



Left: Clive Smith, *Double Single*, 1989. Winner of the BP Portrait Award 1999.
Right: Chuck Close, *Leslie*, 1973. Private collection.

THE NEW PORTRAITURE

Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in the art of portraiture. But, as Martin Gayford shows, portraiture at the end of the 20th century has been redefined to include images of human individuality in the broadest sense

THE PORTRAIT WAS NOT THE EARLIEST form of human art. Before people made portraits, they made images of gods and animals (which were perhaps one and the same). Portraits are rare in some artistic traditions. But in the West they have been prevalent since the days of the ancient Greeks.

Nonetheless, critics intermittently announce that the painted portrait is dead – Brian Sewell does so annually in his review of the BP Portrait Award exhibition. This claim is made for the same reason as the venerable cry that painting itself is dead. Photography is supposed to have killed them off.

Just as painting itself always seems to rise from the grave, however – often shortly after loud declarations of its decease – so does portraiture, which actually appears to be undergoing a resurgence at the moment. Portraits have been seen in such intensely trend-conscious spots as the Saatchi Gallery, and more (not yet exhibited) are to be seen in the pages of the Saatchi Gallery book, *The New Neurotic Realism*. A new generation of portraitists is appearing – Anthony Williams, Isabel Myerscough, Elizabeth Peyton – several of them nurtured by the BP Portrait Award. The exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery connected with that award is invariably crowded. The public, it seems, is interested in portraiture, and the supply of sitters is as abundant as ever.

But is the portrait changing? In recent years there have been fewer and fewer commissioned portraits of the traditional, respectable, diplomatically flattering, Chairman-of-the-Board variety in the BP Award exhibition. The exhibition tends to be full not of portraits in that sense – sitters weighed down with academic robes and chains of office – as of pictures of people. Indeed, like all artistic categories, the old-fashioned class of portraits seems to be dissolving. All images interested in human individuality are portraits in a sense.

In the BP Award show there are generally plenty of self-portraits, often 'naked portraits' – a category named by Lucian Freud, its greatest exponent – paintings that are truthful, intimate, revelatory of private madness or fantasy. The public face is being replaced by the private face.

That, of course, is in tune with wider trends – the removal of formality from public life, the attempts to take the stuffiness out of the Royal Family, the ascendancy of the individual. It is also a development from the live tradition of portraiture, of which there are outstanding, indeed great practitioners among senior living artists.

The truth is, of course, that the portrait never went away as an element in current, living – as opposed to merely academic – art. Picasso, as a



Left: Stephen Conroy, *Marrakesh II*, 1998, Marlborough Fine Art, London.
Centre: Ishbel Myerscough, *Helen Mirren*, 1997, National Portrait Gallery, London. Myerscough won the 1995 BP Portrait Award and this commission was part of the prize.
Above: Lucian Freud, *John Minton*, 1952, Royal College of Art Collections.

recent exhibition underlined, produced marvellous portraits at all stages of his career. Bacon, Giacometti, Miró, Balthus, Matisse – the list of major Modernist masters who were also distinguished, if unconventional, portraitists is a long one.

Throughout the past half century Lucian Freud has regularly produced portraits as distinguished as any in the tradition (his *John Minton* from 1952, for example, surely merits a place in any list of top British portraits of all time). Other senior figurative painters have also continued to paint portraits both powerful and individual. Leon Kossoff's sometimes have the iconic presence of a Cimabue. Neither Kossoff's nor Freud's, of course, has anything to do with the artfully sophisticated presentation of the society portrait.

The truthfulness of Freud is a major influence on younger British painters, and his exhibition in New York a few years ago is credited with helping to revive figurative painting in America. In Britain, what might be called the Freudian tendency can be traced in a number of

younger painters. Lucian Freud has said that photography is a tremendous source of information about the fall of light, but he indicates that his own interests lie elsewhere (perhaps in what goes on in his subjects' heads). And plainly, his portrait of *John Minton* registers the subject's nervous disintegration as no film or photograph could.

