



Drawing and Visualisation Research

Published in *TRACEY* | journal

Presence

July 2016

[www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/sota/tracey/)

sota/tracey/

tracey@lboro.ac.uk

THE LISTENING GAZE

Victoria Evans^a

^a Masters Alumna of Glasgow School of Art, Graduated September 2015

victoriaevansartist@gmail.com

A reflection on the impact of portrait sketching as a mode of active presence.

'Portrait Sketch Encounter' was a series of sketches and conversations undertaken by artist Victoria Evans with members of the public over a three-day residency at Pig Rock Bothy, Modern One, Edinburgh, in October 2014, leading on from a previous portraiture project undertaken in 2012, which together have provoked her to ask questions about the nature of the sitter/artist dynamic and how ideas around presence, becoming, and interaction might be used to reimagine the contested territory of the gaze in art.

Process. Presence. Connection. Becoming. Transformation.

Through my experiences of drawing portraits, and by paying close attention to the reactions of my sitters, in particular, during and after two intensive portrait projects, I have become interested in what might happen if the focus for an artist engaged in portraiture were to move away from the creation of the art object and towards an emphasis on relational experience. I will begin exploring what implications this might have for the attendant discourse around presence, representation and subject-object relations, with particular reference to 'gaze'. I will explore the question of whether drawing relates, for the purposes of this enquiry, more to the ontologies of being or becoming and I will ask whether the context of performative or relational art can offer any new insight into the way portraiture is conducted or responded to in the contemporary art context.

Our perception of 'self' and 'other' is in a constant state of flux, and one of the ways the artist deals with the aspects of consciousness, identity and relationship intrinsic to portraiture can perhaps be illustrated through thinking about 'gaze'.

The concept of 'gaze' and who confers it is always loaded. The position of the subject and the viewer has been an important artistic indicator of the socio-political context in Europe since Italian Renaissance painters moved away from profile views and towards three quarter face depictions. This change in composition gave the viewer a hint of the interior life of the subject, and is credited with heralding the foregrounding of the individual.¹

Diego Valasquez, in his painting *Las Meninas*, made in 1665 and reinterpreted through the eyes of Foucault three hundred years later, used 'gaze' to play with the boundary between reality and illusion, setting up a shimmering, impossible to pin down relationship between model, artist, and viewer. Foucault wrote of the piece: 'No gaze is stable, or rather in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity'² (Foucault, 1971). It is important to note that Foucault describes the complex power relations present in the composition through an analysis of who is looking at whom.

For Alberto Giacometti, in the Twentieth Century, the difficulty of portraying 'gaze' was due to its potential as an indicator of presence or consciousness in another being rather than a delineation of power relations. He saw the challenge of portraying the subject's gaze as quite separate from the technical problems of representation. What concerned him was, he said 'not the imitation of an eye [but] purely and simply a gaze. All the rest is a prop for the gaze'³ (Giacometti, 1955).

One can find evidence of concerns about presence, and also temporality, in painters of the Post-War period, such as Frank Auerbach whose sitters describe him obsessively adding and removing paint in a sometimes endless seeming lack of progress; or in Lucien Freud's ambiguous relationship with his sitters. The dynamic between Freud and his sitters, though, seems to have been of primary importance, even if these relationships were not always purely benevolent. Freud has been accused of solipsism – an inability to know or feel that others really exist. He was described by one acquaintance as having a penetrating,

'malignant' gaze⁴ (Warner, 1988) and yet I wonder if this might not be the flipside of the same concerns about detecting consciousness in the 'other' through 'gaze' that drove Giacometti? There are those too of course, like Francis Bacon, who had such sensitivity to the presence of others that he was only able to work in privacy, from photographs and memory.

Despite the various approaches to 'gaze' in these examples, the response to much of this work still tends to foreground the creation of an autonomous object; the mastery of the artist; and the centered viewpoint of privilege. The relational act at the heart of portraiture is largely ignored except in a biographical context.

