

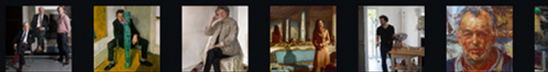
ART

## Any human art

At the intersection of cutting-edge contemporary art and centuries-long tradition, commissioned modern-day portraits push boundaries while still exuding heart and humanity, says Emma Crichton-Miller



ENLARGE



SHOW INFO

DECEMBER 22 2013  
EMMA CRICHTON-MILLER

In February 2012 Australian artist Ralph Heimans (large-scale portraits from £150,000, sketches from £10,000) learnt that he had secured the commission of his dreams. His proposal, to paint the Queen in her jubilee year, had been approved, and on March 21 he was granted an hour's sitting. The finished work, *The Coronation Theatre, Westminster Abbey: A Portrait of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2012*, is a vast (3.3m by 2.7m), richly coloured painting with dramatic lighting and virtuoso detailing of the complex architecture of the Abbey. Its focus is Her Majesty, dressed in her coronation robes and adorned with Queen Victoria's jewels, meditatively gazing at the 13th-century mosaic pavement that marks the spot on which 38 British monarchs since 1066 have been crowned. In June, this painting, bought for Westminster Abbey by Lord Harris of Peckham and only put on view in the Chapter House a month earlier, was defaced by a protestor, purple spray paint almost obliterating the figure of the Queen. Fortunately, the damage was not permanent, but this violent act was evidence of how powerfully human beings respond to portraits. Not only do we easily transfer the emotions we might feel for the person to the painted representation, but we respond with equal force to the values embodied in the composition – in this case, the obvious symbolism of religious and state authority, reinforced by the grandiloquent use of colour and lighting and the sumptuous detailing of fabric and marble flooring.

SHARE THIS ON...



EMAIL THIS

## Most popular



MOTORSPORT  
Wall of honours



ART | FINDERS KEEPERS  
Contemporary sculpture



DESTINATIONS  
Baku to the future



ART  
Any human art



ART | NEED TO NOW  
Telling Tales at Scream gallery



## Archive choice



## Mattia of importance



However far the mainstream of contemporary art moves from the representation of figures in space towards abstraction, or however extreme contemporary art's purposeful deformations of reality, nothing seems to diminish our appetite for a human likeness. Throughout the 20th century the onward march of modernism was paralleled by comparably far-reaching developments in portraiture – from Picasso's depictions of Dora Maar to Lucian Freud's extensive oeuvre, almost all of it portraiture in one way or another. There seems to be something fundamental to western art about the portrait – the effort to respond to and create an original representation of the humanity we recognise in another person. And although we can now record instantly and reproduce infinitely a photographic likeness of those we love and admire, commissioning a portrait, in whatever medium, is still regarded as a high honour – a large gesture of respect. For whereas a standard photograph is a poignant memorial of a single moment, a good painting or a great photograph somehow manages to wrap time into itself, creating an image that reaches backwards into the subject's past and forwards into some as yet unimaginable future.

You have only to pay a visit to London's National Portrait Gallery (NPG) to see how varied and ambitious portraiture continues to be. Since 1980, the NPG has actively commissioned new work from significant artists, raising the prestige of the genre, and its annual BP Portrait Award has stimulated younger artists to rise to the challenge. The work exhibited here is a world away from the kinds of sickly pastels or starkly photographic work you might find in a local gallery. You may not feel entirely ready to have an abstract image of yourself created from your DNA, in the manner of Marc Quinn's portrait of the Nobel prize-winning biologist Sir John Sulston, nor quite so disregarding of the specific physical characteristics of the person you love as to want their character rendered almost metaphorical, as in Patrick Heron's colourful portrait of author AS Byatt, but at the NPG you get a glimpse of the range of media and the many different styles and approaches that are possible.

Heimans, in his early forties, works unambiguously in a grand vein. It is not just the rich Italianate colouring or the dramatic lighting, but also the scale and power of his images. He likes to make narrative pictures that allude to his subject's personal history, and these are often structured by complicated architectural settings. Heimans studied architecture in Sydney before he decided to become an artist. In fact, it was his former lecturer in the subject who gave him his first commission. When he decided to switch to fine art, he avoided art college and instead devoted himself to pure mathematics and art history, hiring his own art teacher, a Polish emigré of the old school. The mathematician is evident in his relish for complex geometries, most vividly on display in his portrait of Vladimir Ashkenazy, in which the architecture of the Sydney Opera House is reconfigured rhythmically all around the pianist and conductor to evoke music. Perhaps out of respect for his Dutch ancestors, Heimans is also clearly indebted to Rembrandt and Vermeer, among other European Old Masters.

