Hedley Roberts: Unknown faces, arch pleasures
Alienated Ambiguity

Words: Michael Eden

Hedley Roberts' 'non-portraits', as the artist has referred to them, present a challenge to the viewer; they are after all *of* something. That 'thing' is generally figured as a person, either in the outline or in the title. The picture plane cropped close to the head often includes combinations of features such as eyes, mouths and some other basic paraphernalia; hats, glasses, hair coverings or beards. There is an identity implied by these features, and a clear effect (akin to encountering a stranger) in looking at the work where the glare of the strange 'thing' confronts or eschews the viewer's own gaze.

With this in mind, in what sense are they 'non'? In terms of the symbolic and narrative possibilities this effect of being confronted with a fetishisticly loaded shape (the head) and the central question above represent the hook or crux of the work. The viewer is asked to consider accustomed form as alien; the usually reassuring familiarity of the face is made to speak of the ambiguity of the person behind the fleshy mask. The otherness which a gaze can convey on another person (such as the objectifying male gaze or, indeed, that of the artist and his subject) seems at odds with the otherness apparent in the subject themselves. Two forms of dehumanisation, the one reductive and the other expansive are clashing over and over again. This oscillation works because the figure or person is simultaneously there and absent. Their presence is an interrupting void sucking in projections and generating ever greater ambiguity. Or the blacked out interior of the figure could represent what is left after the excoriating vision of other people is done with them.

This interplay of forces from without and within is supported by the different levels to which the personages depicted are figured or obliterated. We can identify three distinct categories: those which contain the most features, such as *Big Marina* (2018), *Art Student* (2015) or *Cowboy* (2017) are also the least threatening. Those works have a positive air; the faces are more pronounced, offering some tonal undulations, the colours employ a high contrast and the expressions in the eyes and mouths are non-aggressive, while the paint is not so tortured via process.

By contrast, some images appear more definitely 'othered'. Racial and religious references to Islam appear in works such as *Raspberry* (2016), *Alpha* (2016) or *Ducati Boy* (2014). This may of course be a projection; the ambiguity of the images allows for hairlines and coverings to become hijabs. I was left thinking about the ways particular people are 'othered' because of race or religion and how in these works this way of looking seems to cover over what is there. Roberts bears this out in some of his own statements about the process:

The finished works stop being a representational portrait of the sitter and instead begin to function as "other" portraits of the internal dialogue, thoughts, time and socio-political landscape in which they were made. (Hedley Roberts)

To an extent the interiors act as sponges for the mirroring of current prejudices which makes them strangely alive experiences. By no means though does this feature (race/religion) define the category, which is better described as blacked out (or single colour) figures in general who retain ominous eyes and mouths. *Miami Girl* (2016) is a good example. The outline is strong, there is less of her surface at least, and this makes the image more threatening. For example, the expression of the male figure in *Burberry Cap* (2018), an image defined by one mottled purple hue, is fairly benign despite his presence in the space as an interruption. An unknowable shadowy visage allows the mind to take the Burberry cap of the title and run away into stereotypes about class, taste and a possible encounter with a low-income wide boy. Our own bias, always present when we look at any art is no more present here but is perhaps more obvious, part of the interplay of being made to think about how we look.

Finally, there are those works which appear to be determined by drives and instincts. Sensations embodied by monstrous figures, of which only *Ella* (2014) feels entirely positive. The image consists of yellow and orange swirls, embedded in which are full lips and large open eyes. The other images I would place here are darker and unnerving, with references via colour and expression to apocalyptic science fiction.

Grizzly (2016) takes us to more Freudian territory, no less disturbing. The title suggests hair and teeth while the jet-black figure (seemingly female) has two buns which echo the reference to the man-eater. Finally *Slipped Kiss* (2016) presents a fleshy protuberance of pink hues, almost Baconesque, with a slightly open gaping mouth.

It's possible to see this as a sensual image, but the pink-black combination and the smudged, dappled phallic head take us again into disturbing, possibly violent, resonances.

This is offset by images of hope or higher/lighter energy. *Birdboy* (2014) describes a heroic-seeming figure (a child, perhaps) or a mythical persona masked like a superhero or Mexican wrestler. The bright red outline glows out of the blackness while defiant pursed lips and an upward tilt of face suggest action.

This way of seeing the work is one option, since there are knowable and interpretable images within it; links we can draw to make sense of the artist's language. However, the works are all very much process-driven, painterly, and concerned with surface, colour and viscosity. The more formal aspects are so prominent: history of the painting, visible marks, fast application. It would be neglectful not to address these, since it may be that all the pyscho-interpretation is no more than a secondary concern to a painter obsessed with painting. Colour vibrates against colour, brush strokes carry the eye around the surface, butting up against one another. The approach, even in relatively sensitive images such as *Story of O* (2015) is one of attack: no careful hesitations. Instead, it's fast work, layering and editing. *Big Marina* (2018) is an excellent example of the method; the red outline isn't drawn around the head and hair, the remaining slither sings out between the deep blue, black and pale flesh colours. The ridges of brush strokes reference time and energy. These qualities make even the more disturbing images pleasurable to look at.

