

“The madness of the eyes is the lure of the abyss. Sirens lurk in the dark depths of the pupils as they lurk at the bottom of the sea, that I know for sure - but I have never encountered them,

and I am searching still for the profound and plaintive gazes in whose depths I might be able, like Hamlet redeemed, to drown the Ophelia of my desire.

Jean Lorrain, *Monsieur De Phocas*

Mask by John Claridge. Photograph courtesy of John Claridge © 2019





Roxana Halls: The figure strikes back

No Heroic Male Master

No matter how often the notion of authenticity is kicked around by critics and theorists as a myth, delusion, or even (in scientific circles) as user illusion of the machine, there is an undeniable 'affect' in looking at the work of a genuinely engaged artist painting the figure which strikes back... and lays claim to something fundamentally human. This quality is complex, changeable and ambiguous, as humans are prone to be, but is beautifully communicated in the strangely Lynchian figurative work of Roxana Halls.

To contextualise Halls, and to make clear that this is no cosy or nostalgic practice, it may be useful to consider a pivotal essay by Griselda Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women" (1996), in which Pollock explores the myth of the heroic male master and the legacy of a masculine-dominated painting fraught with subjective inconsistencies and coming under renewed scrutiny and attack. In so doing, Pollock sees this as an opportunity for the female painter:

Instead of using painting as a metaphor, a substitution for the artist, rendering 'him' (as this logic demands) the symbol of art, we could explore the practice of painting, in social as well as symbolic space, as a metonymic trace, an index of a socially formed, psychically enacted subjectivity at work (Pollock, G, 1996)

In this way the painter rescues any notion of the human from myths of the 'whole self' and preserves painting as a

Words: Michael Eden

“THE PAINTED GIRL WATCHES THE VIEWER GRASPING FOR CERTAINTY”

Previous: *Laughing*

While Landing, 2019

subjective negotiation in space and time, and with other people. As if to actualise this theory, although more likely serendipitous, Halls began showing consistently in the 1990s and has enjoyed sustained relevance ever since.

Two striking self-portraits of this period resonate with the Pollock essay ‘...something different must occur if the painter who paints with such a body is, in fact a woman artist, painting from (or to find) “the creative woman’s body”’ (Pollock, 1996). *Nude* (1992) and *Absence* (1995) both show that from the inception of Halls’ career ambivalence was present, even in classical compositions and subject matter.

Nude depicts a well-proportioned female body sitting in front of a canvas holding a traditional artist’s palette. The ephemera and framing of the image is the masculine-dominated territory of nude painting: the female naked body the fetishised object. But we know that this depicts the artist, and wonder why she is not aggressively meeting our gaze, as in Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1862-1863) and its many imitators; the cliché of a feminist reversal which, in fact was always about masculine self-knowledge and was never really meant to emancipate.

Instead, Halls’ large eyes look past the viewer into the middle distance, analysing her own form in a mirror (not depicted), evidence of this analysis being the painting itself. These are subtle and nuanced images. Had she not included the palette, that stare would be mistaken for the sleepy drift of a Lucien Freud model presenting herself to the master. No, here the vexed confrontation with a male viewer is eschewed along with passive objectification; Halls was simply looking at and for ‘the creative woman’s body’.

Similarly, there is a highly nuanced twist in *Absence*, indicated in the title which emphasises a void space next to the subject: a beautiful young woman, hair pulled back and draped over one shoulder. Projectability is an aspect of any good painting and this image appears to be where Halls begins to experiment with narrative. This time the subject *does* stare at the viewer. She is clothed and faintly serious, perhaps the period sofa is associated with a family member, perhaps she is moving house (no other elements inhabit

the framed space). We can’t know, but the title *Absence* immediately implied by the empty seat, seems to declare an independence as well as announce a lack; the body is not defeated by grief, the figure does not require the equally romanticised male counterpart such as that depicted in Halls’ later portrait of *Nick Hackworth* (2007) that would complete this image (Halls is a happily married gay woman, as *Portrait of the Artist and her Wife* (2012) attests to).