Social concerns came to the fore in the the minimalist sculpture of the 1960's, and the subsequent explosion of installation art drew on post-structuralist thought around subjective experience: allowing the viewer to become part of the art work.⁵ More recently the introduction of participative and relational practices (where the artist becomes facilitator, and the interaction with the viewer/participant becomes the artwork) has been linked to attempts to move away from market forces' domination of object based art.⁶ No discussion of 'gaze' should ignore the problematic of 'male gaze' either, but this is a vigorously debated and well documented subject area in itself. I refer to it here only to emphasise the continued socio-political importance of 'gaze' in art. Whilst not for a moment implying that any of these discussions are resolved, I nevertheless wonder if there is room for a widening of approach in drawn portraiture through the discourses of performance and participation? If we were to move towards a process-based approach to the (ethical) portrait encounter, might we then be open to constructive manifestations of utilizing gaze that move beyond associations with power and ownership?

The 'gaze' that I am attempting to delineate is a 'gaze' that belongs to mutual encounter. It is as much a relational phenomenon as a visual one, and therefore has a temporal component. We, as human beings, cannot exist outside of time, that is also to say, without change. We, and the reality we inhabit, are not static. We are always 'becoming'; always participants in the creation of our own reality.

Through drawing, it can be argued, we engage in a particular kind of active presence, a 'noticing' so to speak, of our surroundings and of other people. Where the 'other' comes into the equation in the context of creating a drawing, as it does in portraiture, the complexity of the interaction and the transformative potential of the encounter is not just doubled, but increases exponentially. It is this intense noticing, this durational, exponentially expanded attentiveness to a person or situation, that I want to talk about in relation to portraiture.

As Deborah Harty explains in her article for the Process edition of this journal, the act of drawing can put us into a state of 'fluctuating consciousness'⁷ (Harty, 2012) where we move between states of heightened self awareness on one hand and loss of self consciousness on the other, perhaps more familiar to many from the world of sport as 'flow states'. Whilst Harty, in that paper, is emphasising the role of repetition in reaching these

states, which I agree can be a strong factor, my own experience also suggests that a similarly heightened interaction with the environment, or the 'other', is possible even when engaged in more structured, non-repetitive, modes of drawing such as portraiture.

