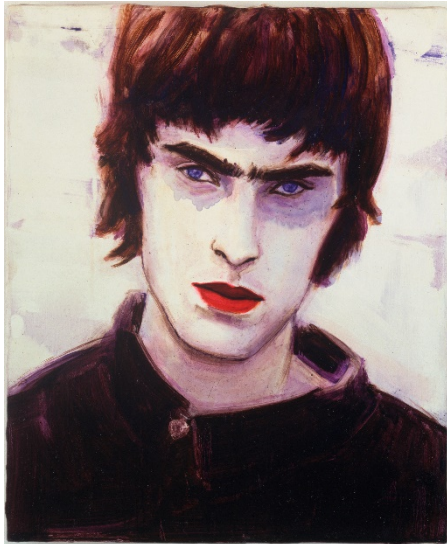


Vessels of Meaning

Elizabeth Peyton: Aire and Angels National Portrait Gallery, London

Paul Gauguin: Portraits, National Gallery, London

Robin Richmond, October 3, 2020



Elizabeth Peyton, Blue Liam, 1996 *Paul Gauguin, Christ on the Mount of Olives, 1889*

After a summer painting outside in the wilds of rural France, and far away from the big, bad, sad city, and a nation riven with anxiety about upcoming cataclysms, it seems almost irrelevant to be back here again, writing about art. Fiddling while Rome burns etc....This morning, Gabriele Finaldi, the director of the National Gallery in London, spoke of the challenges inherent in putting on shows which require international cooperation in this toxic atmosphere (my adjective, not his) but it is indeed heartening that museum collections are so ready to loan their major works to each other. Art without borders. Art without settled status. Art without passports. Art without identity cards. This reciprocity and generosity have much to teach our politicians right now.

Today, within a city block, in two august and venerated institutions, there are two exhibitions that illuminate the possibilities and limitations of art. Both dedicated to portraiture, both artists ascribe profound possibilities to the act of painting the human face. Both artists see their works as vessels of meaning, containing fathomless worlds where we, the spectator, engage with the subject in a deeply personal manner, and project our own thoughts onto the paintings. Portraits are chasms into which we fall, burdened and freighted with all our own emotional baggage. Thus, in some

ways all portraits are self-portraits. We as humans identify with our fellow humans. Even though I am an abstract landscape painter, I do a life class every week to remind myself of this. It's a form of exercise or a meditation. And it's very hard. So it should be. When we look at portraits, we cannot help but identify with the sitters. We look into their eyes and see multitudes.

Or not. Elizabeth Peyton, in her mid-50's, is a shining star in the deep space (or black hole) of the current New York art scene. Her orbit is the groovy downtown scene of celebrity - the beautiful and the damned. She pays court to the art of the cool. Her subjects are herself, her friends, movie and sport stars (as long as they are pretty), royalty, and historical and literary figures. From Napoleon to the present Queen to Kurt Cobain to David Bowie to Liam Gallagher to Giorgione and Michelangelo. She paints small paintings in oil on gesso panel most often from photographs - sometimes from life. Her gorgeous paint slides around on the smooth surface in a dance of gestural broad expressionist loose swoops and the delicate touches of a tiny sable brush. She uses paint and colour to animate the surface of the work and the paint is always interesting. What she paints is not. Her work is distant. Removed. Remote. Cold. Detached. Her paintings do not engage in the scrutiny of the real, but she is perhaps not interested in the real. The show's title alludes to her hero John Donne, the 16th century metaphysical poet, and the National Portrait Gallery have given over some of its galleries to her work, where it looks parched and pinched. Next door to these galleries is the selection of the 2019 BP Portrait Award which is far more interesting and heterodox. The gallery is very pleased to announce that they have made what they call an unprecedented "intervention" in the Upper galleries, placing some of Peyton's small portraits in the permanent Victorian and Tudor collections. This does her no favours at all.

Being next door to a major show of Gauguin portraits at the National Gallery makes it even harder for its neighbour. This show is glorious. Beautifully conceived, beautifully curated, it tells the story of someone who was deeply engaged with his fellow human beings in his work, if not in his life. Gauguin was an old shit (see my blog of Dec 15, 2017). He was addicted to the "exotic". He was promiscuous, abusive, delusional, priapic, romantic, transgressive, cruel, and probably brought syphilis to the South Seas. He "married" a 14-year-old Tahitian girl. He wildly romanticised the indigenous cultures in his painting when he took off to live in Brittany, Tahiti, and the Marquesas Islands leaving behind a wife and children. His narcissism, which leads him to paint himself as a suffering Christ in early paintings, (see *Christ on the Mount of Olives*) brought Van Gogh to the brink of suicide. The failure of the shared "studio in the South" in Arles, which led to Vincent attacking his own ear on December 23, 1888, seemed to cause him little remorse. But what an amazing painter he is. The clarity. The experimental use of bold line and expressionist colour. The complete commitment to his subject, and the empathy expressed in his work, if not in his life. I have always found this confusing. How can one be a good artist and a bad person?

The show invites us to look at what it calls the “surrogate portrait”. Long after Vincent’s horrible suicide, Gauguin, having sent for sunflower seeds from France, grows them, and paints them in Tahiti. It is the ghost of Vincent and I think all good portraits are like ghosts. The sitters seem alive to us and they call out to us from across the centuries, reminding us about who we are and what is important and what is timeless and what is real.