

The Portrait: Positive and Negative versions

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Abstract: *This article aims to explore and examine positive and negative portraiture, and presents the artworks created by second-year Bachelor's degree students from the Painting specializations of the Faculties of Fine Arts in Timișoara and Iași, which has already been exhibited in April in Timișoara within the framework of an institutional collaboration. It will also analyze the relationship between the chromatic ranges of the two versions, understood as a complementary and necessary visual tension that contributes to the coherence of the work as a whole.*

Keywords: *university collaboration; exhibition; portrait; painting; installation;*

Introduction

The concept of the negative portrait in painting designates a distinct mode of visual investigation grounded in the systematic inversion of tonal structures and the consequent reconfiguration of the relationship between light, shadow and identity. By subverting conventional chiaroscuro hierarchies—through the transformation of illuminated zones into fields of darkness and the intensification of shadows into areas of luminosity—the negative portrait disrupts established perceptual frameworks, thereby necessitating a re-evaluation of the visual construction and recognition of the human figure. This approach does not merely alter surface appearance; it fundamentally restructures the semiotic and perceptual logic of portraiture. This approach engenders an image characterised by paradox and tension, yet capable of heightened expressive intensity.

From a more extensive theoretical standpoint, the negative portrait can be interpreted as a visual metaphor for alterity and the inversion of identity. The reversal of tonal values challenges the reliability of visual memory and exposes the extent to which perception is conditioned by learned conventions and cognitive schemata. As E. H. Gombrich contends, the interpretation of pictorial representation is dependent upon conventions that mediate between the visual stimulus and recognition; disruption to these conventions obliges the viewer to renegotiate meaning². In the case of the negative portrait, the inversion of light ratios disrupts established perceptual expectations, thereby unveiling latent dimensions of the face that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

Furthermore, by disrupting the conventional arrangement of light and shadow, the artist transforms the portrait into a reflective space wherein presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, affirmation and negation coexist dialectically. The face thus emerges as a liminal field – simultaneously familiar and estranged – inviting contemplation of identity as a construct shaped by perception, memory, and cultural coding. It is evident that the negative portrait functions as a critical and conceptual strategy, extending beyond the confines of technical experimentation. This strategy interrogates the foundations of representation and the epistemological conditions of seeing.

The advent of photography in the nineteenth century precipitated a profound transformation in visual culture, giving rise to a heightened interest in the concept of the

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² Ernst Hans Gombrich. 1960. *Art and illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

"negative" as both a technical and perceptual phenomenon. The photographic negative, in contradistinction to the traditional pictorial image, which presents light and shadow according to naturalistic conventions, introduced an inverted tonal matrix in which luminance and darkness were systematically reversed. As the generative substrate of the positive print, the negative revealed the image as a construct dependent upon processes of translation and inversion. This technological innovation had a profound impact on the visual arts, offering artists an alternative paradigm for conceptualising light, form, and representation³.

In contemporary painting, the principle of the negative has been assimilated and reinterpreted not solely as a visual effect, but as a conceptual strategy. The artist employs an inversion of tonal values in order to interrogate the stability of perception, the duality inherent in visual systems, and the fragility of memory. By disrupting habitual chromatic hierarchies, painters foreground the mediated nature of sight and underscore the interpretative frameworks through which images acquire meaning. As Crary argues in his analysis of modern visuality, perception is historically and culturally conditioned; thus, strategies that invert or destabilize visual codes serve to expose the constructed character of representation⁴. In contemporary pictorial practice, the negative portrait manifests across figurative, abstract, and experimental modalities. It may operate as a mechanism of visual estrangement, prompting the viewer to reconstruct mentally the implied "positive" image and thereby engage in an active process of perceptual completion. Alternatively, it may function as a critical commentary on the conventions through which the human face is recognised and endowed with identity. In both cases, tonal inversion becomes a methodological tool that redefines the relationship between surface appearance and interior meaning. Consequently, the negative portrait can be said to exceed the parameters of mere chromatic or tonal reversal. This artistic inquiry interrogates the epistemological limits of representation, the instability of visual perception, and the fluidity of identity. The approach adopted in this study is predicated on the premise that inversion constitutes the fundamental element of formal logic. This standpoint is consistent with the prevailing trends in contemporary art that favour experimentation, reflexivity, and the interrogation of perceptual certainties⁵.

