



RALPH HEIMANS' PICTORIAL WORLDS

By Professor Erik Steffensen, Artist and Author

Not many people get the opportunity to be in the same room as Prince Charles and Crown Prince Frederik at the same time. But in March 2018 one particular person was doing so on a daily basis. The portrait painter, Ralph Heimans had portraits in progress of the two heirs to the throne on easels in his studio in the southern outskirts of London. They are meticulous, yet vibrant representations of the two royal men. Some people would call them psychological representations; others might remark that the recognisability and detail are spot on. There is nothing to criticise, no uncertainty, and no fumbling. They are impressive paintings, dignified portraits; but, apart from the purely technical aspect, difficult portraits too. Because Ralph Heimans is not merely a painter who sees. He is also a painter who understands the situation the subject is in, whether he is comfortable in his own body or whether there is a trace of awkwardness. Ralph Heimans' mastery consists of capturing this slight, hidden human 'impression' and discreetly revealing it. There is a reality that accompanies what we see. We sense its existence, though without being able to pin it down.

Ralph Heimans paints real people on the basis of in-depth studies and the use of photographic sources, but he does so in an apparently untraditional way; they are too radiant in that respect. Nor does he indulge in the sophisms of art history or surrealistic tricks. He paints in accordance with what he has experienced with the same loyalty as a novelist who needs to empathise with his characters; otherwise readers would simply not be interested in making their acquaintance. Charles and Frederik are not merely just any old Charles and Frederik. They are people whom the paintings invest with a historic afterlife, which will last much longer than their own earthly life. They will be perused and even admired by thousands, if not millions of eyes, while their own royal gazes will also closely scrutinise viewers and places, because Ralph Heimans has thought it over and decided that in the pictures the direction of the eyes should work as geometrical guidelines for the person's life and place in the universe.

Every decision the portrait painter has made is closer to eternity than many of the other decisions painters make. Because portrait painting is a peculiar genre, they are at once past and contemporary, heavily charged with symbolism and material presence, and in Ralph Heimans' case maybe they even make a future-oriented point: this middle-aged man will succeed to the throne. It is not a case of *Game of Thrones* – and yet. The painting comes across as curiously modern, maybe due to the vivid, quasi-synthetic colour scheme, which has an

Dame Judi Dench (detail)

almost cinematic quality. There is a mixture of science fiction, HBO and fantasy illustration in this painting's galaxy. In any case, there is nothing dusty about the enterprise, not even when the subjects are actors, writers and interpreters of William Shakespeare, despite the fact that he wrote his plays more than four hundred years ago. Ralph Heimans' portraits are not timeless; they are of our time. But they do not cut any familiar axis. They are playful without being indifferent; serious without being weighed down by severity. Maybe that is what makes them akin to literature, theatre and serial culture. Shakespeare is not far away. Not even for someone like Heimans, who was born in 1970 in Australia.

