# STARING
## How We Look

ROSEMARIE GARLAND-THOMSON

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2009

# 1

# Why Do We Stare?

## LOOKING INTO STARING

Staring raises questions. Who stares? Why do we stare? When do we stare? What do we stare at? Why can't we stop staring? What do we do when we are stared at? Should we stare?

We stare because we are curious, and we are curious about staring. *Staring: How We Look* aims to scratch that inquisitive itch by thinking carefully about the stare. It explores staring's possibilities and shows that staring is more than meets the eye.

Everybody stares.[1] Staring is an ocular response to what we don't expect to see. Novelty arouses our eyes.[2] More than just looking, staring is an urgent eye jerk of intense interest.[3] Mike Ervin calls it "the car wreck phenomenon" (2005 interview).[4] We stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want to know more. So staring is an interrogative gesture that asks what's going on and demands the story. The eyes hang on, working to recognize what seems illegible, order what seems unruly, know what seems strange. Staring begins as an impulse that curiosity can carry forward into engagement (figure 1.1).

Spectacles elicit wonderment, but when we stare at one another something more complicated happens. We don't usually stare at people we know, but instead when unfamiliar people take us by surprise. This kind of staring between strangers, this book suggests, offers the most revealing instance of the stare: how it works and what it can do. An encounter between a starer and a staree sets in motion an interpersonal relationship, however momentary, that has consequences. This intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making. Staring bespeaks involvement, and being stared at demands a response. A staring encounter is a dynamic struggle—starers inquire, starees lock eyes or flee, and starers advance or

Figure 1.1. Appleton's Tianga Jungle Girl Show, 1956, Rugby, England. Jack Leeson Collection, National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield.

retreat; one moves forward and the other moves back. A staring interchange can tickle or alienate, persist or evolve. Staring's brief bond can also be intimate, generating a sense of obligation between persons, what Joshua Meile calls "an unavoidable consequence of empathy" (2005 interview).[5] Staring, then, shows us something about how we look *at* each other and how we look *to* each other. "Appearances," according to sociologist Tanya Titchkowsky, "are enactments" (2007, 17). In other words, things happen when people stare.

The lively scene on this book's cover and also on the next page suggests staring's potentially productive interactions. In bold planes and vivid colors, American artist Jacob Lawrence's 1938 painting *Blind Beggars* (figure 1.2) depicts a crowded urban streetscape, probably in Harlem. A pick-up parade of children marches chaotically down the sidewalk, whooping, gesturing wildly, twirling flags, banging drums, and waving sticks. From a window above the street, a woman leans out gawking at the action. The wide-eyed and big-grinned children form an entourage surrounding a dignified, dapper gentleman in a suit and tie and a well-dressed, demure lady walking arm in arm. The couple is the clear center of interest. Everyone is staring at them. Both wear dark glasses and each sweeps the street ahead with a guide cane blind people use. The man carries a tin cup in his other hand. The beggars do not grovel, seek pity, or appear downtrodden. No one turns uneasy eyes away from them. Everyone's getting something out of this. The children are delighted. The woman in the window is fascinated. The starees are the king and queen of the street, blind Pied Pipers running the show. The raucous



