

# CARA GURI



## ART ON DEMAND 6.1

Every day we are subjected to a barrage of cameras, video streams, and images on social media that communicate a range of behavioural and social expectations. The experience of constantly looking at others and simultaneously being looked at teaches us to quickly assess others visually, often drawing conclusions about their identity based on visual information in the absence of any direct interaction. We have all encountered the objectification of others in our daily lives and social circles, whether we fight against it, are subjected to it, or instigate it. We understand, whether consciously or unconsciously, that behaviour can be controlled or manipulated through the power of the gaze, and thus we are aware of the power of the one-who-looks. Historically, the power of the gaze has been gendered; the assumption of a male viewer in traditions of portraiture and film have long made women the object of the gaze.

behind arranged hair, hands, water glasses, or even other portraits. The subject's ability to return the viewer's gaze has been obstructed, leaving only a partially visible figure as the object of the viewer's gaze. However Guri also strategically negates the viewer's satisfaction of apprehending the subject's face in its entirety. Both looker and looked-at are denied the full weight of this exchange.

Compounding the frustration of the visual denouement is the fact these compositions are notably absent of environmental context or detail. Her subjects are pictured against moody fields of solid colour that give the eye nothing else to dwell on besides the subjects themselves. In effect, there is nothing else to look at but the one thing that resists our gaze.

Curated by Bethany Haynes  
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More recently though, some theorists have considered roles of both the looker and the looked-at as important halves of a mutually constitutive relationship.

The power of the gaze has long been theorized, along with the power imbalances it represents. Emerging, White Rock-based artist Cara Guri has recently produced a body of work that considers the transactional nature of looking and being looked at. In Guri's hyper-realistic paintings, she veils the eyes of her subjects

The meticulous quality of oil painting, which allows the artist to represent her subjects in exacting detail, also links Guri's works to the history of portraiture in the Western tradition. Interestingly, a significant number of Guri's works are self-portraits which presents the possibility of the artist as subject and the object: viewer and viewed. Guri's dual portraits/self-portraits leave us with many questions. In Guri's depictions of herself, she rarely faces outward toward her viewer and when she does, her features are significantly

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—obscured, often by another body part, like her hair or hands. In *Helmet*, Guri presents a self-portrait in profile, her head entirely obscured by a curtain of long, red hair that is securely wrapped round it. In the slightly surreal *Exhibitionist*, the artist depicts herself in  $\frac{3}{4}$  length profile. This time, while she is visible from shoulders to hips, only the back of her head and her red pony-tail are visible as she covers her face with another fragmented self-portrait which depicts only a small portion of the side of her face but primarily focuses on her right ear. In *Wallflower*, the artist appears to be passing from left to right across a nondescript green background, holding a cup of tea in one hand while holding up the other to cover her face as though she is caught in an unwelcome snapshot. In doing this, Guri may be disrupting the familiar reading of facial identity, and instead requesting that the viewer dwell in the consideration of how familiarity can be achieved through the recognition of less obvious features: hands, ears, nose, even moles.

The act of guarding in these works makes us want to know more, to see more, to pry these obstacles out of the way to satisfy our curiosity. Through a guarded subjection of personhood to the gaze, Guri adopts a deeply vulnerable position and makes us, as viewers, aware of our privilege.