1. Origins and historical background

The notion of the "negative" emerged in the nineteenth century within the domain of photography, precipitated by the advent of chemically fixed images. This development engendered a paradigm shift in the epistemological relationship between perception and representation. The seminal contribution of William Henry Fox Talbot in 1835 established the negative as the generative matrix of the positive print, thereby instituting a structural logic of tonal inversion in which light and dark values were reversed yet maintained relational coherence.⁶ This innovation revealed the image not as a direct transcription of reality but as the product of a mediating and transformative process, thereby exerting a lasting influence on subsequent artistic practices.

In the domain of painting, the principle of inversion was progressively assimilated as both a formal device and a conceptual strategy. Although not always directly derived from

³ Geoffrey Batchen. 1997. *Burning with desire: The conception of photography*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

⁴ Jonathan Crary. 1990. *Techniques of the observer: On vision and modernity in the nineteenth century*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press; Beaumont Newhall. 1982. *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*, 5th ed. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

⁵ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Bois, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. 2016. *Art since 1900: Modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*, 3rd ed. New York: Thames & Hudson.

⁶ Jonathan Crary. 1990. *Techniques of the observer: On vision and modernity in the nineteenth century*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press; Beaumont Newhall. 1982. *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*, 5th ed. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

photography, explorations of reversed tonality and chromatic opposition resonate with the negative-positive dialectic introduced by early photographic processes. For instance, the late works of Edvard Munch exemplify experimental uses of intensified chromatic contrasts and print-based inversions that destabilise conventional figure-ground relationships.

In a similar manner, during the twentieth century, Andy Warhol utilised serial silkscreen techniques, employing chromatic inversions and non-naturalistic colour schemes to disrupt the anticipated correspondence between likeness and identity, thereby accentuating the constructed nature of the portrait image. He was among the first artists to experiment with chromatic inversion and the conceptual significance of the negative. In his series of Self-Portraits and Marilyn Monroe, he subjected the image to a process of mechanisation and chromatic alteration, drawing it closer to the photographic aesthetic of the negative. Through oversaturation or tone inversion, Warhol transformed the portrait into a commentary on mass media, identity and visual reproduction.

Examining the works of Francis Bacon reveals a heightened engagement with the theme of inversion, manifesting in his portraits through techniques such as dramatic contrasts, tonal distortions, and the subversion of naturalistic modelling. Although not strictly "negative" in the photographic sense, Bacon's treatment of light and shadow generates an analogous perceptual dislocation, compelling viewers to confront the fragility and mutability of identity. In contemporary practice, artists have further extended this strategy by directly appropriating photographic negatives as painterly references, translating inverted tonal schemes into painted surfaces that challenge perceptual habits and visual memory.

The principle of inversion was also exploited by Gerhard Richter in multiple works derived from photographic images, where the transfer from positive to negative becomes a way of exploring the instability of perception. In the series *Negatives* (1960–70), Richter painted images derived from photographs developed in reverse, achieving an effect of strangeness that problematises the relationship between image and reality.

Another significant direction in the exploration of inversion and perceptual destabilization is opened by Chuck Close, whose large-scale portraits constitute a rigorous investigation of structure, tonality, and optical mediation. Although not "negative" in the strict photographic sense, it is argued that certain of Close's works may be interpreted as forms of pictorial negativization, insofar as they fragment and reconstruct the human face through chromatic grids and systematically organized tonal modules. In these paintings, the image emerges not from continuous modelling but from the aggregation of discrete units, each functioning as an autonomous chromatic event within a predetermined structural framework.