"Any painting is a self-portrait." To what extent is that true, and what does this say about portraiture?
For me, painting is a way of being in the world. It's a method by which someone who calls themselves an artist tries to reconcile the inevitable existential difficulties of negotiating the experience of being. The work that an artist makes is a bridge from their world into the world of others. We can try to have empathy with others, but we can't experience their world, and so the artwork is always a view from the perspective of the artist, whether it's a portrait or not. So in that sense, all artworks are portraits of the artists' world view.

What is the relationship between the subject and the painter?
The subject of an artwork isn't always the same as the content. For example, in a painting of an empty chair the

Ducati, 2016

Nostalgia, 2016

subject could be the idea of 'absence'. However, in portrait painting, there's a fundamental idea that the painting captures some inner aspect of the sitter who is portrayed. The accepted idea is that the 'personhood' of the sitter is the subject. The usual method for constructing this is figurative; i.e. the painting 'looks like' the person. If it's a 'good' likeness then it's a 'good' painting of the subject. I'm not really interested in this kind of portraiture because people aren't simply their external appearance, they have interior lives and live in a world context. There's much more to them than a crafted visual likeness.

What is the power of portraiture over photography?
Generally speaking, we have an elitist value system that places portrait painting in a hierarchy over photographic portraits. This has its origins in the idea that a portrait painting is medium that requires affluence; time to sit for sessions, finance to pay for the artist's time and materials. The person commissioning the portrait needed to be able to afford a skilled painter, who would likely be able to portray the person favourably and in an appropriate fashion. By contrast, photography quickly emerged as an accessible medium, and it might be said that a fair likeness can be easily achieved. So, portrait painting tends to be considered to be an elitist and skill-intense medium when compared to the democracy of photography. Of course, there's plenty of contemporary examples of high-status professional-quality photographic portraits.

Do you feel that photography has replaced portraiture? What is your relationship to photorealism?
For me, the power of painting is the way a painting, once started, tends to be considered as having its own 'agency'. What I mean is, that when we talk about figurative painting we talk about it being 'lifelike'. This idea is based the Aristotelian notion of art as 'mimesis', an imitation of life, which is fundamental to the idea of a portrait. Even when modernism broke the chains of figurative representation, the traditions of portraiture hang onto the idea that the painting captures some imagined 'lifelikeness' of the sitter.

When we speak about photographic realism in painting, what we're really speaking about is painters who copy the way a camera 'sees'. This is a mechanically created 'perspective', a way of looking at the world that is so familiar to us, that we don't really see it. The camera 'frames' the image, and if we look back through the history of photography, we can see a gradual shift from the staged conventions of portrait painting to a visual language that is created through the functional and creative possibilities of the lens. For example, the cropped close-up image isn't common in the tradition of painting, because the physical difficulty of making a study that close to someone would be very challenging.

The traditions of portraiture are about the physical space between the artist and the sitter. Painting has explored many different types of perspective and ways of 'seeing'. Photorealism is one of those methods. I do respect the craft and technique in that way of working, but ultimately, I don't find that kind of work very interesting. Although, I must also say that there are other styles that I'm also bored with. There's so much new 'naive' portraiture on Instagram produced by trained artists who deliberately use poor technique to seem like 'outsider art'. There's also a lot of stylish work where the artist is making some sort of slick smeared or splashy painterly intervention in an otherwise photorealistic painting. For me, the intellectual ambition of the work needs to be genuine, and the adoption of a stylistic device for little more than capturing commercial interest is an act of artistic 'bad faith'. There's a lot of that in portraiture.

Paintings were once commissions for the wealthy. When that isn't the case, what is a portrait?
Owning high-quality, high-value or high-cost art remains the privilege of the wealthy, and the average contemporary individual is unlikely to own a commissioned portrait painting of themselves or loved ones. However, they will likely have many photos of their family on their phones, and they'll also have very carefully selected images of themselves that they've captured in the best light at the best angle. These selfies are the contemporary equivalent of the portrait. The camera, software and filters are designed to provide favourable likenesses, with engineers, developers and tech-entrepreneurs making technology that enables the person to create something that they feel represents and captures their best 'likeness' and sense of 'self'.

Of course, sometimes this means digital face-tuning, whitening teeth, smoothing skin, widening eyes or even adding kitten ears.