The young woman depicted (these paintings both date from early in Halls’ career) has a slightly upturned mouth. Whatever the personal resonances or possible projections, she has presented us with a highly loaded romantic cliché still reverberating with visual force (the attractive debutante), but has also forced us to examine the empty space, setting up a tension and interrupting an easy interpretation. That has amused her in advance; the painted girl watches the viewer grasping for certainty. This tension is less aggressive with the viewer than, say, a Cindy Sherman image (which Halls seems to reference in images such as *Dollface*, *Violet*, and *Edward* from a series in 2003) opting instead to outwit the congealing force of interpretation with endless speculations.

Cinematic and Surrealist Resonances

Halls’ first solo show *Downstairs 1996-1998* at Beaux Arts Bath highlights early themes echoed throughout the practice, including a filmic quality which demands contextualisation beyond painting, surrealist strategies, and the influence or commonality between the work and German symbolist masters.

Much has been written regarding the overtones of Weimar Germany and resonances with German expressionism regarding Halls’ output, and I would not deny these links which are clear in subject matter (performance, theatre, subculture and sexuality) and colour choices (deep reds, black and garish green, as used in the *Tingle - Tangle* series). I would suggest, though, that as an alternative way into the work we might see works such as *Keys* (1998), alongside the works of experimental filmmaker Maya Derran, in particular *Mesher of the Afternoon* (1943), which contains not just an interesting exchange of keys between

alternate versions of the same woman, but also plays with similar subject matter to effect in lens-based media.

Derran, often overlooked, also used weightlessness as a metaphor for anxiety and identity crisis, much as we see in the Halls works *Binding* (2016), *Levitating* (2002) and *The Suspended Room* (2012). Derran also develops the notion of masking and unmasking in relation to authenticity, which is a feature of various works by Hall, not least in her self-portrait, *The Parasol* (2000). This depicts the artist in white make-up, like a mime or harlequin performing what appears to be a trick with the eponymous parasol (an object associated with genteel feminine behaviour).

To contemplate Derran alongside Halls is also validated by both artists’ insistence on the centrality of the feminine experience and their shared mastery of surrealist methods, especially the loaded object and incongruous juxtaposition.

Yet another resonance less explored would see paintings like *The Fireplace* (1996) understood in reference to German symbolist painting and etching; seeing Halls in the context of Max Klinger, for example, (thinking of Klinger’s *Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove* (1878) where he explores what would come to be known as fetish) may offer less obvious ways to appreciate her handling of metaphor, allegory and ambiguity as a compositional issue, not simply as a matter of filling the picture plane with related items.

Klinger, for example, handles narrative similarly and composes images carefully, considering their depth, weight and texture, often using the unfolding of fabric and hair to reference swift movement and vibration against uncannily still backgrounds, as we also see in Halls’ practice. Halls’ painting *The Fireplace* directs the eye haphazardly around, but provides areas of void-like depth and contemplation, even including a suggestively placed elbow-length glove (seen also in *The Parasol*).

The Sewing Machine (1997), *Seated Figure* (1997) and *Circle* (1996) seem to demand a surrealist reading; they depict an ephemeral and transparent human form cut from fabric,

interrupted by light and by the solid materiality of the background with its inanimate but potent objects.

These works attest to themes recurrent in Halls’ practice: identity as defined by cultural mores, by family dynamics and by personal agency are all problematised. The practice as a whole may contain some didactic and pointed criticism, or play with signs. However, taken as a whole it is an exploratory and speculative body of work which prompts doubt and attempts to navigate a highly unsure but savagely overdetermining media and historical context which has often marginalised female voices.

The *From the Blue Bar 1999-2000* series further cemented surrealist and symbolist strategies: the classical subject matter, dramatic and theatrical dressing of space, and the direct and intentional use of ambiguity which we see with say a de Chirico, Magritte, or, perhaps more appropriately, Dorothea Tanning. Many of Halls’ works are ‘oneiric’ in this classical sense and may be seen to speak to our associations with dreams and the unconscious. This can be seen in the *Grisaille* works, a term which refers to monochrome or stone-like rendering; the bled-out colour and greyness could be associated with stasis and prolonged psychological pain.