The methodology employed by Close entails the conversion of photographic source material into a grid system, thereby subdividing the image into a multitude of cells. In the artist's practice, each cell is then reinterpreted through carefully calibrated variations of hue, value, and saturation. This procedure transforms the act of portraiture into a process of analytical decomposition and reconstruction. When viewed at close range, the viewer encounters abstract configurations – circles, lozenges, or gestural marks – whose internal tonal contrasts may appear dissonant or inverted relative to naturalistic expectation. However, when observed from a distance, these discrete elements coalesce into a coherent likeness, thereby demonstrating the perceptual synthesis performed by the observer.

In this sense, Close's technique foregrounds the mechanics of vision itself. By disrupting continuous tonal transitions and replacing them with modular chromatic structures, he exposes the constructive nature of optical perception. The grid functions in two distinct yet interconnected ways: firstly, as a compositional armature and, secondly, as a conceptual device. It serves as a conduit between mechanical reproduction (i.e. photography) and painterly interpretation. The resulting image oscillates between abstraction and figuration, surface and depth, part and whole.

This approach can be interpreted as a contemporary reformulation of the negative-positive dialectic. Rather than reversing light and dark globally, Close redistributes tonal information across a structured matrix, compelling the viewer to reassemble the image cognitively. The portrait, therefore, becomes less a transparent representation of identity and more an experiential field in which perception, distance, and visual memory are actively negotiated. By means of this technically disciplined yet conceptually reflexive practice, Close transforms portraiture into an inquiry into the conditions of seeing and the processes by which the human face is visually constructed.

1.1. Relevant artistic references in Romanian visual arts

Subsequent generations of Romanian artists, emerging in the post-1990s era, embarked on a radical reformation of their portraiture, departing from realistic or expressionist depictions to a conceptual structuring of identity. At this stage, the human figure often becomes a pretext for reflection on memory, historical and individual trauma, or on the image as cultural mediation. Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu, and Ștefan Bertalan are regarded as trailblazers in the field of experimentation in postwar Romanian art. They introduced a fresh perspective on portraiture by combining diverse media such as photography, drawing, collage, and performance. In their oeuvre, the human figure serves as both document and metaphor, with techniques such as inversion, doubling, and fragmentation becoming recurring artistic devices. In Ion Grigorescu's video self-portraits, for example, one can observe a symbolic "negativization" of the self, with a tension between the visible and the hidden, between reality and recording.

2. Methods and methodology

The pedagogical framework of this study was grounded in a practice-based approach, integrating observational analysis with experimental studio work. Students were assigned to produce enlarged (self-)portraits on square canvases measuring 80 × 80 cm, a format that imposed both compositional constraints and opportunities for spatial reinterpretation. Participants were given the option either to preserve the original pose of the source image or to reinterpret the portrait through an alternative position or model, thereby encouraging both fidelity and creative deviation within the same task structure.

A central methodological component consisted in the systematic exploration of positive and negative chromatic ranges. Students were required to investigate the inversion of tonal values, focusing on the dynamic interplay between light and shadow as mediated through their chosen painting techniques. This emphasis on chromatic inversion functioned as a means of disrupting habitual perceptual patterns, prompting a reassessment of how form, volume, and depth are constructed visually.

The exercise further incorporated analytical observation and iterative decision-making processes. By translating photographic or drawn references into painted surfaces under altered tonal conditions, students engaged in a critical examination of figure-ground relationships and compositional balance. The methodology fostered structural thinking, as well as a heightened sensitivity to tonal gradation and contrast. Overall, this approach combined technical execution with conceptual inquiry, enabling participants to deepen their understanding of visual perception while expanding their expressive and interpretative capacities within the field of portraiture.

3. Results

Students were encouraged to select either self-portraits or portraits of acquaintances in order to ensure a high degree of originality and personal engagement within the creative process. This choice was intended to strengthen the conceptual and affective connection between the subject and its artistic representation.

In addition, participants were required to consider the conditions of display as an integral component of their work. Particular attention was given to the relationship between the artworks and the exhibition environment, including spatial arrangement, viewing distance, and lighting conditions. Given that the exhibition was scheduled to take place in April 2026 within the gallery space of the Faculty of Arts and Design, West University of Timișoara, the role of artificial lighting systems and their impact on perception became a critical factor.

