

David Treloar: Gestural portraits and simple joy

Spiralling Intentionally Towards Figuration



Words: Michael Eden



Previous: *Now what was I thinking*, 2019
Top: *Self Portrait*, 2018
Below: *Self Portrait 2*, 2019

David Treloar is an artist living and working in London who initially trained as a painter before adopting a multidisciplinary approach to his work. However, after becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the unresolved, detached influence of modernism in his abstract and sculptural work, he has returned to the foundations of his training, figurative drawing and painting. He creates energetic, gestural portraits partly derived from the simple joy of extracting the magic from observed form, partly in response to the trauma of condensing an evanescent object into a moment's believable reality. The resulting works frequently pirouette between beauty and malaise, exploring the uncertainty and frailty of the human condition

Graduating with a BA in fine art painting from Wimbledon School of Art and studying as a postgraduate at the prestigious Royal Academy between 2003 and 2006 has given Treloar the great benefit and protracted struggle of an art education. Despite some painful periods of doubt and outright dismay, the artist managed to retain his passion for painting throughout his early exchanges with tutors, students, collectors and gallerists. He accomplished this with a clash of self-aware questioning, skill and a craving to paint well. During this period, Treolar also had to confront the fashionable shifts in the art world demarcated by money, theory, philosophy, critics and hacks.

Treloar is a wonderful example of the cyclical or rather spiralling nature of a true art practice carried out by a passionate individual able to sustain interest, shift focus to and fro, and to be as genuinely engaged by making, and thinking that making through, as he is by ideas and subtext. During his varied career, Treloar has made interior design objects, sculptures and assemblages as well as painting landscape, abstract and figurative works. He has produced hundreds of portraits; some commissioned but many autobiographical and self-motivated. These works provide a hermeneutic feast for the viewer; indexing a life as seen and as remembered by the artist and attesting to a fully rounded practitioner, asserting himself in space.

We have come to associate artists with one trick that they are famous for. This is sometimes due to our lack of knowledge and curiosity or waning attention span. Often artists either play to this or edit out their own past in

order to seem like research scientists experimenting on an exceptionally important theme; ever forging ahead towards some ultimate truth. With Treloar, as with characters like Picasso, or to make a more contemporary link, with Hirst, the actual practice is varied and sometimes contradictory, often returning to themes with slightly different focus, spiralling as it were and moving off at tangents. His is a practice, *in the round*, making for a rich and impactful body of work.

The main oscillation has been between abstraction and figuration, with Treloar's recent portraits playing the key part. It's worth having a sense of those abstract works to background the artist's 'return to order'; a return that translates the lessons learned into figurative representation.

Some Objects Want to be Abused (Some Want to Abuse You)

From the RA final show in 2006, four works blur the line between design and art: *Pillion Rule* and *Colour me gone*, *Hot Box. (Cold)* and *Lady Luck*. All these objects are sumptuously made and coloured according to high-end lifestyle products. The most striking of these, *Pillion Rule*, combines insectoid references, including stings and thoraxes with aspects of bespoke Lambretta design. *Pillion Rule* is a motorbike term: last to get on, first to get off. This object is an imagined possible two-seater chair from the 1950s; the figures and their relationships are implied. *Colour me gone* continues in a design/art vein by attempting to play up to a kind of pornography of materials and specialist tendencies of design aficionados through pointing out similarities between specialisms/consumer tribes and socioeconomic limitations regarding opulent material.

This work looks like furniture but stands on plinths. Inviting interaction and then denying it, the objects are highly fetishised and sexual in a bombastic way. The original title for *Lady Luck* was *More Meat in Your*

” THE SIMPLE JOY OF EXTRACTING THE MAGIC FROM OBSERVED FORM

Seat, but needing to tone down the candour to facilitate inclusion in the RA catalogue, Treloar opted to name the piece after a popular burlesque night at a local Soho club. Once again, he used a bespoke Lambretta seat as a starting point. This seems like a nod to Picasso and the appropriation of African masks for a full-on conflation of face, backside, and hermaphrodite genitalia. Body parts are referenced and an implied figure interacting with it is again an intrinsic part of how the work seeks to operate contentiously with the viewer.