This observation is borne out in *Laying The Table* (2008) which depicts a dense architectural amalgam of ruined buildings which nevertheless coheres into an intimidating structure devoid of people save for a lone female figure preparing a table for dinner. Halls has commented:

I painted this after a particularly debilitating depressive episode during which I was unsure if I would paint again. To break this lassitude I finally attempted to paint one tiny picture and discovered that it was only in the act of making work, however modest my intentions, that I would realise that my fears were unfounded. Shortly after this I began Laying The Table, with far less timid intentions. (Roxana Halls)

The use of cinematic tropes to frame this personal trauma is an interesting strategy, clearly clutching for a meaningful structure to rationalise destructive forces. Turning these

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Laughing While
Crashing, 2019

“THEY ARE GROTESQUE YET EQUALLY FASCINATING AND ALLURING”

into mini narratives and re-naturalising them through the act of painting is a charged form of reflection which offers much to the viewer.

Specifically Lynchian Dichotomy

Halls’ works have an undeniable filmic duality. This aspect is best understood in relation to David Lynch and there are some easily discernible links and crossovers when considering their practices: the unconscious and the uncanny as themes, points of transgression, and the personification of otherness in strange figures. We might also consider Alice from *Alice In Wonderland*, and Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (Halls produced commissioned works on both subjects). These women or girls, in their subverted forms at least, are Lynchian as well as Hallsian types. Think of Laura Dern as Lula in *Wild at Heart* (1990) or Naomi Watts as Betty in *Mullholland Drive* (2001).

Like Lynch’s female leads, Halls’ women worry, struggle and probe sometimes to the point of self-destruction or madness; *Lucky Strike* (2001), *Red Cloak* (2003) and *Burletta* (2003) all have the quality of a Lynchian nightmare, while *Spotlight* (2001) could be a lingering shot of the stage curtain in *Mullholland Drive* after Rita and Betty watch, aghast, as the dramatic performer on stage collapses while her voice (she was lip-synching) continues disturbingly. These readings add a layer of depth to Halls’ portraits and figurative works; she joins the conversation about female subjectivity and as a creative woman brings a much-needed reference to the debate.

Halls’ shows: *Tingle - Tangle* (2009) comprising 11 paintings, *From the Regent Saloon* (2001-2003) comprising nine works, as well as works such as *Terina the Paper Tearer & Inferna the Human Torch* (self-portrait, 2009) all include Lynchian overtones. This is evident in the colour and tone and in repeated use of the red curtains, performers and

theatrical settings; motifs utilised in Lynch’s canon to indicate thresholds crossed and to announce or present subject matter in inverted commas.

Willkommen (2005), a work from *Tingle - Tangle*, depicts a ringmaster or general ‘turn’ lifting the curtain where we glimpse female legs engaged in dance. He could easily be a Lynchian archetype such as ‘The Giant’ from *Twin Peaks* (1990) or, considering the white face make-up, perhaps the ‘Mystery Man’ of *Lost Highway* (1997) is more accurate. Like the performer in *Willkommen*, these figures represent a crossing point between worlds; they are grotesque yet equally fascinating and alluring, inviting us out of our comfortable habits.

These works play on a sense of phantasmagoria bombarding the viewer. For example, *The Girlie Hurdy Gurdy* (2009) presents a circus of the female body on display, what you might expect to find behind the red curtain of *Willkommen*. My favourite of this set, *Grit and Ina Van Elben’s Tingle Tangel Machine* (2007), shows two identical Hallsian women on either end of six flattened puppets in similar garb. The image brings to mind, amid all the japey, the threat of dissolving into mere simulacra (the puppets are operated by the women who themselves appear to be behaving mechanically). The glib smiles of the cut-outs add to the unsettling feel of the scene, while a smaller cut-out is churned around in the belly of cogs and wheels under the stage. Sex, death and violence with hints of irony and self-assertion.

To truly grasp the Lynchian dichotomy though, Halls’ work must be taken as a whole. Her portraits, such as those commissioned for *Sitting* (2018) or *Lucy & David* (2017, a double portrait) should be understood alongside self-motivated pieces. The aforementioned images are light and optimistic, almost utopian in colour and treatment

“THE POSES ARE IRONIC; THE WOMEN, POUTING, WITH HEAVING CLEAVAGE...”

of subjects. Halls’ people are decent, generously featured, warm and stable, not quite idealised, but affirming. This is the world of Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986) and its opening white picket fences, a surface no less relevant or real than the underbelly that Halls and Lynch explore, but presenting a wonderful contrast when thought through in relation to one another; how would ‘Lucy’ and ‘David’ traverse the landscape of *Tingle - Tangle*?