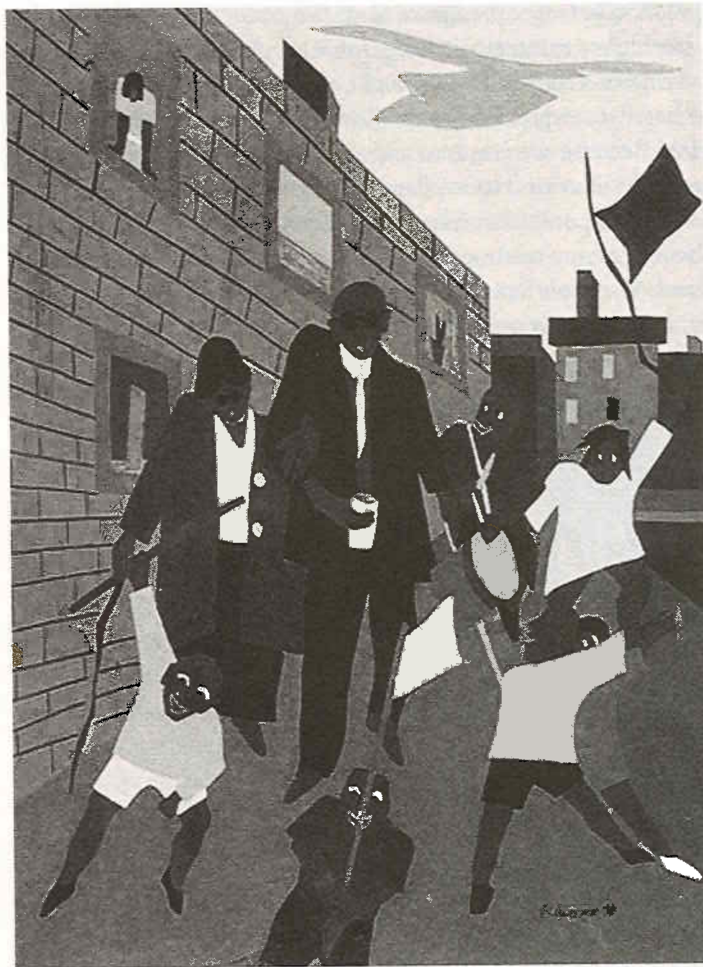

Figure 1.2. Jacob Lawrence, *Blind Beggars* (1938).

scene of *Blind Beggars* shows how staring can be a mutually vivifying visual dance in which starers and starees engage one another.

Even though we like to stare, everybody knows we are not supposed to do it. Mothers scold gawking children. Etiquette manuals caution against untoward eyeing. The timid wither under riveting stares. Indiscreet looking invades another's space. People just simply don't like to be stared at.[6] As with other bodily impulses such as eating and sex, staring elicits strict social regulation. So staring is often a furtive, guilty pleasure. Never far from voyeurism, it can be an inappropriate and mutually embarrassing act. Starers must defend against accusations of vulgar overinvolvement, and starees must defend against intrusive overexposure. Consequentially, staring can roil up common unease on both sides of those ogling eyes.

This contradiction between the desire to stare and the social prohibitions against it fills staring encounters with angst that can be productive, leading starers to new insights. Triggered by the sight of someone who seems unlike us, staring can begin an exploratory expedition into ourselves and outward into new worlds. Because we come to expect one another to have certain kinds of bodies and behaviors, stares flare up when we glimpse people who look or act in ways that contradict our expectations. Seeing startlingly stareable people challenges our assumptions by interrupting complacent visual business-as-usual. Staring offers an occasion to rethink the status quo. Who we are can shift into focus by staring at who we think we are not.

Figure 1.3. Mark Gilbert, *Henry De. L.* (1999). Oil on canvas, 72 in. × 42 in.



We can see how a productive staring exchange might work by looking at a portrait of Henry de Lotbiniere (figure 1.3) that was part of the Saving Face exhibition by painter Mark Gilbert shown at the British National Portrait Gallery in 2002. De Lotbiniere, a London barrister who underwent fifteen operations for facial cancer over thirteen years, presents himself to the public eye through Gilbert's portrait. The effect of the painting is to stage a staring encounter between viewers and de Lotbiniere that makes him seem simultaneously strange and familiar, very like his starers and very unlike them. The painting itself instructs viewers how to look at de Lotbiniere. To use W. J. T. Mitchell's (2005) formulation, this picture wants you to stare. It does so by nestling the barrister's quite stareable face in the context of a particular yet ordinary person. His unusual face is one of many distinguishing features; he has long legs, large feet, expressive hands, a strong jaw, and, of course, a barrister's wig and robes. De Lotbiniere's single eye steadily meets and measures the eyes of his viewers, drawing them toward his astonishing face, which is deep in the background yet acts as the commanding focus of the portrait. De Lotbiniere's seated body juts out from his face into the foreground of the painting, drawing the viewer caught by the barrister's unsettling eye-to-eye contact on a visual tour of the robed, dignified man that culminates in his comfortably crossed knees and two typically shod feet. The effect of the portrait is to manipulate our eyes by both calling up and calling off our stares. It offers for contemplation the surprising sight of de Lotbiniere's unorthodox face at the same time that it situates that face in the reassuringly familiar body of an ordinary barrister. De Lotbiniere's presentation enlists staring to tell a story about him. It invites starers to wonder about his unusual face, to find coherence in a sight that at first seems incomprehensible, to reconcile the Cyclops with the lawyer. If starers stay the course, their eyes will work toward reducing the strangeness of de Lotbiniere's face by giving it a story. Whatever that story may be, it will not be the same one that started them staring.