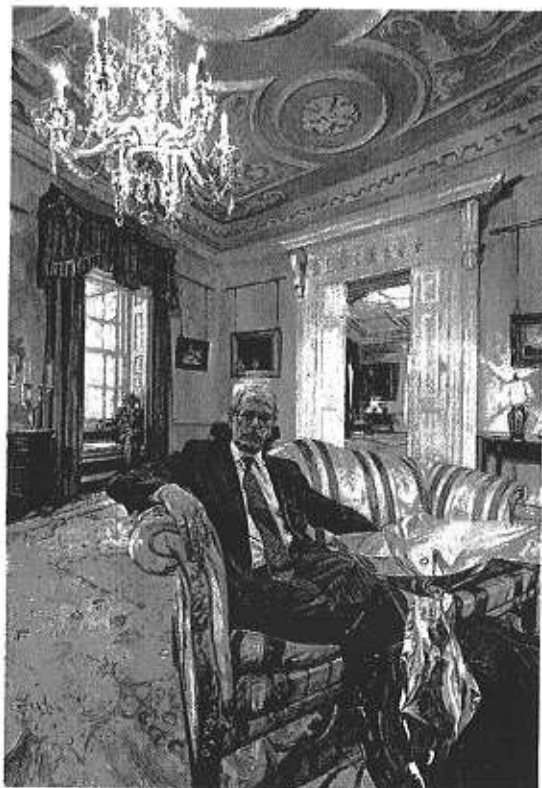
Among those younger painters who have taken the Freudian route are Victoria Chalmers, whose disquieting *Charlotte I-IV* is in the Saatchi book, and Jenny Saville, whose massive, more than life-size nudes are mainly self-portraits. Ishbel Myerscough looks beautiful and glamorous in magazine photographs. Her self-portraits are different, almost unrecognisably so – seedier, more intimate, often naked or partially naked, preoccupied with marks and puckerings of the skin. They present a private truth. Alison Watt, like Myerscough a product of Glasgow School of Art, frequently paints herself, but in a way so transformed – the face longer, the limbs clumsier – as to be almost unrecognisable.

Stephen Conroy, on the other hand, another Scottish artist who boomed in the 80s, has tried in his most recent work to meld an almost Edwardian technique with a Baconian starkness of presentation (with backgrounds of Modernist stripes). The result is a little reminiscent of the portraiture of Graham Sutherland.

Is such a bare, stripped view suitable for a public person? Perhaps: there was considerable excitement a few months ago at the idea that Freud might paint the Queen. Myerscough's portrait of Helen Mirren for the NPG is closer to the subject's public image than her pictures of herself, though still a close and revealing view. It looks as though in future we may see our rulers and notables in a much less formal guise – though what implications that has for rulers and notables is another question. Already, in tabloid newspapers and glossy magazines, we like to see celebrities stripped naked, both literally and metaphorically.

The young American Elizabeth Peyton's paintings of rock stars and stylishly languid young people – *Jarvis and Liam Smoking*, *Noel*

Since Sickert – if not before – portrait painters have produced portraits which are, in effect, pictures of photographs



Above: Walter Richard Sickert, *Winston Churchill, 1927*. National Portrait Gallery, London. Fund assisted 1950.
Left: John Wonnacott, *John Major, 1997*. National Portrait Gallery, London.

↳ *Liam (MTV Awards)* – represent an opposite approach, accepting that the essence of our image of such celebrities consists in their fame. Her paintings, which look as though they might be based on snaps, are woefully unrealistic, romantic in the sense that romance is understood in teen magazines.

John Wonnacott's portrait of John Major, again for the NPG, is perhaps the most recent attempt to do something novel with the state portrait – again from a master of self-portraiture and early exponent of the naked portrait. Major himself is not presented as a grand figure, the drama of the painting being contained in a virtuoso, wide-angle exploration of the interior of Number 10.

Wonnacott has said that for him the difference between painting and photography resides in the dimension of time, the difference between an instantaneous shutter-opening and a painting being the hours of thought, the hours spent concentrating on the sitter, of which the final image is a distillation. That distinction probably applies even to those painters whose

work, unlike Wonnacott's, is explicitly based on photography.