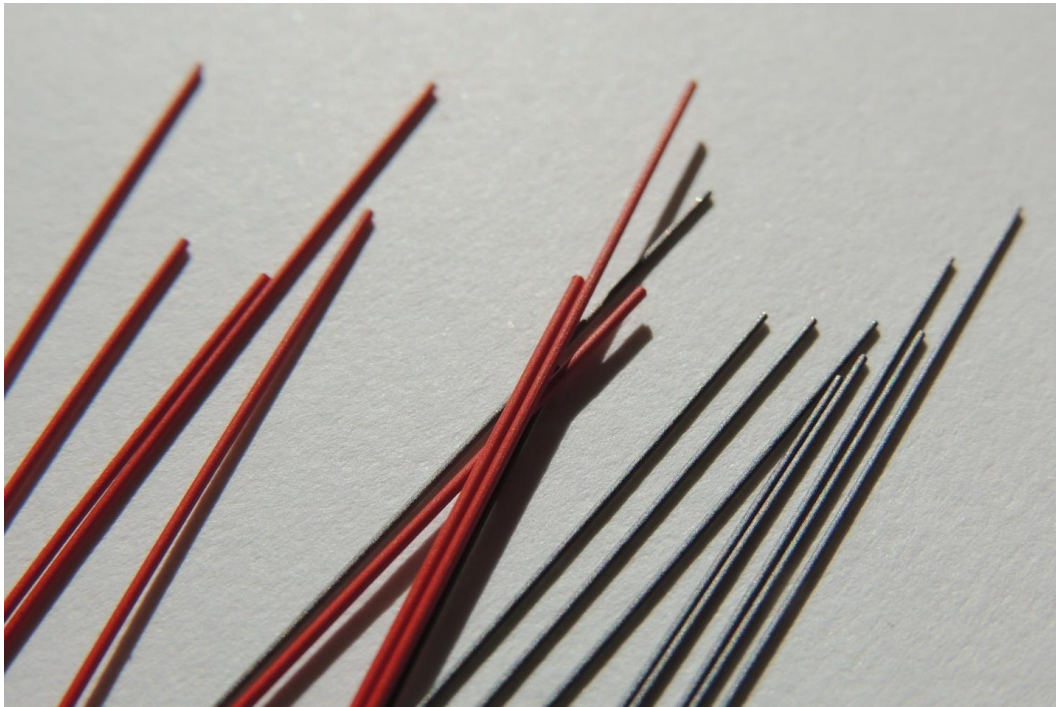


FIG 1: DRAWING MATERIALS. PHOTO VICTORIA EVANS

The process of drawing uses eye, mind and hand in a combination of observation, interpretation and action, whereby the artist enters actively into a relation - a connection - with her subject. In portraiture, the involvement of a second consciousness - in the person of the sitter - adds another dimension to the activity. Here it is the presence of the other which provides the heightening effect. The artist is observed as she observes, and a feedback loop is created, amplifying the sense of interactive presence and taking the encounter out of the artist's control. In drawing, the permeability of boundaries between self and other, body and world, inside and outside, comes to the fore. The act of making a portrait is capable of creating a specially heightened social space, a moment of intense attention between sitter and artist that combines embodied, ocular, and social experience. Every portrait is also a self portrait - the artist's presence is half the subject of the work, but equally the presence of the sitter is not only the subject, but half the act of making.

In this sense, the process is one of interaction. The sketch produced in the artist's hands, can be seen as a byproduct - mere documentation - of the real, relational work taking place. In locating the site of value away from the work on paper, and relocating it in the experience of drawing/sitting itself, it is perhaps possible to rethink gaze as a transformative, interactive process. And drawing therefore, despite its ability to confer a sense of connection to the present moment and promote a consciousness of 'being', is just as strongly related to 'becoming'.



FIG 2: DRAWING OF CLARE, 2012. PHOTO PAUL CAMERON

CASE STUDY – 28 DRAWINGS LATER

My interest in the portrait encounter began when I asked 28 friends and acquaintances to sit for drawings over the course of one month a few years ago. In these portrait sittings I quickly discovered that normal social relations are suspended and there are another set of conventions at play. One person – the sitter – consents to stillness and to being observed, the other person – the artist – consents to activity under scrutiny. Whether or not there is a commercial transaction taking place, the artist assumes the mantle of the 'professional' in calm control of the encounter but in reality there is vulnerability in both roles. The sitter may be anxious about many things: how they will be portrayed, does the artist view them as attractive; will they look old or ugly? The artist must deal with her own anxiety too; about her performance in the eyes of the sitter; her own wish to make good work; fear of hurting the sitter's self image, etc. Under the surface, the portrait encounter is a loaded situation, and a temporary contract of trust must be created.

During or after the session each friend spoke about their experience of being drawn. There was often a strong reaction to the portrait itself – seeing a likeness being created in an unfamiliar way, without the particular accuracies (or distortions) associated with mechanical reproduction - in some cases inspired reflection on ageing and mortality. The majority (most of whom were not accustomed to portrait sitting) reported the strangeness

of sitting in silence with a friend, but that feelings of initial discomfort gave way to a state of stillness and calm that they found surprisingly relaxing. Many also mentioned that they did not usually experience this sense of calm in their daily lives. Further, in at least one case where a sitter's self-image had not previously allowed him to see himself as a traditional subject for portraiture, there was a profound satisfaction expressed at the way a hitherto unrecognised need had been met by the experience.

It seems, therefore, that the experience of sitting quietly to be drawn might differ in some fundamental way from other quiet activities such as reading or working that the sitter engages in regularly. Is it simply the act of being looked at that is so soothing? The scopophilic pleasure of having a gaze turned on us? Or is there a particular quality to that looking, that attentive present-ness, that is unique to portraiture – to the portrait encounter? As the artist, I was strongly affected by the sessions too, even though in this set of drawings I was not usually the recipient of the sitters 'gaze'. They would often prefer to read or look elsewhere. Even so, the process of regarding my friends anew, and being in quiet awareness of each other etched those moments to my memory at the same time as I committed marks to paper. Several years later, a glance at one of the drawings can take me back effortlessly to that experience.



