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ALESSANDRO RAHO

JUST PAINTING FACES

Helena Kontova



Kevina, 7/96. Oil on canvas, 102 x 72". Courtesy Maureen Paley, Interim Art, London.

HELENA KONTOVA: BETWEEN the many genres of painting, why do you choose to work strictly with portraiture?

Alessandro Raho: I think it's natural for me, its all I've ever done. Through my teenage years and going to college, I never did anything else apart from that. It's been the only subject that really interested me.

HK: Was it something that had to do with your relationships and obsessions with other people?

AR: No, because I was just drawing faces, literally, my whole life. Then when I got to fifteen or maybe sixteen and I went to art college, I thought about it more deeply, and how I could construct art work with this natural inclination to want to draw people all the time. I had to think it through, I had to decide what I really wanted from the picture of the person. Then as it slowly dawned on me, I tried lots of different combinations from very cartoony looking people to film stills of people I didn't know, or famous people. Then it suddenly seemed so much better to have my own friends involved. That was what I really knew and I could deal with. My friends on my own terms. I could take photos and have complete control over the whole thing, and it was honest because it was dealing with what my life was like, people I knew.

HK: So, you never tried to paint anything else, like still lifes or landscapes...

AR: I do try in the studio sometimes because genre work is important to me as an artist and particularly because what I do is very genre based. Sometimes I wonder if this area of work may eventually come into what I am doing but I know that always the ultimate thing for me is to paint the human being, to paint the face. It is also sort of the most tricky thing to do, there's a certain magic to it.

HK: You said that you are basically privileging friends and family members in your paintings. Are there also portraits commissioned by other people?

AR: No, I don't do that. If I do let that happen, then someone else has the choice of what I paint. And I don't know how that fits into this body of work. I paint the same per-

son a lot of times. If a commission comes in, you don't have so much control over what the person looks like. I did it once, and I realized quite soon after, it was a mistake. It was worth trying out to see what would happen. But I became so worried about what the person thought who was buying the portrait. And that never happened to me before. I have to have complete control about the people in my painting.

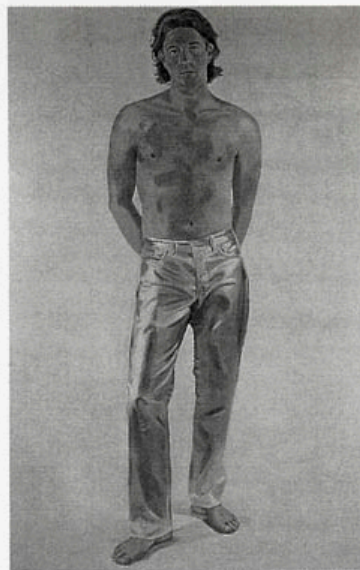
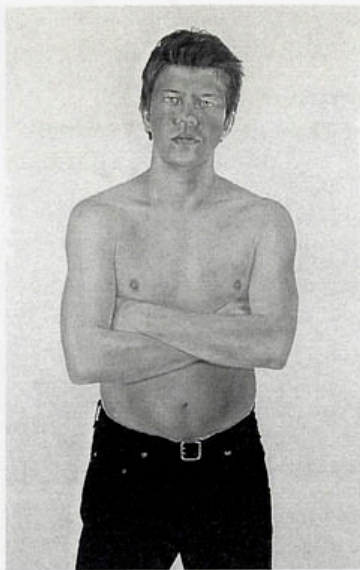
HK: What is the difference between your portraits and those of say Alex Katz or David Hockney?

AR: They're both really big influences for me for a start. With David Hockney it's a very different painted surface to mine. I try to do a more painterly surface than Hockney's. Alex Katz is more stylized in his paintings than I am, and he relies on an incredible flatness whereas I am more concerned with form.

HK: Your paintings are much more three-dimensional...

AR: I remember at my first interview at Goldsmiths when it was run by Jon Thompson. He was looking through my sketchbooks. At that time I had the name of my mum's second husband, which is Scottish, and there was not any Italian reference in my name at all. He was looking through sketches and he said, "You paint just like an Italian." It was so strange; he was a big fan of Italian work, very knowledgeable. He never explained himself, what that meant. And I said, "Well my father's Italian, but I've never been to Italy." I think it was the way I modulated form. A sense of chiaroscuro and how this articulated space. Describing form in this way has always been very natural to me. A three-dimensional space is really the most exciting thing because of the paradox on the picture plane being flat. I always know that on a picture plane, no matter what you paint, even

Facing page: clockwise from top left: Mikis, 5/96. Oil on canvas, 42 x 29"; Ewan, 4/96. Oil on canvas, 42 x 29"; Jessica, 1997. Oil on canvas, 107 x 74 cm. Courtesy Monica De Cardenas, Milan; Carl, 1996. Oil on canvas, 24 x 34"; Paul, 8/96. Oil on canvas, 42 x 29"; Kevina, 7/96. Oil on canvas, 57 x 37".



