

# Art in America

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## TREVOR SHIMIZU'S PAINTER PERSONA SPOOFS MASCULINE IDEALS OF ARTISTIC GENIUS



Trevor Shimizu: Self Portrait Asian Heartthrob, 2008, oil on canvas, 12 by 9 inches

Throughout his expansive body of work, New York–based artist **Trevor Shimizu** has been “willing to reveal highly personal and potentially shameful things” while simultaneously “cultivating a *Fantasy Self*—an *ideal* self-image.”<sup>1</sup> I’ve excerpted those characterizations not from a piece of art criticism but from a description of Type Four individuals, one of the nine categories defined by the Enneagram personality test popularized in the 1970s. Shimizu’s exhibition “Performance Artist,” opening this month at **Kunsthalle Lissabon** in Portugal, includes a new work titled *Personality Research Center*, comprising a collection of slides and printouts dedicated to understanding his Enneagram type—also known as “The Individualist.” This is the artist’s second work in this format; he more typically makes paintings or videos.

Famous Fours highlighted in Shimizu’s “research center” include Vincent van Gogh, who inspired Shimizu to become a painter: the artists share a birthday as well as a personality type, plus Shimizu’s grandparents had a dog named van Gogh.<sup>2</sup> Fours’ greatest fear is that they

“have no identity”; they strive to compensate for “negative self-image and chronically low self-esteem.”<sup>3</sup> Countless fantasy Trevor Shimizus have appeared in the artist’s work over the past two decades: for example, a sex symbol in the painting *Self-Portrait Asian Heartthrob* (2008), a tech bro in the “Lonely Loser Trilogy” videos (2013), and a decadent late-career artist in the “Made by Assistant” paintings (2013). Shimizu’s paintings typically illustrate a scenario, and the title often gives as much information as the rendering. The Japanese-American artist considers *Molly Ringwald (Self Portrait)* (1999) his first performative self-portrait. Shimizu painted himself as Anthony Michael Hall, with Molly Ringwald looking at him lovingly—a nod to the duo’s performances in John Hughes’s films *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and *The Breakfast Club* (1985). As Shimizu told me in his Queens studio this past August, he identified with Hall’s nerd characters, though Hall never won Ringwald’s favor in either.<sup>4</sup> At least, he related to Hall more than the off-putting Asian stereotypes in Hughes’s films, as he noted to C. Spencer Yeh in an earlier interview.<sup>5</sup> Even in his fantasies, Shimizu’s ambitions are often more banal than wondrous.



Trevor Shimizu: proud-father, 2014, oil on canvas, 30 by 22 inches.

These imagined selves recall the work of another famous Four represented in Shimizu’s installation: Cindy Sherman, whose “Untitled Film Stills” (1977–80) show the artist posing in staged stills for movies that never existed, relying on well-known female character tropes. Although Shimizu wasn’t exposed to much contemporary art growing up, he became enamored of the artist persona after seeing the film *Basquiat* (1996). Yet, unlike some of the characters he performs, he isn’t completely sincere in aspiring to becoming the next great artist, and his quick style of rendering outlines—often achieved with a dry brush—suggests that he is making no effort toward technical mastery.

Shimizu has been so embarrassed by a few of his works that he has destroyed them. He made the painting *Serving Ryan Gosling Coffee* (2010) after spending a summer working as a barista in an LA coffee shop frequented by the male star of *The Notebook*. But he covered up his fanboy moment, turning the canvas into one of his “Sunburn” works—a series showing people getting sunburns, which serve as humiliating markers of trying to look more attractive by getting a tan. He told me that he recently found a forgotten charcoal self-portrait with the torso ripped off, and remembered he had drawn himself wearing a T-shirt that promoted Les Claypool and the Holy Mackerel, a band he was, years later, so ashamed ever to have liked that he felt compelled to eliminate any evidence. But he’s coming to terms with his embarrassing phases, even mining them for artworks: *Retrospective Self-Deprecation* (2019) is a postcard featuring two photographs of the artist: in one, from around 2010, he’s in his early thirties and slightly overweight. This unflattering photo is paired with a more recent one of Shimizu with his daughter, where he looks like a healthy, proud father.