FIG 3, DRAWING OF AMY, 2012.

It might be informative, after considering the friendly, low-key, artistic intimacies outlined above, to turn for a moment to the heights of scopophilic pleasure to be found in the gaze of a lover. Jean-Paul Sartre talks, in *Being and Nothingness*⁸ about how one becomes

possessive of one's lover, not because of loving them, but because of the way we react to their gaze. We have, through them, the tantalizing possibility of knowing a part of ourselves that is normally opaque to us – our object-ness or 'being-in-itself' – how we appear to others who do not have access to our 'being-for-itself' (our consciousness, our subjectivity). Sartre is generally held to have a pessimistic view of romantic relationships as doomed to fail, bedeviled by the desire to possess. He sees 'knowing' as a modality of 'having' and so our desire to know and be known is ultimately destructive of our freedom. But if as Nietzsche recommends we take the cognitive leap of including the temporal or changeable in our understanding of 'being' so that it is more properly understood as 'becoming'⁹, perhaps 'knowing' becomes more synonymous with 'experiencing'? In this case, within the powerful and highly desirable bestowing of mutual gazes, might it be possible to behold without the desire to possess, to experience without the need to calcify? This philosophical insight might then, in turn, enable us to work towards a more constructive contemporary interpretation of gaze in art.

The notion of becoming, as I have mentioned, implies temporality and mutability, and this is something a non-philosopher, like myself, may find easier at first to attribute to the verbal phenomena of talking and listening. The therapeutic properties of talking are well documented. Perhaps then, it may be helpful to characterize the active, present, looking and noticing, that I am attempting to describe, as *the listening gaze*. Through naming it thus, I hope to make clear that in the portrait encounter, the sitter plays a key role in the artist's perception of them. They are not a mute, passive object of study who is doomed to be perceived only via their surface, but the lines between artist and sitter, visible and invisible, seer and seen are infinitely intertwined and mutually co-creating. As Christine Battersby writes it in her book *Phenomenal Woman*, '...'self' does not emerge out of the exclusion or the abjection of the 'other' (as is too often suggested in poststructuralist philosophy). Instead, it is from intersecting force-fields that 'self' and 'other' emerge.'¹⁰

CASE STUDY 2 – PORTRAIT SKETCH ENCOUNTER

I was curious to know whether this particular quality of attention – that may have been influenced in case study 1 by the intimacy of friendship – could be recreated with strangers. During my Masters programme, I undertook a short residency in Pig Rock Bothy at Edinburgh's Modern One during October 2014 with the aim of exploring this question.

Located on the grounds of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, Pig Rock Bothy was commissioned by the Scottish National Galleries to provide a temporary venue for a varied programme of talks, performances and events as part of Generation: an exhibition celebrating 25 years of contemporary art in Scotland. The Bothy is a beautifully constructed translucent inside/outside space, at once within and without the formal sphere of the gallery, and so particularly appropriate for exploring and exposing the process of art making.



FIG 4: PIG ROCK BOTHY. PHOTO VICTORIA EVANS 2014

In an attempt to put people quickly, at their ease and to try to recreate the sense of connection that I had experienced in case study 1, I decided to introduce a verbal dimension to the encounter. I invited the public in to the Bothy interior to have their portrait sketched and to talk to me about our different experiences of galleries, contemporary art, and what it feels like to be drawn.

For anyone who is not at heart a multi-tasker, drawing whilst talking and listening is a challenge. At times line has to be prioritised over likeness, or drawing over conversation, and at other times the dialogue takes over and the drawing becomes more of a side activity to talk through. But occasionally both sitter and artist relax into the encounter and the drawing and interaction come together effortlessly. It is easier to recall the particular mood and quality of each short encounter more lucidly than the minutiae of the conversations, but there are a few particular details that stand out in my memory even now: The calm engendered by a man whose meditation practice made him especially comfortable with stillness; the young woman who explained that under my scrutiny she began to perceive her own face as a mechanical diagram; the warmth and openness of a man who was a frequent visitor to the gallery who talked to me about his artist brother's schizophrenia; and the two young siblings whose unusual self-possession and talent for stillness lent them an uncanny air of simultaneous presence and absence.

