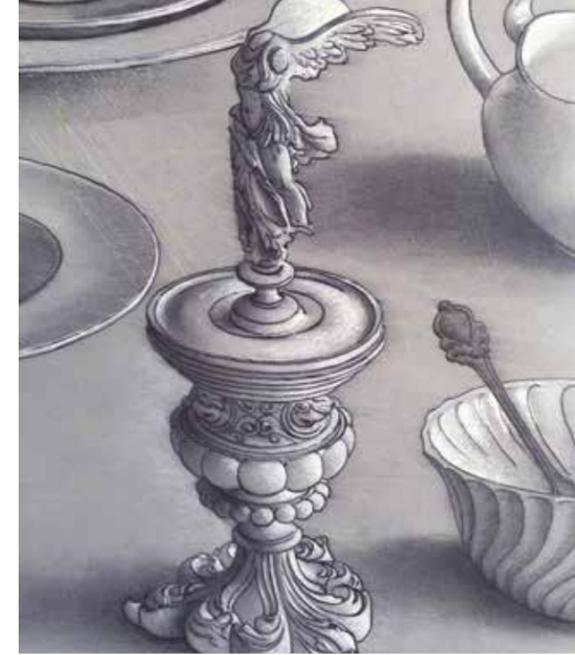




LEFT *An Angel at My Table*, oil on linen over panel, 100x70cm  
 FAR RIGHT Miriam in her studio  
 RIGHT A pastel study for *An Angel at My Table* BELOW RIGHT A reference image for *An Angel at My Table*



TALKING TECHNIQUES

# FACE OF AN ANGEL

NATALIE MILNER asks the 2018 BP Portrait Award winner MIRIAM ESCOFET why she brings a touch of the surreal to her stunning realist paintings

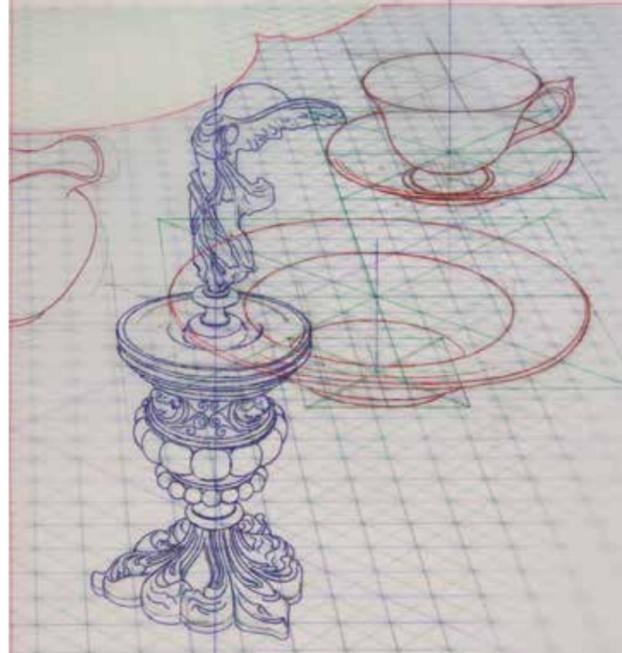
There's something magical about a cup of tea in Miriam Escofet's BP Portrait Award winning painting *An Angel at My Table*. The artist captured her 85-year-old mother Alma clasping her cuppa, drawing the viewer into an intimate narrative. "My mum has the tendency to go into a reverie when she has tea," says Miriam. "Her head turns the same direction and she has a serene look; I wanted to capture that."

The self-taught painter has been chosen to exhibit at the prestigious portrait award exhibition four times before, but this year she carried off the top prize. The artwork, selected from 2,667 entries by judges including artist Glenn Brown and journalist Rosie Millard, was praised for its "constraint and intimacy" and representation of the "universal mother". Last year's winning artwork by Benjamin Sullivan pictured his wife breastfeeding their daughter. A mother figure is an innately powerful image. "If we're lucky, our mothers are the most fundamental relationship in our

lives," says Miriam. "She can represent a place of refuge, a very still, safe central point that you can come back to. That's what I wanted to express in the painting."

