# ALTERED IMAGES: THE NEW PORTRAITURE

Simply painting a portrait is so last century. Nowadays, leading artists are using diverse methods, from computer technology to neon signs, to depict a person's character

Louisa Buck, *The Telegraph Luxury*, 8 October 2015

Alessandro Raho, *Michael Craig Martin*, 2012, (left); *Polka Dot Man*, 2015, (right), Picture: Alessandro Raho. Courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery

From primitive images of hunters on cave walls to portraits of Medici popes and princes, the urge to portray and to be portrayed is as old as art itself. And even in our current era of selfies, Snapchat and Instagram when everyone's smartphone can take a top-quality snap, there remains a hunger for a more formal portraiture: the National Portrait Gallery's annual BP Portrait Award packs in the crowds every year and the Royal Society of Portrait Painters continues to rake in commissions. But at the same time the definition of what now constitutes a bespoke portrait has become as broad and as various as art itself, and many of our most progressive artists are pushing back the boundaries of the made-to-order likeness for their own artistic ends.

Marc Quinn has not only produced a series of self-portrait busts from his own frozen blood, but his portrayal of Sir John Edward Sulston hanging in the NPG consists of the geneticist's own DNA (taken from a sperm sample) preserved in agar jelly and mounted in stainless steel. Rather more restrained is German artist Tobias Rehberger's practice of portraying his subjects as sculptured flowers in vases – patrons are invited to bring along their favourite blooms – while French artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's family portrait for Cincinatti collector Andy Stillpass took the form of a freestanding metal clothesline festooned with white clothes belonging to each family member.

Even though Tracey Emin is best known for scrutinising herself, she too has ventured into the realm of commissioned portraiture. Her Neon Life: A Portrait (2009) was based on the subject's answers to a 15-point questionnaire, which ranged from the innocuous ("How old are you?"; "Who is your favourite poet?") to the challenging ("Passion, romance or hardcore sex?"), from which she created a bespoke neon for a "carefully vetted" chosen few.

However there's no such restriction for those wishing to be immortalised by Japanese superstar Takashi Murakami, who updates the open-access approach of the late Andy Warhol by offering commissioned portraits made from a photograph and available in a number of formats and sizes. Sitters can supply a favourite shot, be Skyped or go to the studio, and the resulting image is superimposed onto a typical Murakami background of happy smiley flower faces in candy colours.

Michael Craig-Martin, one of the key figures of early conceptual art and eminence grise to the YBAs as a tutor at Goldsmiths, is also not averse to taking portrait commissions. Two of his best-known sitters are the architect Dame Zaha Hadid, for a work commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery, and Laura, Countess of Burlington, for a portrait to hang at Chatsworth House. He has also created images of George Michael and his former partner Kenny Goss. All have been mounted on LCD monitors that hang on the wall like paintings, but in which the hair, skin, eyes, brows and lips in the head-and-shoulders images constantly and mesmerisingly change colour. "I'm not a portraitist and I never want to do too many, but I find them challenging and interesting to do," he says.

"I draw people in exactly the same way I draw shoes and tables and books," says Craig-Martin, at the same time confessing it to be "actually more time-consuming than anything else I do. A person's face is a complex thing, and sometimes takes months to finish." He begins by taking photographs of his subjects that will then form the source of a line drawing created on his computer. "I'm trying to find as much straightforward information as I can; I want it to look as much like them as possible," he explains. This linear framework is then animated by an ever-changing kaleidoscope of vivid colours that seeps into each part of the face at different speeds, and is randomly selected by specially developed computer software. No view of these portraits is ever the same and Craig-Martin feels that this state of perpetual flux "suits portraiture wonderfully: it implies mood changes and the progress of time and a kind of living, breathing non-determined life-cycle. It's as close to being organic as a mechanical process can get."

Craig-Martin's former pupil Julian Opie is another major figure who has harnessed computer technology to make portraits. Lately he's moved into three dimensions with larger-than-life busts created with a 3D printer, having also mixed tradition and modernity with hand-painted fibreglass reliefs and even portraits in mosaic. Like Craig-Martin, he regards the recognisable depiction of people as part of his wider, lifelong examination of how we view the world and its objects.

In the case of Opie's early portraits – most famously those commissioned by the four members of Blur for their 2000 Best of album, which were also emblazoned on billboards throughout the country – this involved working digitally from photographs and distilling distinguishing features to the absolute minimum. "I wanted it to be as though each person I drew was a multinational company with a logo," he declared at the time. "The notion of people as types is very interesting… everybody is a type if you draw them as I do."