Shimizu made the postcard for the Lisbon launch of *Broadcasting: EAI at ICA*—a book edited by Alex Klein, a curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Philadelphia, and Rebecca Cleman, director of distribution at Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York. At the ICA in 2018, Klein and Cleman organized a show about the history of EAI, a nonprofit dedicated to the preservation and distribution of media art. The exhibition included a video from Shimizu’s “Lonely Loser Trilogy.” The artist, who graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2002 after transferring from UC Santa Cruz, was formerly the technical director of EAI, and the organization recently acquired many of his video works. Following the EAI/ICA collaboration, Klein organized Shimizu’s Lisbon solo to call attention to his video practice. The artist’s first video—the 840-minute *Spice* (1991–2013)—comprises recordings of the adult television programs he watched as a teen at night while his parents slept. The pornographic scenes are interrupted by quick switches to other shows: he changed the channel to hide the content when his mother or father got up for a glass of water or to use the bathroom. He edited this footage into a work later in life, voluntarily showcasing what he used to hide.

When Shimizu discusses his experiences or makes work about his past, it’s with the distance typical of an elderly person, as if telling stories of an entirely different version of himself, way back when. His *Jimsonweed Research Center* (2017) comprises a video and folders of printouts warning of the dangers of consuming the psychoactive plant. In the video, a friend of Shimizu’s recounts a bad trip that Shimizu experienced as a teenager after accidentally ingesting jimsonweed. The witness describes how Shimizu screamed at a kid who had teased him and spit on the cops who arrested him. As with much of his work, the piece is sincere though not moralizing. “There’s always an impulse to make [my work] somewhat entertaining,” Shimizu told me. The detachment with which he treats his various phases, whether personal or painterly, makes sense given the vast quantity of work he’s produced, due in part to the speed with which he renders his sketch-like paintings, and the low-budget, DIY nature of his video productions.

For more than fifteen years, Shimizu’s video and painting practices were separate, until he made his first video painting in 2017. He began to hang unstretched canvases, typically painted monochrome, on the wall, cutting a hole in the center to make room for a monitor mounted on the wall behind. He has reworked earlier videos to appear in this format. The best known of these video paintings incorporate the “Lonely Loser Trilogy,” for which Shimizu took on the persona of a tech bro who is really into extreme sports. Shimizu used a Google Glass camera—a short-lived device worn almost exclusively by tech enthusiasts—to record himself watching skateboarding videos for one part of the trilogy, and snowboarding and mountain biking for the



Trevor Shimizu: *Made by Assistant (watching porn)*, 2013, oil on canvas, 18 by 23 inches. COURTESY 47 CANAL.

other two. The point-of-view filming and subject matter recall athletes wearing GoPros, though the artist is not outside doing tricks—he's just watching other people do them on his laptop.

In 2018 Shimizu added a fourth piece to the series, which he still calls a “trilogy”: a video of a concert he found online. During his aspiring rock musician phase, he attended a Rage Against the Machine and Red Hot Chili Peppers benefit concert for the Free Tibet movement. Just a few songs in, he entered the mosh pit, only to get elbowed in the face, and had to sit out the rest, sporting a bag of ice. He found the concert on YouTube and recorded his screen, a nod to the ways in which concertgoers tend to mostly film other people's phones when attempting to record a performance. Shimizu wears headphones while watching the concert on his screen, so the video's soundtrack is actually the dishwasher in the background, making him what he calls “this pathetic character that doesn't leave the house.” It's not hard to draw parallels between the tech-bro character and the modernist male master in the “Lonely Loser” video paintings, implied by Shimizu's proud, gigantic signature, which sometimes takes up nearly a quarter of the canvas. Both personas' grand ambitions are easy to mock.

While the video paintings were Shimizu's first material melding of the two mediums, his painting practice has always been as performative as his videos. Two years after seeing Courbet's self-portraits in a 2008 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Shimizu decided to paint himself doing all the non-art jobs he'd had: telephone engineer, personal

assistant, computer technician, video store clerk, pizza delivery driver, Chinese buffet server, US census enumerator, nightclub photographer, carpenter, one-hour photo developer, barista, and telefundraiser.