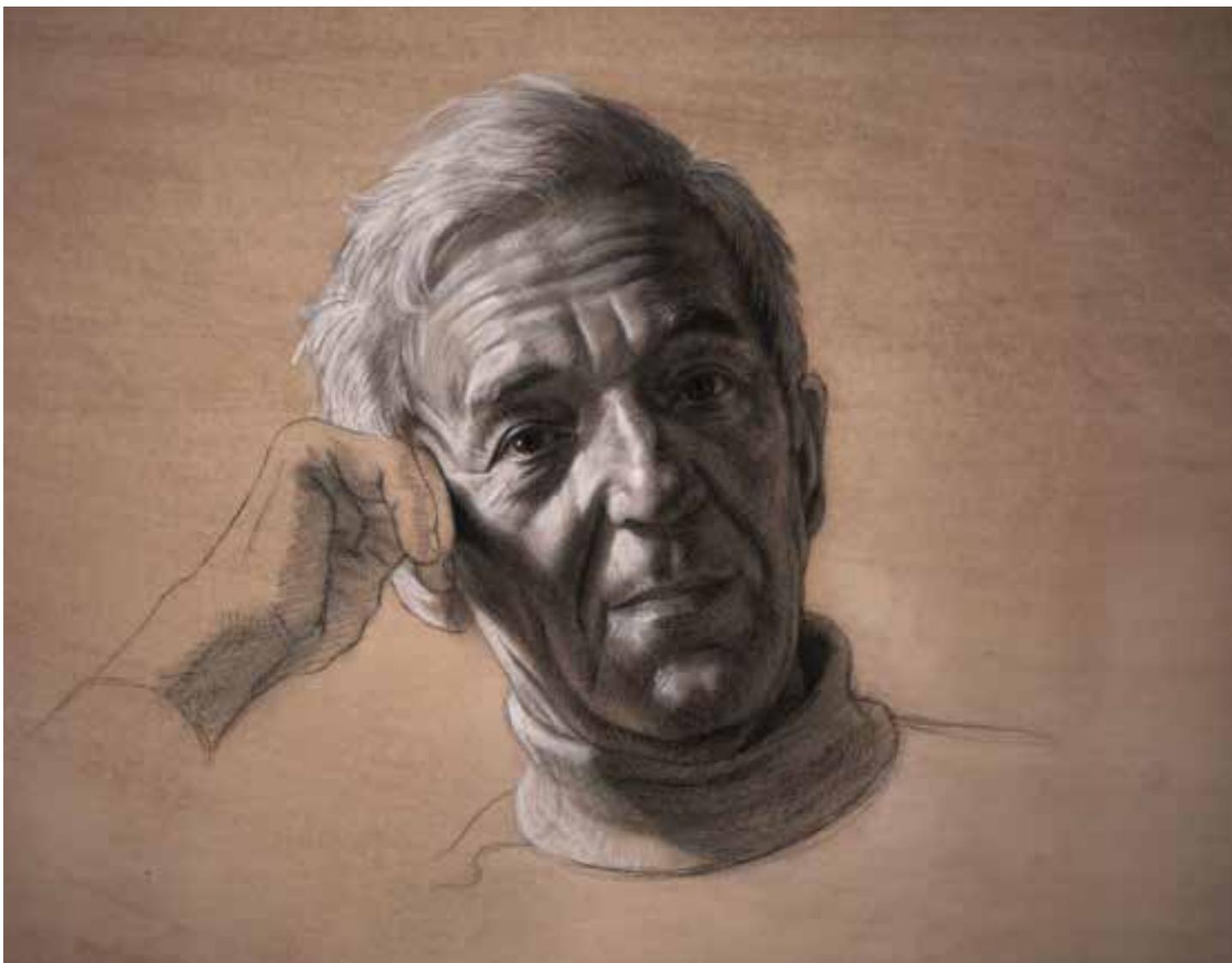
The fact that Ralph Heimans decided to become something as specific as a portrait painter can be no surprise, if you look at his family's history. Not only are there Dutch ancestors, but also Dutch citizenship on his father's side, and Lebanese roots on his mother's. It is an unusual blend. But, from a Jewish point of view, the fact that his parents settled in Australia was the most natural thing in the world. Whilst portrait painting and the kaleidoscopic worldview are surely nothing strange for any Dutchman with a tradition that encompasses Rembrandt and Vermeer, it is quite unusual in a southern hemisphere perspective. Australia has no great tradition, when it comes to older art history. On the other hand, though, there is no shortage of incredible personal stories. Ralph Heimans' own family is a good example of world citizens with southern, northern, eastern and western roots. More than that, in their professional life, his family have investigated stories about life among people to form images, sound and text that other people can immediately use. Whereas Ralph Heimans paints his stories in oil on canvas, throughout his life Frank Heimans has been the most assiduous producer, author, interviewer and documentary-maker imaginable. He has worked on all sorts of interesting historical subjects and, through personal evidence, communicated images of who and what Australia and her people are. This man of Jewish background has been controversial, investigating the Holocaust, the Aborigines, pornography, drugs and the occult in his international award-winning films and stories. So the painter, Ralph Heimans has a background of research that does not come from strangers or any training. It is in his family's nature to move, to understand points of view from many perspectives and to delve into topics that seem unusual. When projects are voluntary, work starts in the studio, so the preliminary work is not spontaneous. Ralph Heimans' creativity is more complex. He puts together a jigsaw puzzle consisting of many pieces, and part of the foundation also comes from his education and interest in high-level mathematics.

