Seeing and not-seeing

I am frankly thrilled to be here after more than another decade during which the People's Portraits exhibition has lived and grown at Girton. Portraiture has of course become but one of the art forms that has flourished under the Mistress's guidance and enthusiasm, and that's been wonderful to witness. As these occasions, too, have always been literally full of wonder, when we anticipate and then see a new portrait joining the collection.

But I can't simply launch into my talk without pausing on what has just happened. Because this has been a moment of very special witnessing. Once again, we have the privilege of the painter's and sitter's presence. Yet I don't recall a previous occasion on which the sitter had herself sought out the portraitist to bring home the heart of a campaign, in quite the way that Sylvia Mac has done. What Alastair [Adams] has painted is extraordinarily powerful -- I find myself very moved.

In other words, the painting works. Paintings work in many ways, of course, but Sylvia has added a dimension in the hope – as you have told us -- that it would *do* something rather special in what it invites us to witness. To see with her. And in the way the light falls and catches the detail of what it records, one also sees the beauty of a part of the body one would not ordinarily focus on.

So while I was invited to talk on any subject of interest to the event, it is impossible to ignore the fact that there is already a compelling subject in the room: what is before us. And because it is so provocative in the way it asks us to reflect on what we do and do not see, that has to be my theme.

Here I must ask indulgence from both painter and sitter. I have never forgotten Daphne [Todd]'s comments when – while she was making an portrait of me – I tried to enter into the spirit of things by showing her an article I had written on the concept of a portrait that touched my work as an anthropologist in Papua New Guinea. She would have none of it. It was not PNG that was the problem, the problem was to imagine any congruence between words and paint. So I am a bit nervous about putting anything about this magnificent and challenging painting into words. Not that I am going to re-describe it -- you have already heard the sitter and painter – but I do want to ponder on the theme it suggests so compellingly, namely the way in

which what is seen and what is present but not seen can play into each other. – Sylvia, as well as Alastair: apologies for everything I shall no doubt get wrong: these are only musings, they are not interpretations of what might have been imagined or intended, just thoughts stimulated by the image.

Over one's shoulder[1]

Seeing and not-seeing, then. Now in the nature of things one does not ordinarily see one's back. – Though PP has an arresting instance of what can be done with mirrors (*The hairdresser*, Saied Dai). -- The sitter's glance is elsewhere, but her – your -- head is turned as though you were looking over your shoulder. This gives the figure a kind of double focus – as though one could see front and back at the same time, just as, when you talk about body scarring, you contrast what people usually see and what you *know* of yourself that others don't see. If I have understood you right.

What is also *no*t seen in the painting is the full body form that is ordinarily presented from the front. That too is glimpsed. The turned head allows us just that glimpse. -- [To Sylvia:] I am talking of the painting of course. I have to say it's very nice to meet you face to face as well!

Perhaps we can pause for a moment on the glimpse as a kind half-way point of vision between what is seen and what is not seen. We all know its power. What is seen out of the corner of one's eye isn't subject to the same kind of processing – interpreting, formulating -- as anything we deliberately look at, so it often lingers in unexpected detail. Of course there are other kinds of glimpses too. Architecture may invite us to glimpse through an aperture such as a window or arch, directing one to pay attention to something that thus gets framed, as a portrait as a whole gives us a frame. Famously, of course, the periphery walk through the belt of trees round Girton's boundary was laid out as an explicit exercise in the edification of the glimpse – the idea was that the walker looked onto the College buildings now magnified as a vista full of interest and enlightenment by being only half-seen from the serpentine path (Brown 1999: 7). It is the imagination that is enlarged by the glimpse.

For me, something of that effect jumps out of the painting. Instead of seeing everything all at once, it is also possible to linger on one aspect rather than another. In how the viewer's eye is drawn now to one part and now to another, each focus or moment of attention makes the other

[1] My thanks to Debbora Battaglia for a discussion that illuminated this perspective.

glimpsed. This comes to mind, if I may talk personally for a moment, because it was something I see in Daphne's rendering of myself when she gives me two heads – now looking up, now looking down. Of course one can see them together, but equally easily one can see first this, then that, so that each image temporally eclipses the other.