These parameters were carefully integrated into the creative process, as they significantly influence the visual articulation of the works, especially in relation to the perceptual tension generated by the juxtaposition of positive and negative chromatic versions of the portraits. This approach fostered an awareness of how presentation strategies contribute to the reception and interpretation of visual artworks.



Fig. 1. *Tatiana Bișog, acrylic on canvas, 80x80 cm, positive and negative versions, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași*



Fig. 2. *Raluca Simon, acrylic on canvas, 80x80 cm, positive and negative versions, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași*

A particular focus was placed on the character's facial expressions in both the positive and negative versions, emphasizing their differences despite sharing the same position or being mirrored, as seen in figures 1 and 2. The negative version represents the darker side of the self—the inner ego revealed once social masks are removed—thus reflecting a deeply intimate dimension of human identity. The negative version can also be a symbol of our unconscious, which covers a large area of our cognitive system. This is the revolutionary theory brought up and developed by Sigmund Freud⁷. Jacques Lacan also considered that our unconsciousness is structured as a language⁸ which in our opinion needs to be deciphered. Thus being said, the negative version of a portrait in painting can serve as a pretext to reveal the invisible side of our ego, which is, in fact, the *id*. The juxtaposition of these two versions—positive and negative—creates a necessary contrast that refers to the psychological duality between consciousness and the unconscious, between the visible and accessible part and the invisible and inaccessible one. This latter dimension, often denied by our consciousness, represents the unintegrated side that remains buried within our being.

This is why the use of cool tones in the negative version suggests distance and detachment, while the variation in luminosity further distinguishes it from the positive version, where warm colors dominate, conveying proximity and vitality⁹. The sense of distance and detachment from consciousness—which stands for visible reality—is opposed to the unconscious, which generates an invisible reality. This reality is just as real as the visible one, possessing its own authenticity and unfolding in parallel to the unanimously accepted reality”.

This duality follows a universal rhythm found in natural cycles: day and night, changing seasons, light and shadow, warm and cool color spectra, as well as biological and physical processes such as the heartbeat.



Fig. 3. *Crina Cărăbuș*, oil on canvas, 80x80 cm, positive and negative versions, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași

⁷ Curtis Hannah. 2015. *Everyday Life and the Unconscious Mind. An Introduction to Psychoanalytic Concepts*. London: Routledge Press, p. 4.

⁸ Roberto Harari. 2004. *Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. An introduction*, translation by Judith Filc. New York: Ed. Other Press, p. 41.

⁹ Robert Hirschler and Andreas Schwarz. 2023. "Itten's seven colour contrasts – a review. Part I. Early contrast theories and the road to Itten's contrast theory". *Journal of the International Colour Association*, 33, 136–154, [Itten's seven colour contrasts -a review Part I. Early contrast theories and the road to Itten's contrast theory](#), p. 143.

Once the character redirects her gaze toward the viewer, a sense of discomfort emerges, as the viewer becomes directly implicated in the image. This is particularly obvious in the positive versions of figures 1 and 2, and even more so in figure 3, where the contrast is intensified by the altered positioning of the portrait.

In the positive version, the character confronts the viewer directly, establishing a reciprocal gaze. In contrast, the negative version—rendered in semi-profile—creates the illusion that the viewer holds control over the image. However, this sense of control is destabilized in the positive version, where the spectator is unexpectedly exposed and becomes the one being seen.

The world is not linear; as Jacques Lacan suggests, the viewer is not only in the position of observing the world, but is also observed by it. In this way, the notion of a fixed, singular perspective is disrupted, introducing the concept of a fissure within the act of seeing¹⁰.

Students from the West University of Timișoara, Faculty of Arts, participating in the Experimental Atelier course, engaged in the development of three-dimensional forms—specifically masks—derived from negative portrait studies produced through cyanotype experiments conducted under the supervision of PhD Alexandra Costea, within a project organized by the Centrul de Proiecte Timișoara.

