

CHOICE

BY ROYAL

APPOINTMENT

Photography Ellis Parrinder

By Matthew Westwood

HE'S HIGH SOCIETY'S FAVOURITE ARTIST. BUT RALPH HEIMANS' PORTRAIT OF THE QUEEN IS SURELY HIS CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT



**R**alph Heimans was in London when the phone call came mid last year. His portrait of the Queen in the crimson velvet Robe of State that she wore at her 1953 coronation had been vandalised while on display at Westminster Abbey. A man from protest group Fathers4Justice had sprayed the word "Help" in purple paint across the canvas before a guard could wrestle him to the ground. "I was terrified that he spray-painted the face, which he did," Heimans says. "But not the eyes. I was very nervous about that. Because the face is the soul of the painting, and that's something that would be very hard to repaint."

The distressing incident is half a world away from where Heimans, 44, is sitting now, in the back yard of his temporary home near Sydney's Bondi Beach. It's a sunny afternoon and Heimans is relaxing in jeans and a black T-shirt, his arms covered in red, blue and black paint. He's painted his share of family portraits, but these days his work takes him to the upper echelons: maestros of music and law, political and community leaders, Princess Mary of Denmark at Frederiksborg Castle. There's talk about possible future paintings of Ben Kingsley, Judi Dench and Bill Clinton.

Heimans was the only artist to be granted a sitting with the Queen for her Diamond Jubilee, after former High Court judge Michael Kirby and others put his name forward, but his masterstroke was to propose a painting that showed the interior of Westminster Abbey, the site of the coronation. Not since Cecil Beaton's 1953 photograph had the Queen been depicted in the Abbey in an official portrait (although in both cases the sitting was done at Buckingham Palace).

His most recent painting, unveiled at Parliament House in Canberra in March, is the official portrait of the former governor-general Dame Quentin Bryce. Much has been made of the

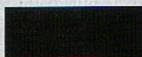
symbols in the work, from her "suffragette purple" suit to the landscape reflected in the glass. She is shown stepping out of her office at Yarralumla through a glass door: an allusion to glass ceilings.

Heimans' genre is portraiture, but he is also a narrative painter. Typically, he spends weeks researching a sitter and then takes time getting to know them and their story. Bryce invited him to spend a week at Yarralumla, where he "got a feeling for the rhythm of life" in the household. "Context plays such an important part of my portraiture, so finding the context and collaborating with the subject, finding a meaningful setting, is a very important part of the process," he says. Nothing in a composed painting is incidental. Bryce is shown emerging from her office with a pen in her hand and a sheaf of paper with the vice-regal crest: a reference, Heimans says, to her habit of writing personal letters by hand every day. There are small but personally significant details: on the desk is a feathered ceremonial stick that was a gift from the women of Papunya; a statue of Simpson and his donkey sits on the bookshelf.

All of his pictures tell a story. His portrait of Vladimir Ashkenazy shows the conductor in his characteristic white skivvy and, behind him, the rhythmic architectural details of the Sydney Opera House. The picture of Princess Mary, for the Danish Museum of National History, is set in a drawing room at Frederiksborg. Heimans put a mirror behind the princess and, amid a clever play of light and reflection, a picture of Hobart's Constitution Dock.

Heimans has learnt to trust his instincts when meeting a subject for the first time: those myriad flickering details – like the Queen's "sad eyes... kind eyes" – by which we appraise someone, often subconsciously. But the collaboration is important if the portrait is to tell a story. He wants to "delve into the universe of the subject" and help construct a portrait that represents, in part, the subject's self-image and place in the world. Empathy and rapport are as

**Story teller:**  
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**Glowing:** Heijmans' portraits of Queen Elizabeth, left, and Quentin Bryce



essential to his kit as palette and brushes. His open, friendly face and gently courteous manner must help put his subjects at ease. He'd get a very different result without that trusting relationship. "You might get a static image, a two-dimensional image, which is something that I fight against: the subject in the armchair," he says. "That fills me with horror."