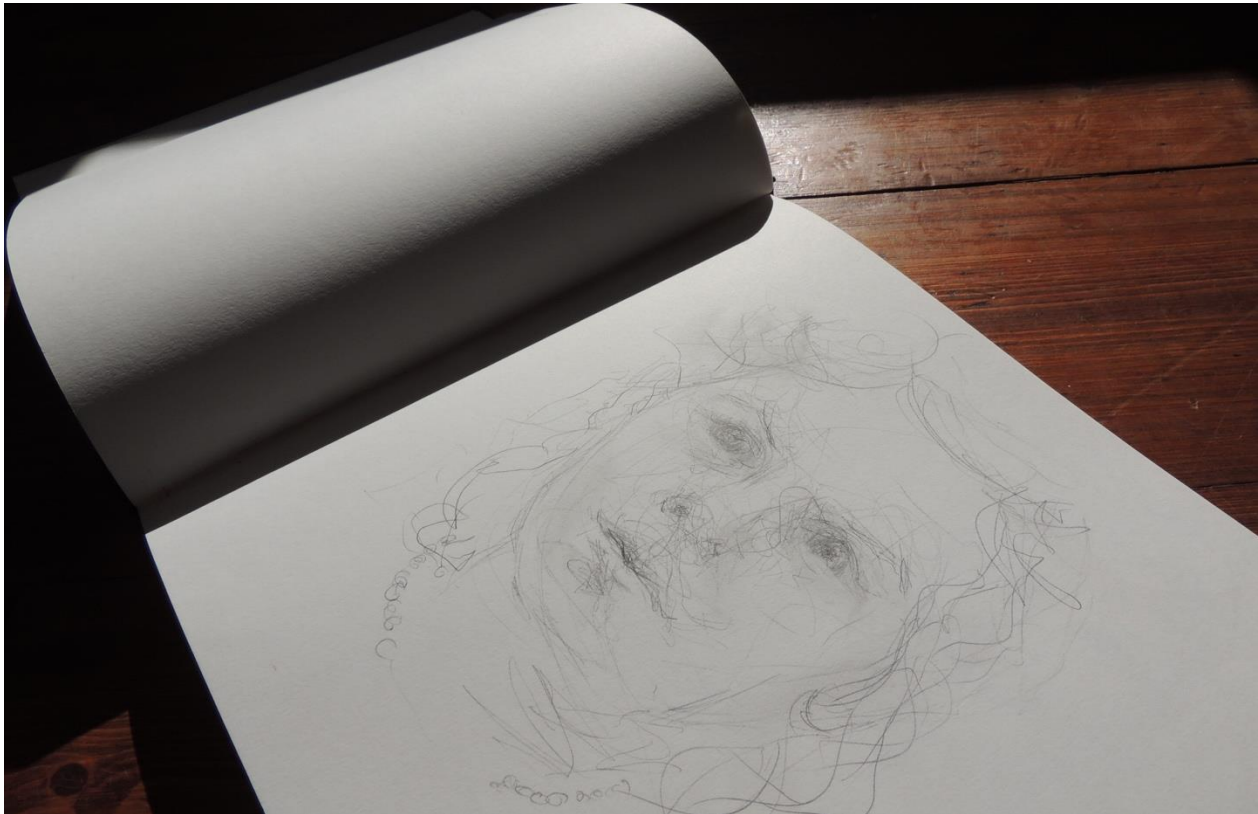


FIG 5: PORTRAIT SKETCH ENCOUNTER, 2014.

Often a sitter made a remark along the lines that the portrait had captured their 'essence'. Leaving aside for a moment the social pressure that subjects may feel under to 'approve' a portrait, this is an interesting observation. 'Essence' is a somewhat contested idea (at least as to whether it is an a priori state or a self determined creation), but in the context of portraiture and likeness it seems to have quite a specific usage.