Any of us can be a starer or a staree. To be a staree is to show a starer something new, to catch a starer off-guard with an unfamiliar sight. What counts as a new sight in the shared visual landscape constantly shifts depending on a starer's expectations, surroundings, mood, level of engagement, individual history, and acculturation. Once triggered, a stare can yield its bearer myriad responses, from curiosity to confusion, attraction, discomfort, even repulsion. Starees, of course, are sometimes reluctant participants in their starers' visual search for something new; they have their own lives to live. Moreover, people become more or less stareable depending on the context. Gilbert's barrister, for example, might not be particularly stareable in an oncology waiting room or amongst friends and family. Staring encounters nonetheless draft starees into a story of the starer's making, whatever that story might be,

whether they like it or not. Because lived staring encounters are spontaneous and dynamic—in the way that Gilbert's staged staring encounter with the barrister is not—they can be pliable under the guidance of an experienced staree. Indeed, accomplished starees often develop a repertoire of strategies they use to choreograph staring encounters.[7]

A snapshot of two practiced starees hints at the skillset starees can wield when they enter the public eye. Theresia Degener, a lawyer, professor, and disability rights activist, and Gisela Hermes, a professor of disability studies in Germany, linger by a riverbank on a summer afternoon in this casual

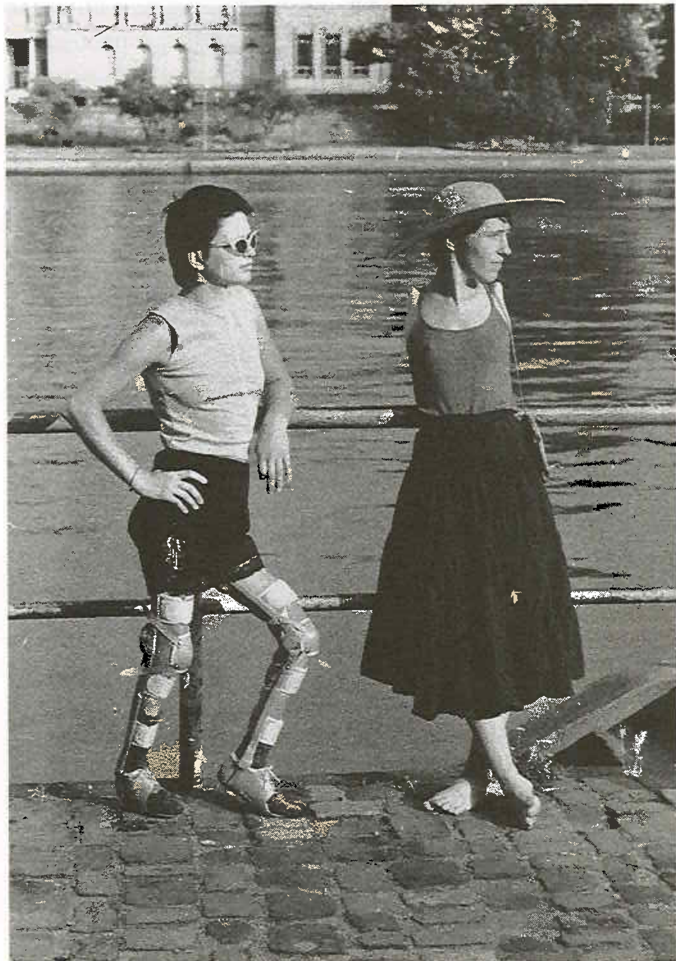

Figure 1.4. Martin Glueck, photo of Dr. Theresia Degener and Gisela Hermes.



photo (figure 1.4), perhaps on vacation, perhaps with another companion who snaps the picture. The friends costume and pose themselves as we would expect in such a setting. Degener sports a sun hat, flowing skirt, and bare feet. Hermes wears shorts and chic sunglasses and stands nonchalantly with arms akimbo. Both women gaze with interest at some sight further on down the river. This altogether unremarkable scene is interrupted, however, by a single arrestingly conspicuous feature of each woman's body that is juxtaposed with her ordinariness. Degener is armless and Hermes' delicate legs are laddered from hip to heel by elaborate supportive braces. This scene is both visually quiescent and eye-catching, familiar and strange at the same time. The exposure of armless shoulders and anomalous legs is rare outside medical venues or sideshows. Most striking perhaps is the apparent comfort with their unusual bodies that these women's comportment and clothing suggest. In fact, the women seem simply to be going about their day, unapologetically taking up what conversation analyst Harvey Sacks (1984) calls "doing being ordinary." They make, in short, an extraordinary sight ordinary. When people with stareable bodies such as Degener and Hermes enter into the public eye, when they no longer hide themselves or allow themselves to be hidden, the visual landscape enlarges. Their public presence can expand the range of the bodies we expect to see and broaden the terrain where we expect to see such bodies. This new public landscape is in part a product of the laws, social practices, and changed attitudes wrought by the larger civil rights movement—including the disability rights movement.[8] These encounters work to broaden collective expectations of who can and should be seen in the public sphere and help create a richer and more diverse human community. This is what starees can show us all.

