

Introductions: Takes on Portraiture and Identity

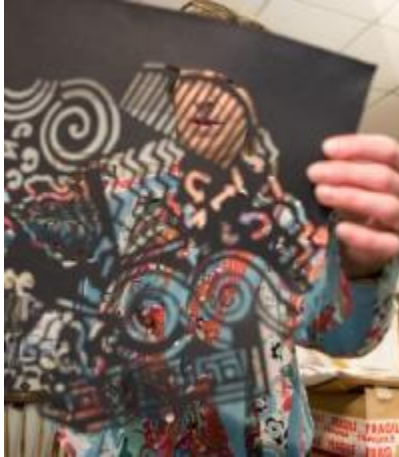


Eileen Hogan
Professor of Fine Art Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Graduate School

I have painted people since I was a student, but often the works are distinguished either by the subjects' absence (with only a trace such as an empty park bench or tracks made in snow) or they are back views. Nowadays, some of the people have turned around and are looking out of the painting, but not directly at the viewer. A recent series of 'portraits' of Ian Hamilton Finlay was painted in fragments as a presence in his garden. There was a relationship between the act of Ian walking towards or away from me, and that was the way I painted him – approaching, passing by and leaving. I paint other sitters when they are talking to someone else, an oral historian, who is recording their life story. This allows me to observe how their face and body change as they talk about their life, what shapes they tend to relax into as their tension reduces: their gestures and their postures when speaking. In both cases I describe portraits as being part of my practice and I *never* describe myself as a portrait painter, because in the context of the art world and the art school the words 'portrait' and 'painter' have uncomfortable connotations. For most of my working life figurative painting has been out of favour and practitioners of it were considered to be backward looking. This has meant that it was only the people who really wanted to paint who did and it became a rather eccentric activity. Painting portraits was even more so – something to be done in the privacy of one's own studio and not talked about. I set up this research project in order to start a conversation.

In 2015 I applied for modest funding from the UAL to start a 'Community of Practice' and the steering group quickly fell in to place: myself, Mark Fairmington, Reader at CCW, Stephen Farthing, UAL Rootstein Hopkins Professor of Drawing, Charlotte Hodes, Professor in Fine Art at LCF, and Anita Taylor, Professor and Dean of Bath School of Art and Design. Charlotte and I now lead the project. What initially seemed like group therapy became a dynamic dialogue, which brought together artists, theorists, curators and writers, examining what happens when different disciplines and perspectives are brought to bear on the concept of portraiture. We have organised four symposia: at London College of Fashion (2015) and at Corsham Court, part of Bath Academy of Art (2015), and this year at Hauser & Wirth Somerset and at the National Portrait Gallery. The themes that have emerged from these events relate to identity, the embodied self, vulnerability, exposure, possession, gaze, power and the archival inhabitation of the body. These strands have been brought together through a series of essays commissioned for our web-based learning resource, designed by *She Was Only* and launched at the symposium at the National Portrait

Gallery in July 2016. Here, artists and researchers explore the representation of exposure in their practice in the context of the works in the exhibition: *Exposed: The Naked Portrait* and of the NPG's permanent collection.



Charlotte Hodes
Professor of Fine Art, London College of Fashion

At school, the idea of portraiture was a common test of aptitude and technical accomplishment. The ability to render through observation a 'surface' likeness was seen as the highest accolade in artistic talent and one guaranteed to achieve high marks in what was then the O-level and A-level examinations. However, even at that stage in my education it made me somewhat uneasy, as I could not see how such an approach necessarily revealed any deep understanding of either the person sitting inertly in the schoolroom or how it could be a vehicle for my own expression. This feeling continued when as an undergraduate at the Slade School of Art, I observed fellow students in the life rooms studiously working to capture a likeness of the model. I felt that there must be another way to proceed and one that engaged more sensuously with the material of paint itself. I looked for inspiration to works that fractured the self, such as Patrick Heron's, *Self Portrait* (1951) or Sonia Delaunay's, *Self portrait* (1916). The latter was used as the cover design for the catalogue for her exhibition at the Modern Art Museum, Stockholm, and was simply made up of concentric coloured circles.