Ralph Heimans studied both Mathematics and Art History at university in Sydney before committing himself to a career as a painter and continuing his studies at art school. In addition, he took lessons with a Polish artist, Ziggy, an emigrant from Kraków, who lived on the outskirts of Sydney. The Pole's work bore indelible traces of traditional European painting in terms of practice and methodology, equal portions of mysterious and secretive alchemy, and discussion of



serious issues through sensory perception of the outside world. A lesson could easily consist of a conversation about colour during a walk in the woods, while observing nature, or practical work on underpainting or the awareness of pigments and materials in the studio. The work was slow and with no apparent result. You could even have taken Ziggy for a character in the quirky educational environment of the *Harry Potter* stories, only with modern-day Sydney as the setting. There is nothing mysterious or inaccessible about portrait art, but slowness is a keyword: something for which the subject must make a pact with the painter, if the paint-

Dame Judi Dench, 2018.
Private Collection

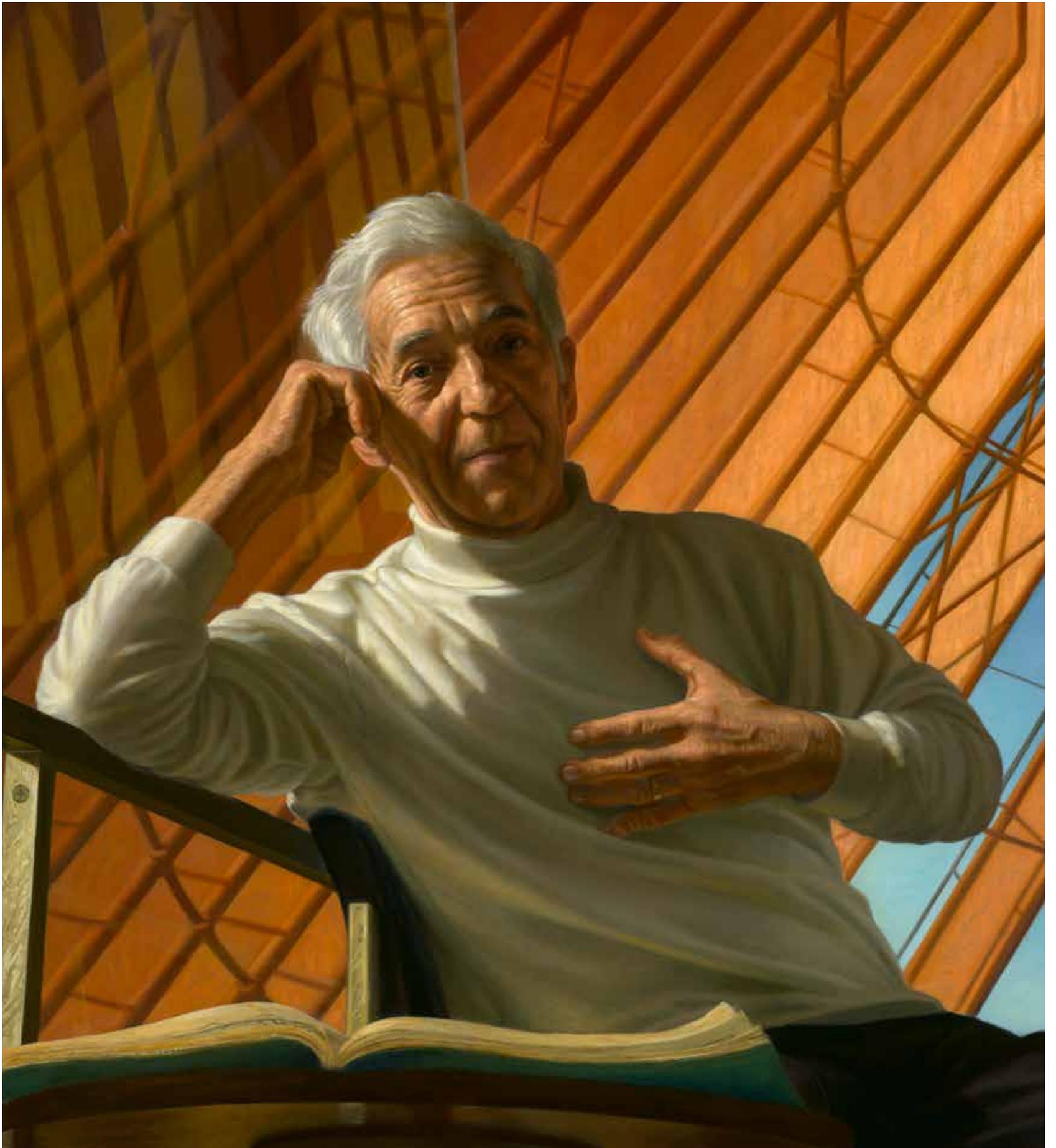


Study for Architecture of Music
(Vladimir Ashkenazy), 2011.

Detail of Architecture of Music
(Vladimir Ashkenazy), 2011
National Portrait Gallery, Canberra
(gift of Michael Crouch AC and
Shanny Crouch)

ing is to become a reality. It takes practice, and it is not something you learn on a course. It is something to which you must commit and devote long-term study.

Looking at the same face, and judging whether you have really captured its character, and estimating whether your entire concept for the painting is sustainable, requires not only skills, but also conversation. It is desirable if the artist more or less captures the universe of the subject or adds something to the portrait of the person or family, which we were not previously aware of. Ralph Heimans works towards the realisation of a work with great patience, even though it may sound enchanting that the entire research phase and getting to know a family might take place during a skiing holiday in the Alps. Extravagance and generosity can go hand in hand, but the process is always the same, even if he suddenly has to conjure up a painting of a family, in which there are strong sexual undertones, and in which the fetishistic value of things can be perceived through the