The Cold Comforts of Science

The works *Big Bounce*, *Entropy* and *Their Lives* made between 2010-2012 deal with existential crisis and the possible insurmountable realities faced by human beings who know just enough to grasp their own ignorance in the face of colossal forces.

'We are all the current lucky alignment of atoms.' David Treloar

The Big Bounce is a theory that suggests that, rather than just having the Big Bang at the beginning of the universe, the expansion and collapse over vast quantities of time could have happened several times, but that the laws of physics in the next bounce might not be the same as the ones we have now.

'The idea being that as science looks to explain our origins it is quite possible that past our current singularity event, we would have no way of understanding a prior state of existence. The object d'art is a contemporary take on mid-century modern atomic design, a vanity mirror, with a crazy load of old balls (nonsense atomic structure) on the other side. Entropy: the old science again. Waiting for the gradual decline into disorder. The painting is of a money box where the American Indian is in a perpetual state of tension/suspense with the Bear, the metronome ominously ticking its measurement of time. Their lives: an abstracted version

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of a Russian atomic design clock, inverting the image and substituting the clock face with an optical illusion that continues to wink and glitch at you... Time measured in an anxiety-inducing “the horror the horror” way.’ (David Treloar)

Two images named *Untitled* shown in David Ben White’s *Temples to the Domestic* at Clifford Chance are paintings of folded paper conflatons of minimalist mathematical formula for dissecting a rectangle and trompe-l’oeil. Here again the artist is trying to bring together aspects of different art tribes, probably with an intention to please neither. Contributing to *SOCIAL SPACE* (2011) curated by Emma Jamieson, the *Sudoku Towers* series consists of a graphic drawing of an imagined design for a tower block. The exact layout is derived from a system applied to a sudoku puzzle. Another work about smallness and unfathomable quantity. The popular sudoku puzzles we know were based on a Swiss number puzzle by the retired American architect Howard Garns. The artist here is thinking about what kind of architecture sudoku would be, exploring alienation and themes of order and objectivity.

Geometrickish, a group show at the Cello Factory curated by David Small continues this approach but applies the question, *If we had to build the world again where would we start?* to it. (Verlan 2012), another group show, curated by Gabor Gyory and Nick Jensen at Twelve Around One gallery brings this period to a close and consisted of a modular sculpture in concrete, *6 flavours* (in reference to

quarks in atoms that change their behaviour; up, down, left, right, strange and charm).