Left: Ewan, 8/96. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48"; center: Kevina, 1996/97. Oil on canvas, 260 x 183 cm; right: Carl, 1995. Oil on canvas, 72 x 102".

if it looks very three-dimensional, you're still aware of the surface. It's part of the duality that's always been really exciting to me. You're looking at the surface, then you're looking through the surface.

HK: Sometimes your paintings look more minimal. Do you feel closer to minimalist painting or to Pop Art?

AR: Probably Pop Art because Andy Warhol was such a big influence as well. In the early stages Pop was really important for me. Because it was not about skill and craft. It was a screenprint process that anyone could do. Then after that, I moved towards less of a pop stylization and more towards a feeling for the individual. More towards concerns of "good" painting (laughs).

HK: The ground of your paintings is usually monochromatic, it is quite flat and white.

AR: There was a big show of Richard Avedon's in London, which was incredible. I thought wouldn't it be amazing if they were paintings, as well. All those 60s photographs of the Factory with Andy Warhol, and people he knew, on just a white background. They were just fantastic. And then Calvin Klein and the Gap, took those up for ad photos in London. There's a lot of ad photos with just these white backgrounds, so it felt very now. It is also the color of my studio, and when I take the photographs in the studio for my paintings there is the white space behind the people I'm painting. The white paint is pulled around, there's no shadows hitting the rectangle, it's just a smooth surface. It just became so simple because what I wanted to do was portraiture and I didn't really want to

do anything else. What I wanted to paint was the face, so anything else I was adding seemed sort of irrelevant and was bogging the whole core of the work down. Suddenly, I thought, yeah, the white space, it just seemed right, that's the easiest way to get at what I want to do. A perfect solution.

HK: Your paintings are based on photographs. What is the difference for you between shooting the photograph and painting the subject?

AR: Just before I started making portraits, I found my technique for constructing a painting. It was to work from photographs. To find a photo I liked and remake it as a painting. It was refreshing to have the canvas in front of me and know what had to be done on each part of it. When I started doing the portraits of friends with the camera, it suddenly meant something to me. It was my photograph, it felt great. I could do whatever I wanted. When I began to paint them, they became more real and something that had to do with my life.

HK: Is there a difference for you, in the portraiture of a woman or a man? Do you have preferences?

AR: Not any more. In the beginning I was known for painting men. I found it easier in a way because I could make a man look sexy and it wasn't sort of a redundant image. I could take men's tops off and just paint the skin. It felt sort of subversive in a way, because we're so used to all the newspapers and magazines showing women like that. But I also wanted to be able to paint women as well, I wanted to find a way in. Now I'm

doing that. It's really liberating and it's free, and then I can have a whole new subject in the work. I have no preference really. I want to be able to paint everyone. I want the work to be as broad as that, to be able to paint a number of different subtle things. But, with the men I can take more liberties. They never felt vulnerable. With the women it's not the same.

HK: Did you ever try to paint older people?

AR: No, I haven't yet. Mainly because my friends aren't older, so far. Sometimes I see older people on the train and think that person has a certain quality that would be really great in a painting, but I haven't asked any as of yet. As my friends become older, they'll be painted as older people.

HK: You said, that you are also looking at Old Masters, like Ingres, and Frans Hals. Is there any relation between your painting and English portraiture in history?

AR: Friends say that. England has a very strong figurative tradition, I'm conscious of that. The old masters are so important. They're not dead paintings to me. They are great paintings today. ■

Helena Kontova is the Editor of Flash Art.

Alessandro Raho was born in Nassau, Bahamas. He lives and works in London.
Selected solo shows: 1995: Rena Bransten, San Francisco; Interim Art, London; 1996: Interim Art, London; Jay Gorney, New York; 1997: Monica De Cardenas, Milan.
Selected group shows: 1994: "Don't Wake up," Interim Art, London; 1995: "Brilliant! New Art From London," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; 1996: "Face to Face," Victoria Miro, London; 1997: "False Impressions," The British School at Rome.

ALISON JACQUES