In addition, he emulated famous artists in his “Late Works” (2012) and “Made by Assistant” series. For “Late Works”—which constituted Shimizu’s first show at his New York gallery, 47 Canal—the artist imagined himself as a senile artist who made unsigned, undated paintings, never meant to be shown and supposedly found only after he died. The pictures include sexual fantasies about his nurse, several of them images of her sunbathing, plus self-portraits with crow’s feet and wrinkles. For “Made by Assistant,” he created paintings attributed to a fictional studio assistant who became obsessed with Shimizu’s wife, and painted countless portraits of her. *Made by Assistant (Watching Porn)* shows Shimizu viewing smut on a big screen as evidence that his assistant does all the work. Those scenarios didn’t really happen, of course; the works were all made by Shimizu himself. “I’m actually a feminist, so I think porn is disgusting,” he told an interviewer in 2015. “I’m also a wholesome guy.”<sup>6</sup> It’s difficult to take either that statement or his fantasy of watching porn as completely sincere: conventionally, one fantasizes about reenacting porn or winning extreme sports, not watching either on a laptop. The layers of screens that recur throughout his work serve as stand-ins for levels of remove.

Shimizu worked with many aging artists and artists’ estates during his time at EAI, and was also an assistant to such veterans as Dan Graham, Shigeko Kubota, and Carolee Schneemann. These activities fostered what he calls his “conceptual art wannabe” phase, which includes an ongoing body of work dedicated to Graham. The video *Highlights* (2018–19)—a computer screen recorded on an iPhone, then saved as an Instagram story highlight reel that’s displayed in the gallery on a monitor—shows a screen playing country music videos, with Graham’s voice occasionally singing along off-screen. Another painting from the series illustrates the true story of one afternoon when Shimizu and Graham’s wife, artist Mieko Meguro, were meant to meet Graham at a matinee movie in Times Square. They grew worried when Graham didn’t show up and wasn’t answering his phone, though it turned out he had gone to the cinema’s Union Square location and watched the film without them. The painting shows Graham enjoying popcorn and a movie, while Meguro files a missing person report.

While all of Shimizu’s work retains a distinct deadpan humor, a number of recent pieces are outright jokes, practically painted memes. They’re often paintings of Instagram screenshots, social media being a perfect platform for the artist’s interest in persona performance. Some have the humor of a teen boy, like his fart series (2015): numerous paintings of fart clouds with smiley faces. His “Groupies” series (2018) comprises portraits of the women eager to get with him or, more precisely, of their Instagram profiles, since they are actually spam bots that seek to lure and scam men. The paintings in his “Unfollowers” series (2019) depict screens showing accounts that have unfollowed him. He told me that after downloading an app that tracks unfollows, he “started to become like a sociopath, checking to see who unfollowed me so I could unfollow them.” When he showed the paintings, they created “a lot of awkward interactions with friends who unfollowed [him]”—including his own sister. Now, he just doesn’t follow anyone. Two videos, *Deleted Stories* (2018–19) and *Unused Stories* (2018), are being shown in Lisbon. Instagram stories auto-delete after twenty-four hours, but the compiled items Shimizu posted then deleted suggest that he found his own stories so boring, dumb, or embarrassing that he had to take them down earlier. “They’re usually stupid weed jokes,” he told me.



Trevor Shimizu: *Made by Assistant (Sit Ups)*, 2014, oil on canvas, 15 by 12 inches. COURTESY 47 CANAL.

*Vape Dad and the Nannies* (2018) was his last joke painting before taking a hiatus from the series, fearful that his work might become as uncool as dad jokes. A number of earnest pieces about fatherhood complement these, though. Fatherhood is a surprisingly rare subject in art history, given how many artists have been dads. Five years before becoming a father, Shimizu started making work about his parenting hopes and fears: *Girlfriend Wants a Baby* (2010) shows a couple lying in bed while a baby floats in a cloud above them. The cloud is colorful and bright, though in many places the colors mix and become muddy, producing a dark gray fog and making it unclear whether the cloud is happy or ominous. The “House Husband” series includes *House Husband (Dog)*, 2014, which shows the artist smoking a pipe, ignorant of the fact that the dog has just pooped all over the house and the baby. *Goofy*, from the same year, is a portrait of the Disney character—a widower and single father—rendered as jejune (and, well, goofy) as ever. When Shimizu showed the work alongside *Girlfriend Wants a Baby* and *House Husband* (2013) in a 2014 show at 47 Canal, he presented *Goofy* as a tragic figure, swirling together the serious and silly in a manner characteristic of his oeuvre.