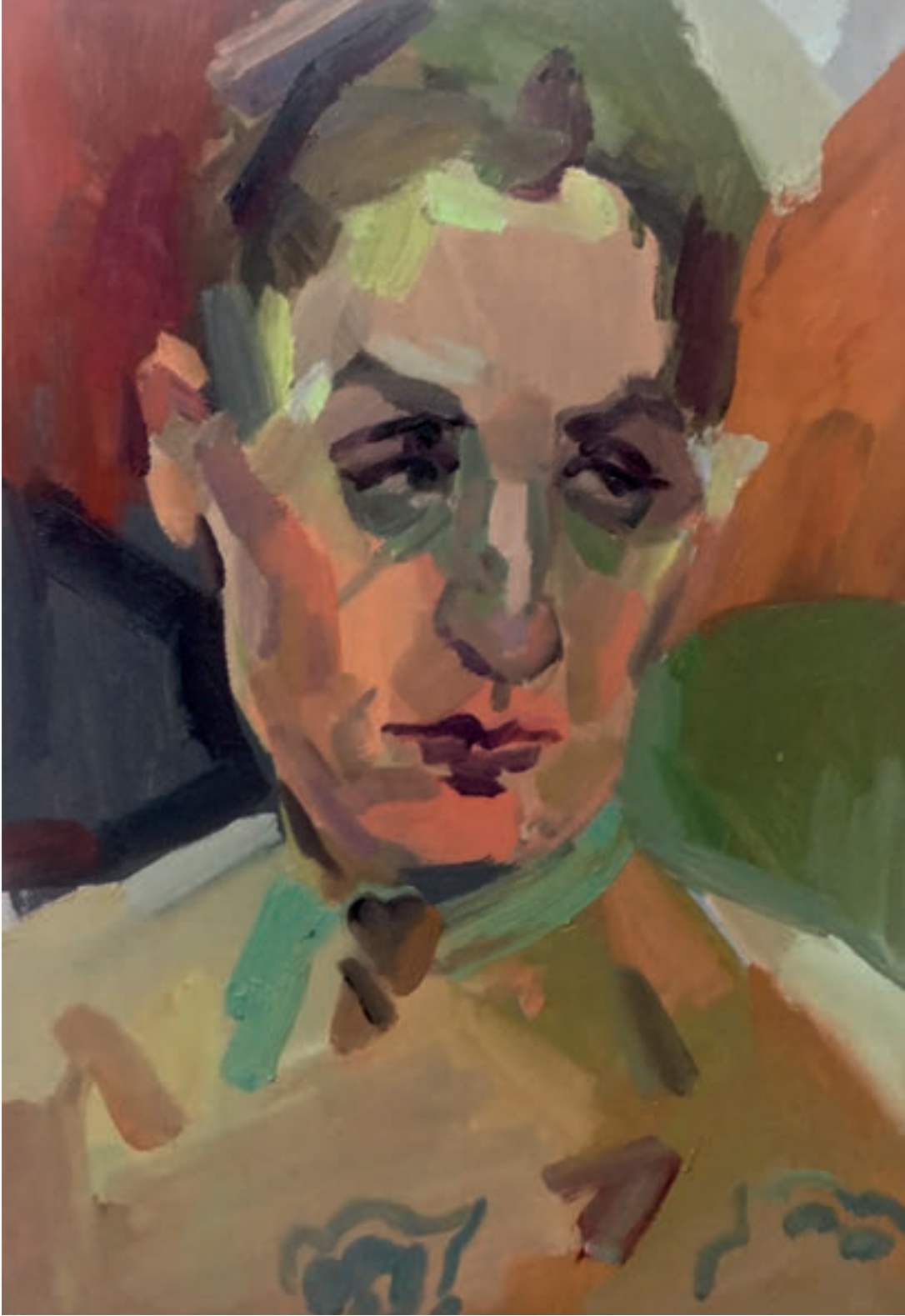
‘I had been reading about a school in Africa where all of the walls had fallen down and only part of the internal walls remained. The teachers and pupils still organised their activities lining up and walking through doors that no longer existed in order to maintain order. The modular nature of this potential modernist architecture is appealing to the best in humanity to organise their behaviours.’ (David Treloar)

These works can be seen at the artist’s blog Wondermental (davidtreloar.blogspot.com) and make an interesting underpinning for his portraiture which retains the intensity of the artist’s intentions pointed in a new direction.

Retour à l’Ordre

Like many artists Treloar is opting to exploit Instagram (@treloar.david) to showcase his work. In recent years a plethora of thoughtful portraits have poured out of him exploiting the hard-won skills developed over years of training and editing. A range of 2-D media including pens, pencils, acrylic and oil paint is employed to effect. Treloar’s handling of people is classically attuned and his understanding of the weight and three dimensions of the head is informed not only by his training at the RA but by countless journeys around London observing and recording the public, as evidenced in early works such as *Sketch* (1999/2000). This image is wonderfully light in touch and showcases inert skills

Where the fuck did
Monday go, 2019



GIVES HIS PEOPLE A SENSE OF
LIFE AND VIBRANCY
”



J Sleeping, 2019

which form the basis of Treloar’s later finished pieces. This grounding gives his people a sense of life and vibrancy akin to impressionist and post-impressionist works and gives the finished work a sense of history over, say, a more illustrative approach.

However, the interest in process is paramount here and his exploration of the various media, notably paint, competes with the expression of likeness or narrative. Treloar is a gifted painter and as such his works should be understood in that context; fast and loose handling works well when you have a solid grounding in rendering the figure. This approach also emphasises the painting process, increasing impact for the viewer and replacing the lifestyle opulence of earlier works with the sumptuousness of painting reconciled with art history. Treloar’s portraiture is not illustration; there is depth, deftness of handling and compositional experimentation. He has not lost the objectivity of his eye or ethos, but this is put to better use here in favour of emotional impact.

