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LEAH GARCHIK -- Just Say Cheese -- Promise It Won't Hurt / Having your portrait taken, like looking in the mirror, isn't always what it's cracked up to be. Dorian Gray, you ain't seen nothing yet.

By **Leah Garchik** Published 4:00 am, Sunday, January 26, 1997

I'm not familiar with your posing-for-a-picture face, but let me tell you about mine. We used to have a good little dog that sometimes did bad things. Every time I scolded her, she would hit the deck and roll over, curling her lips off her teeth. It was a grimace of shame and a plea for forgiveness: Woe is me and I'll do anything to be your friend.

There it is, my posing-for-a-picture face. I hate it.

Nonetheless, at the end of vacation or after a holiday gathering or family ritual, when the pictures are developed, I'm eager and optimistic. I'm terrifically interested, of course, in whether we managed to capture that snowy morning at the **Taj Mahal**, or whether my cousins' kids were all smiling as we sat around the dining-room table. Those pictures take at least 3.72 seconds of viewing time.

What I want to do when no one else is looking, though, is study the ones with me in them.

Who's that big-toothed woman smiling as though she's just been told she has six months to live? Is this the sort of lady who swaps ballet gossip over tea with her girlfriends, or trades cosmetics premiums with the pal who sits at the adjacent desk? Is this a woman who likes to have a good time, or a woman signing up volunteers at a card table on open school night? Look at that waistline; would you believe she is the mother of 12? Is she dancing with her husband as though they're used to quaffing champagne every night?

My questions go beyond the images on the two-dimensional picture plane. It's as though the photographs themselves contain truths not available elsewhere: How does the rest of the world perceive me?

"It's OK to be in love with yourself in a healthy way," says photographer **Russ Fischella**. "Just make sure your posture is appropriate and your balance is right." Fischella, known for making San Francisco's finest ladies look even finer, takes an hour and a half to apply makeup to the

faces of his clients before he puts them in front of his camera.

"I work on an image with them," said Fischella. By the time a client, even a stranger, is ready to pose, he perceives "who they are inside. I'm sensitive enough to start creating an atmosphere that's extremely comfortable. My goal is to continually work with them until they're at ease." This is a far cry from a short peek in the mirror above the formica "prep" table in the waiting room at the **Sears Portrait Studio** in Tanforan. "I do it with the kids quite often," said **Mercedes Bulutoglu**, who was there one recent afternoon with 3-year-old Ashley, in green velvet, and 10-month-old Rodi, in blue corduroy. "I send the pictures to relatives."

Fischella's portraits are said to make every woman look beautiful. "People say that I make them look the way they think they look," he says. All of his pictures reflect positive qualities in all of his subjects. "I think there's such a thing as being a great human being," says Fischella. "I work on establishing that."

Elsewhere, even great human beings can be dissatisfied with the images that show up on the pictures. Bulutoglu says she's not usually pleased with pictures of herself -- "I don't come out good" -- and she wasn't either with the first picture she had taken when Ashley was a baby. "Her dress was kind of up. I didn't like it."

Does it have to be perfect to be pretty? I asked. "Of course," said Bulutoglu. "You're paying for it

Ashley has been lately giving her a hard time during photo sessions, said Bulutoglu. "Before, I didn't have any problem," she said. "Now she doesn't want to smile. She makes funny faces." What's probably set in is her sense of herself. "It's the self-consciousness that photographs terribly," says Fischella. "Puppies and babies photograph well. They're unself-conscious. Their skin is relaxed, their eyes are relaxed. As we mature, we start putting walls up." **Scotty Morris**, who used to be a newspaper photographer and free-lances nowadays taking pictures of social people at social events, says that subjects often tell him his pictures are the best they've ever seen of themselves.

It could be because they're very photogenic -- "nothing to do with their looks; it may have to do with bone structure" -- or it could be luck. But it's probably because the shot is unposed; the subject hasn't had the chance to feel self-conscious.

Even Morris, a professional, gets "very embarrassed" to be photographed. He views the final results as critically as most lay people. "I'm telling you that in the last 10 pictures of me, nine of them have gone into the garbage can." Looking in the mirror is no preparation for looking at yourself in a picture, says Fischella. When you're looking in the mirror "you're completely at ease. In a picture, you get to see how the rest of the world sees you."

Judy Dater, a renowned fine art photographer who has taught at the **San Francisco Art Institute** San Jose City **College** and UC Extension, recently began taking portraits of people for money.

There are, of course, similarities in the craft. "I've always done pictures of people," says Dater. But there are big differences. "If I'm making a portrait of somebody for art, I'm picking the person for how they look, because they fit into my cast of characters. I'm more like a casting director for a movie, and these are my personal choices for who's going to fit an idea that I have.

Often, portraits Dater makes for art are of "someone who in a classic sense wouldn't be considered beautiful. To me, that's more interesting than just looking beautiful."

If Dater is hired to make a portrait, she has to respect the "movie" of her patron. Even clients who hire her because they are attracted to the quirks of her art modify their tastes when it come to looking at themselves.

"Mostly, they want to look attractive," says Dater, "to look nice. They want the picture to portra all the most positive aspects of their family. They don't want to be reminded of more provocativ or interior stuff. They don't want that hanging over the fireplace."

A snapshot of a group is often more revealing than a posed picture, especially if "someone is jus taking the snapshot, not telling people what to do," says Dater. "Just look at who's touching, who's not, who's smiling. That tells an enormous story."

If hired to take a photo of the same group, "I would sort of mix it all up," says Dater, "trying to make it look nice."

If inspired to shoot the same group as art, "I'd get it the way I saw it. I would be making a picture that's based part on truth and part on fiction, taking what is there and using it as raw material fo my own movie." Most people worry about looking "too fat or too old," surprised when "they don't look as good as they think they do," says Dater. "I took a picture of my husband, and he thought he looked like a porcini, with little round cheeks."

Diane Arbus, who was known for portraits that emphasized oddities, put the reverse spin on it. "There is a gap between the way people try to look," she said, "and the way they can't help looking."

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