

Artist's Talk Delivered at the Unveiling of the Bill and Melinda Gates Portrait at the National Portrait Gallery on May 17, 2011

When I first received this commission from the National Portrait Gallery in the spring of 2009, I began negotiations with the staff at the Gates' Foundation to see what kind of access I would have to Bill and Melinda.

Limitations of time and access are a fact of life when it comes to contemporary public portrait commissions. In the past, artists would expect their subjects to sit for days, weeks, and even months. Few, if any of my subjects, are able or willing to make that kind of commitment. I usually count myself lucky if I can spend a couple of days in their company – one day to get acquainted and one day to photograph– supplemented by phone conversations and correspondence.

Trying to find fruitful ways to work with such limited contact has influenced the procedures that I use in composing my work. I still rely on many of the techniques and craft skills that portrait painters have been using since the Renaissance, but without the assistance of the digital camera, the computer, and visual processing software, this portrait, and most of my other portraits, would not have been possible.

The limitations imposed by the Gates Foundation were even more severe than usual. After a good deal of back and forth, it was concluded that I could spend no more than one hour with Bill and Melinda early in September of 2009.

The photo shoot was scheduled to take place at Bill's new company in Kirkland, a suburb of Seattle. Named Bg3C, for Bill Gates catalyst. The company is intended to be a think tank where Bill can work with scientists and engineers on projects that engage his curiosity. In the fall of 2009 it had a minimal staff housed in a lavishly appointed suite of offices overlooking Lake Washington.

On the day before the photo shoot, I was permitted to unpack my lighting equipment in Bill's office. I observed with trepidation that it was a maze of furniture, coffee tables, floor lamps, artwork and mementoes. Staging the photo shoot was not going to be easy.

In the meantime, I spent a couple of hours photographing the premises, recording details of the interior architecture and décor; the illuminated, translucent, partition wall of the conference room, the large, flat-screen monitors displaying digitalized versions of impressionist masterpieces, and the expansive views of the lake and landscape from the office windows. I was collecting raw material. The backgrounds of my portraits are inventions; they don't exist in reality. Elements might be lifted from the actual location of the photo shoot, but these elements are then shuffled, rescaled, and combined with imagery imported from other places both real and virtual. The

resulting backgrounds are rhetoric rather than record, used not only to enhance the visual drama of the portrait, but also to help shape the narrative of the portrait and to expand its meanings.

Prior to flying to Seattle I had read several biographies of Bill, all of the available magazine interviews with Melinda, and watched hours of videotaped lectures, panel discussions and conversations.

Although I had corresponded with Bill's chief of staff, I had had no direct communication with Bill and Melinda themselves – no phone conversations, no email correspondence, no correspondence of any kind.

I almost always conduct my photo sessions by myself, but in this case, because there were so many unknowns and because the time constraints were so severe, I asked my wife, Joanne, to assist me.

At eleven o'clock in the morning we were introduced to Bill and Melinda. Bill was wearing his customary button down collar dress shirt and slacks. Melinda was wearing a pants suit with an electric blue silk blouse. After half an hour under my photo lights she stripped off the jacket. So the clock was ticking, there were 59 minutes left. My two subjects, despite the ubiquitous press and TV coverage, were essentially complete strangers to me, and I had no inkling what kind of chemistry I would be dealing with as I began to photograph.

My photo sessions usually function as a kind of visual brainstorming. I don't ask my subjects to adopt formal poses. Instead, we improvise;

trusting that in the course of a relaxed session, characteristic and natural poses, gestures and expressions will spontaneously emerge. While I photograph, my subjects and I talk. If I've done my reading and preparation prior to the photo shoot, this is usually easy, and one of the more pleasurable parts of the whole portrait process. The conversation helps my subjects to relax and to forget about the fact that they are being relentlessly photographed. The conversation helps me to establish a rapport and to satisfy my curiosity about their attitudes, background and accomplishments.

Over the course of the usual two or three hours I'll shoot 1,500 to 2,000 pictures. Circumstances force me to substitute this brief, but intense photo session, for the extended sittings of the past. But quantity alone cannot substitute for the subtle nuance of observing and interacting with someone day after day. Only when the processing power of the computer, and a lively and empathetic imagination are applied to probe, sort and manipulate this cache of images does anything that might remotely approximate such an encounter begin to emerge.