Discussions of essence involved descriptions of qualities perceived to be ineffable through which the subject could recognize themselves. A proper analysis of essence in portraiture is outside the scope of this paper, but I mention it because it seems to be allied to a quality of intense interest, fascination even, brought to bear as the sitter examines the portrait. Neither the identification of essence, nor the level of the subject's interest shown in the drawn image, bore an obvious correlation with whether or not the portrait was either flattering or technically well drafted, in fact I would go so far as to say that the rougher, scrapper images sometimes elicited a more profound response. Perhaps this can tell us something about the the experience of portrait sitting, and the sitters' motivation for participation in the first place. Although there are a host of class and status associations with portraiture which may also predispose people to particular reactions, in my small, self selecting sample, this keen and deep curiosity about how they had been 'seen' was marked and evident throughout.



FIG 6: PORTRAIT SKETCH ENCOUNTER, 2014

Given that I'm arguing for the potential to reposition the portrait drawing away from the image and towards the encounter, it's informative to look at this point towards practitioners of performance or interactive art for insight into what it means to be 'seen'. In thinking about encounters where gaze is central to the experience, Marina Abramovic's performance 'The Artist is Present' at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2010, immediately comes to mind. The performance had her sit, silent and still, whilst members of the audience were invited to take turns sitting opposite her. Many participants were brought to tears by the intensity of this exchange. (<http://www.marcoanelli.com/portraits-in-the-presence-of-marina-abramovic>)¹¹. The impact of these encounters may well owe much to Abramovic's formidable personal presence, but it seems to indicate that the very act of experiencing the silent gaze of a stranger can have a profound emotional effect.

Although of course what is happening in a portrait encounter is something much less confrontational – the focus is ostensibly on the production of a document, so there is less potential for extreme social discomfort than in Abramovic's project. But I would suggest that once the participant begins to move beyond discomfort, the particular quality of attention at work, *the listening gaze*, may bear some similarity in both instances.

