

Ralph Heimans’ famous faces make for a winning exhibition



Ralph Heimans, The Coronation Theatre: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2012

In an unusual departure from its mixed-artist exhibitions, the National Portrait Gallery has opened its 2024 season with an exhibition of high seriousness – Ralph Heimans: Portraiture. Power. Influence.

Given that almost all of the sitters are famous people, although not all the portraits were intended for public display, members of the general public are bound to have an opinion about them and the show has every sign of being a sure winner.

The exhibition is deceptively muted, with dark colours on the walls exuding an air of grandeur. The low theatrical-style lighting places focus on the portraits themselves of public figures, including the late Queen Elizabeth, King Charles III and Queen Mary and King Frederik X of Denmark, but also taking in Australian intellectuals, business leaders and politicians as well as British figures in the arts, such as actors Judi Dench and Ben Kingsley.



Gloves off (Tom Uren) 1996

There are earlier works, such as his unconventional painting *Gloves off* (Tom Uren) 1996, shows the late Labor politician Tom Uren gesturing against a background that looks wild in comparison to the lavish settings of almost every other portrait.

An early National Portrait Gallery acquisition (the NPG holds four of his portraits) on show is *Radical Restraint*, 1998 in which former High Court Justice Michael Kirby, a great supporter of Heimans, is the only judge facing the viewer.

The artist, Sydney born and trained, has long since made an international career for himself, having moved overseas in the late 1990s to be nearer the source of portrait commissions. But he was on hand to talk about his work, which is firmly grounded in the tradition of Renaissance portraiture, showing us the wealth and power of his sitters through not just their faces but the objects which surround them.

Viewers will find the backgrounds almost as fascinating as the visages.