## AN ANATOMY OF STARING

*Staring: How We Look* is an anatomy of staring.[9] It dissects staring encounters to expose their hidden vitality. *Staring* is a vivisection that reveals what hides in a seemingly obvious visual gesture. Staring, it proposes, is an intense visual exchange that makes meaning.[10] Staring here is more than just looking. The stare is distinct from the gaze, which has been extensively defined as an oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim.[11] As we will see in the chapters that follow, starers engage in several variations of intense looking: among them are the blank stare, the baroque stare, the separated stare, the engaged stare, the stimulus-driven stare, the goal-driven stare, and the dominating stare. At the heart of this anatomy

is the matter of appearance, of the ways we see each other and the ways we are seen. It unsettles common understandings that staring is rudeness, voyeurism, or surveillance or that starers are perpetrators and starees victims. Instead, this vivisection lays bare staring's generative potential.

The "we" of this book is a rhetorical convention to draw readers into an identification with the book's point of view, with its contention that staring is a universal impulse. The "we" does not imply any exclusive group, but rather it recruits an ideal reader: the general, educated reader or academic who is curious about why we stare. William Ian Miller calls this convention the "invitational we," which is "the voice of attempted sympathy and imagination."[12] This rhetorical strategy is an effort to avoid the flattening pronominal dichotomy of "we" and "they" that divides starers from starees.

The use of "we" yokes starers and starees in a mutually defining process that helps reveal how social relations create identities. By framing staring as a psychologically fraught and socially charged encounter, the book addresses how identity emerges through interactive processes. In this way, *Staring* expands the broad critical discussion about visuality in modernity through its focus on disability identity formation. In other words, it shows how staring works, what it does, and how it makes us who we are. This anatomy strives to reveal connections among our own staring practices, interpersonal relations, and the meanings we give to human variations.

To dissect staring, the book approaches staring from a distinctly social model, using several analytical instruments: the social sciences of visual communication, interactionism, cognitive and social psychology; the history of visuality and curiosity; and most of all, the humanistic disciplines of philosophy, disability and feminist theories, ritual and performance studies, and literary criticism. It uses these tools on an eclectic collection of "scenes of staring" that serve as case studies. These scenes take the form of narrative accounts, artistic representations, photographs, films, and performances. In all, *Staring: How We Look* is stalwartly humanistic in its approach. Its perspective is more that of the literary critic and philosopher than the historian or social scientist. To bring forward the generative rather than the oppressive aspects of staring, it leans more toward Erving Goffman than Michel Foucault, more toward Charles Taylor and Martin Buber than Jean-Paul Sartre, more toward D. W. Winnicott than Jacques Lacan.

Because most studies and analyses of staring focus on starers, bringing forward the roles of starees is crucial to presenting a full account of staring. Human starees, rather than car wrecks or sublime spectacles, epitomize the staring encounter and are the center of this book. To get at what starees do and how they understand these intense interpersonal visual exchanges, this anatomy of staring draws from self presentations, visual representations, and published accounts by and of starees as well as interviews with



people who have stareable traits, all of whom have spent years—sometimes lifetimes—managing staring encounters. Developing a balanced account of starer/staree interactions changes the usual understanding of staring as a one-way act. Doing so highlights the dynamic nature of staring encounters, recasts starees as subjects not objects, and reveals new perspectives.

The book consists of six parts, each of which addresses an aspect of the staring relationship. "About Staring" introduces staring as a complex and compelling social exchange in which we all participate. "What Is Staring?" focuses on the roles and perspectives of starers, laying out the four interrelated aspects of staring: physical response, cultural phenomenon, social relationship, and knowledge gathering endeavor. "Don't Stare" explores the history, social regulation, and cultural contradictions of staring. "Starers and Starees" serves as a transition from the focus on starers to one on starees. "Scenes of Staring" develops an extended analysis of the four parts of human anatomy most likely to draw the stare: faces, hands, breasts, and bodies. Finally, "A Last Look" explores the ethics of looking and offers a model of staring as an opportunity for mutual recognition.

# 7

# Looking Away, Staring Back

The first problem is where to direct your eyes.
—medical sociologist, Fred Davis, "Deviance Disavowal"(1961)

## LOOKING AWAY

The contradictions among our desire to stare, the abundant offering of stareable sights, and the perpetual admonitions of our mothers make public staring a furtive pleasure at best for many Americans. Few of us get the unambivalent license to stare that the writer Walker Evans found, as we saw in the last chapter, in Parisian café society. Consequently, our eager stares often quickly shift to uncomfortable looking away. Our ocular id, in other words, jerks our eyes toward a stimulating sight and our ocular super-ego guiltily retracts them. We may withdraw a stare in simple deference to propriety or parental prohibition. Charges of rudeness further encourage us to cut and run. Sometimes, however, truncated stares come from our distress at witnessing fellow humans so unusual that we cannot accord them a look of acknowledgment. To be suddenly confronted with a person extraordinary enough to provoke our most baroque stares withers our ready curiosity and we turn away, snuffing out the possibility for mutual recognition. If the knowledge that staring delivers is unbearable, the expected elasticity of human connection that mutual looking offers becomes brittle. When we suddenly find ourselves face to face with some momento mori or our most dreaded fate—we look away.