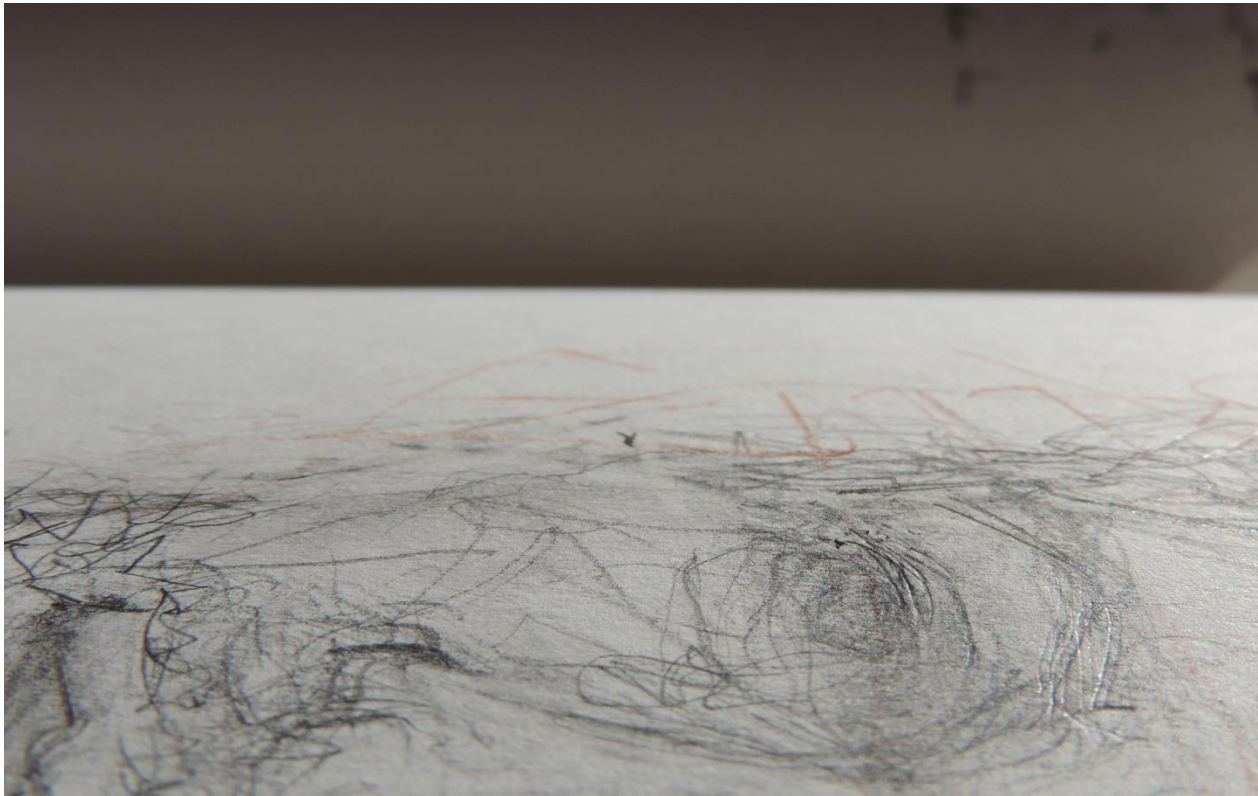


FIG 7: PORTRAIT SKETCH ENCOUNTER, 2014

It's an obvious truism perhaps to affirm that the act of listening or being actively 'present' to another person has the potential to be a rewarding experience for both parties, but I would argue that the specific quality of (external) surface observation, when combined with a quality of active (interior) presence can make for a potent combination. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the early 20th Century phenomenologist (whose ideas influenced Christine Battersby, quoted above), describes seeing and being seen as 'a reciprocal insertion and intertwining in one with the other.'¹² The portrait encounter, it seems to me, is a manifestation of this process, this interplay between visible self and seeing body, in dynamic interaction.

The wish to consolidate the visible and felt selves may date back to our earliest experiences. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, talks of 'the mirror stage', the seminal moment in a child's development when she first sees her own image in a mirror.¹³ What occurs, according to Lacan, in that moment is a rupture that informs the concept of the self. Through glimpsing her specular image and recognising it as a representation that others can perceive, she understands that there is a schism between how she feels herself to be and how she is perceived externally by others. Her identity, forever onwards, is a dual identity – split between her feeling self and her appearing self – her self-for-others. The act of portraiture speaks directly to an unfulfillable desire in the sitter, born in that moment of splitting, the desire for her interior idea-self to be amalgamated into her exterior image-self. To have others see her as the complex, fragmentary individual she feels herself to be.



FIG 8: PIG ROCK BOTHY. PHOTO VICTORIA EVANS, 2014.

In the age of the selfie - the instant self-portrait – where few social gatherings are without their attendant Facebook or Instagram documentation, there is no lack of opportunity to contemplate one's own image on a superficial level. The very proliferation of video and photographic images, is perhaps evidence that this desire can never really be sated. However, hand-drawn portraiture offers us something, not better, but subtly different perhaps from even the most sensitive photographic portraiture, the chance to glimpse ourselves un-mediated by a machine; directly via the eye, mind and imperfectly skilled hand of another seeing and visible self. The ability and the desire of a sitter to recognise themselves even in the most rudimentary sketch is not only testament to the superlative facial patterning abilities of the human animal, but also implies something more.

One might argue, then, that it is not in spite of the roughness and inaccuracies of a sketched likeness that the beholder can recognise themselves, but in some ways because of them. It is possible that, the very shortcomings in rendering are part of what allow us to read something more than the surface concerns of facial geometry, and therefore recognise an alternative self-image not usually visible. A chance to see oneself through another's eyes. What the beholder is looking for in their own portrait, then, is not a narcissistic affirmation of self, but proof of connection with the 'other'.

The heart of this fascination, we may conclude, is in the enticing impossibility of seeing into another mind and finding ourselves as we appear there. In the end this fascination appears to be as strong whether the artist is a close friend or a total stranger. Glimpsing ourselves through others helps us see ourselves in the world, and in this respect at least, a friend is as mysterious an 'other' as a person you are meeting for the very first time. For me, especially now, in the internet age, it is clear that hand-drawn portraiture speaks to a need to be perceived as more than just the superficial. The wish for our inner selves to be visible in our external appearance remains, in our image-obsessed society, a pressing yet not fully acknowledged desire. I have called seeing ourselves as we 'really are' an impossibility. But, if you incline towards an ontology of 'becoming' rather than of 'being', whilst denied a static self capable of being completely known (even to yourself), you may take comfort in the idea that friends, lovers and strangers alike are all intimately engaged in a process of mutual creation, all of the time. In one sense, you are the 'other' and they are you.