As a young art graduate I was often asked whether my work was in essence a self-portrait and at the time I did not know the answer. I have been reflecting on this ever since and feel that perhaps I am more comfortable with my work being a reflection of the 'self' rather than as 'portrait'. In contrast to the focus on external appearance, as with the observed portrait, I see my work as emanating from a sense of the internal, or my 'female self', from the inside out. This embraces the idea of the body as a membrane through which experiences pass and as such I would claim they should be seen as self-portraits.

In Joanna Hogg's film *Exhibition* (2014) the character of D played by Viv Albertine has a deeply physical and tactile relationship to the environment of her modernist house, in which she lives along with her fellow artist and partner, H played by the artist Liam Gillick. In contrast to Gillick's character who is focused on external forces, D seeks to become as one with her environment, wrapping herself around and under furniture and on window ledges, becoming part of the furniture. I wondered whether these powerful images of D captured in the film were not portraits rendered, through the senses of the body's relation to the objects, with which it comes into contact.

The significance of About Face is that it has developed through conversations and dialogue. This reflects the creative approach of the project's initiator, Eileen Hogan, with her collegiate sense and openness to share. The project is on going and will be shaped by the varied practitioners, researchers and curators that already form the core group. I hope that it will also encourage our current students to reconsider the rich and diverse field of portraiture.



Mark Fairmington
Reader, Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Graduate School

I have made paintings of people, of their faces but I have never called them portraits. After making paintings that interrogated the idea of the natural history specimen: the dead animal, the stuffed animal; people then began to appear. The paintings' way of looking, however, remained the same. The scrutiny of a surface charged with the pleasure of examining in detail, as if this necessarily determines verity. In the insect paintings, the complex surface of the collected specimen becomes the subject. The specimen as individual then is relieved of the task of representing the species. These were more like portraits than entomological illustrations, such as the Tudor portraits by William Larkin, where he revelled in the details of embroidery and the lace at the expense of character of the subject.

My paintings use photography as a way of recording information, a way of eroding the hierarchy between parts of the subject, and thus rendering every part as if they were of equal significance. In the Samson series I used photographs of male body builders from the magazines: *Flex* and *Muscle and Fitness* as source images. I excised the faces of the bodybuilders, not those faces where they are able to pose for the camera, but the ones where the physical exertion is too much and the face becomes a grimace. Cropped to remove any context for the facial contortions they exist as specimens of pain or ecstasy. These paintings reminded me of the 'Character Heads' created by the sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt between 1770 and 1783: a taxonomy of expression and feeling, on the male face.

In my paintings of eyes, a single eye on a round wooden panel is depicted in isolation, reminiscence of Victorian keepsakes. In these 'Lovers' Eyes' the portrait embodies the act of possession: a person captured, collected, indeed possessed by another. The fragment becomes an artefact representing the whole, much as the specimen might represent the species, and the history of its various taxonomies.

The Collected Human describes some of the human images that I found in the Wellcome Collection, in the storage depot. Miniature portraits of characters in the collection, anatomical heads, wax heads, death masks; the images are

poised between life and death. *The Forgettory* (2014) is a painting of the head of an anatomical figure. The bandages that appear to bind it have been applied by conservators, to protect the object from accidental damage. My mother is in an advanced state of dementia, and the title for this painting comes from an increasingly rare and touching moment of lucidity, when she told me that, while she has no short-term memory, she has a very good forgettory.



Stephen Farthing
Rootstein Hopkins Chair of Drawing UAL

I don't know when portraiture began to slip off the art school curriculum but I suspect it had vaporized as being of even marginal interest to either staff or students, by the end of the 1960s. How we reconcile this with the successes of Andy Warhol and Chuck Close is unclear, but somehow we do.

During the three years I spent as a Diploma in Art and Design student at St Martins School of Art, at the very beginning of the 1970s, not one of my tutors suggested I take a walk down the Charing Cross Road and take a look through the front door of the National Portrait Gallery. Instead, I was sent to the Tate, Cork Street and *Studio International* magazine – never, I suspect, with portraiture in mind. It wasn't until 1975, when I spent the spring term living and painting at the Royal College of Art's studio in Paris that I began to see any connection between portraiture and my ambitions as a 'modern' artist.