The turmoil that looking away brings has led several artists to ponder staring relationships in their work. In 2005, the portrait painter Doug Auld

created ten paintings of young people significantly disabled by burn injuries. His portrait series, "State of Grace," explores the "visual reality" of his subjects and reaches to express "who they really are at their core" (Auld 2005–08). Auld uses the familiar conventions of traditional portraiture—such as realism, texture, color, pose, and likeness—to portray very unconventional subjects. The jolt of these portraits of burn survivors comes from showing us a kind of person we rarely see. As portraits, the paintings announce that their subjects are worthy of public commemoration, important enough to look at, even beautiful. These pictures force us to make sense of faces patterned with vivid colors, limbs sculpted into surprising shapes, and bodies deeply etched with intricate swirls. They lure our curiosity, invite us to stare. As the realism of portraiture does its work of making a likeness, we come to recognize the effects of burning on flesh. Auld's portraits translate what we think of as disfigurement into pictures of "beauty and courage." They confront us with "our fear and our repulsion of the unknown," converting it into appreciation for their subjects' "unique disarming beauty." (Auld 2005-08).

Auld undertakes more, however, than making people who are hard to look at presentable. He intends these paintings to let us stare without having to look away. "I hope," says Auld, "the viewer will look" (Auld 2005-08). The motivation for the series of portraits came from a scene of staring Auld experienced thirty years before he began to paint burn survivors. Ambling

Figure 7.1. Doug Auld, "Rebecca and Louise." Diptych/oil on canvas, 50 in × 80 in © doug auld (2005) from his series "State of Grace" (portraits of burn survivors). www.dougauld.com.



through an outdoor market, the young Auld encountered a vision he was not "prepared for," he told a *New York Times* reporter in 2006. He caught sight of a young girl who was significantly burned. Her face shocked him into staring, imprinting a vivid image that stayed with him over the years. "She was literally melted—no ears, no nose, just holes. Slits for eyes. Her neck was like a long, drawn thing." His description captures his struggle to make sense of her strange face. So challenging was this task and so unprepared was Auld that he withdrew his stare, short-circuiting his inquiry into her humanity. When the girl looked back at the man whose eyes were locked on her face, he lost his voice and did "what everybody else did. I turned my head away" (Newman 2006, 1.25). Haunted for years by this broken connection, Auld decided to address his regret with his art. He approached the Burn Center at St. Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, New Jersey, in order to contact former patients to seek permission and cooperation in painting their portraits.

"So go ahead and stare," the open faces and direct looks in Auld's portraits seem to say. In fact, one of the subjects, Alvaro Llanos, explains his willingness to participate in the project by saying: "I'd rather people be staring at a painting than at me" (Newman 2006, 1.25). Another subject, Louise Benoit, appears in a double portrait along with her sister, Rebecca (figure 7.1). Instead of the conventional double portrait of aristocratic couples or monarchs, however, this picture shows sisters who acquired their distinctive looks together in a fire that killed five other family members. Auld means his pictures to sustain our stares, to give starers "the chance to gaze without voyeuristic guilt at the disfigured, [so] they may be more likely to accept them as fellow human beings, rather than as grotesques to be gawked at or turned away from." In staring at the portrait of herself and her sister, Louise Benoit wonders however whether the arresting close-up views of their burned faces will disgust people or encourage them to "see more than scars" (Newman 2006, 1.25). What happens in the delicate transaction of looking and looking away is unpredictable.

The artist Chris Rush also grants us "Permission to Stare" in his portrait series of "unusual children and adults," most of whom are people with disabilities, that was exhibited at a Brooklyn gallery in 2006.[1] Rush's drawings are studies from life done at a facility for disabled people where he volunteers. Like Auld's paintings, Rush's portraits gain their aesthetic punch by putting unusual faces in our faces. Whereas Auld uses bold texture and color to render scarred flesh less shocking but still compelling, Rush gets between his subjects and our discomfort by softening their differences with the medium of conte crayon and posing them with great dignity. Rush's pictures navigate between us and them, attending carefully to the visual relationship by gratifying our "deep curiosity" while at the same time inviting "empathy" and "sensitivity." The exhibition narrative explains that the portraits invite

us "to draw close to their strangeness and see something of ourselves waiting there." They show what to many of us is the "strangeness" of disability in the familiar frame of a portrait.