These exploratory processes, which bridged two-dimensional photographic techniques and three-dimensional object-making, facilitated a deeper understanding of the human figure. The translation of negative imagery into volumetric forms encouraged students to critically reinterpret anatomical structures and expressive features. Consequently, the integration of experimental media and sculptural practice expanded the range of creative responses and interpretative strategies, contributing to the enhancement of students' artistic and conceptual skills.

The outcomes of the two disciplines, focused on the study and experimental investigation of the human portrait in its diverse formal and conceptual manifestations, were disseminated through the group exhibition *Portret*, held between 17–23 April 2026 at Galeria *Mansarda*, Faculty of Arts and Design, West University of Timișoara. The exhibition opened on April 17th 2026 at 12 pm and presented a selection of student works developed through interdisciplinary and practice-based research approaches.

The event was coordinated by University Lecturer Ioana Palamar, University Lecturer Smaranda Moldovan, Assistant Lecturer Oana Maria Popescu, and PhD student Alexandra Costea, and brought together contributions from students of the Faculty of Arts and Design. As indicated in the exhibition poster, the project also involved collaboration with the National University of Arts “George Enescu” Iași and was supported by the *Centrul de Proiecte Timișoara*. The exhibition functioned as a platform for disseminating experimental outcomes in portraiture, emphasizing the integration of analogue photographic techniques, such as cyanotype, with expanded practices in drawing, printmaking, and three-dimensional form.

¹⁰ Roberto Harari. 2004. *Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. An introduction*, translation by Judith Film. New York: Ed. Other Press, pp.121–125.

PORTRET



17-23.04.2026

Expoziția colectivă a studenților din anul II, specializarea Pictură, de la Universitatea Națională de Arte „George Enescu” din Iași și Facultatea de Arte și Design din cadrul Universității de Vest din Timișoara

VERNISAJ 17.04.2026, 12:00

Galeria Mansarda, Facultatea de Arte și Design (str. Oituz 4, Timișoara)

Coordonatori:
Lect.univ.dr. Ioana Palamar, Lect.univ.dr. Smaranda Moldovan, Asist.cerc.dr. Oana Maria Popescu, Drd. Alexandra Costea

ABABEI Francesca, ABRUDAN Carla, ALEXANDRU(REISZ) Daniela, APOSTOLESCU Daria, BANYAI Bianka, BASARABEANU Beatrice-Iulia, BUCĂLUȚĂ Carmen, BURCUȘ Carolina, CĂLIN Paula, CĂRĂBUȘ Crina-Miruna, CURMENȚ Anca, DOMINOSCHI Maria-Sofia, DĂMĂTĂRC Veronica, HUBERT Ramona, IAKAB Andrea, IURCHEVICI Clara, KRAJNJAN Julijan, LAPA Gabriela, LUNGU Bianca-Daria, MANEA Mihai, MIHAI Bianca-Elena, MIRONIUC (BIȘOG) Tatiana, NEDELEA Ionela, NDINI Suela, PERIDE Elias, SIMON (POPA) Raluca, SÎRBU Raluca-Ioana, STRUGARIU Izabela-Alexandra, TĂRĂBUȚĂ Patricia, TUTUNARU Andreea, VERDEȘ Maria-Daniela, VUC Denisa



Fig. 4. Poster of the event.