Personal & Societal Reflection

Threesome, shown at the New Art Projects, London and The Gallery, Liverpool in 2018 was a collaboration with fellow portrait artists Sadie Lee and Sarah Jane Moon (and included images of each of the women). The title, an obvious reference to sexual dynamics, also plays with the dominant representation of gay women in the popular media and the enigmatic closed loop which they appear to present to broader heteronormative audiences; at once peripheral and hyper-eroticised, often adjuncts to or vessels for masculine development or titillation, and simultaneously central to pop culture forms such as the music video, pornographic films, and as stand-ins for older forms of male power. I’m thinking of the cool, violent, yet easily sexualised heroines of films like *Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* (2009) where can-do pluck and aggression is given an alt-punk female shell.

The works in *Threesome* take a shift in tone and purpose; they are lurid and coloured with reference to psychedelia and nightclub lighting. The women depicted, and Halls herself in *Threesome II* (self-portrait, 2018) appear to be engaged in rather wooden dance routines, satirising the actual mannequins in the background. The poses are ironic; the women, pouting, with heaving cleavage, play their part in such a way to force the viewer to think about the articulation and behaviour of women, and perhaps specifically gay women, in mass media. The attack on

a London bus in May of 2019, where a gay couple were commanded to kiss and assume sexual positions by a group of four male thugs, reminds us how pervasive this framing is. The media is not responsible for the attack, but is complicit in the framing of it; violence carried out in microcosm reflecting directly more abstract violence at the macro level.

Underlying that attack, and lampooned in Halls’ works, is the attitude that *these are not people, they are objects to be posed, to derive sexual pleasure from, and to look at, surfaces pure and simple*. The skin is covered in sickly light, the attractiveness of the subjects is too overt and too gaudy to be pleasurable. Halls’ image has her swathed in a fluffy wrap, full lips shimmering seductively but with a strangely quizzical expression in the eyes which seems to say, ‘Is this what you want? Is this what I am?’ Beyond this there is a sense in which the three women depicted play with the limitations of the tropes, like children playing with adult clothes:

Each is flanked by a triumvirate of characters from a very specific history of queer cinema, that of the lesbian as seen by male directors. The actresses who played these roles have been replaced by mannequins who are mere approximations of the original women. Thus, questions about authenticity and spectatorship circulate these iconographic portraits. (Exhibition write-up, 2018)

Candid social commentary combined with the subtle accents of personal introspection define much of Halls’ current output.

Laughing While, a series including images created between 2012 and 2019, continues the theme of reassessing typical representations of women. At first glance this suite of



Nick Hackworth, 2007

"...THE CHOICE DOES IMPLY CERTAIN PSYCHOLOGICAL TENDENCIES OR INSTINCTS WHICH COULD PROVE INTRIGUING TO EXAMINE."

12 works shows seemingly manic women grinning unnervingly throughout their various activities, which include *Laughing While: Leaving, Jilting, Smashing, Flouting, Eating Salad, Addressing, Defacing, Eating Yoghurt, Reigning, Unwrapping, Eating Strawberries* and *With My Mouth Full*. What initially seems to be a symptom of desperate hysteria in the women quickly becomes associated with acts of defiance and self-direction in the face of societal expectations. The mouths are often open, gaping.

Taken in conjunction with the self-portrait *Laughing With My Mouth Full* (2012), we can understand this series as a riposte to, among other things, childhood reproach (where little girls begin to learn about being polite and behaving properly).

Showing work consistently from 1990 to the present, Halls continues to explore these themes with a combination of social critique and personal reflection filtered through her deliberate and skilful painting. She has been featured in conversation with the actor Katherine Parkinson for BBC Radio 4's *Only Artists*, first broadcast on December 5 2018. Halls has also featured in *Art Reveal* magazine and *Artist and Illustrators*, and has appeared in three films which address aspects of her practice (including two from Paintwork Films: *Appetite* and *Costume*) as well as a short insight into *Tingle - Tangle* by Martin Perry. Halls was selected for exhibition with her painting *Laughing With My Mouth Full* for the biennial Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Prize, which ran at Piano Nobile Gallery, King's Place, London from May to September 2019. Currently, Halls is exhibiting a selection of works from her series *Appetite* in the Summer Group Show at Reuben Colley Fine Art, Birmingham.

"Any painting is a self-portrait." To what extent is that true, and what does this say about portraiture?