One of Rush's most arresting drawings presents a young woman in the regal profile pose we know from the familiar commemorative portraits of the Italian Renaissance (figure 7.2). Her likeness emerges from the sharp line her stately features form against the background; her nose and chin lift imperially; her eyes gaze impassively down on the world beneath her. Her head is turbaned with a richly colored and ornately patterned aristocratic headdress, and her shoulders reveal a simple but elegant gown. On first

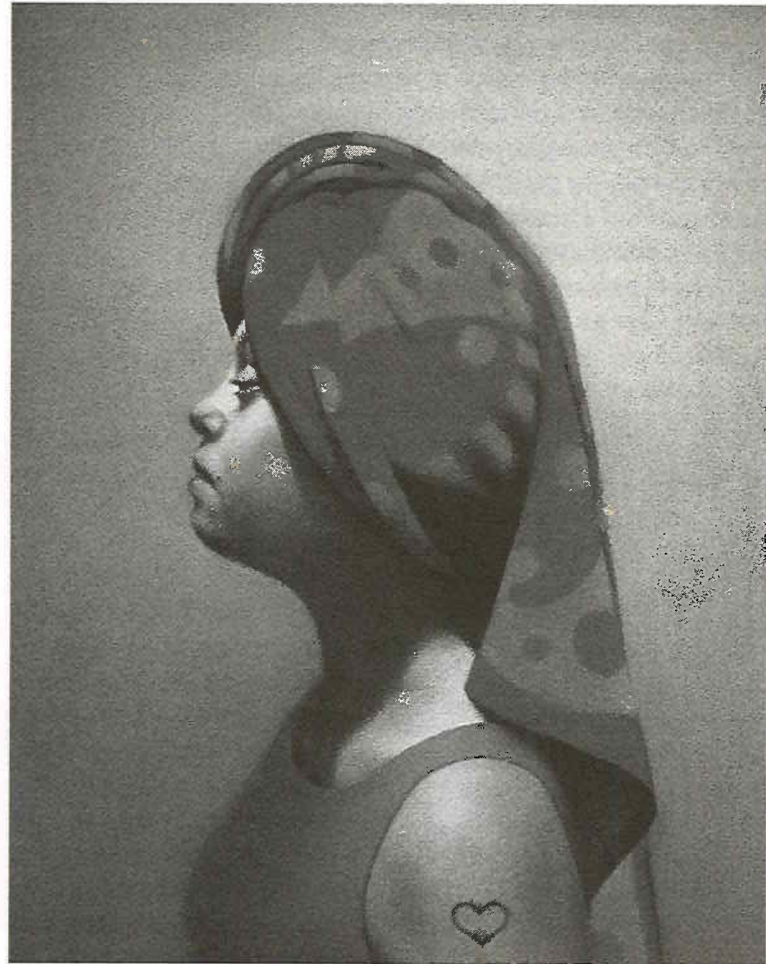

Figure 7.2. Chris Rush, "Swim II." Conte crayon on paper. Portraits are life size in scale.



glance, she looks like a modern Florentine lady. On second glance, however, we recognize a face we have never seen in a portrait. We see the distinct features of a person with Down syndrome, her hair wrapped in a bright beach towel, her face in a faraway reverie, and a simple heart tattooed on her shoulder below her bathing suit strap. The portrait invites us to stare, engrossed perhaps less with the "strangeness" of this woman's disability and more with the strangeness of witnessing such dignity in a face that marks a life we have learned to imagine as unlivable and unworthy, as the kind of person we routinely detect in advance through medical technology and eliminate from our human community.

In *The Body Silent* (1987), anthropologist Robert Murphy, who conducted fieldwork on his own experience of quadriplegia, points out that looking away from people who make us uncomfortable differs from granting them visual anonymity. Looking away is an active denial of acknowledgment rather than the tacit tipping of one's hat to ordinary fellow citizens expressed in simply not noticing one another. Looking away is for Murphy a deliberate obliteration of his personhood. "[A] wheelchair cannot be hidden," he notes, "it is brutally visible" (93). People refuse to look at Murphy, he concludes, partly because they know that they are not supposed to stare at him and have no easy way to relate to him. Having been on both sides of stares, Murphy writes of his own "selective blindness" before becoming disabled, contending that a disabled person entering his "field of vision" would not register in his consciousness. After he began using a wheelchair, however, he saw that sociality between nondisabled and disabled people is "tense, awkward, and problematic," and that this is often expressed through ocular evasion. The newly quadriplegic Murphy found that acquaintances "did not look [his] way" and that he was "virtually ignored in crowds for long periods, broken by short bursts of patronization" (91). This "pattern of avoidance" begets feelings of shame and guilt which initially erode Murphy's dignity and self-esteem (91). Murphy's subtle analysis of the social message that looking and looking away sends to starees suggests that recuperating the dignity lost in such exchanges is a demanding task for people with disabilities.