A significant commission to paint the controversial judge, the Honourable Michael Kirby AC CMG, just as he was moving from the Court of Appeal in New South Wales to the High Court of Australia, led to a run of commissions to portray lawyers, including an English QC, but he has also painted or sketched significant public figures, such as the philanthropist Dame Elisabeth Murdoch and the French national rugby team.

The Queen is not the first royal personage he has painted. In 2006, he was commissioned to create the first official Danish portrait of Australian-born Crown Princess Mary. Heimans painted the fashionable young princess wearing a simple suit, standing in the garden room of the Frederiksborg Palace – rather than the formal state rooms – and gazing thoughtfully out of the window. Her home town of Hobart, Australia, appears as if reflected in the mirror behind her.

Such a glittering client list has also attracted many private commissions, especially within the banking communities of London, New York and Hong Kong. One happy client, Paula, remembers that when her husband first suggested the idea of a portrait she was horrified, but when she met Heimans, she found him "such an easy, approachable guy" that she agreed.

On the eve of a rare selling exhibition of the work of design-art doyen Mattia Bonetti, Lucia van der Post examines his powerful – and eclectic – influence





Heimans produced a group family portrait that captured a very happy moment in their lives, when they were living in Hong Kong “in an art-deco stand-alone house in a country park”. It is night-time and the couple’s two children, then four and six, are seen through the old-colonial windows, sitting inside the warmly lit house, while Paula is outside on the curved balcony, with her husband in the background and the high mountains in the distance beyond the house. Now in their London home, the painting captures their “nostalgic connection to that place. It’s where our children were born.”

Entrepreneur and Stradivarius enthusiast Nigel Brown, whose former company commissioned his portrait was guided to Louise Riley-Smith (£7,000 for a 24in by 20in portrait) by a similar personal instinct. “I knew her and liked her portraits. If I had to endure this process at the hands of my firm, I wanted to enjoy it.” Riley-Smith, who came to painting as a second career, learning directly from a series of artist-mentors, acknowledges that she was extremely lucky to discover that she had the knack of capturing a likeness. While her portraits appear to be conventional, they have a looseness and informality that is very appealing. As well as having a natural sympathy for her sitters, however, Riley-Smith listens attentively to their desires, and finds a setting that suits their characters. Brown wanted to have his motorbike helmet and his violin in the picture. He took off his shoes to reveal his Garrick Club socks. The picture took 30 hours, as Riley-Smith does not work from photographs. “I didn’t mind,” says Brown. “I could choose the music.” And the result? “She doesn’t see me the way I see myself. But you don’t think about a picture – is it like me? Instead you think, is it likable by me? I like it more now that there is a bit of distance.”

James Lloyd (portraits from about £4,000) has won, among many other accolades, prizes and scholarships, both the 1997 BP Portrait Award and the 2008 Ondaatje Prize for Portraiture, which is given to the best painting in the annual exhibition of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters. Three of his bold, thickly painted oil portraits – of Paul Smith, Baron Simon of Highbury and the actress Maggie Smith – are in the NPG. But he does not think of himself as a portrait painter – as he points out, you wouldn’t really call Velázquez or Lucian Freud “portrait painters”. “I pretty much fell into it,” he explains. “I just found myself painting people.” He is uncompromising in his commitment to the quality of the picture, but readily acknowledges that “if the likeness isn’t there, it is quite hard to say that it is good.” He mostly prefers sitters, if possible, to come to his studio, near to London Bridge, and its distinctive decoration and high views of London feature in many of his works.

Sir Nicholas Scheele, former chancellor of the University of Warwick and one-time president and chief operating officer of the Ford Motor Company, recently sat for Lloyd, who was commissioned by the university, and comments, “I can see why he has to work in his studio – he knows where everything is and he doesn’t have to worry about paint dripping everywhere. He can just focus on the individual and the paint.” Over six sittings, Scheele became fascinated by Lloyd’s process. “He mixes all his colours with a palette knife and then paints on the canvas with brushes. It is almost as if he is doing a mural.” Like most contemporary dignitaries, Scheele did not wear his robes – “they are desperately uncomfortable” – and because he had admired another of Lloyd’s paintings, which used a mirror to reflect the artist, Lloyd put a mirror into this. This reminds us that what we are seeing is the result of a very particular interaction between artist and sitter, a drama in which the sitter responds to the surroundings and the artist as he reveals (or conceals) his own personality.

