

life in the third person

life in the third person is not a self-portrait. It is masquerading as one. Julia Gutman's face and body appear everywhere in the textile work, populating its woven tableaux. Here, two figures sit in a state of intimacy and dislocation—facing opposite directions, while simultaneously resting against one another. They are together and yet apart. Just beyond them, a group throws a limp form of another figure into the air. And further on, to the right, a pair of figures are entangled in a violent scene, with the blade of a sword pressing down on an overpowered body, which lies below. Gutman's image is in every one of the scenes, yet because of this repetition the individual person also ceases to really be in any of them. The monumental textile is not a retreat into narcissism, but a push to understand the limits of our own image.

The repeated image of the artist is, in a way, a proxy for all of us. It stands in for our urge to be understood, the impossibility of encapsulating the complexities of our own experience, and the inadequacy of our public projections. Most challengingly, the multiplied selves of Gutman's work suggest the inevitable warping of our image that occurs as it moves through the world, becomes unmoored from us, and is moulded by the hands of others. "Someone writes a memoir at 22 and then they're 50 and they still have to speak to whatever they were," Gutman explains. "The irony is that the more that you try to explain who you are to people the more likely you are to flatten yourself and lose your capacity to change or be complicated."

The ideas here—self-definition, autofiction, and the cultural obsession with identity—all feel unmistakably contemporary. Yet suggesting the enduring nature of these concerns, the inspiration for Gutman's work comes from a much older source: Danish author Hans Christian Andersen's short story, *The Shadow* (1847). It tells the story of a man whose shadow one day abandons him. The shadow returns years later to the man, and switches places with him, pretending to be the man himself. The shadow ultimately has the man killed, in a critical act that suggests how the image of the man has overtaken his actual existence. Andersen's parable moves into the fantastical, yet it captures the very real threat of our image moving beyond our likeness and turning against us. Put simply, the abiding threat that our shadow will one day no longer follow us.

The duality of Andersen's story is telegraphed by the two large figures on the left-hand side of Gutman's composition. While the figures have an almost identical flipped appearance, the Janus-faced posture of the two seated bodies suggests a divide, as they both physically and emotionally turn away from one another. This fissure is subtly registered in their contrasting facial expressions, which punctuate their broader figural similarities with points of unmistakable difference. The seemingly innocuous interchangeability of the two figures—their conspicuous sameness—produces a point of tension as one is left wondering, who is the shadow here?

Gutman's work itself becomes a shadow in its centre. Here, she briefly transforms into Francisco Goya, or rather her textile scene recreates the Spanish old master's painted composition, *The Straw Manikin* (1791-2). In Goya's original work, which itself served as a cartoon for a royal tapestry, we see a group of four women using a sheet to throw a human form, constructed from straw, into the air. While this strawman retains the illusion of autonomous animation, it is really the figures below who compel his movement, casting him into the sky with every heave of the sheet. What we are seeing is a theatre of control, and more critically the loss of it. The stiff downward facing arms of Gutman's straw-woman similarly emphasise her lack of agency, suggesting how first the figures below and then gravity act upon

her form. This visual spectacle is underwritten by the rhetorical idea of a “strawman argument,” wherein a distorted version of an opponent’s argument is presented and then easily dismissed.

The last of Gutman’s scenes, to the composition’s right, asks: who occupies the centre of a story? Again the artist pulls at the past and weaves historical texture into her work, with the image of two figures lying on the ground being taken from Jan Willem Pieneman’s painting, *Battle of Waterloo* (1824). The original painting speaks to a kind of egocentrism that we all share in—the base urge to see ourselves as the protagonist of any narrative, no matter how marginal our presence. It was believed to have initially been commissioned for the Duke of Wellington, who sits astride a horse in the painting’s centre surrounded by a large crowd of figures, commemorating his victory at the Battle of Waterloo. However, the painting never made it to the Duke. A flatteringly heroic, yet somewhat marginal, depiction of the wounded Dutch Crown Prince, also pictured in the painting, led his father, King William I, to purchase the artwork, keeping it in the Netherlands. With this, the painting’s propaganda and protagonist had shifted from the Duke to the Crown Prince.

Gutman’s textile extends this historical co-opting, by shifting the artwork’s focus once again. The two bodies that she has taken from Pieneman’s *Battle of Waterloo* are even less significant than the Dutch Crown Prince in the original scene. They function as fallen, lifeless, bodies, which produce a generalised backdrop of violence rather than describing the tragedy of an individual death. Yet these are the figures that Gutman chooses to emphasise. In transporting these two minor characters into her work, Gutman invites us to consider the shifting relativity of every story and every such scene, which are filled with individuals who each unquestioningly believe that they sit at its centre. In presenting two interchangeable figures in the midst of struggle—a beheading occurring in a landscape of gingham—the textile suggests the absurd and self-defeating nature of our need for perpetual attention.

For Gutman, the hardest person to copy is not an old master painter, but rather herself. In order to produce her monumental 12 metres long textile, she worked with a large Jacquard loom at the TextielLab in Tilburg, the Netherlands. The Jacquard loom’s computer-programmed process of weaving involved a completely new mode of working for the artist, whose manually-driven practice typically involves the sewing together of old garments. “Materiality is normally driving the entire process,” Gutman explains. “I’ll have a composition in mind, but the materials have so much energy and the clothes have so many technical limitations, so it becomes a process of letting those things cook.” The Jacquard loom introduced the opposite problem for Gutman: it provided her with complete freedom.

For *life in the third person*, Gutman decided to become her own shadow. She rebuilt her process digitally, meticulously recreating the layers of her hands-on aesthetic—and avoiding the flat uniformity and consistent texture of a tight computer-file weave. Rather than reaching for a seamless aesthetic in her final work, Gutman represents the anatomy of her own process in the textile. We see this thematized in the stitches that loop across the work, and the fragmented shape of the composition, which Gutman traced from pieces of historical Egyptian textiles. Materiality is not effaced but highlighted here, as she combines a series of different fibres in the work—weaving together cotton, mohair, and wool—while also experimenting with looser open weaves. Suspended in the space, *life in the third person*, also reveals the other side of its construction, literally, on its other side. In this sense, the artwork *is* a self-portrait—not in the images that it presents, but in the artistic practice it reveals.

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