THE SCOTSMAN

Declining Face Values

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HOWEVER many billion people there are on Earth, they all have different faces and, with the rare exception of identical siblings, after only the most fleeting acquaintance we can generally differentiate any one of those billions from all the others we may have encountered and recognise them again when we see them. It is a remarkable gift that we have. The 60 portraits in the BP Portrait Award exhibition celebrate both the gift and our appreciation of the human diversity to which it is a response, but they also have an added dimension. Not only do the portraits reflect the natural diversity of the sitters, but the artists painting them set out to assert themselves, too, and so make their own individuality clear. But portraiture is a social activity. Whatever the result, it generally arises from a social situation, the relationship between artist and sitter. It is not really socially appropriate, therefore, that the artist should present a sitter and then try to upstage them with their art. The best portraiture is self-effacing, but there is not much sign of that here. The pictures all clamour for attention.

The relationship between artist and sitter may be professional, but the professionals here, with too much skill and not enough imagination, look slick and unconvincing. Morgan Penn may have shown with the Royal Society of Portrait Painters, but Katy Does it while Baking a Cake, for instance, is a really awful picture. Or that relationship may be just casual, incidental even. Here, for instance, Edward Sutcliffe's close-up portrait of an old man with a lined face is titled Only for a Fiver – it took a fiver to entice the sitter. I do hope more changed hands in the end and the painting is not a monument to parsimony. Or it may be, as most do here, that the portrait records someone close, loved even, a friend, neighbour, lover, wife, girlfriend or child; or too often the best-loved sitter of all, the self. There are too many self-portraits here and I don't think they should be included at all. If portraiture is a social act, painting yourself is something different, antisocial even. There are plenty of examples of all of the others here too, however, and in all shapes and sizes. Jaime Perandones, for instance, paints his wife lying back in the bath with one breast floating like an island in the foreground and a long view up her nostrils. Not flattering. Michael Simpson, the elderly sitter in the painting that has won the big prize, is a neighbour of the painter, Paul Emsley. It is a large picture, bigger than life-size. It might be more impressive, however, if the way the sitter is seen full-face against a dark ground without context and with blue-veined skin and red-rimmed watery eyes were not all a straight lift from the haunted, suffering faces that Ken Currie paints with such power. Second prize goes to Johan Andersson for his portrait of a friend, a girl called Tamara. A pretty blonde girl looking at us with big dark eyes as she coyly shows one small breast is a seductive image, but analyse it a little and the golden skin and airbrushed eyes look suspiciously like Mario Testino's glossy pin-up icons of inflated celebrity. Indeed the relationship with photography is problematic throughout. Anna Maria Micu's self-portrait is simply a painted photograph. You have to look closely to see the difference.

Hynec Martinek's prize-winning Zuzana in the Paris Studio is the same. It is a close-up photo of a girl with spiky hair and silly glasses enlarged in paint, painstakingly, but almost undetectably. Yet adding painting for painting's sake to an essentially photographic image doesn't work either. Daphne Todd's portrait of art critic Bill Packer is built up of wanton extra planes of paint and indeed of carpentry, too – for some unfathomable reason the canvas is stepped in the middle – but it doesn't work. Indeed, knowing the sitter, it is rather horrid. On the other hand the rapidity of Eileen Hogan's three sketched heads of Ian Hamilton Finlay really captures something of the sitter's animation and changing expressions in a way that does seem specific to painting, even if the images are based on photographs, as seems likely. As well as capturing the transitory, painting can give a kind of permanence to an image, however. In The Bevan Boy, a powerful portrait of a grizzled ex-miner, Philip Renforth adds solidity and tangibility to what was clearly originally a photograph. In her portrait of Jose Escofet, Miriam Escofet uses the compositional devices of window ledge and single flower in the hand, as well as the high finish of 15th-century Flemish painting to give dignity and permanence to the image. Vicky White's Kate, a girl sitting in a café, has a similar quality of permanence.

Nevertheless, this is a motley assemblage of pictures. What happened to the portrait? Some of our greatest artists in the past were portrait painters, so why is it so hard to do it well now? Our power to recognise faces and to understand them is at the very centre of our visual cognisance of the world. You might suppose, therefore, that portraiture, the record of the individual face, would also be central to the business of art universally. But it is not so. Looking at the history of world art, portraiture only appears sporadically as a central objective for the artist. The Egyptians did it up to a point.

Portraiture was not an important art for the Greeks, but it was for the Romans. It was really they who made the truly individualised portrait a major art form the first time. Subsequently it appears from time to time in the Far East, but it was really only in the modern West that it became a central art form again. The earliest portraits appear at the very end of the 14th century. By the 15th, portraiture was firmly established in northern Europe. The Italians followed suit and thereafter the painted portrait remained central to Western art till the late 19th century.

Individualism shaped modern Western culture, and the portrait celebrated that fact. It was, of course, associated with power. If power resided in the individual then a portrait was a way of confirming that, but from the 17th century onwards, as power passed to the bourgeoisie first in Holland then in England, Scotland and France, portraiture became the great bourgeois art-form. Since the beginning of the last century, however, that has ceased to be so. There have been fine portraits painted since, but nothing to compare with Ramsay or Raeburn for instance. The advent of photography and Modernism both had an impact, certainly, but they alone do not explain the radical weakening, indeed near demise, of the portrait. Maybe the answer is that we have become too much the same. As the powers that shape our lives have become faceless, our differences have been reduced to fads and fashions; our individuality diminished. That is rather what the Portrait Award suggests. The pictures all compete: there is no common ground, no unifying style, but when everybody strives to be different, they end up all looking the same. Perhaps that is a comment on our times. Consumerism achieves uniformity under the cultivated fiction of universal difference and individual distinction. The mass-produced designer label buys the illusion of individual choice. Here all claim difference; none stands out.

• The exhibition runs until 16 March.