*The Architecture of Music
(Vladimir Ashkenazy), 2011.
National Portrait Gallery, Canberra
(gift of Michael Crouch AC and
Shanny Crouch)*



bright red soles of the Louboutin shoes at the end of a pair of long, freshly shaved women's legs on a thick pile carpet in Hong Kong. The subject is seen, but so is the surrounding space, without the interpretation inclining one way or the other. It is not the decadence of a lifestyle that Ralph Heimans highlights in a portrait, nor is it about flattery or exposure. He does everything on the basis of loyal affection for the person, space and the artist's skills, which the client has recognised in the painter. It is a dual activity. Without this exchange, the artist could not produce good portraits. It is the individual client who determines the degree of sensitivity, privacy or publicity. The Australian element can have a liberating effect, like an alien's eye in the middle of an otherwise heavily charged reality, where heritage can control an environment. So is it not wonderful to see Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II standing in a setting, which was created by the painter; as opposed to where she was standing when he met her prior to her Diamond Jubilee, which was the reason the painting was commissioned? The official portrait of the Queen was originally shown at the National Portrait Gallery of Australia in 2012, where it attracted a record number of visitors and received international attention. Now this portrait and another of Ralph Heimans' studies of the Diamond Jubilee are part of the permanent collection in Westminster Abbey, where from this year it is hanging in the Abbey's Triforium Gallery. A portrait painter is also a sorcerer, who can bring tempers to the boil. Even though the painter is not so exposed, his works are: as objects of wonder, hate, vandalism and eulogy. Society does not receive all gifts with equally open arms, but, to an overwhelming degree, art still seems to be the link that connects us on a deeper level, be it film, painting or some other artistic genre.