**Heijmans knew he wanted to be an artist,** but his path from enthusiastic student to royal portraitist took him down some byways at first. He grew up on Sydney's lower North Shore, the middle child of Frank Heijmans, a documentary filmmaker, and Josette, a French teacher. His older sister Ingrid is a psychologist and his younger brother Jeremy is a political activist who co-founded GetUp!. On finishing Year 12 in 1987 at Mosman High, which had a good art department, he won the Australian National Art Award, sponsored by *The Australian* and presented by Bob Hawke and Rupert Murdoch.

He used his \$2500 prize money to fly to Europe, where he hoped to find a school that would provide rigorous tuition in drawing, anatomy and perspective. It was the late '80s and traditional Academic training had given way to theory and postmodernism. At the Royal Academy of Arts in London he was told the life-drawing room was hardly used. "I was a bit taken aback, and decided to forge my own path," he says. Back in Sydney, he enrolled in architecture ("a disaster"), and started on an unlikely combination of pure mathematics and fine art. His first commissioned portrait was of an architecture lecturer, Trevor Howells. "I took it seriously and didn't make it cheap," he says.

He studied art at the Julian Ashton school, and also had private lessons with a Polish immigrant he refers to only as Ziggy, who gave him "this extraordinary European education in suburban Sydney". Ziggy taught him the painting techniques of the Dutch old masters (Heijmans

has Dutch heritage). It involves building up layers of transparent and semi-transparent glazes to make a rich, glowing surface. Master and pupil worked on just one painting in the eight years they were together, but the old-world education involved a lot of philosophical discussion: aesthetic values, candlelight and sunset as light sources, the nuances of different poses, harmony in nature, psychology and music.

"Light on skin looks beautiful if painted in that technique," Heijmans says of Ziggy's glazes. "He would mix his own oils, and teach me secret recipes. It was perhaps as you would have learnt hundreds of years ago. He was the type of person to click his heels and kiss women's hands. He was from another time." He doesn't want to say too much about Ziggy, because they broke off – Heijmans says it was necessary for his artistic growth – and haven't spoken since. Heijmans will occasionally mix oil and pigments as Ziggy showed him, but he also brings modern tools to his portraits. Typically, he will take photographs of the subject and use these as references for compositional drawings in which he works out the pose, expression and scenic details. There may be more sittings, more drawings and more discussion before he puts paint to canvas.

In the case of the Queen's portrait, photographs were essential. He did photographic studies of the Abbey interior – including the 13th-century Cosmati Pavement and lamp-lit Choir – at night when the church was closed. He had just one precious hour in which to record the Queen's expression and pose: unlike

Lucian Freud, who had sittings with the Queen between May 2000 and December 2001 to do his 23.5cm x 15.2cm oil painting.

From the photo studies, Heijmans produced a drawing of Elizabeth's face, which he then transferred to the canvas along with the Abbey background. Thus was the Queen returned to the site of her coronation and that of every English monarch since 1066.

*The Weekend Australian* art critic Christopher Allen has strong views on the use of photography in portrait painting, especially in the Archibald Prize, where it has become ubiquitous (despite rules that specify the portraits must be painted from life). Tell-tale signs are a flattening of detail and loss of painterly vitality, as if the life has been sucked out of the subject. Heijmans is a skilful painter, Allen says, and would be better still if he didn't rely on photographs: legs cropped at the shins and inert facial expressions give the game away. He says the Bryce portrait "looks like nothing so much as someone posing for a photograph".

For Heijmans, photographs are a means to an end; a form of note-taking. He doesn't reproduce a photograph, he insists, but draws on multiple images and his memory to make a composition, taking "the eyes from one photograph and the mouth from another". The method, he argues, is not so far from the traditional Academic training that he sought but couldn't find in Europe: a rigorous understanding of light, form and the human figure, all based on the ability to draw.

**Heijmans is not the only Australian portraitist** to sit with royalty and other famous people. The Queen has been depicted in portraits by William Dargie – in the "wattle painting" so familiar from RSL clubs – and by photographer Polly Borland, who has the Queen in a stunned-monarch pose against a glittering gold background. But his portfolio of eminent individuals is growing, and





**Radical Restraint**  
Heimans' depiction of  
Michael Kirby

he has important commissions coming up. His wife, Tami Bokey, a film editor, now manages his career as well as helping to raise their two daughters, Ellie-Rose, three, and Hannah, two.