First it was through reading an interview with (to my mind) an important American artist; and also the encounter with a painting by Hyacinth Rigaud, in Versailles. In the interview Jim Dine talked about his very flat bathrobe self portraits that he was showing at the American Cultural Centre, on Rue du Dragon. When Dine was asked: "Why empty bath robes?" he said he wanted to make a series of self-portraits, but felt a lot of pressure to be a modern artist. He had decided therefore, to use the bathrobe as a surrogate or body double. This caught my imagination: he thus provided me with a way of circumnavigating the problem of appearing to travel backwards.

The painting in Versailles, like Dine's self-portraits focused on the wrapping of flesh and not the stuff we are made of. It was a high camp, decorative portrait of *Louis XV* in coronation robes. A storm of golden *fleur de lys*, silk tassels and baroque drapery that framed the figure, to the point of drowning, a 15 year old king's tiny pink face. Rigaud gave me the subject matter and Dine both the mission and permission I needed.

The painting I made in 1974, as a result of the time I spent in Paris, started my career as a painter. It is an off beat, post modern portrait that owes as much to Dine and Pollock as it does to any deeper historical influence. The painting now sits in the Walker Galleries collection in Liverpool, what makes it strange, is that I did not go on to

paint many more portraits. In 1974 it seemed a risky picture to paint. Today I can see that it was only risky in so far, as it looked beyond what was then fashionable, and what I was ever formally taught to paint at art school.

Today I suspect that whether it is painted, drawn, photographed, filmed or modelled, the portrait is such an important part of our visual culture, that we, the people who are responsible for creating the curricula in art schools, need to first reconstruct our understanding of the subject, then get it back on the curriculum.



Anita Taylor

Professor and Dean of Bath School of Art and Design at Bath Spa University

The Lens of Portrayal Drawing, documenting and depicting people has always been fascinating, where the privilege and liberty of looking at someone's face comes to represent remarkable intimacy. As a sixth form student, my art teacher took me to see the David Hockney portrait drawings on show at the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent. It was the 1970s, and my teacher shared his enthusiasm for a revival of figuration. My fascination to draw others was endorsed; and I also began working as a portrait model. At art school in the 1980s, the life room provided space both for reflection and the accumulation and acquisition of information, soon to be transcribed into paintings of invented, remembered, and memorialised narratives. It also provided space for affirmation, simply to find an equivalent to that moment in time in that singular space with that individual person. The modes of thinking about this activity were wide ranging, from the perceived conservatism of the academy to problematic issues levied through feminist and other political agendas. Nevertheless, it seemed to have a profound value to me and to what I wanted to make. A debate and discourse around figuration and portraiture was alive, through the exploration of pictorial language, visual rendering and the quest to form a perceptual equivalent to the experience at hand. A heady mix of influential works in my orbit dealt with "portrayal" of differing kinds: old, new, expressionist, analytical, observed; the genre examined through drawing included painting, sculpture, photograph, film and novels. The drawings of Kathe Kollwitz had a profound influence on me, with their intimately inscribed, but stark emotive depiction, of grief and despair; so too Rembrandt's or Dürer's self analysis [or portraits]. The emphatic capacity of these drawings seemingly traverse time, with their direct connection to the now, through the immediacy of mark, trace of observation and empathetic authenticity. The sharing of the personal or collective narrative via depiction of individuals to whom others/we can identify still seems critical to an understanding of the human condition.

In my own practice, the journey has moved towards the exploration of the role and function of the drawn self. Consequently, over an extended period of time, I have been making large-scale drawings that explore the relationship of the female subject, as the artist and model, with the defining acts of scrutiny, gaze and feeling

embodied through the act of drawing. As the transcriber of information [and as a model] there is something affirmative about looking at a face, at the individual trace of lived experience and, through drawing, facilitating access through that observation to enable the connections to see what I was/am thinking and was/am looking at.

I was delighted to be invited to participate in this group, About Face, and to begin to explore an under-mined dialogue about the 'edges' of contemporary portraiture and to seek to re-evaluate the role of portrayal through the lens of creative practice.

Photographs by Nick Howard