While this is a truism, and one which although I at earlier stages of my career have considered somewhat apposite, it doesn't mean that portraiture is rendered superfluous.

Of course, elements of the self, of unconscious memory and experience are part of all work, but those aspects could be very encoded. A self-portrait could in itself be a kind of feint, because when you make something within that genre which is seen to be explicitly autobiographical, you can do other things with it. I've always considered self-portraiture to be a cornerstone; I treat myself as a laboratory and many of my broader themes were thus propagated. My entire *Laughing While...* series stemmed from my self-portrait *Laughing With My Mouth Full*, in which, in contrast to the implied constraint of my palette and clothing, I regard the viewer with my mouth agape, exposing its livid contents.

I tend to think far less about this notion in terms of artists working in portraiture than I do of those working within other forms. Just thinking something as simple as 'why does a person choose abstraction? Poetry? Dance?' This may give merely an indication, but the choice does imply certain psychological tendencies or instincts which could prove intriguing to examine.

Obviously, there are pragmatic technical requirements associated with self-portraiture as distinct from the making of a portrait: the sleight of hand, mirrors and reflections. So to say that all work is a self-portrait doesn't mean that all your work is unconscious, but rather to imply something about what portraiture is in terms of that relationship between the maker and the external person, as distinct from saying that all painting is deriving from things which are personal to the self.

What is the relationship between the subject and the painter?

In my case, in most of my work, a very particular and collaborative one. Although those who work with me in the creation of a painting, and whom I paint, are in cahoots with me on the intention for the work and enacting a role rather than 'being themselves', I'm uncomfortable with the language that surrounds their contribution. There is an implied domination in subject, a passivity in the term 'sitter'. I've largely worked with a select few people over numerous



Nude, 1992

works who have appear in varied guises over several years: most notably Lisa Roberts and Leah Muller, examples of our work together being *Laughing While Eating Strawberries* and *Laughing While Eating Salad* respectively. But I think of them much less as subjects than partners-in-crime.

What is the power of portraiture over photography?

It's got to be about time hasn't it? That which unfolds and shifts over protracted observation in terms of the sitting, in terms of your own conception, about temporality. Those extraordinary things which photography can't do. In photography you can of course do amazing things, and most obviously in street photography there's something about that split-second capture. Many photographic portraits, of course, involve a great deal of contrivance, but you're not often getting that evolution of the relationship between the painter and the sitter, the evolution of your own looking. You might get that in a series of photographs, or when regarding your own work, but not in the making of the image in the same way.

This is not a question of wanting to crassly hierarchise the value of these forms, and I hold many photographers in high esteem, referencing them in relation to my own work. Artists such as Cindy Sherman, Claude Cahun, etc. As my work has latterly become more deliberately cinematic, I've used photography and film more as a key component in my process of working, and have collaborated with photographers. This was most evident in my series *Curtain Fall* created with Matthew Tugwell and exhibited at The National Theatre in 2009, in which the cabaret 'performers' from my *Tingle - Tangle* painting series are seen wandering beyond the canvas and out into the south London theatre where I make my studio.

But as much as I've enjoyed such forays and the incorporation of photography, there is never a question of it supplanting painting in my practice.

Do you feel that photography has replaced portraiture?

No, and I don't believe it can.

What is your relationship to photorealism?

I consider that we have but a distant acquaintanceship. Inevitably, as I work representationally, there is an assumed, albeit tenuous, connection with work which is more directly photorealist. However, I would be more keen to discuss reality not as a simple rendition of what's in front of you but rather about the nature of reality, about what is invisible: consciousness, time and psychology, and all the things that

constitute that which is beyond obvious photographically-defined appearances. The human moment as I might want to explore it is not merely 'verisimilitudinous', it's got some kind of presence, a sense of selfhood in it, perhaps a narrative, is alive and feels 'real'.

Paintings were once commissions for the wealthy.

When that isn't the case, what is a portrait?

This feels like a dual-stranded question, but implicit in both is the perceived power dynamic. To a degree, and on a purely practical level, for portraitists working professionally, clients are still clients. The artist still has to think about what the commissioner needs in the way that they did three or four hundred years ago... without, perhaps, the fear of exile!

On the relatively few occasions where I've chosen to undertake a commission, I've considered it my privilege to respond to them largely as I choose, and have been very fortunate in my clients' agreement.