In future portraiture projects it would be a fascinating exercise to push further towards abstraction, and so see how far representation can be put to one side without displacing the notion of 'essence'. From my observations so far, I would predict – allowing for some small preamble to manage the sitter's expectations (and of course depending on the sitter's familiarity with the concept of abstraction) – that the idea might well prove persistent. This would provide further evidence that the important element of artistic activity in a portrait encounter is not so much the mark on the paper at all, but the activity of looking itself. It would be interesting too to test further to what extent the verbal element is a necessary or vital part of the portrait encounter with strangers, and how far an empathetic artist can succeed in 'listening' purely with their eyes.

About the artist: With a background in painting and narrative film and television, Victoria graduated in September 2015 with a Masters in Fine Art Practice (Sculpture) at Glasgow School of Art. Her approach to her work combines the traditions of psychological absorption and physical immersion in audience experience and she works with a shifting combination of moving image, stand-alone objects and site-responsive installation. The interplay of sculptural, painterly and cinematic concerns is central to her practice, but she also engages in photography, painting and drawing, book-making, cross-disciplinary collaboration and audience participation as both process and/or end point. Victoria is engaged with philosophical ideas around time, simultaneity, chaos and complexity, and embodied perception. A constant in her work is the dialectical relationship between interiority and exteriority, and drawing is one of the tools with which she explores and connects to the world in the research stages of projects.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Metmuseum.org, (2011). *The Renaissance Portrait from Donatello to Bellini* | *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. [online] Available at: <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2011/the-renaissance-portrait-from-donatello-to-bellini> [Accessed 19 Feb. 2016].
- ² Foucault, M. (1971). *The Order of Things*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- ³ Wilson, S. (2016). *Alberto Giacometti, 'Jean Genet' 1954 or 1955*. [online] Tate. Available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/giacometti-jean-genet-t04905/text-illustrated-companion> [Accessed 19 Feb. 2016].
- ⁴ Warner, M. (1988). *Lucian Freud: The Unblinking Eye*. [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/04/magazine/lucian-freud-the-unblinking-eye.html?pagewanted=all> [Accessed 18 Feb. 2016].
- ⁵ Bishop, C. (2005). *Installation Art*. New York: Routledge.
- ⁶ Bishop, C. (2006). *Participation*. London: Whitechapel. In particular, J. Ranciere 'Problems and Transformations in Critical Art', pp. 83-93; and L. Clarke & H. Orticia, 'Letters 1968-69', pp 110-116.
- ⁷ Harty, D. (2012). Drawing/ Phenomenology/Drawing. *The Tracey Journal: Drawing As Research*, [online] Process. Available at: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/sota/tracey/journal/proc/harty.html> [Accessed 19 Feb. 2016].
- ⁸ Sartre, J. (1956). *Being and nothingness*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- ⁹ Nietzsche, F. (1889). Reason in Philosophy. In: *Twilight of the idols, or, How to philosophize with a hammer*. Translated from German by D. Large. Reprint 1998. New York: Oxford University Press.
- ¹⁰ Battersby, C. (1998). *The Phenomenal Woman*. New York: Routledge, pp.4-14.
- ¹¹ Anelli, M. (2010). *Portraits in the presence of Marina Abramovic*. [online] Marcoanelli.com. Available at: <http://www.marcoanelli.com/portraits-in-the-presence-of-marina-abramovic/> [Accessed 19 Feb. 2016].
- ¹² Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). The Intertwining – The Chiasma. In: *The Visible and the Invisible*. Edited by C. Lefort. Translated from French by A. Lingis. Evanston [Ill.]: Northwestern University Press, pp.130-55.
- ¹³ Lacan, J. (2006). The Mirror Stage. *Ecrits*. Translated by H. Fink and B. Fink. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., pp. 1-8.