Is there a market for portraits outside of commissions? Do you create other artistic work outside of portraits?
A commission is a pre-agreed contract to produce something for a client. I don't actually make that kind of commitment. What happens is that someone might send me images and ask if I would be interested in painting them, and then they ask how much a painting would be. We talk and I agree to make a painting or not. However, there's no contract. I don't expect them to buy the painting. Often, they do, but it's not a done deal. For me, the painting exists beyond the idea of it being a portrait of that particular individual. The process I go through means that the painting stands on its own, without a need for it be a 'portrait' specifically.

A paradox between the solitude of painting and a human subject, how do you approach that?
Solitude is important to me. I have a love-hate relationship

Birdboy, 2016

with it, but I find it necessary for my mental health. I'd say that most painters are people who need time away from other people, time alone. This solitude is a kind of self-imposed exile, where we force ourselves into intensely self-reflective sessions to make work or consider what we are making. Before the explosion of the art world in the mid '90s and before social media, being an artist could be a much more lonely experience. That's why private views and openings were so important; they offered opportunities for artists to meet and see each others' work and talk.

Social media has changed all that. I'm connected to artists all across the globe and can have conversations on live video in the studio with ease. Social media has opened up the studio and practice of the artist. Where once we made the work in solitude and then had the 'big reveal' at the opening, keeping current now means artists post images of work in progress and in the studio every day. The big reveal has been replaced by a culture of continual exposure through social media platforms like Instagram. Of course, this can impact the necessity of solitude, and does create pressure to continually perform to the social

media audience. It's important to be in in the social media environment, and it's extremely rewarding, but you've got to know when to turn it off.

How do you consider the relationship between the sitter and the painter? What's in it for them? Immortality?
Why does anyone take a selfie on their camera phone? Like Narcissus in the Greek myth, we're fascinated by the image of ourselves. I think this is because there's an inherent disconnect between the interior experience of being in the world and the external mirror image that the portrait offers us. We catch ourselves in a reflection and instantly correct our posture, hair or clothing to project our best self. We can never see ourselves as others see us until there's a 'portrait' or reflection.

The portrait is an act of trying to reconcile our internal and external. The French psychoanalyst and theorist Lacan talked about this in his idea of 'mirror stage' where the infant becomes aware of their own subjectivity through a mirrored image. Fundamentally, I think a portrait offers an opportunity to reconcile the sublime terror that is inherent in the difference between internal identity and how we might be perceived.

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 don't think about the skin in this way. For me, painting is a way of interpreting an inability to capture the interior life and lived experience of the person. I don't think it's possible to capture a 'lifelike' representation of the sitter, or anything of their interior existence. I think that it's just not possible to know the lives of each other, to know each other's experience. We only make assumptions based on our own experience.

When I'm painting, I'm not painting the person, I'm painting the space between the artist and the subject, the audience and the person portrayed. This space is filled with assumptions about the sitter, projected ideas about their lives, their identity. It's also filled with contextual noise, thoughts of my own about all sorts of things, the news, a distracted thought about an experience, a memory, a story I've heard, or some preconception that my cultural experience provides.

What is the future of portraiture?
I think there's still a lot of opportunity in portraiture, and painting. I'm particularly interested in developments in

neuroscience, neuroaesthetics and neuropsychology; in how visual perception works. This area of science is still in its infancy, and there's a lot of opportunity for artists to collaborate with scientists. It would seem to me that artists have tacit knowledge of how visual perception works through practical experience but cannot explain why.

I think we still have a long way to go to understand the qualia of individual experience, how each of us might perceive things differently. The more I read, the more it influences the way I make the paintings. For example, the concept of pareidolia is how we can tend to see images in abstraction, and in particular faces. This is fundamental to visual language, and it's now being used to inform computational intelligence in neural network software like DeepDream which is designed to see faces in complexes of images to produce new visual outcomes. I'm also interested in the metadata that surrounds a painting and how this information is 'attached' to the work. After all, when we look at a work of art, we come at it from an informed position. We think about it in terms of socio-economic-political context, about the cultural information that informs it. The artwork never stands alone, it's always in an information context, and that context is the metadata.

An authority on the artwork is someone who knows the most about it. When we read the interpretation on the wall at a gallery, or an interview with the artist, we're bringing contextual information as metadata to the artwork. Currently we do that mainly through the Internet, or perhaps books. But there's also a new context that's become more apparent in social media, which is the voice of the wider audience in commentaries below the line. When I'm at a gallery, I look up the artist on my phone and find out more about them, in real time, whilst looking at the work.

I think there's a future where augmented reality systems will make metadata immediately available in the context of viewing the artwork. These systems won't necessarily just be static and authoritative, they'll be dynamic, feeding from the ever-changing cultural context and audience readings of the artwork. It'll be really interesting to see what happens to the authoritative voice of the expert, when so much metadata can be made readily accessible to the audience in real-time viewing. Imagine a world where the painting can be viewed in reality, but also simultaneously the artist making it, and in context with interviews and opinions. It'll be a massive upgrade from the audio device handed out at museums.

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