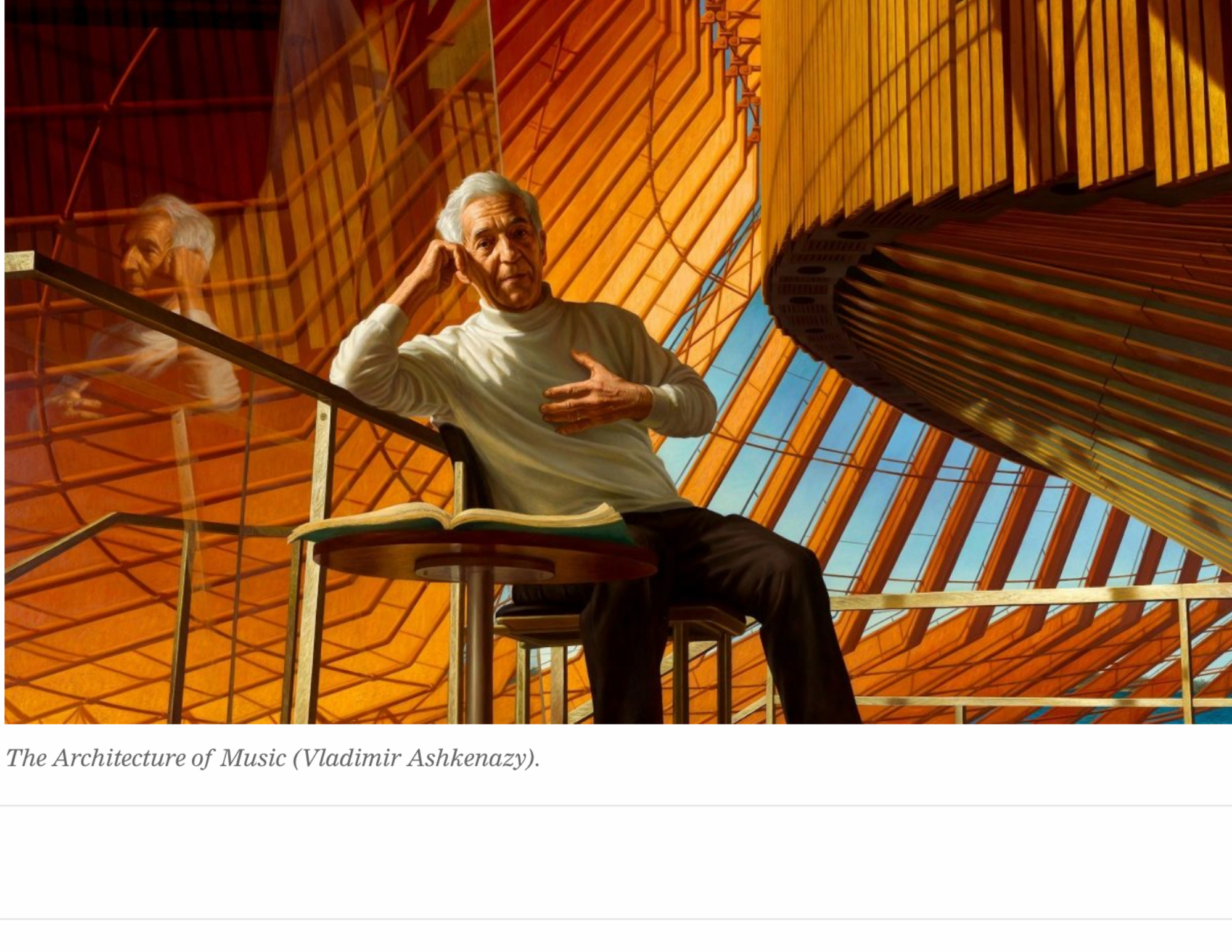


Heimans at the NPG with his 2018 portrait of the then Prince of Wales (now King Charles III). Photo: Mark Mohell

The 2018 Portrait of HRH The Prince of Wales (now King Charles III) suggests the comfort of a country squire’s residence, while Heimans’ 2020 impression of Melbourne’s Pratt siblings, Leon and Lilly, shows a sumptuous setting complete with gold frames, harp and fine porcelain – certainly in the great Flemish tradition where power and wealth were demonstrated in the possessions of the sitter.

A self-styled cinematic painter, Heimans, who also trained as a mathematician, is fascinated with architecture. A self-portrait in the exhibition shows him in the Paris Metro, which he makes look almost as grand as the Sydney Opera House seen in his 2011 work, *The Architecture of Music* (Vladimir Ashkenazy).

Four years in the making, Portrait Gallery director Bree Pickering said the exhibition demonstrated Heimans’ excellence in the field of commissioned portraiture, showing just why he had become the artist of choice for the British and Danish Royal families.



The Architecture of Music (Vladimir Ashkenazy).