Conferring dignity on people whose differences draw stares is the challenge to which these portraits of disabled people rise. These portraits intervene between starees and starers to offer respectful, even beautiful, pictures of people we have not learned to look at in this way. They revalue devalued people, the kinds of people most of us have only glimpsed in institutions or in medical pictures with black boxes over the eyes. This anonymity that medical photographs impose on a staree also prevents the person pictured from staring back at the viewer. Auld's and Rush's portraits rework the way we usually stare, however. They keep us looking rather than looking away. They grant us more than permission to stare; they use the clout of high art to transform

our staring from a breach of etiquette or an offensive intrusion into an act of appreciation. These portraits enable visual pilgrimages of deliberate contemplation that might be scuttled in a face-to-face encounter on the street. The invitation to look that a portrait offers precludes our skittish staring and instead allows us to look deep and long into these unfamiliar faces made strangely familiar.

## STARING BACK

Staring is a high-stakes social interaction for everybody involved. The struggle for starers is whether to look or look away. The struggle for starees is how to look back. Stareable people have a good deal of work to do to assert their own dignity or avoid an uncomfortable scene. People with unusual looks come to understand this and develop relational strategies to ameliorate the damage staring can inflict. Rather than passively wilting under intrusive and discomforting stares, a staree can take charge of a staring situation, using charm, friendliness, humor, formidability, or perspicacity to reduce interpersonal tension and enact a positive self-representation.

In her memoir, *Autobiography of a Face* (1984), Lucy Grealy writes about discovering as a young girl the possibilities that staring back might hold for her. Grealy spent a lifetime as a staree after her multiple surgeries for jaw cancer, starting when she was eight years old. Having to navigate the world outside her family soon showed Grealy that she "possessed a certain power" because people "noticed" her. "Wherever I went, even just to the store with my mother, I was never overlooked," writes Grealy, "I could count on some sort of attention, and I discovered that people were embarrassed when I caught them looking at me. I stared right back at the strangers. . . . They always looked away quickly, trying to pretend they hadn't been staring" (Grealy 1984, 101). What practiced starees come to understand, Grealy suggests, is that stares are to be engaged rather than avoided. Some take up this engagement with the relish and others with dread. Nevertheless, whether they are a challenge or a burden, stares do not necessarily make one a victim; rather, they can make one a master of social interaction.

Accounts from starees such as Lucy Grealy about staring back find support in the portraits of people with disabilities by Doug Auld and Chris Rush. These portraits show rather than tell how starees stare back. Portraits can provide their subjects with an opportunity to deliberately engage their viewers through the conventional poses of traditional portraiture. Eye comportment is one of the most important elements through which portraits define their subjects. Intense eye-to-eye engagement with the viewer can



make a subject seem to reach out of the picture to stare down the viewer. A pose of outstaring one's starer confers an authority that people like the ones that Auld and Rush portray can have trouble maintaining in facing social stigma. We expect such an imperial gaze to come from a monarch but not from people we have learned to see as pitiable or even repugnant. One burn survivor who saw Auld's pictures, Dan Gropper, thinks these portraits work against what he calls the tiresome "poor Dan" attitude he gets along with the stares (Newman 2006, 1.25). Taking a good look at these portraits can show viewers that people who look like Gropper or Auld's subjects can and do "have a very good life."