When we spoke, the family was preparing to cross the globe again and settle back at Herne Hill in London, where Heimans has a studio and several portraits to be getting on with. One of them – for the Sydney-based Kirby Institute, of Michael Kirby and the institute's director, David Cooper – has just been packed in an enormous crate for shipment to London.

Kirby has been a benevolent influence on Heimans' career. They met at around the time Frank Heimans was making a documentary about Kirby for SBS's *Australian Biography*. Heimans asked if he could paint the judge for the Archibald. The 1998 painting was done not long after Kirby's departure as President of the NSW Court of Appeal and he is shown wearing the "crimson and fur" robes of that court. The title, *Radical Restraint*, refers to Kirby's progressive and traditional values on the bench, and Heimans depicts him in an imaginary grouping of past judges holding his wig and turning to address the viewer. Kirby says Heimans shows him with an expression of mild irritation mingled with duty and obligation: "My brothers say he captured perfectly the look I gave them when they came into my bedroom, looking for assistance with their studies."

The Kirby painting wasn't selected for the Archibald and Heimans has not entered since: the publicity of the nation's most celebrated art prize is "not something I felt like I've needed". But the picture, now held by the National Portrait Gallery, was a breakthrough for Heimans and his art. It was the painting in which he first combined a portrait with an implied narrative about the sitter and his milieu.

Kirby also set in train the portrait of the Queen, believing that Australia needed a royal portrait for the Diamond Jubilee. Discussions



were had with Louise Doyle, then director of the NPG, and a proposal was made to Buckingham Palace by John Dauth, high commissioner in London at the time (and a former press secretary to the Queen). Unusually, perhaps, for such an important project, Heimans' royal portrait was done on spec. It was not commissioned by the NPG or another official agency. Approval came just 10 days before the scheduled sitting. Before he knew it, Heimans was at Buckingham Palace watching the Queen advance down a long corridor, attended by footmen and wearing the Robe of State. "It could be your grandmother, but she had this extraordinary presence," Heimans recalls. "I was told to say, 'May I take control

now, Ma'am?' Which I could not say; I fumbled. But she kind of smiled. She got the idea."

Heimans unveiled the 250cm x 342cm painting – the full title is *The Coronation Theatre: A Portrait of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II* – at a private viewing for the Queen's assistant private secretary and the Dean of Westminster Abbey. The clergyman agreed to acquire the picture after its public exhibition in Canberra. It had been on display at the Abbey for just a few weeks when it was vandalised with the purple paint. Unsure at first whether it could be repaired, a team of restorers set to work with solvent and cotton buds to remove the stain. The job took five weeks. "It was a very nerve-racking experience," Heimans says. "There was always the suspense as to whether the cleaning would be successful and they wouldn't remove too much paint. They were meticulous. And the touching up was minimal, because they did such a great cleaning job." The painting will eventually be housed in a special Diamond Jubilee Gallery to open within the Abbey in 2017.

The portrait was unveiled at the NPG by Quentin Bryce. It may not be a coincidence that Heimans later received an email from Parliament House asking if he would paint the official portrait of Bryce. "My approach to portraiture is something that really appealed to her, because she has this strong belief in the power of storytelling as a guiding principle," Heimans says. "So there was a natural union there, a harmony in our approaches. We hit it off, I guess."

Heimans has adeptly negotiated the protocols and procedures that surround such prominent figures. Another high-profile portraitist, Vincent Fantauzzo, says Heimans has a reputation for discretion: "He has established that he is a trustworthy guy. Trust is a big thing in the painting of portraits." Kirby says: "I think he is getting his commissions simply because his work is outstanding. He would be one of the top portraitists in the world."

In London, Heimans will complete the commission from the Kirby Institute, and a 4m painting of billionaire American philanthropist Darla Moore. And there are discussions about a portrait of Bill Clinton, who Heimans met through a donor to the Clinton Foundation. "At the moment I am in discussion with a whole bunch of exciting different parties," he says. "This is exactly the space I want to be in, to be able to have the freedom to turn my attention to work that really inspires me, and people who have made a significant contribution." ●