

Face Value.

Copyright Sarah Szabo 2010.

Is it any wonder that human beings are fascinated by the human face when it is the first image that we ever respond to? Our brains are hard wired to read faces and we rely more than we know on the weight of meaning behind a raised eyebrow or the downturn of a mouth. The art of portraiture, an avenue of art practice whose value has at times been exalted and derided by critics has nevertheless always had an instinctive appeal.

The advent of photography in the mid nineteenth century let loose the creative terrain of the artist from representation to abstraction and the explosion of style into various 'isms' has led us down paths both sublime and ridiculous. Since then the obituary of portraiture has been written many times but its universality has never allowed the corpse to be buried. In fact, theorists are now arguing that one too many unmade beds and sharks in formaldehyde has caused a swing back to classical representation and figurative art. Even Saatchi and Saatchi, the world's most flamboyant spruikers of cutting edge conceptual 'art' are getting lyrical about the splash of oil paint on canvas.

In reality critics can theorise all they like but the fact that the Mona Lisa is arguably the most famous art work in the world and The Archibald prize for portraiture is the only art event in Australia that consistently gets the turnstiles spinning, eclipses much of it. It's not so much that portraiture is simply art for the masses implying perhaps an uneducated appeal but more that we are genuinely responsive to its charms because it's subject is so close to our hearts - ourselves.

Figurative artist Bob Booth renowned for his portraiture, particularly his ecclesiastic studies, believes art should sweep across the barriers and boundaries between people "I think portraiture is the strongest of all in this area – it reaches into the soul," he says. "Oddly enough a lot of the conceptual and abstract stuff was deemed to be more in keeping with the common person –more common art than high art. In fact I believe it was exactly the opposite in that only those in the know could actually even recognize some of it as art at times. For me it was the art of the elite. Whereas art at its best is common to everybody and can be enjoyed at different levels."

He believes a successful portrait is one which reveals humanity "Obviously it is not just a way of reproducing the appearance of a person because a camera can handle that moderately well," he says. "The camera itself does not reach into the 'other' the way that an artist does because the artist is also a human being."

The cornerstone of our western culture is the uniqueness of the individual and his or her accomplishments. Professor of Contemporary art, Ted Snell notes that the history of portraiture includes polar swings between idealism where portraits of historical figures were not necessarily faithful renditions but idealized versions and the warts and all of realism. (Airbrushing celebrity photographs is really history repeating itself with the

subject being imbued with a flawless beauty that is less than skin deep.) He sees the ebb and flow of its fashionability as charting the self-confidence of different cultures. “Portraiture always flourishes at times when there is a confidence in the culture – they want to be recorded and documented for posterity. When there are moments of great doubt - spiritual doubt or concern about the future then there may be a return to landscape themes for example but certainly where there is success, a sense of well being and pride that is when people have their portraits painted.”

For the artists themselves the act of painting a portrait can be more than the sum of its parts. Figurative artist Andrew Daly has a number of elements to his practice including commissioned works where the brief is to create a rendition or likeness which illustrates the identity, and station of the sitter and more personal works where he uses an individuals physical characteristics and expression to convey broader themes.

“Obviously in any visual art you are expressing an attitude or state of mind through visual means. Portraiture isn’t necessarily all about the sitter,” he says. “People always talk about capturing the personality but you can also use facial expression to help you with the overall expression of the painting.”

Similarly artist Julie Dowling who has been called one of the most collectable artists in the nation is a portraitist whose work has many levels of meaning beyond the identity of the sitter. Aboriginal but white skinned, Julie draws on the oral history of her community to piece together a lost history and genealogy. Portraiture for her is a healing mechanism, which is very much a communal process. “That is what I found so difficult at university - it is very much about you in your ivory tower but in our family it is not so much the I culture as the We culture,” she says. “That is the predominant force so the artwork has to fit into the process of the family and community.”

Her portraiture is heavily influenced by the religious influences, which dominated her childhood primarily because her Grandma believed that the church would protect them from the government, and by the cultural imperative of finding family who had been displaced. “The act of trying to find family is very much a face on thing and my mum’s way of trying to pick out family in the crowd was looking at details like the eyes or the shape of someone’s cheek,” she says. “So I grew up with that kind of emphasis - my eyes were always looking at peoples faces.”

Julie happily considers herself an outsider in the art world. Her work has a political dimension which does not lend itself to doing commissions. “I don’t have time – I just open the door and there is a subject.” She sees her work as a social document and a journey towards personal and community identity.

Why in the age of digital photography do people still want their portraits painted? In the 18th century the act of having a portrait painted was largely a display of wealth and position and in some respects that hasn’t changed - government, corporate and academic clients are a strong market for the commissioned artist. Heirloom portraits which commemorate family and children are an emotionally valuable investment for a family.

Price depends on the artists reputation, the medium used and the size and complexity of the work. (Both Andrew Daly and Bob Booth have mentioned prices in the \$5000 to \$7000 range for oil on canvas commissions).

Bob Booth believes that portraits are still a symbol of status but not necessarily the kind that puts one human being above another but because human beings are wonderful. “The end product – that means another human being has been engaged with you, has been involved and valued you significantly to use the best that they are as an artist to express something about you – I think it is a very valuing and valuable thing.”

END