

HUFFPOST ARTS

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[Photorealist Painting vs. Painterly Photography](#)

Every year, when the BP Portrait Award comes along I make a trip to the National Portrait Gallery in London to see it. And every year, the same discussion comes about with whomever I am perusing the exhibition with (usually my significant other, who I might add for the sake of this discussion, is a photographer): ***If a photorealistic painting wouldn't make a good photograph, does it make it a good painting?*** And, having seen two impressionable photography exhibitions in London the same week-- Sally Mann at the Photographers' Gallery and Wolfgang Tillmans at the Serpentine Gallery--the counter question arises: ***When photographs look painterly, does that offer a unique quality to a photograph?*** Perhaps photography, the newer art form, has an unfair advantage.



Last Portrait of Mother by Daphne Todd © Daphne Todd



Harry by Michael Gaskell © Michael Gaskell



Tim II by David Eichenberg © David Eichenberg

This year's BP Portrait Award winner went to a painter's painter, Daphne Todd, for her portrait of her dead mother, titled *Last Portrait of Mother*. The second prize was awarded to Michael Gaskell for a less-than exciting (or chilling, as in the case of Todd) but skillful portrait of a young man named Harry. But it's the third that struck me, in a semi-irritated way: David Eichenberg's *Tim II* is painted so that the artist was clearly copying a photograph. Yes, many painters use photographs as a tool or a guide (David Hockney even argues that this tool has been used by artists for hundreds of years through the use of lenses and optical devices) but when a painter simply copies a photograph, I feel cheated. In Eichenberg's work, he mimics the shallow depth of field, which is a lens-based quality. In other works you might see the on-camera flash technique used by such fashionable art photographers as Juergen Teller and Ryan McGinley. (An example of this is the painting below, by Oscar Burnett, titled *The Player?* though this at least offers depth on another level, i.e. the pattern of the William Morris wallpaper in the background, a nod to Morris, Peyton and on-camera flash all in one.)



But Eichenberg's painting--its composition, light, subject--in any photographic terms would be the equivalent of a snap, an insignificant photograph. So then is it an exercise in painting technique and nothing else, or a comment on the photographic medium? Just to stress this question, when compared to some of the other exhibitors in the show, i.e. a painting where there is clearly a style (for example, the two works below, *Gillian* by Miriam Escofet and *Blue Coco* by Shaun Downey)



and the personality of the subject comes through the brush strokes, natural light source, colors; or even a work that looks like it could have been pulled from a film still, like *The True Self-Portrait* by Carlos Muro,



which offers an interesting composition and fascinating almost-pixelated painting technique. So while I quite enjoyed the exhibition, particularly Todd's work and the works just mentioned, the realist portraiture-versus-photography question continues to bother me (and I know I'm not the only one).