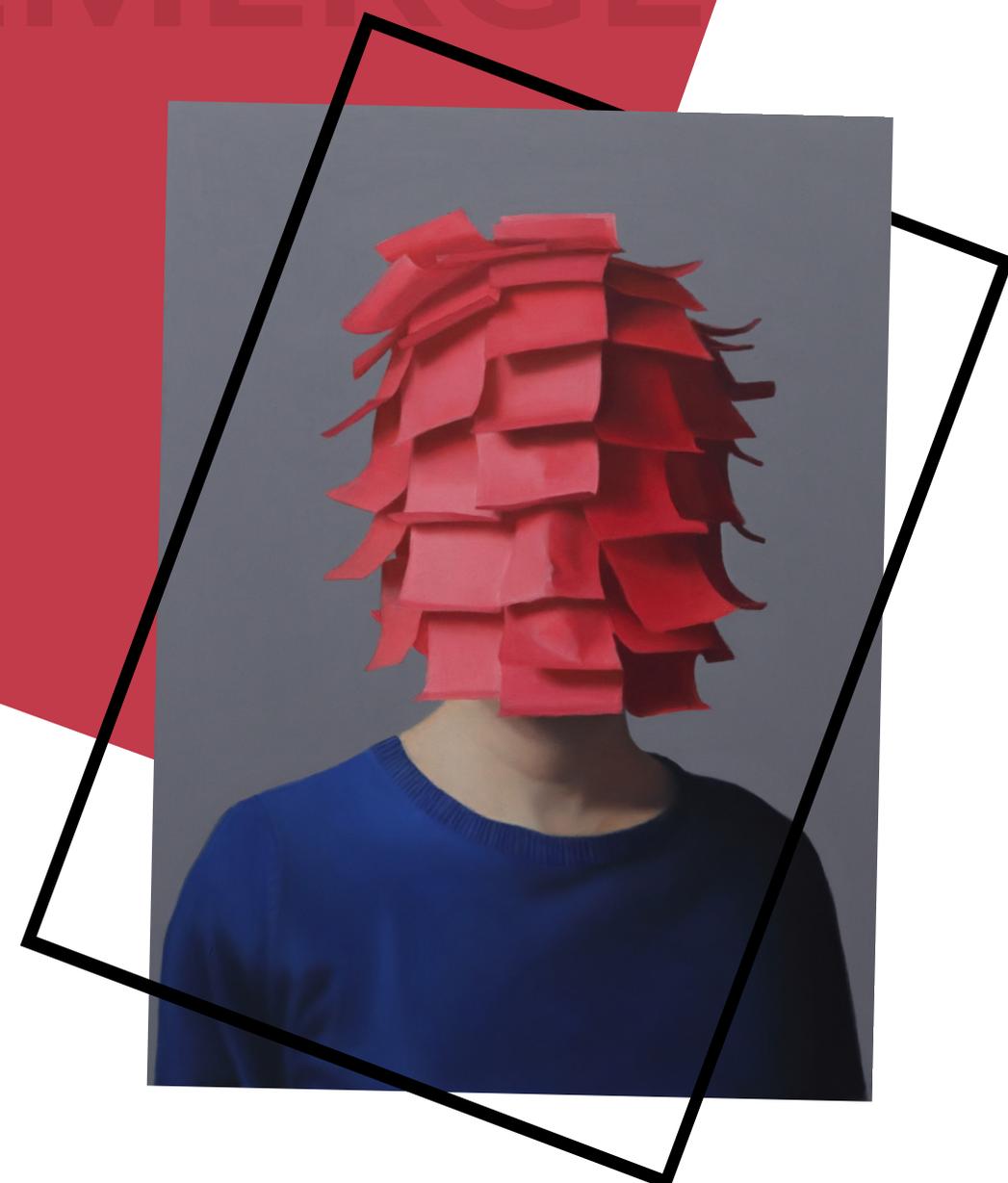
In laying bear and frustrating the power relations inherent in the act of looking, the subject of the painting shifts between the figure that is depicted and the viewers themselves. The figures in Guri's paintings ask the viewer to adopt a slow encounter; and to consider the nature of this encounter through the lens of both historical portraiture and contemporary image culture.

**Cara Guri** is an emerging artist currently based in White Rock, British Columbia, having spent some of her formative years between Abbotsford and Hope. She has a BFA from Emily Carr University, and has completed a residency at Columbia University in New York City. She is interested in modes of identification of self and other, historical portraiture, and the forced slowness of her medium in our contemporary, mass produced society.

Cover image: *Icon*, 2019, oil on panel, 16 x 12 in.

Inside left: *Headpiece* (detail), 2019, oil on panel, 20 x 20 in.

Images courtesy of the artist.



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THE REACH GALLERY MUSEUM  
32388 Veterans way, Abbotsford, BC  
[thereach.ca/emerge](http://thereach.ca/emerge)

Graphic Design By  
Kassandra Corcoran

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