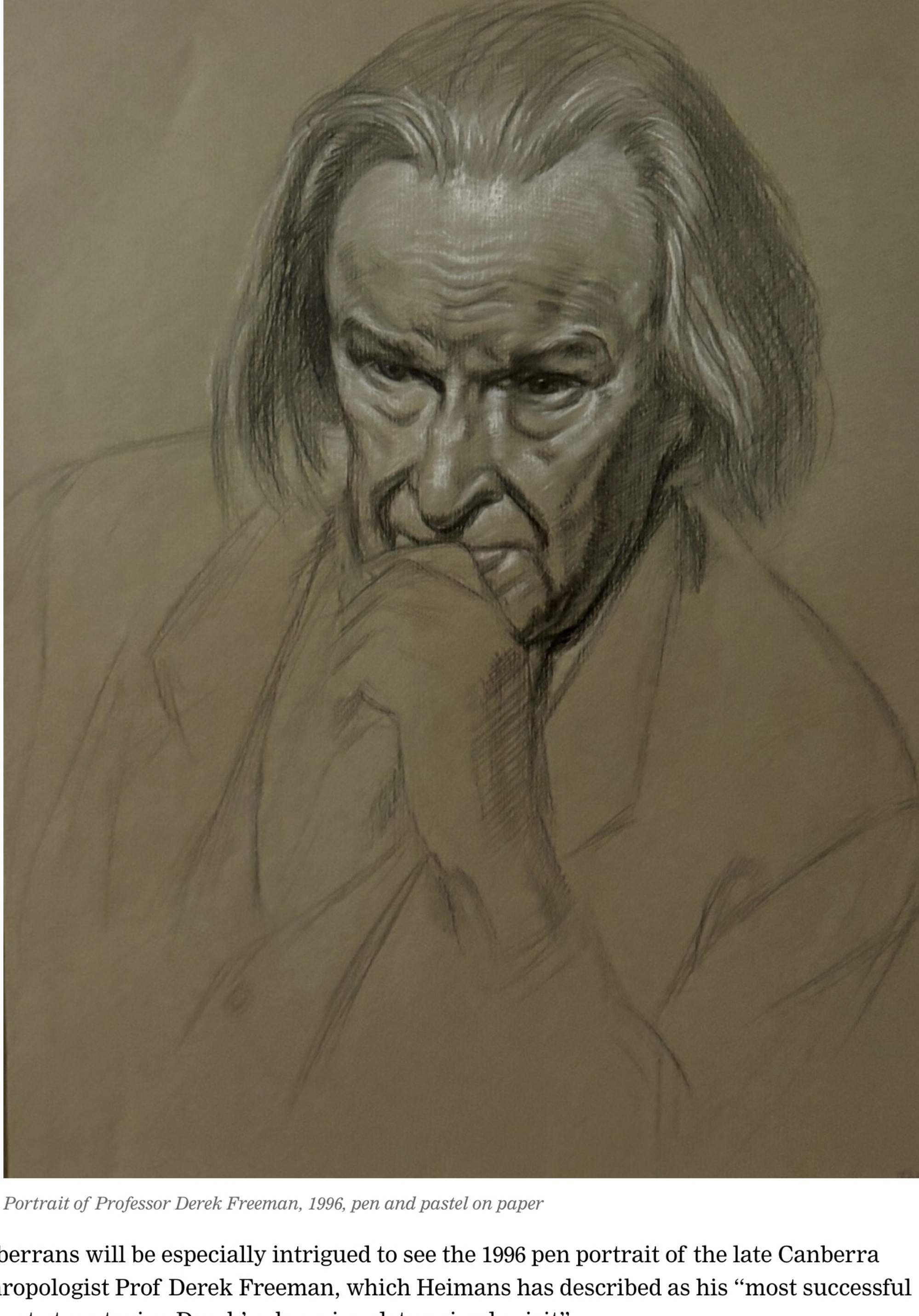
Performing a balancing act, she said, his paintings gave rare insights into the people themselves, despite the constraints of performing to a commission.

I asked Heimans how he managed to achieve that balancing act without overly flattering his subjects: “It is obviously part of his job to do justice to the legacy of the sitter,” he said, “but I aim to be truthful and so I collect a lot of information before talking to them... then empathy and understanding are the most important tools in the portrait painter’s toolbox.”

Viewers will doubtless be intrigued by his insights into his sitters’ personalities.

The portrait of former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd for instance, shows a fiercely resolute individual, but also features Mr Rudd’s cat Louie, softening the impression.

An essential part of the viewing, placed in mini-galleries, are preparatory sketches and drawings by Heimans, some leading to full portraits but others, like the anatomical drawings done at age 17, showing his perceptions of the human body.



Portrait of Professor Derek Freeman, 1996, pen and pastel on paper

Canberrans will be especially intrigued to see the 1996 pen portrait of the late Canberra anthropologist Prof Derek Freeman, which Heimans has described as his “most successful attempt at capturing Derek’s obsessive, determined spirit”.

Heimans is shown speaking on screen about his Diamond Jubilee portrait of the late Queen Elizabeth II in the Coronation Theatre at Westminster Abbey where his portrait normally resides, a work already seen by thousands here at the Portrait Gallery from 2012 to 2013.

Describing the cinematic and theatrical imperatives in his art, he explains how he had depicted the queen lifting her heavy, jewel-encrusted robe, “as if to show us something”.

With just an hour for his sitting with late monarch, everything for his brief, he said, had been carefully considered by the queen herself, down to the diamond ring inherited from Queen Victoria.

“Most private portraits don’t reach the eyes of the public,” he said, “but in my portrait of the Queen, there was an opportunity for me as artist to engage in a public conversation.”

“I wanted to say something about Her Majesty that was counter to most narratives, to show the singularity of her life, to show her isolated and introspective. Maybe it’s a reflection of who I am.”

Ralph Heimans: Portraiture. Power. Influence. at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra until May 27.