

The Australian

About face

- **by:** There is more to a portrait than flesh marked by the traces of personality, writes Christopher Allen
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Jeffrey Smart's Margaret Olley in the Louvre Museum

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Archibald Prize Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney. Until May 24. Regional tour. Salon des Refuses S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney. Until May 3. Jeffrey Smart: The Question of Portraiture Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Victoria. Until April 13. A PORTRAIT is not simply a pictorial account of an individual but a model of what it is to be an individual.

The history of portraiture as a genre, therefore, is at the same time a chronicle of conceptions of identity and of the self. A portrait prize held continuously through the best part of a century, such as the Archibald, is a rich source of material showing the development of such ideas within a society. A selection of work from the successive years of the Archibald could make a fascinating exhibition, one that would tell us much about the changing spirit of Australia during the course of the 20th century. It's just a shame so many of the pictures in recent shows have been so bad.

This year's winner, Guy Maestri's painting of blind Arnhem Land singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, stands out from the vast majority of the other pictures in the exhibition, but it is regrettable he has chosen to depict Yunupingu's head on the colossal scale mindlessly adopted by so many less able painters in the show.

The Archibald doesn't really have to be as dreary as it is. The Salon des Refuses at the S.H. Ervin Gallery has a number of more appealing pictures and, incidentally, proves that not all contemporary portraits are afflicted with the disease of macrocephaly. Only a couple of Dear Leader scale pictures assault the viewer: Ling Song's Rick Amor in pop dots and Zhong Chen's Charles Blackman executed with a house painting brush. A few others are too big without being monstrous. Most are life-size, and so quite naturally involve at least a half-length of the body as well (massive faces, as I have said before, are among other things a way of evading most of the real questions of portraiture).

Among pictures in this category are Kerry McInnis's Euan McLeod (which shows that you can paint a big picture without departing from human scale); Wendy Sharpe's Self-portrait in Florence; Peter Churcher's portrait of his mother, former gallery director Betty Churcher; Henry Mulholland's Study for a Man Watching Cricket (Dr Peter Elliott), and Claire Stenning's Angus McDonald. Prudence Flint paints herself in a whimsically stylised idiom reminiscent of children's illustrations, poring over a map of the world.

There are life-size heads by Tom Carment (of Martin Edmond), Abdul Karim Rahimi (of Peter Pinson), and Julian Meagher, of his uncle Roddy Meagher: the well-known judge is also the subject of a half life-size portrait by David Hickson and one in approximately one-third life-size by Amanda Penrose Hart. Graeme Drendel also has a half life-size oil sketch of Stuart Purves. Needless to say, these smaller paintings are more intense and draw the viewer in more effectively than ones inflated beyond their natural scale.

Oversized pictures are evasive and bullying, but there are other dimensions to the problem. The loss of appropriate scale is part of a breakdown of the genre of portraiture. The traditional portrait represents a man or woman not only as a personality expressed in physiognomy, figure and attitude, but also through the evocation of typical environments, such as a home, a study or workplace, a relevant public setting and, above all, some indication of occupation and social role. It makes obvious sense within the original intentions of the Archibald Prize to show that a person is a doctor or a general, a scholar, a judge, a philanthropist. Equally, it is clearly useful to show a scholar among books, an engineer among machinery, or an artist in a studio.

These are not, however, simply useful forms of artistic shorthand. For, as people have always known, and as existentialism more recently reminded us, we are what we do. Our identity is inseparable from our social role: our occupation and the education that prepared us for it, the way we live up to or fail to live up to our rank, our privileges, our responsibilities. It is appropriate to represent a man or woman in the dress and context of their office. And yet this way of thinking has become somehow unfashionable: we are now as likely to see a judge lounging in an open-necked shirt as wearing judicial robes.

What happened? Since the 1960s, there has been a growing discomfort with robes of office and the idea of rank. This may look like egalitarianism, but in reality differences of wealth are much greater now than in the '60s. It is more to do with a revulsion against the idea of responsibility, the mass-market version of the kind of dangerous and silly ideas developed by some French writers in the wake of the disturbances of May 1968. What one could characterise as the paranoid critique of power reached its most hyperbolic level in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who thought they could deconstruct the super-ego; but of course what is left when you try to take apart the internalised mechanisms of authority and responsibility is indistinguishable from the laissez-faire world of Thatcherism.