Opie's subsequent portraits of friends, family and celebrities – including Kate Moss, Bryan Adams and Diane von Furstenberg – all followed this reductive principle, with a line or two for a mouth, dots for nostrils or eyes and equal and sometimes more importance given to clothes, hairstyle and accessories. The same principle was also applied to animated works that were computer-programmed to nod, blink or shake their heads.

Increasingly he is drawing inspiration from his own extensive art collection, which ranges from ancient Greek and Roman sculpture to 17th- and 18th-century portraits by the likes of Godfrey Kneller, Joshua Reynolds and George Romney, all of which feed into even his most hi-tech pieces. Now Opie declares of his most recent work that, while continuing to simplify what he sees, "by looking at European Old Masters and Japanese Manga animation, I have found a way to use shadows within my system to create more depth and action."

His latest reliefs and portrait busts utilise advances in 3D printing, but he still has to paint them by hand because the technology is not yet sufficiently developed to accommodate colour. "When I feel some nervousness as to my own abilities I look at a late Egyptian plaster head I own, and I imagine someone picking up a brush 2,000 years ago and knowing what he was doing and doing it," he says. "I should feel able to do the same."

Boo Ritson has no such hesitations about picking up a paintbrush, but she doesn't simply paint her sitters – she paints directly onto them. If you want to be portrayed by this artist you have to be prepared to have your face, clothes and hair slathered in a slick of water-based emulsion which she then photographs while it is still wet. "I'm not very interested in portraiture that claims it reveals self, because I don't think it does," she declares. "For me, it's not about flattering the subject, it's about commenting on the subject. Putting paint on a subject interrupts everything you want to think about looking at a human being. The person becomes an object, and that's fascinating."

Objectification Ritson-style means that sitters never know quite how they will be portrayed. She has claimed that "clichés and stereotypes fascinate me", and has a particular penchant for Americana: one art dealer appeared as a mafioso. "I tell them about the process and that I will come up with something that I feel is appropriate. They have the right to veto that and then we can discuss and restart, but I never change the work."

Ritson insists that having the paint applied is “very relaxing, like having a face mask”. But it is also a “one-hit sit” process, necessarily intense as she strives to get the paint on and the subject photographed before the paint dries. Lately she has also depicted figures in landscapes and more complicated mises en scène, but she will still consider portraying individuals to order, with the caveat that potential sitters should “accept that the thing they are asking for might not be the thing that they end up with.”

Alessandro Raho’s portraits appear to be more straightforward. His subjects are painted in oil on canvas in their everyday clothes, and usually against a plain white background more commonly associated with photography. Just a year after graduating from Goldsmiths College, Raho was the youngest artist to be included alongside the high-profile line-up of Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Sarah Lucas, the Chapman brothers, Tracey Emin et al, in the now-iconic 1995 exhibition *Brilliant! New Art from London* at the Walker Art Gallery in Minneapolis, which is credited with launching the YBAs in America. But despite his avant-garde credentials, Raho has always remained true to the figurative tradition. “Drawing people comes way before any idea of art for me and I couldn’t let it go,” he says. “I had to find a way for that to make sense to me, and that’s how I latched onto the art world.”

Alessandro Raho, *Judi Dench*, 2005, Picture: Alessandro Raho, Courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery

NPG Director Nicholas Cullinan considers Raho to be “truly a painter of modern life”, and a consistent concern for this artist has been that his paintings are emphatically of their time. He never paints from life but works from meticulously composed photographs of his subjects taken in the studio. “Even though I love the old portrait painters, right from the start I knew I didn’t want to ape an old-

fashioned style," he says. "At college I was as excited by Gap adverts as I was by Old Masters, and I wanted to make art that would reflect the life I lived. You can't compete with the art of the past, but you can paint a Mickey Mouse T-shirt, and to me that felt exciting."

Although Raho now enjoys making commissioned portraits – "I've started to find everyone interesting to look at. I see characters everywhere" – he admits that his first major assignment, to paint Dame Judi Dench in 2005, was "really nerve-racking". This was not because she was a grande dame – in fact quite the opposite. "When she came to the studio she was as lovely as everyone said she was," he recalls. "She's obviously an amazing actress, but in my portraits I don't really want you to act, I want you to stand and be you. But how do you act just being yourself? I ended up saying, 'Maybe if you could just stand as though you are waiting for a bus?' And that seemed to work." Raho's direction was certainly successful and, judging by the portrait currently hanging in the National Portrait Gallery, waiting for the bus may be one of Dame Judi's finest roles.