Why mention the effect of the half-seen glimpse? What I infer -- if I may, Sylvia -- from what you have said about the campaign for raising awareness, the problem is that while the face evokes something of oneself as a person, it is also incomplete. Not just in the ordinary sense that any self-presentation is partial, but because that other side of what had *happened*, the accident that had sculpted your back, was so important. It was always there.

So let's come back to the activism involved in the portrait, to the fact that this is a piece of work that *does* something, and is meant to do something, in very specifically pointing to body scarring. And this surely holds for anyone who views it. It makes the viewer think of all the other kinds of ways in which bodies are formed through what happens to them – including industrial or agricultural accidents, as well as wear and tear or just age – yet are not ordinarily 'seen' in that light. Because the activist or campaigning dimension to this work of art makes us demand a bit more from the idea of seeing and not-seeing than what is presented to vision. What is presented to vision, in such a context, calls on us also to acknowledge how we know things.

This is not just playing on the double sense of 'seeing', both what is visually accessible and what we know exists. Rather, viewing is being used to insist on a certain kind of knowing – witnessing in fact.

Words to one's face

At this juncture I briefly leave the room, as it were, in order to take you somewhere else. It is about the fact that even when we may 'know' something, depending on how it is brought into mind it may not be 'seen'. That is why we need interventions! And campaigners! In what we have just been hearing, the vehicle of bringing things to mind, that is, seeing them, is the sight of a powerful image. In the instance I am about to relate it was not an image that was lodged in my mind, but (suitably enough!) an unusual set of words, a round of tickings-off, admonishments. I was being told off, in no uncertain terms, and it was especially galling since I already 'knew' what I was being told.

I want to take you briefly to a place called Mt Hagen in the rural Highlands of Papua New Guinea, with which I have been familiar for well over 50 years. -- You might have thought I had learnt enough! -- Anyway, on a visit some seven years ago now, I was confronted with a situation where portraits of a kind indubitably *did* something – although, despite being a seasoned fieldworker, it took me ages to 'see' what it was. I had come with piles of photographic prints intending to share, with them or their descendants, photographs of people I had taken years previously, in the context of informing them I was going to donate my collection to the National Museum in PNG's capital, Port Moresby.

Now I had been braced for criticism ('She would not have liked to be viewed like that!' / 'You had no right to take that picture') but it never came. Instead I was thrown by what I wasn't seeing. In fact I now think the photographs, some of which I had rather fancied as portraits, had cast me under a spell, to the point that they eclipsed what I knew. The occasion of the telling-off was a simple proposal to a Hagen friend that I seek out particular persons to give them the prints. The entirely unlooked-for response focused on what I was really going to do with these material objects.

Vehemently and patiently, my Hagen associate explained that I couldn't just go around with the images, handing to some and leaving others out; more importantly, showing concern carries ethical consequences. Bringing previous interactions with people to mind (for example, when the photograph had been taken) compelled an activation of relationships, and relationships require honouring (substantiation). By having individual photos in envelopes to hand to people, I was imitating giving a gift – the aesthetic would reveal that as my intention. It was the material form of the paper – as photo and envelope – that was the problem. For while it hinted at a gift, indeed the envelope looked rather like a wallet, a photograph itself was hardly a sufficient vehicle for the gesture of concern: if I was giving things then it had to be something of worth. A picture in an empty envelope would be interpreted either as an insult or else as making an allusion to something bigger to follow later.

I had forgotten my own understandings of how people show the value of relationships! I had made the mistake of individualizing the photographs, turning them into a gesture of affection, personalizing my own memories. I was looking to make that affection visible, through a visible means of recall. And I did not *see* what I was I doing. As I was informed, a photograph was hardly a sufficient vehicle for the expression of such sentiment. If I was giving things – as the form of the gesture suggested -- then I had to be giving something of value to the recipient.