The Boyers, 2008.
Private Collection

Twenty years ago, in 1997, Ralph Heimans settled in the Montmartre district of Paris. In recognition of the fact that the career of a portrait painter evolves differently from that of other artists, because he works from project to project and each project takes time, in Europe there was greater opportunity to get a career off the ground. Because Ralph Heimans is determined and ambitious, though there is no mistaking his sympathetic, jovial Australian tone. Maybe we should just view it in the light of his upbringing surrounded by Dutch furniture and a quiet sensitivity as in a 17th-century Dutch painting. Making a living as an artist is not easy and, even though Paris sounds like a Mecca for tourists when it comes to artistic experiences and culture, France is a financial wilderness for any artist trying to establish him/herself. It is a long time since Paris led the field as a global artistic metropolis for visiting artists. But Ralph Heimans continued and gradually got commissions in neighbouring countries. A breakthrough to a large circle of wealthy customers came after the commission to paint Mary, Crown Princess of Denmark, who was born in Hobart, Tasmania, and so was matched with fellow countryman, Ralph Heimans as a portrait artist. It was both an exciting and brave choice of artist, and it was a successful portrait. Since then Ralph Heimans has painted portraits of several royal figures.



One of his best-known works is of the conductor and concert pianist, Vladimir Ashkenazy, whose relaxed attitude, but confident, friendly look is captured in a strictly orchestrated painting, in which the organic architecture of the Sydney Opera House turns in on itself like a Möbius strip in the context. Ralph Heimans' background in Architecture and Mathematics does not fail him in this warm painting, in which the shades of the wooden structures reveal an obvious interest, not only in the aesthetic dimension of art, but also in music as a whole. What we see is a symphonic study rather than a chamber music composition. The title is simply *The Architecture of Music (Vladimir Ashkenazy)*(p. 54), but we can see that the truth is greater than that. We immediately perceive that there is a spatiality and strange perfectionism shared by the respective domains of the pianist and the artist.

Whereas Sydney Opera House forms a modern backdrop for a portrait, Westminster Abbey is an older 'set' and a private home is something altogether different. Ralph Heimans seems to mix fiction and fact in his paintings. Maybe he even enjoys the freedom that art can provide in an otherwise close-knit concept: if there is no recognisability in the physical appearance of the subject, the portrait has failed. Ralph Heimans elevates the recognisable element of a painting to a supernaturalistic level. He flits round at ease in fancy apartments and rooms, even though planning the projects can often be so logistically challenging that the artist is only given an hour of the model's time. The artist operates with his camera and his preliminary studies and ideas with great accuracy in a sitting, before taking all the material back to his studio and coming up with the master plan, which then forms the essence of the painting. Ralph Heimans' painting is almost like a time machine, in which you could just as well be in the No Man's Land of 1770, when the Europeans claimed Australia, as in 2018, when the children have just been sent off to school after a hectic family breakfast. Everyday life and events merge freely. In a reflection behind the Danish princess we see what may be a view of her birthplace, Hobart, even though we presume we are in a castle in North Zealand. There is also a magical element to the series of portraits of writers, on which Ralph Heimans worked for a number of years, in which interpreters of Shakespeare are put under the magnifying glass. The Norwegian author, Jo Nesbø is an excellent example of this (p. 74). His flat in Oslo comes across as a kind of occult medieval temple with a tattered picture of the moon hanging over the bed in the bedchamber. In the painting, what is true and what is false? It is the universe of books. Here there is room for mass murder and Macbeth, and our own imagination is aroused. Jo Nesbø's hoodie brings us face to face with everyday life. Once we have noticed the ultra real garment, it is hard to imagine other than that the person is real. Alive and kicking. And yet only through the reality of books and art? Moving on this knife-edge of magic realism is an art in itself. *Consider Your Ways* (p. 96), as another painting is titled, is not just the motto of the setting incorporated as advice to young people. It also resounds in Ralph Heimans. He chooses his ways with care, and always finishes before the deadline.