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

I never really know how a piece will develop as I start, and there is a fair degree of panic and faith that an image I want to look at again will emerge. I guess the approach is then very personal and has a degree of honesty that then is a reflection of myself. I feel in order to bring a portrait to life, I’m embarking on an ever-evolving process of loss and recovery, not knowing where things will lead. In previous bodies of work, making furniture sculpture or architectural modular sculptures, my ‘artist’s hand’ was deliberately left absent. Projects were realised and methods of production left no room for discovery. Painting again in a more expressive way is more exciting, but filled with risk and as an artist I feel more exposed. For me, it is this act of searching, this desire for communication with the viewer that gives of myself more than the nature of my subject.

What is the relationship between the subject and the painter?

As a painter my primary concern is to make a painting, and my assumed responsibility is therefore unapologetically to the process of falling backwards into the arms of the viewer. I observe for as long as is necessary to produce

an instinctive, physical response; my initial laying down the image tends to alarm unsuspecting observers with its ferocity. I can meticulously mix colour for hours then attack the canvas with the closest object to hand.

My rough approach to colour and tone have the objective of retaining a vibrancy and immediacy, within a lucky stroke the image becomes. In observing my subject I initially look for blocks of tone or gestural responses to a sense of thrust, trying to approach the figure from a starting position of abstraction before looking for little visual rhymes and asking myself which details are necessary. I work against the clock purposefully, trying to catch the moment before the image dies. This is not to undermine nor downplay the importance of the relationship with the sitter. If they have agreed to a long session, you get to play out an exchange of experiences and you both inform each other for a while. You feel both more particular and simultaneously less alone for a bit. Connected. Being human feels important for a while.

What is the power of portraiture over photography?

If you subscribe to the Stoic idea that ‘everything that exists is already fraying at the edges, and in transition’ it feels as though the passage of time necessary to create even the quickest of portraits might be able to convey some of the impermanence of being. I feel that the inclusion of the human form is the relatable symbol of this constant state of flux to which we are all subjected.

What is your relationship to photorealism?

For me a photo, as a source to work from, can lack dynamism and it can be challenging to engage the viewer with laborious realisation through process. A specific instance when I did use photography was in a portrait of my daughter during my wife’s C-section. My relationship to time in the moment became completely skewed in such a high stress situation and I was literally trying to piece the memory back together using photos for clues. If ever a portrait was a self-portrait, this is it.

Portrait paintings were once commissions for the wealthy. When that isn’t the case what is a portrait? Are there still echoes in the DNA of portraiture of the privilege of the subject at the mercy of the painter?

I don’t know. The subject is always at the mercy of the painter. There are artists who attempt to redress the balance of who has historically been portrayed through portraiture and to represent those who have been excluded for their race or social standing. For me, the politicising of these ideas is of less interest than the kindness with which Velázquez succeeds in depicting king and servant alike, centuries ago.

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

Although still widely employed by portrait artists I don’t do it myself. After Michael Landy’s *Break Down*, the idea of including a few items that provide some kind of oblique summary of the sitter seems to lack ambition. It may be that during a conversation with a sitter you pick up on something they are saying and find some visual equivalent for it in their surroundings, such as an angle, a colour, a little something to riff off and organise by.

Do portraits ignore artistic history, existing in a parallel art world that has its own rules and references? (Portraits are not art for art’s sake).

I suppose this depends on the definition of a portrait, its intent, and its relationship with society around it.

The language of traditional portraiture adopted by painters like Michaël Borremans after Velázquez or Manet has certainly carried into territory which doesn’t fall within portraiture, and, for me, the reverse applies. I guess much portraiture isn’t for art’s sake but for the celebration of certain individuals’ achievements and social/cultural standing. Does it engage the viewer? Is it a question of presentation? Are the twin artist/sitter name-drop idiot boards in the National Portrait Gallery evocative of a highbrow version of Madame Tussauds?

At what point is a painting of a person not a portrait?

This depends on the definition of portrait. Figurative drawing and painting from life has been such a core part of my practice that the figure is a fundamental motif—the emotional charge or technical focus may be the defining intent.

” MOST OF MY LANDSCAPE PICTURES OF PATHS, TREES AND MOUNTAINS ARE COVERT SELF- PORTRAITS

Sometimes the face or figure is being used to only speak of more general concerns, and sometimes my knowledge of someone or the circumstance of the image’s creation inform my choices. I would hope not to make any paintings that are solely about the sitter. For me, the fulcrum for success hinges more narrowly on the vitality of the work’s communication with the viewer.