Above all, what I gave had to be of value to myself – money, for example, and on a scale proportionate to what I had. That evaluation took into account the fact that I worked for money, just as through the land they worked people gave me food they had cultivated or artefacts they had made from its resources. If I did not give some product of my work (substance) then it would be better if I didn't share the photos at all.

Valuing relationships showed in other ways. Thus my old pictures prompted elderly acquaintances to show me old photos of myself that they had kept all these years as signs of their concern for me. This was often accompanied by prompts on their part in the form of gifts (for me), with the expectation of counter-gifts.

Admonishment came from another quarter too. My hosts were preparing for an event that was disputed between clan groups. Timing was all, and people were nervous: I was told they would be looking for a 'sign' as to what would happen. Again, it was what I was going to do with the bits of paper that created a problem. What bothered them were pictures of an earlier generation of now deceased personages. They distinguished between insignificant photographs of all manner of people in everyday life, and a handful of prints I had made of previous clan 'leaders'. Images of the latter were potential candidates for plans already in progress for a public display in a cultural information centre, mounted at a venue where everyone would have intimate knowledge of these leaders and their descendants. It would matter -- as if I didn't know -- whose image was to be promoted, and my snaps were an interference. It would be best if no-one knew I had them, that they remain unseen. And so they did.

I don't want to give a wrong impression of Hagen people, who these days use all kinds of media platforms, were conducting financial transactions over mobile phones well before it became usual here, and circulate electronic images at will. Looking back, I wonder if it was not my antique approach to prints of photographs that had elicited some antique responses! I tell the story against myself, of course, but it underlines the enduring point that even while we may 'know' something, it may need to be brought vividly into mind in order to be 'seen'.

Connections

The small point of connection between my story and 'our' painting is that images have effects – they indeed do things – that can go beyond an aesthetic response. I think this chimes with what both Sylvia and Alastair have told us about *Love Disfigure*. That said, mentioning photographs also brings a point of contrast, on which to conclude.

This is the well known observation that by contrast with the photograph a 'painting … can bend, shift or combine moments in time' (Zeitlyn (2010: 10/34). No doubt its effect varies from occasion to occasion, but the time it takes to paint isn't insignificant. And the time it takes to view isn't insignificant either. To absorb what is in front of us requires the duration of a gaze, often one to which -- happily in this case -- it is possible to return.[2] But then another kind of time is caught in looking over one's shoulder: the nature of a glimpse is that it is fleeting. Seeing now this, now that, one focus eclipsing another: it's as though, in a manner of speaking, the movement of the viewer's eye mimics the hand of the painter. Of course, if I can put it like that, the painter is simultaneously adding each new moment to previous ones.

I'd like to think that what is true of each portrait is also true of the People's Portraits collection as a whole. What has formed and grown over time under the hands of individual painters from the Royal Society of Portrait Painters has also grown along the walls of Girton's corridors over a period of what is now twenty years, as the Mistress observed. That does indeed make this [20th] anniversary occasion a special one. It is special other ways too. Alastair has always been a supporter of PP, and was President of the Society [of Portrait Painters] when the Mistress took office; it is just lovely that he has donated to this year's exhibition – *Love Disfigure* is I believe his third. As for the Mistress herself, 2022 is the thirteenth year in which she has nourished People's Portraits.

For the Girtonians who are here, they'll be aware that this year is sadly her last, and that the events this weekend will be almost her final public engagement. In thanking you, Sylvia, and you, Alastair, and the Royal Society of Portrait Painters, we should also be thanking Susan [Smith] for how she has helped grow the College through how she has helped grow this fascinating, challenging and inspiring exhibition.

References

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2 Malcolm Guite (from the audience) made a similar comment at the PP unveiling on 9 July 2022.