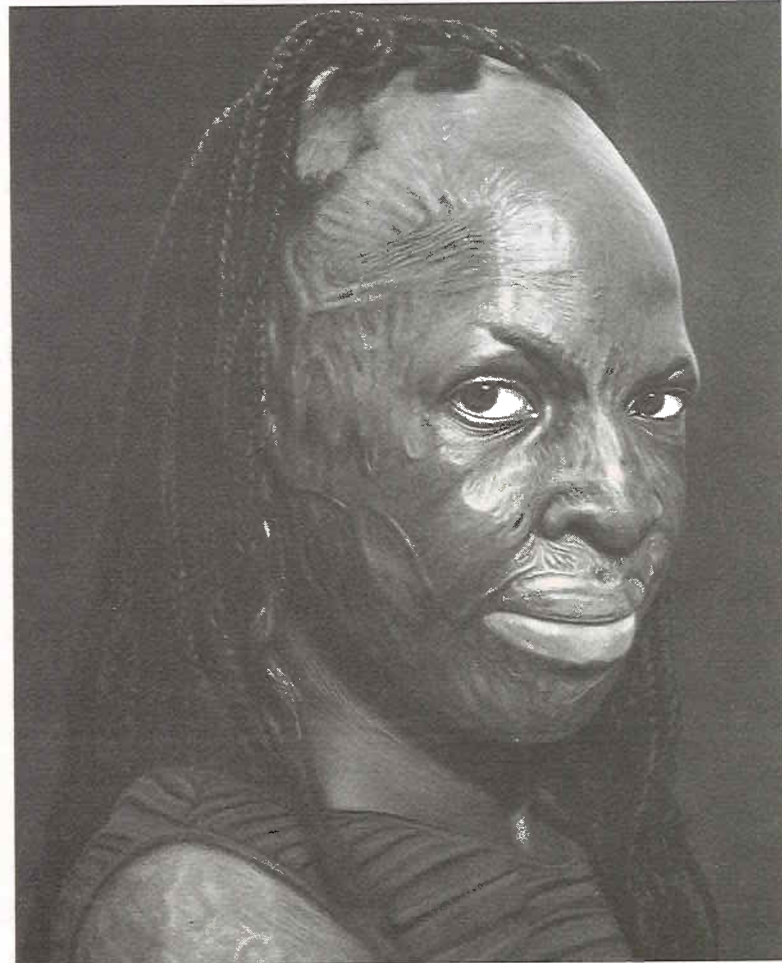

Figure 7.3. Doug Auld, "Shayla." Oil on canvas, 40 in × 50 in © doug auld (2005) from his series "State of Grace" (portraits of burn survivors); www.dougauld.com.

Refusing to wilt under another's stare is a way to insist on one's dignity and worth. Shayla, for instance, one young African-American woman Auld portrays, stares back with a particularly penetrating look (figure 7.3). In a three-quarter profile pose and bedecked with African-style braids scattered across her scarred scalp, Shayla's eyes are steady on us, emerging from beneath furrowed brows out of a stern face textured with intricate brushstrokes and colors that announce the residues of burning. Shayla is staring hard at us staring at her. Her look refuses even a shred of the poor victim role. She has caught us and we cannot look away. In another example of looking back, one of Rush's most striking subjects stares at us with a look that approaches an ironic smirk (figure 7.4). In a little black dress and a sleek hairstyle, a young woman named Gwen elegantly fans out a hand with long, beautiful fingers just beneath her chin, accentuating her face. Her eyes stare directly at us from a most unusual face, one we'd consider disfigured. As a vamp, the ever-desirable woman playing hard to get, she stares openly at us staring at her. This vamp's self-presentation suggests a womanly confidence and sophistication that contradicts what we have learned about people with so-called facial deformities.

Portraits, of course, show only half of a staring exchange. Because they are static representations of starees, the portraits of Shayla and Gwen allow us to consider how starees can use comportment, expression, and even costuming to stare back. In other words, these portraits pull the staree out of a live encounter in order to deliberately stage a staree's self-presentation. Face-to-face staring encounters, in contrast, are living communications filled with complex and dynamic interrelations. Many starees take the lead in these interactions. Uninvited attention is something that people generally do not put up with for very long without developing a set of effective responses. Sometimes starees rise to the occasion with deliberateness, grace, and generosity. Sometimes, however, the stare-weary have crankier responses. One man with restricted growth who has been stared at his entire life reports that he reacts to gawkers with "avoidance" or "disengagement," and often "flips them the bird" (anonymous, 2006 interview).[2] Part of the "embattled" nature of having a stareable disability, Robert Murphy (1987) observes, is managing the patterns of attention, avoidance, and awkwardness. Murphy concludes that the visual presence of disability "robs the encounter of firm cultural guidelines, traumatizing it and leaving the people involved wholly uncertain about what to expect from each other" (87). As many of the interviews for this book suggest, the work demanded of ultra-noticeable people to deal with this uncertainty can be taxing, tedious, or even tormenting.

Nonetheless, starees also suggest that managing staring exchanges can generate creative interpersonal skills that are psychologically sustaining.

Figure 7.4. Chris Rush, "Vamp." Conte crayon on paper. Portraits are life size in scale.

A vigilant staree assesses the precise attitude of the starer, measuring intentions and attitudes so as to respond in the most effective way. Accomplished starees can help starers maintain face by relieving them of anxiety, understanding their motivations, working with them to overcome their limited understanding of human variation, and indulging their social awkwardness. A seasoned staree evaluates when to turn away, stare back, or further extend the stare. Some allow the staring to go on in order for the starer to get a good look. Others find it most effective to use eye contact and body language to terminate the stare as soon as possible, although this risks being interpreted as hostile. Another option is to redirect the stare. For example, one staree reports connecting her own eyes to those of the immobilized starer and guiding them away from the feature of her own body upon which the starer's eyes have fixed. By taking over the stare, this staree adeptly rescues the hapless fellow from the embarrassment of the stuck stare and restores the ease of typical face-to-face encounters.

Starees develop fluent staring management routines that are more sophisticated than simple defensive reactions. The psychologist Len