As far as the portrait is concerned, what remains when the social role is stripped away is a mere body, or even a face. We scrutinise the features, we amplify them to an enormous scale, inspecting every line and wrinkle, in search of an elusive essence. But because role and activity have been suspended, there is nothing there: big vacant features, at most flesh marked by the traces of a personality. As Heraclitus maintained, there is no being without becoming, or as the modern philosopher A.N. Whitehead put it, "at an instant, there is nothing".

Similarly, at an instant we are no one, at most but the shell of a person. This is the trap of photography, which registers the likeness of the instant, and it is why photography is so inherently melancholy: it is always an image of absence. But good photographers can sometimes capture fleeting moments of presence. When, on the other hand, painters, whose task is to achieve a synthesis of being in movement, base their work on photography, they generally produce something that lacks the virtues of a photograph without acquiring those of a painting: and so the bigger they make the picture, the more lamentable the result.

Far from the Archibald, both geographically and aesthetically, is a much more important and more enjoyable exhibition at the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery. The gallery has a collection of Jeffrey Smart's portraits and self-portraits, curated by Rodney James. This is an outstanding idea for an exhibition, for Smart is arguably Australia's greatest living artist; portraiture has never been among his primary concerns as a painter, yet it is a pervasive theme if one considers the small number of actual portraits, a few self-portraits and indeed the larger number of works in which friends modelled for the usually anonymous characters that populate his world.

The Mornington exhibition brings together almost all the main works in the first two categories and a few of the

third. The surprise is a show of this importance is not travelling. It would have been an obvious fit for a venue such as the S.H. Ervin in Sydney, for example.

Although Smart's portraits do not exceed life size and are usually considerably smaller, they are in some respects quite unconventional. His sitters are never represented in their personal environment and Smart never depicts interiors or other intimate spaces. Ultimately one may consider the portraits as a deviation from the rule of anonymity and abstraction: rare instances in which he has decided not to subsume models into impersonal figures but to retain their particular identity. One can see a transitional form in the Portrait of Clive James, in which the ostensible subject has been reduced to minute scale in what is essentially a cityscape.

In the other important portraits, the figure is generally set in a place and sometimes given an action that have symbolic overtones. Smart's precedents for this are the historical or allegorical portraits of past centuries, when the likeness of an individual might be complemented by allusions to biographical events, mythological fancy dress, or emblematic references to character and virtues.

The early Self-Portrait (1964-65) shows the figure of the artist, quite far off, on the edge of a road that characteristically rises up before our eyes, forming an artificial horizon. Although he is standing still, as though posing for a photograph, we assume he is travelling away from us, along the road into the distance. Behind him are the kind of road signs that appear so prominently in Smart's later work. When we look more closely, we realise that we are seeing all of these signs from the back; the suggestion is that the artist is travelling in the wrong direction, against the grain. This was how Smart felt for years when he was pursuing his figurative style of painting at the height of the fashion for abstraction.

Portrait of David Malouf (1980) is the most overtly allegorical, especially in the sense that allegory is a form of symbolism that deliberately calls attention to itself as an enigma. The author is seen in overalls, holding a pipe that descends through a small grate into the ground, in a way approximately reminiscent of a service station attendant. He stands in a vast open parking lot, with a row of coloured removalists' vans in the distance, and behind that a blank apartment block with the faded sign "OVIDIO".

The key to all this is that Malouf, who was then, like Smart, living in Italy, had recently published his novel *An Imaginary Life* (1978), about the Roman poet Ovid's exile among the barbarians. Smart sees Malouf as isolated in the featureless world of the modern industrial city. But like the author of the mythological compendium of the *Metamorphoses*, Malouf draws inspiration from a deep and inexhaustible well of the imagination.

Other portraits are less readily decipherable, such as the 1984 Portrait of Germaine Greer (the mysterious and much-debated graffiti 'R.' on the wall surely stands for Rosemary Roche, the woman who posed for the figure, as Greer would not) or Margaret Olley in the Louvre Museum (1994-95), for which the exhibition includes the pencil sketches of Olley's features, compositional drawings and an oil study.

Of the self-portraits, the most deliberate and direct is the 1993 head and shoulders composition. To anyone who knows the artist personally, the picture conveys little sense of his lively and irreverent personality. But Smart is a good example of the principle that a writer or painter becomes someone different when they sit down at their desk or enter the studio. The person you meet at a cocktail party is not the one who, in his impersonal and professional role, composed the poem or picture. The 1993 self-portrait represents not Smart the man but the altogether sterner and more deliberate persona of Smart the artist.

Christopher Allen travelled to Mornington Peninsula as a guest of the MPRG.