Theoretically, one thing that's quite interesting in the evolution of portraiture is how the concept of what an artist is has changed. There's a lot more prestige attached to being an artist, and yet many artists are still economically weak. But it's interesting to note some of the similarities, whatever the intended outcome of the portrait, procured or not. A subject in either instance, for example, may be quite dissatisfied with the portrait in terms of how they thought it would reflect their inner sense of themselves, whereas it could be quite successful to a wider audience in terms of the kind of presence or implied psychology. And, conversely, so very often there are portraits where the sitter may have been happy with the result, but unless they are intimates of the subject, are of limited interest to a wider audience. So often what's interesting about a portrait is when the artist does something which deviates from the brief and in a sense, this could be said of portraiture in general.

As for the second part, I personally find the continued use of that concept in relation to portraiture to be both gendered and problematic. Merciless sounds like assault. There is an implication that something is being taken from the subject, that they are helpless rather than that they are being responded to, or that there is any kind of empathy or collaboration. I don't know to what extent that is true for all portrait artists now, but for me it is key.

We do have to be careful about assuming that balance and authenticity or reciprocity are automatically inherent

in certain forms of contemporary portraiture, and it isn't a given that the relationship will be more equal. I'm not sure that in a more modern context with a person painting an intimate or friend whether a similar social stature automatically produces a different kind of painting. That would be a false assumption and a different kind of hierarchy and power structure could be at play.

Classically, a portrait also contains symbolic elements which allow the painter to creatively tell more of the subject's story. Is this still the case?

Well as we know, traditionally it wouldn't be that the objects would automatically say something really intimate about the person, but rather bespeak of their status and attainment. I think sometimes people might choose to paint portraits of people embellished with symbolic elements in an attempt to demonstrate or explore their understanding of the contemporary world, rather than because they find those objects especially fascinating or that they constitute insight.

I often incorporate still life elements into my compositions as part of my *mise-en-scène*, or indeed to foreground the intention of the work. An example is the use of food in my *Appetite* series, which incidentally wasn't even especially concerned with consumption, but rather with its complex associations with self-surveillance.

Do portraits ignore artistic history, existing in a parallel art world that has its own rules and references?

It's true that at certain moments of art history portraitists did seem to be more interested in what was going on in the main channel. And it is odd how if you look at portraits from the late 19th century into, shall we say the mid-20th century, more of them seem like examples of a particular formal development, whereas quite a lot of more recent portraiture is quite photorealist and doesn't appear to be that interested in what's going on in the contemporary stream. Why is that? I have a suspicion that a lot of artists today who are responding to the human element would not equate their work with portraiture, and would consider regarding it as such somewhat anachronistic. I'm rather excited by suggesting that such explorations could be an aspect of an artist's methodology today.

Do you feel constrained or liberated by the term 'portrait'?

As it is largely understood, constrained. I would not describe myself as a portrait painter and I'm perplexed if people do, although of course I understand why they might.

“YOU COULD SAY THAT, PARADOXICALLY, SOME OF MY PAINTINGS ARE PORTRAITS WHEN THEY ARE NOT INTENDING TO BE SUCH”

I mean this as no slight; I am a great admirer of many portraitists.

I use the human form within my compositions, and it is of particular interest to me. But what interests me is its capacity for manipulable plasticity, akin to how I might use still life or mannequins, rather than personages. I am keenly interested in the human condition but that to my mind is not the same as a portrait. The figures in my paintings become my protagonists in a staged scene from an imagined movie or stilled performance I've created, and are never intentionally themselves.

Occasionally there will be a quality in a person which I'm responding to and find interesting, and that will generate a piece of work, but generally they are enacting something for me. Beyond that they aren't even about the scene itself, they seek to evoke a response, a memory or inaction much as a filmmaker might give shape to a situation with a similar intention.

In a sense I see myself as an accidental portraitist. My characters are fictionalisations and they adopt personae. Much has been written on the idea that human subjectivity is not coherent, the very idea that you might grow up into a personality being something of a misnomer, as if there were an intelligible, slowly-altering selfhood. There is much evidence to suggest just how changeable we are, that it is questionable the degree to which we have an authentic self. And therefore, if you accept just a base level of that, then in a way there is something more truthful about presenting human beings in roles because we are always playing them. If I paint a picture of myself looking anguished or mad or debased or arrogant, well, you don't go around the world like that, but on some level it is some manifestation of one aspect that is part of me and which needs some kind of metaphorical expression. So is truth metaphorical or is it verisimilitude? What can be confusing perhaps with my work is that I traverse these boundaries and there is, I accept, something disorienting about that.