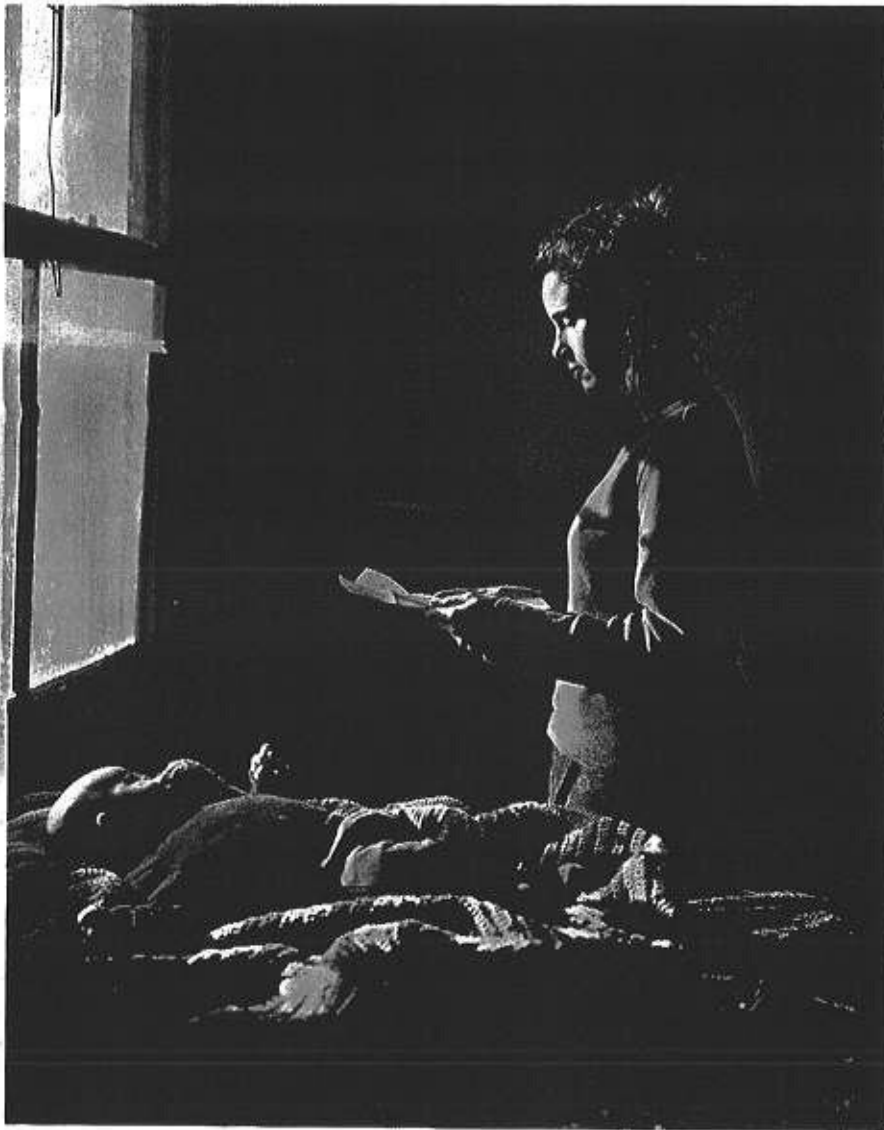
Since Sickert – if not before – portrait painters have produced portraits which are, in effect, pictures of photographs. But of course, when you do that, you produce an image, which is very different from the original photograph. Rather than being – as photographs appear, wrongly, to be – straightforward, transparent, just a slice of reality, a painting based on a photograph becomes an image about the complexity, the oddity, of image-making. This is why Warhol portraits are more than just wonky silk-screens of publicity shots.

Chuck Close – followed by Jason Brooks, who is included in the Saatchi *Neurotic Realism* book – makes paintings based on photographs. But they turn into something quite far removed from a standard Kodak head and shoulders. Close, a celebrated American artist whose work is currently on show at the Hayward, paints meticulously detailed images of ordinary people on the huge scale of a Christ in a Byzantine apse. In his earlier work, each blemish of the skin,

every follicle – the little details which we scarcely see – becomes insistently present. But examined closely, the familiar image dissolves into a mass of tiny, abstract marks. Through their obsessive detail they become mysterious and also, at times, repulsive. The later pictures are made up of dots and whorls of colour, as if filtered through some digital programme.

Close also takes photographs, as did Warhol. The recent Close exhibition at the London gallery White Cube was of portrait photographs printed by an ink-jet printer so as to produce a velvety depth of darkness reminiscent of the drawings of Close's friend Veja Celmins. Works such as these belong to the category of 'artist's photographs', which shade into art photographs.

Tom Hunter, another Saatchi New Neurotic case, approaching the matter from the other direction, has taken photographs that mimic Old Master paintings, notably Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter at a Window*. This work illustrates the long-term fascination of painting for photography, and vice versa. Both, we can



Left: Tom Hunter, *Woman Reading a Possession Order*, 1998.

Saatchi Gallery, London.

Above: Jan Vermeer, *Woman Reading a Letter at a Window*, c.1651.

Gemäldegalerie, Dresden.

now acknowledge, are highly artificial, and if they do not necessarily tell lies, they are bound to be economical with the truth.

An exploration similar to Close's of portraiture at hugely expanded scale – a view of the face as it might be experienced by a passing fly – has been undertaken by Ron Mueck, who has claims to be the only new wave portrait sculptor. His huge *Mask*, exhibited at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in 1998, is a hyper-real depiction of his own face, cut off at the hair line, and suspended from the ceiling, and over a metre and a half in height. Mueck's work, however, though it is often based on a snap of a real person, is at least as much a work of the imagination – as in *Angel*, a small but very real naked man with wings sprouting from his shoulders.

Often the treatment of surfaces is based on direct examination of his own skin – bristles, pores, and all.

As all these artists show in different ways, the human face – like the human body – is just too interesting a subject for art to give up. In a way, of course, many of the best portraits – Velázquez's *Philip IV*, Goya's *Charles IV* – have always been intensely revealing, whether formal or informal. As our interest in the individual life in all its detail increases – of which the biography boom is further evidence – and our faith in public façades decreases, it is likely that informality and intrusiveness will increase too. The challenge for artists is to find unfamiliar and fresh ways of seeing that most familiar of all images, the human face.

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