The Boyers (details)

Tetty, 1995.
Private Colletion

The artist paints women and men. And children and young people. And pets as if they were members of the family. He weaves dream and reality into paintings of great strength and authenticity without resorting to gimmicks.

The frequently large scale of the paintings allows him to tell extraordinary stories. The family portrait, *The Boyers*, measuring 190 x 250 cm, portrays a family in a relaxed attitude, where each member of the family seems to have his or her own space: even the dog, which is positioned centrally in the picture, stands with its end towards the viewer and vigilantly keeps an eye on the distant walls or doors of the deep room (p. 56). Is a sound coming from the kitchen out there? In any case, it is alert to the fact there is something outside this room, full of antiques, modern art and personal belongings. The youngest son, sitting on the floor, has screen time on his Mac, while the daughter, barefoot, is sprawled over the sofa her mother is sitting in. There is exposed skin and choice fabrics. It is an erotically charged picture underscored by a painting on the wall of the large, almost regal living room, fitted with chandeliers, beautiful fabrics and dove blue wallpaper. The painting on the wall depicts a nude woman seated in a basket chair. The painting lends the scenario an oriental touch. There are a number of details that point in that direction: a floor vase, a Buddha statue and a starry-sky wall, which blends gently with the other modern artefacts in the room. Even the lamps have something cosmic about them with their glowing sensual shapes that resemble conches, shells and vegetation. It is a voyage round the world in objects, but you also get a sense of a family whose history is tied up with the things. There are personal preferences in the choices, depicting the individuals involved, seen from the point of view of both the painter and the people depicted. There is also a discreet hint of meaning. Who binds the family together, and where are they in their lives right now? As mentioned before, the dog belongs in the picture, but the maid is also there. It is a collection of people who desire intimacy. The painting also depicts a well-off, privileged family of individuals. It is an important picture that extends beyond the client's self-image. Ralph Heimans has succeeded in creating a work that incorporates modernity. The dog, the high-tech appliances, mobile and computer have all been given a place in the picture. There is a world outside the picture. The family is connected: like the rest of us and with the rest of us. We are part of the picture. It is a picture of the world, Version 2.0.

One of Ralph Heimans' smaller pictures, the portrait of the 97-year-old Tetty, who survived her internment in the Auschwitz concentration camp, because she had a rare blood type that could be used in the Nazis' medical experiments, shows us a woman with a look that extends beyond time. Sad and fixed. It is a calm portrait, a soulful portrait with a particular detail. The mark from her time in the camp is still there: a prisoner number tattooed on her forearm, discreetly visible under the sleeve of her blouse. Tetty is just a number in the line in the camp with no other identity. A black umbrella hangs on her arm: an object that evokes weather and protection. Choosing an umbrella as the protagonist's most



*Study for portrait of
Sir Ben Kingsley, 2018.
Private Collection*

highly treasured object is, in its way, an adventurous choice. There are no valuable objects or attempts to elevate her in the world via symbols, art and incense. Tetty is important for who she is, in her own right. The painter is aware of this. Just like his father, whose first major research project was about the Vienna Boys' Choir who were going to tour Australia in 1939, but had the good or bad fortune to get stranded there. The ship never sailed back to Europe, because Australia declared war against Germany that same day. The boys were between 8 and 13 years old, and several of them never returned, but were declared hostile aliens and placed with foster families in Australia. The boys could sing. Now they were 'prisoners of war'. It was not until Frank Heimans had carried out his research that their fate became public knowledge. The same can be said of Ralph Heimans' painting of Tetty. If it were not for its presence on the artist's website alongside Queen Elizabeth of England, we would not notice the eternal pulse of history. It is the artist who obtains and processes the material, be it high or low, and no project seems to be tackled without sympathy and empathy with the life and being of the person being portrayed. Ralph Heimans' painting is personal without being private.





Paula, 2008.
Private Collection







The Jungels, 2011.
Private Collection



Pam, 2016.
Private Collection



Nude, 2003.
Private Collection