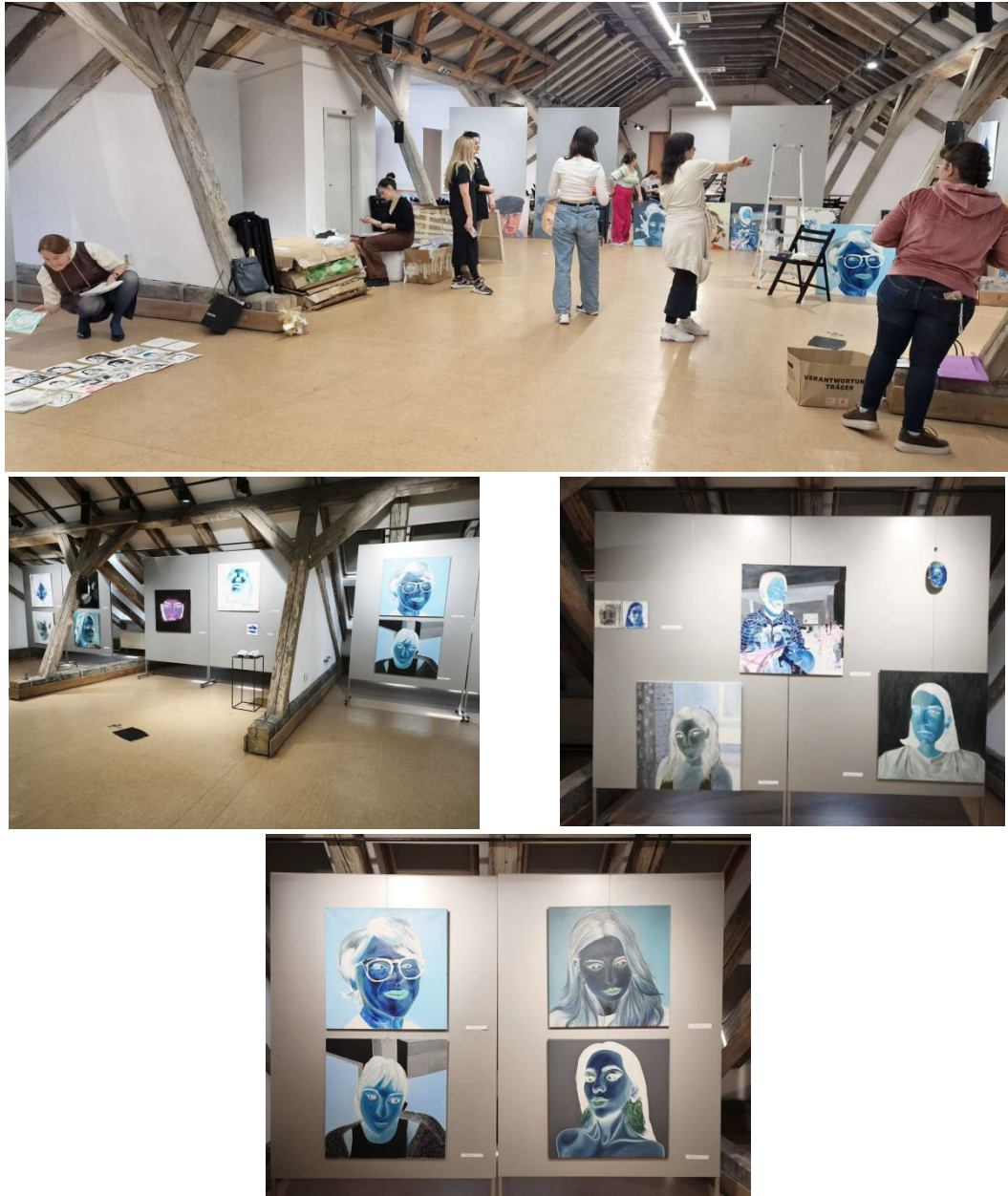


Fig. 5.6.7.8 *Photographs from the exhibition Portret*, held between 17–23 April 2026 at Galeria Mansarda, Faculty of Arts and Design, West University of Timișoara.

4. Conclusions

From a theoretical perspective, the negative portrait can be interpreted as a type of visual deconstruction of the human figure, with the artist using the technique to explore and challenge traditional ideas of the human form. It brings to the fore a dialectical relationship between presence and absence, between what is shown and what is hidden. According to the phenomenological logic of perception, the negative image functions as a memory imprint — an inverted representation of the visible world that forces the viewer to mentally reconstruct it.

Therefore, the portrait in negative is not just a chromatic inversion, but a critical gesture towards the very convention of representation. It invites reflection on visual identity and the way in which the gaze constructs meaning, as well as the relationship between image, reality and memory.

5. References

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