You could say that, paradoxically, some of my paintings are portraits when they are not intending to be such. In asking people to be my protagonists in even extreme scenarios they could be portraying some element of who they are in escaping the confines of their subjectivity and playing a role. So much as an actor would say that in portraying some aspect of themselves there is something of the self there that allows expression while going into character. This is most pronounced in my more recent work, the *Laughing While* series.

A paradox between the solitude of painting and a human subject, how do you approach that?

If you are painting a scene of great social vibrancy, a street scene perhaps full of people (not that I do this) then it might seem paradoxical to be painting interaction and noise and the social whirl while in the midst of it you are alone, so this might be true. But there seems to be an implied understanding that any interaction with a person in a painting is somehow different from the solitude of making. A human subject is to me inherently solitary. There is a profound element of solitude in human subjectivity.

How do you consider the relationship between the sitter and the painter. What's in it for them? Immortality?

It's as varied as lots of other situations isn't it? Vanity, they want to spend time with you, could be a commission, or they are just being paid. Historically I've almost exclusively painted people who are close friends and actors, but more recently also people who I feel drawn to and are sympathetic to my aims.

We generally have a good time while working. I assume they are in it for the larks and the dress-up. But it's interesting how in collaborating in these works, much as with the viewer, they have got a kick out of imagining themselves in an extreme, even catastrophic, scenario. It can occasionally give them license which can have more personal implications. This of course greatly interests me in turn.



*Laughing While
Reigning, 2015*

"I WASN'T PLAYING TO SOME SIMPLISTIC NOTION OF EMPOWERMENT IN OLD AGE."

Often portrait painters seem to consider skin as a conveyor of time, each line or fold carved out of the plain canvas of youth. How do you see it?

I'm not interested in the more obvious implications of that. I'm not somebody who is going to paint every blemish and every blotch. There's a kind of anti-aesthetic there and that can be its own kind of vanity on the part of the artist to indicate how penetratingly truthful they want to be seen to be, as if to be 'unflinching' about the corporeal shell is inherently more honest. That doesn't interest me any more than it would to play to someone's vanity. Such things can become conventions and conventions ossify and take on the appearance of self-evident truth, and I decry such constraints.

If I were painting an older person, I would be interested in them for a particular reason and certainly not as emblematic of decay or the passage of time.

When I painted Mrs Muriel Talbot and the Britannia Marionettes for my Tingle - Tangle series, for example, it was because the work was a crucial component of the over-arching schema and although the work depicted a woman not aged but rather alive with stories and memory, poised and unfazed, I wasn't playing to some simplistic notion of empowerment in old age.

Do portraits have to be of people?

No, and that seems fairly obvious to me. The most obvious assertion of this in my own work might be *The Tower of Mabel* where I depicted the precarious assemblage of the unseen subject's paraphernalia as a careful constructed persona in danger of slipping. Although in my work *Carvery* my self-portrait is clearly apparent, I'd suggest that it is the

objects with which the table is laden which are more the focus of the work than myself, partially implied in the way my use of colour merges my figure into the surrounding negative space. I wanted here to ask questions about the relationship between the mundane meals of my working-class background and my exorbitant youthful ambitions, and I chose to paint a meal as a site of self-determination as I stand over it and attempt to carve a life.

I have painted jellies, cakes and other comestibles with far more human presence than some of my more discernible mortal beings.

What is the future of portraiture?

I would imagine that the use of the human face and subject isn't going to go away. It can be premature to think that things are finished, however hard to predict how they will alter. It's in the nature of the future for it to seem unknowable, to some observers the conventions of portraiture can seem rather tired, like it's come to a dead end and that there will merely be more iterations of certain tropes, but it would be arrogant to assume that we know that. It may be, though, that portraiture continues to remain at the periphery of the cutting edge. On a simple level, you have to believe that as long as there are new human beings with new minds we will want to represent and explore one another, and I don't doubt that there will continue to be extraordinary and innovative instances of this.



Laughing While Eating Strawberries, 2015