Is there a market for portraits outside of commissions?

Hopefully, although I’m afraid I don’t permit the commercial nature of a commissioned portrait to interrupt my process. For me figurative work introduces a fascinating layer of intrigue. The ambition and obsessive search in an Auerbach, the colour and material application in a Gilman, the rawness and daring in a Sickert transcend their subject. Within any painting of a person you would hope there was a greater ambition than likeness; celebrating people’s special particulars whilst realising we are just another permeation of code on a timeline.

Do you create other artistic work outside of portraits?

Recently I have been sniffing around landscape using oil, ink and bleach. I’m not interested in making work about green and pleasant lands, or looking to reflect the wonder of nature. I am interested in emotional charge, representation of space and light reflecting my psychological state. The paintings are usually battles. I am usually listening to Sleaford Mods or The Fall, and I am usually thinking about

my journey through life; uncertainty, a mix of discovered beauty and anxiety. I was homeless many years ago and the landscape isn’t something you passively walk through but something that has to perform all functions; the figure is notable by its absence.

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

I very rarely work from photographs.

As much as possible I wish for my marks to be an intuitive reaction/response to what I am seeing in a live situation with another person so there isn’t solitude when I am working. I often feel guilt at the selfish drive to unforgivingly respond without the filter of flattery or acceptance of anything the sitter would wish to project that would stop me having freedom to take liberties with the approach and materials. I jealously protect this insistence on urgency and responding to now, and now and now. In this way there is a paradoxical solipsism in my process. I also really enjoy talking to my sitter and going on an emotional journey, and the slower pace this brings makes for a very different kind of painting. The paintings still resist being a careful rendering of features, instead being the result of a chase.

How do you consider the relationship between the sitter and the painter?

What’s in it for them? Immortality?

Shared experience, I hope. If I mention narcissism, nobody will commission me again...

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 couldn’t be less interested. The more detail there is in a painting, the more particulars, the less interested I am. I used to love all the warts and all, showing history. It doesn’t work for me now due to the speed of my work. There is a pace to the looking and the reaction. My studio walls are covered with trite mantras and aphorisms. Just do it. Trust the brush. Liberate the Paint from Strict Servitude to Representation. Now Now Now. That is completely interrupted by detail. Rather than studying the surface of a person as a register, I look at them unromantically as an interruption in space, a receptor of light and a shifting set of tones on a structural blob.

A painting really isn’t a person. Within the visual language I use I want to see how expressive I can be and still achieve something that passes as a legitimate stand-in for the perception of seeing a person in space. I think of us as groups of atoms that have arrived at a pattern of reproduction within a timeline in the universe. I don’t think of static preserved precious moments. I think about a fleeting coming together of light on a person that is beautiful, and another human and their sense receptors able to recognise this.

Do portraits have to be of people?

No. I harbour the secret opinion that most of my landscape pictures of paths, trees and mountains are covert self-portraits.

What is the future of portraiture?

I think there is a definite return to portraiture and the figure, although it could just be that my focus is now in this area and I am therefore more aware of things happening in it. Due to platforms such as Instagram there is more exposure to the Atelier style and a rigorous approach to

measuring and tone. There are groups like 404 who devised the '100 heads in 100 days' challenge who start with the underpinning of traditional skills before searching for forms that feel relevant to now. The generosity with which artists are willing to share their successes and failures and offer support and some level of discourse around portraiture is both helping create a sense of community and encouraging inventiveness and ambition.

In an exhibitionist world and with the current anti-elitist narrative there are overtones of an equivalence in quality between the output of the art educated and the Sunday painter. This narrative will probably mean portraiture remains a pejorative term amongst the capital A art world, but may help widen the appeal to the masses. As an art teacher, I feel that any level of introducing a more critical reflection of the figure through drawing and discovered beauty (a slower pace to endless selfies) should be supported and encouraged. Whilst society feels unstable, unknowable and changeable it will fit my current working bag of approaches, so I will definitely be working in this vein. I would love it if that coincides with a time for fruitful discourse and popularity.