Painter Catherine Goodman (portraits from £12,000 to £25,000), who is also the founder and artistic director of the Prince’s Drawing School, suggests that “the humanity in another person” is always the primary focus. Even when she is painting a chair or a landscape, it will often become a person for her. “I am painting a fox at the moment that is my father.” Goodman won the BP award in 2002 for a sensitive, traditionally painterly portrait of Father Antony Sutch, then headmaster of Downside School, whom she had known for many years. She tries to make no distinction between her many paintings of friends, family and long-standing subjects and the portrait commissions, and is currently embarked on a year-long project to create 12 portraits, of which only two are formal assignments. Among her subjects are literary agent

Gillon Aitken, film director Stephen Frears and a 29-year-old soldier who lost both legs in Afghanistan. She works by long immersion – taking between 12 and 15 sittings and sometimes working on portraits of friends over several years. She admits that sitting for a portrait is an “extraordinarily intimate experience”, but argues that the more you ask from a sitter, the more interesting the process becomes for them. Her paintings are built up in layers as if incorporating many different moods. “Part of the point of a painted portrait is that you can include time. Photography is all about the moment,” she says.

Paint is not the only medium to achieve this. One of the more startling recent commissions by the NPG was Sam Taylor-Wood’s intimate digital film portrait of David Beckham sleeping. Another artist who uses digital technology to probe the conventions of portraiture is American David Michalek (\$50,000 for a single portrait or tableau). Recent work, shown from Trafalgar Square to the Venice Biennale and the Lincoln Center, has involved the creation of hyper-slowed-down digital-video portraits of actors, dancers and friends, as well as private clients. These are sometimes life-size or larger and can last from 10 minutes to over an hour. They look like stills until you see the smallest movements, and when you realise that what you are looking at is slowly metamorphosing, it’s like watching life itself. Michalek prefers to think of his primary subject as time: “I elongate time, I sculpt time.”

However, Michalek is also fascinated by the interaction between artist and subject. “When I do take a commission, I am interested in finding the context in which these people can be themselves.” Photography and film do not just capture the light and shadow, they record “the signs of the symbiotic relationship between the subject and the artist. At every point it involves your heart.” For this reason he and his assistants spend a long time with clients, observing, talking and, especially if the subjects are children, working out the most appropriate props, costumes and activity to film to reveal something of their inner life. One recent commission is a gorgeously textured, moving portrait of Pauline Reyniak and her two young sons, which Reyniak commissioned for her husband. “I am always trying to capture the precious fleeting moments of my sons’ childhoods. When I saw the portrait David did for another family, I was blown away. It was innovative and cutting-edge and I knew at that moment that I must commission a portrait of my family in this unique way. It is the ultimate 21st-century portrait, a stunning image that unfolds at a glacial speed.” As Reyniak says, “David’s intimate approach captures the essence of who we are. The art is in the way he works with people, it’s not about the technology at all.”

In the end, however, whatever the technology, whatever the style, no matter how beautiful the finished product, what really matters in a portrait is that magical sense that it renders visible to us, the viewer, a

In the end, however, whatever the technology, whatever the style, no matter how beautiful the finished product, what really matters in a portrait is that magical sense that it renders visible to us, the viewer, a distinctive, precious, unique human personality.

**Catherine Goodman**, [www.catherinegoodman.co.uk](http://www.catherinegoodman.co.uk) and see Marlborough Fine Art. **David Michalek**, [www.davidmichalek.net](http://www.davidmichalek.net). **James Lloyd**, [www.jameslloyd.org.uk](http://www.jameslloyd.org.uk). **Louise Riley-Smith**, 18 Clarendon Street, Cambridge CB1 1JU (01223-513 015; [www.louiseriley-smith.co.uk](http://www.louiseriley-smith.co.uk)). **Marlborough Fine Art**, 6 Albemarle Street, London W1 (020-7629 5161; [www.marlboroughfineart.com](http://www.marlboroughfineart.com)). **National Portrait Gallery**, St Martin’s Place, London WC2 (020-7306 0055; [www.npg.org.uk](http://www.npg.org.uk)). **Ralph Heimans**, [www.ralphheimans.com](http://www.ralphheimans.com).

---

See also

Portraits, Paintings, Digital arts