking. And by shocking, I don't mean the art. I mean the cronyism, the bald influence of money on government, and the apparent blindness to all these things by everyone involved.

Sullivan implies that it is OK to discriminate against traditional portraiture, as long as you have a rich patron dangling dollar bills over your head, telling you to. Unfortunately, in this case, it is not a matter of custom, it is a matter of law, and National agencies simply cannot discriminate. I don't know the proper clause in the proper law, but someone should dig it out. National or federal agencies are required to work in the public interest, and the wishes of one docent are clearly private. Her wishes are not only private, they run counter to the wishes of the public. Just as a matter of numbers, skill and beauty in art are important to more people than innovation. Any poll would show this, by a large margin. I am not saying polling is the proper way to define art, but if Modernism wants to continue to control art from the top down, they should quit pretending to be democrats and egalitarians. Forcing the public to look at art it hates is not democracy, republicanism, or even capitalism. It is a corrupt corporate fascism, which exists only to prop up the current markets and galleries.