As I moved Bill and Melinda around the office, shooting them on a sofa, perched on the edge of a desk, sharing a large arm chair with one another; and rearranged my lights and framed my shots; Joanne and I carried on a conversation with them that moved from home schooling their kids when the family was in Paris for a few months, to the life cycle of the malarial parasite, to the importance of lobbying foreign governments, to the dilemmas of education reform. At the end

of 60 minutes, Bill's chief of staff announced that it was time for the next event on their agenda and we were abruptly finished.

Even before flying out to Seattle I had been thinking about different ways that I might approach the portrait, and different historical models from which I might draw inspiration. I knew that there were certain tacks that I was not likely to take. For example, it would be presumptuous, based on so brief a contact, to attempt a psychological portrait, to depict what the 18th century English portrait painter, Sir Joshua Reynolds described as the "peculiar coloring of the mind".

There were other things that I didn't want to do; I didn't want to make a conventional corporate portrait, a glamorous society portrait, or a celebrity portrait. (Although there is no doubt that Bill himself occupies the status of a celebrity in the public imagination. Every visitor, workman, or contractor who happened to come by my studio would invariably exclaim "hey, Bill Gates", when they caught sight of the portrait in progress).

What did I think that the portrait could and should do? After the photo shoot, while I was in the process of editing my images on the computer, I decided that there were three stories that the portrait could convey, if not explicitly and completely, then at least by implication.

There were first, the public biographies of Bill and Melinda -- who are they, where do they come from, what are their backgrounds? – the meat and potatoes of portraiture. Some part of this could be implied by the simple rendition of visual facts: How old are they? What do they look like? What kind of clothing have they chosen to wear? What do their body language, their gestures, their expressions tell us about them? I would try to record these facts with a visual clarity unencumbered by expressionist or rhetorical flourishes, in a style that would be modeled after John Singleton Copley's portraits from the turbulent 1760's – those wealthy and public-spirited Boston merchants and their capable and independent wives that he painted with such candor and lack of bombast.

The second story was the saga of Microsoft, the start-up tale of technological innovation and entrepreneurial success that produced the tremendous wealth that funds the foundation. I decided to signify this story through a contemporary, hi-tech setting, loosely modeled on the interior of the bg3C offices. I also wanted to suggest the importance of the computer revolution by using the image of a large, flat-screen monitor as the centerpiece in my narrative scheme for the portrait.

The third story was the ongoing story of the foundation itself – a philanthropic undertaking unprecedented in its size, scope and global ambitions and the related story of the marital partnership that was guiding its development. For the foundation itself, I would lift images from the foundation's website that referenced important aspects of its

work and methodologies, and compose these images as a display on the flat-screen monitor. Bill and Melinda's partnership, their mutual dedication, their co-equal authority, and their contrasting, but complementary personalities, would be literally embodied in their poses and expressions.

Let me step out of sequence to say a little more about the pose that I eventually constructed. Simply having Bill and Melinda stand together, or showing them seated side-by-side on a sofa would not suffice. I needed to find, or to create, a pose that would link them together, and at the same time dramatically differentiate them one from the other.

In the end, Bill's pose with arms folded, is more self-contained than Melinda's, which is more relaxed with her right arm extended toward the observer. Melinda, by most accounts more empathetic and people oriented than Bill, is shown with her head backgrounded by the human kaleidoscope of the foundation's projects. Bill, usually described as the more cerebral partner, is shown with his head backgrounded by the clouds.

Although their head and torsos are set apart and distinct, Bill and Melinda both look us squarely in the eye and their legs line up symmetrically suggesting a unity of purpose.

I also wanted to make sure that I didn't replicate a traditional pattern where Bill would appear as patriarch and Melinda as helpmate.

Although Bill sits higher than Melinda, he is perched, slightly precarious, while she appears enthroned, and I've enlarged Melinda's hand to give her a more commanding presence. Although Bill sits in front of Melinda, the subdued tonalities of his shirt modestly link to the background tones of the floor and sky, while the electric blue of Melinda's blouse, framed by the plummy tones of the armchair's upholstery, boldly asserts itself.

To return to the general compositional scheme:

I decided that the interior setting of the portrait should open out to a version of bg3C's view of Lake Washington, the Seattle suburbs, and the Cascade Mountains, because this specific geographic locale plays a role in all three stories. It's the place where Bill grew up and where he and Melinda raise their family; it's the place that hosts the nearby corporate campus of Microsoft; and it's a locale that both Bill and his father have described as fostering a distinctive culture of civic responsibility directly linked to the creation of the foundation.