She began by setting the scene in the soft north light of Alma's kitchen, laying out her white porcelain crockery on a grey table cloth. Next came a detailed pastel study from life, as well as photographic reference, from which the painting evolved in her home studio in Balham, London. Miriam used a combination of methods to establish Alma as the focal point. She chose a reduced palette to indicate her mother's stillness and let colour shine only from the skin tone. This subtle effect is produced using an intricate glazing technique using her favourite Schmincke Mussini semi-transparent oils. "The glazing is key for me as it's a great way to refine light levels," she says. "There's a quality about it. You read colour through layers of colour and end up with something incredibly complex that you couldn't mix in one go. For me, it's about the sense of space it creates." >

TODD WHITE PHOTOGRAPHERS



LEFT Miriam's perspective drawing for *An Angel at My Table*  
FAR LEFT *Olive Tree and Moon*, mixed media on gessoed board, 56x51cm  
RIGHT *Sophia*, oil on linen over panel, 70x50cm

## “I wanted to unify the perspective of objects to lead to a vanishing point contained within the figure”

Space is also implied through designed perspective. “I wanted to convey a sense of timelessness by unifying the perspective of the objects to lead to a vanishing point contained within the figure,” she explains. It’s a technique derived from the Renaissance artists she admires: Hans Holbein, Jan van Eyck, Leonardo da Vinci, Anthony van Dyck, Rembrandt van Rijn and Andrea Mantegna. “The quality of Renaissance painting is mind-blowing and their discovery of perspective was a game changer,” she says. “I think it was a magical period of invention. I am drawn to paintings that seduce you. In my work, I’m trying to hook you and take you somewhere special.”

Miriam’s realistic narratives are complemented by hidden surreal elements. The crockery in *An Angel at My Table* is a way to introduce another dimension of interest to the painting. “The moving objects suggest the movement of time around the central figure,” she says, “to emphasise that she’s the centre point of my universe.”

The artist’s family lived in Barcelona until she was 12 and her childhood home was adorned with religious statues that her parents collected. They had a profound effect on Miriam. “You get to a point when objects have a meaning for you. They have their own personality and say things,” she says. “Nowadays, I develop a very personal language with the repertoire of objects I like to paint.”

With a degree in 3D design from Brighton School of Art, she’s conscious of the tangibility of an artwork and is drawn to making things. She’ll create props for paintings: the angel cup on the table in the winning portrait is a maquette made from plaster. She prepares her wood panel too, going through a painstaking process of attaching a fine-quality linen, applying gesso primer, smoothing with a credit card and sanding. “It produces a very absorbent, toothy ground so that the oil paint takes well,” she says.

Much of Miriam’s passion comes from watching her father, artist Jose Escofet, at work in his studio. He was the sitter for her first portrait, too, and the work was exhibited in the BP Portrait Awards show in 2007. More than 10 years on, she’s still painting her family. Next up is her seven-year-old niece Mia. “I think the expectations are high after all this hoo-ha surrounding the prize and she’s thinking, ‘Oh, perhaps it’s not so bad to sit for auntie after all’”, she laughs. With such strong memories from her own childhood, it’s unsurprising she’s turned to a young subject for her next project. “Children are connected to the world around them – everything has the potential for magic,” she says. “I think as artists that’s what we try to hang on to.”  
See the *BP Portrait Award 2018* exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London WC2, until 23 September.  
[www.npg.org.uk](http://www.npg.org.uk); [www.miriamescofet.com](http://www.miriamescofet.com)

TOOD WHITE PHOTOGRAPHERS



### MIRIAM’S PORTRAIT PAINTING TIPS

•DRAWING IS KEY

Start with a very good drawing. If it isn’t right, no amount of paint can resolve it.

•LIGHT IT UP

There is a magic light that can fall on somebody’s face and

there’s a destructive one, too.

Make sure your sitter is in good light because that’s what reveals the face’s form.

•REDUCE YOUR PALETTE

I use a reduced tonal palette for skin because I build it up in

layers. I start with a midtone, a dark tone and a light tone to describe the form and leave the variation in colour to evolve.

•MAKE A MEDIUM

The right brush and medium can make paint application

incredibly smooth. My father gave me a medium recipe of equal amounts of cold-pressed linseed oil and turpentine, plus dammar varnish. For fine detail and final glazes I swap linseed for walnut oil because it is more extendible.