Later paintings in his 2016 show—which was called “New Works” and held four years after “Late Work”—depict him engaged in such domestic acts as massaging his pregnant wife’s feet (*Foot Massage*, 2016). The show included a “Baby Expert” series replete with renderings of handy baby-carrying devices, as well as *Breastfeeding in Public (1)*, 2016, a cartoonish, straightforwardly titled portrait of his wife, Erica Papernik-Shimizu, an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art. “New Works” also featured a mini golf course—an exaggerated acceptance of his new “dad” role—and a series of paintings of stuffed animals belonging to his



Trevor Shimizu: *Vape Dad & The Nannies*, 2018, oil on canvas, 15 by 19 inches. COURTESY 47 CANAL.

daughter, Goldie (b. 2015). More recent paintings reproduce the child's drawings. Goldie's bedroom houses Goldie's Gallery, where Shimizu has curated exhibitions for artists like Meguro, Ken Kagami, and Antoine Catala. Earlier this fall, Galerie Christine Mayer in Munich did a gallery swap with Goldie's, hanging all the paintings at child level.

Most recently, Shimizu has leaned into the painterly tradition of drawing from what he knows: "portraits of my wife, daughter, cat, still lives of objects in our apartment, and landscape paintings of places we enjoy visiting." The switch was inspired by Shimizu's recent purchase of the catalogue for MoMA's 1998 Pierre Bonnard retrospective, which he visited when he was studying video and performance in art school. Shimizu remembers feeling "somewhat underwhelmed" by the show, but he purchased the Bonnard catalogue to revisit his early thoughts on painting. His recent landscapes use significantly more paint than his earlier works, which often left large swaths of canvas visible.

Though Shimizu follows the Impressionists in painting his surroundings, he doesn't aim to romanticize or beautify his environment. Rather, his depiction of the natural is more mundane, replete with chipmunks, turtles, shrubs, hills. A city dweller seeking out flowers and chipmunks

can be understood as a form of finding the good in the everyday, as manifested in the artist's 2015 exhibition "Trying to Be a Good Person" at Rowhouse Project in Baltimore. The show focused on the less glamorous and never easy aspects of trying to be good, like doing the dishes, walking the dog, or going to therapy. The show took place in a house undergoing renovations and featured rooms of paintings, some on unstretched canvases that filled entire walls. Ceramic animals populated what would be the child's bedroom, a painting of someone



View of Shimizu's exhibition "New Work," 2016, at 47 Canal, New York, showing, left to right, *Baby Expert (Walking)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 58 by 55 inches, and *Koala bear*, 2016, oil on canvas, 72 by 68 inches. COURTESY 47 CANAL.

washing dishes hung above the kitchen sink, and the master bedroom featured fart paintings. *Happy Farting 2* (2015) shows a couple passing gas in bed together without shame, smiling and enjoying one another's company: the kind of intimacy where you don't have to perform a persona.

But the show had a tragic element: *Autoerotic Asphyxiation* (2015) shows a man dying of the eponymous state. "You try really hard to be a good person, but then you fail and die in some embarrassing way," Shimizu told me, calling his viewpoint at the time "cynical." Still, the show reflects the ways in which being a goody two-shoes is kind of a joke and nearly impossible to do earnestly, and so offers an alternative to art's moralizing function. Shimizu lends sympathy to those trying in earnest to be good, while making fun of those trying too hard to be great. Maybe the most embarrassing thing you can do is believe sincerely that you are a great artist. But even worse would be to not bother pursuing meaning and goodness.

<sup>1</sup> "The Individualist: Enneagram Type Four," The Enneagram Institute, [enneagraminstitute.com](http://enneagraminstitute.com).

<sup>2</sup> While [enneagram.net](http://enneagram.net) lists van Gogh as a Four, [enneagraminstitute.com](http://enneagraminstitute.com) classes him as Type Five, "The Investigator."

<sup>3</sup> "The Individualist: Enneagram Type Four."

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the artist, New York, Aug. 9, 2019. All Shimizu quotes are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> Trevor Shimizu, "Confusing and Accurate and Deadpan," interview by C. Spencer Yeh, *Bomb*,



Feb. 19, 2019, [bombmagazine.org](http://bombmagazine.org).

<sup>6</sup> Shimizu in Jacob Fabricius's interview book *Trevor Shimizu Season 2*, Episode 8, Copenhagen, Pork Salad Press, 2015, p. 35.

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