When I finished my first photo edit I had thirty or forty working images, but none of these was exactly what I was looking for, so I began cutting and pasting, using image manipulating software to take a hand gesture from this pose, a head from that, lifting Bill from one image and putting him next to Melinda from another -- inventing new poses and combinations that didn't exist in my original photo files. When I had assembled six or seven of these digital collages that pleased me, I printed them out to use as references, and painted a

set of preliminary studies in oil on gessoed paper. I've brought three of these studies to show you. Painting them helped to clarify and advance my thinking about the portrait and helped me to internalize Bill and Melinda's features so that when I began work on the actual canvas, I could focus on making a good painting and not fret about capturing a likeness.

When the studies were finished, I photographed them and then imported their digital images into the computer. Working with the raw material that I had collected on the day prior to the photo shoot, I began creating virtual architectures for the figures to inhabit. After a week of this I decided which of the various poses was my favorite, calculated the proper dimensions for the painting, and then continued to refine and simplify the architectural setting.

The flat screen monitor was especially problematic; not only where I should place it and how big I should make it; but exactly what kind of imagery it should display; and how that imagery might be rendered to suggest the precision and flux of an electronic reality different from everything else depicted on the canvas.

Initially I thought that I would use the monitor simply as a device to describe the broad spectrum of activities that the foundation supports. I imagined that it would contain many small images, each referring to a different activity – eradication of malaria, distribution of vaccines, aids prevention, agricultural science, clean water technologies, education, and so on. In addition to the information they conveyed, I

thought that these small images would make a striking visual contrast to the large, fore grounded figures of Bill and Melinda, and by rendering these small images in a “pixilated“ or pointillist, manner I would add to and enrich the painterly variations of the portrait.

I began with a collection of images, randomly arranged on a black field like icons on your computer’s desktop. But this was not interesting to look at. The small images needed to be more organized, and needed some kind of background pattern to provide coherence.

Many of the images that I started with depicted Bill and Melinda visiting clinics, surrounded by school children, or interacting with researchers. It was too much. The effect was hagiographic. I eliminated all of those images and began adding images of maps and graphs that documented the foundation’s efforts to develop new metrics for evaluating and improving the impact of its spending.

I organized my growing collection of images into two, distinct sets: maps and graphs in one set, project images of people and things in the other. To deepen the fictive space, I rotated each of the project images into three-dimensional perspective. I thought, perhaps I should add some text to the display. I introduced the phrase: “all lives have equal value” which is one of the recurring themes of the foundation, and placed it in the middle of the screen between my two sets of images, but the opaque lettering leapt out of the composition like a strident slogan. I thought, “It doesn’t need to shout, I can make

it whisper”. I altered the transparency of the text until it settled quietly into the surface. Then I thought, “those are just words, can I find some way to embody and reinforce that sentiment visually?” I combed through the foundation’s website and came across a photograph of a graduation ceremony at a girl’s school in Africa. Two girls in the crowd caught my attention, their luminous faces full of promise. I cropped the picture and enlarged the detail, so that it filled the entire background of the monitor. Then I blurred the focus of the faces to make the icons pop in the foreground and finally, I angled the entire image – icons, text, and background – to match the perspective of the partition wall behind Bill and Melinda.

I felt that I had now succeeded in investing the monitor with the qualities that I had been searching for, but in so doing, the monitor had become an exceedingly complicated visual artifact that was going to be very tedious and time-consuming to paint from scratch. Rather than do that, I decided to scale up the image in the computer, print it out on archival paper, collage it onto my canvas, and using it like the cartoon for a fresco, paint on top of it to create the intense color and pixilation that I wanted.

Adding the heads of the two girls to the images on the monitor felt like a turning point for the entire composition. The virtual space of the monitor heightened my awareness of the confined architectural space of the office interior and the expansive panoramic space of the landscape outside. The larger-than-life heads of the two girls now shared the focus of the composition with the heads of Bill and

Melinda. What had formerly been a duet was now a quartet with four pairs of eyes rhythmically enlivening the surface. The girls turn their expectant glances to the future, Bill and Melinda turn and face us, challenging us to become engaged.

The process that I've been describing, from the photo shoot in Seattle to the finished composition, took five months to complete. These compositional preliminaries provided me with a solid road map for the portrait. But happily pixels are no substitute for paint. Putting paint to canvas is always an unpredictable adventure, full of surprising detours and discoveries and unexpected cul-de-sacs and frustrations. But if I've done my job well, the transitory litter of digital documents and photographic fragments involved in the creation of this portrait will have been swept away, superseded by a *painting* with a formal coherence and a narrative clarity that I hope will engage visitors to the museum in the years to come.