

A Knee Play entitled: “I realise I am just at the pattern stage”

Martin Friedman on Chuck Close:

“by painting his fellow artists, (he)was implicitly stressing both the importance of their friendship to him and his high regard for their work.”¹

What is a nomadic portrait? Literally speaking a nomad has no permanent abode but moves from place to place, and a portrait, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is an ‘elaborate or vivid description’ of a person or animal. In this project we have been asked to explore the movement from one visual mode of representation to another, with no limitations, through the interpretation of a portrait, whilst always being mindful of the paradox of portraiture ‘who does the portrait represent’?

“On the one hand the work focuses on its represented subject: on the other, it expresses the artist’s conceiving of that subject and hence the artist *per se*.”²

Portrait artists approach their subject in a multitude of ways, yet all with the same *raison d’être*; to represent the sitter. This interpretation, this gaze is what is unique to each partnership, whether a portrait or a self portrait, the essence of the sitter is what we aim to reveal. Graham Coulter-Smith writing about Mike Parr’s Self Portrait Project examines Lacan’s notions of the gaze:

“Lacan implies that the rational, conscious gaze can be turned ‘inside-out’ when he asserts: ‘consciousness, in its illusion of *seeing itself seeing itself*, finds its basis in the inside-out structure of the gaze’. Lacan’s ‘inside-out’ gaze would appear to be the other side of the rational, conscious gaze. It is effectively the ‘gaze’ of the unconscious.”³

He goes on to say that ‘the essence that Parr’s self Portrait Project is seeking lies outside the visual-geometric order.’⁴

Mike Parr
Zastruga Self Portrait 1986
Oil crayon & charcoal on paper
69.5 x 100cm



In order to reach this revelatory stage of the unconscious vision, I found I needed to undertake a very conscious process of gathering information. Karen, my sitter, entered into this relationship or transaction very openly. A narrative developed through ongoing conversations and she shared much material, both physical and anecdotal from her past with me. Early on it became apparent to me that the mode of representation for my portrait of Karen would be an abstraction of her. Certain elements recurred; pattern, text, colour, convention, metaphor which would form the basis of the portrait.

¹ Martin Friedman, *Close Reading; Chuck Close and the artist portrait*, Harry N. Abrams, NY 2005, p.11

² Wendy Steiner, *Postmodernist Portraits*, Art Journal, vol 46 No 3, 1987

³ Graham Coulter-Smith, *Mike Parr: The Self Portrait Project*, Schwartz City, Melbourne, 1944, p.39

⁴ *ibid*



⁵Francis Bacon says of Picasso's portraits:

“Picasso was the first person to produce figurative paintings which overturned the rules of appearance; he suggested appearance without using the usual codes, without respecting the representational truth of form, but using a breath of irrationality instead to make representation stronger and more direct; so that form could pass directly from the eye to the stomach without going through the brain”⁶



As my portrait of Karen developed the metaphor I chose for the structure of the work was the concept of pattern.

Pattern, n, Excellent example; perfect ideal, model from which thing is to be made, type, sample of cloth etc, decorative design on surface.⁷

These many meanings became embodied in the dress pattern of a “princess” dress, exploring the notions of social ideals, ‘happy ever after’. The concept of concealed/revealed became apparent and the idea of layering the dress pattern over paper and embedding the text of our conversations into the two layers took shape. There was a strong somatic or physical element to the making of the work, with movement and dance also becoming embedded into the work.

A constant dialogue went back and forth at each stage with ideas triggered in Karen entering the portrait and then these ideas re-entering Karen’s work in a new form. We also experienced a strong synchronicity in everyday life. As the work was progressing I had had the idea that the mythical, symbolic dress, so much a part of Karen’s make up and desire, would finally be made, however, interestingly this has not so far eventuated. As more patterns were made, the drawing of the portrait slowed and a fog descended. I felt I had reached a place of limbo, an in between place with the next revelation/development just out of reach.

To quote artist Joan Grounds on the notion of ‘information drawings’

‘...notations of the most primitive nature, where one puts down the germ of an idea, the first dimensional manifestation of a form or a field, often the trigger to a work...’

Once again the metaphor for pattern emerged dominant; this was just the information or the pattern for what was to come next. I realised I was in a sense in the realm of a Knee Play. As David Byrne explains a Knee Play is the ‘joint’ that holds together the larger scenes, a sub story, a place where comment can be passed on the larger actions which take place in the acts: an introduction to the next act.

⁵ Pablo Picasso, *Weeping Woman*, 1937,NGV

⁶Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait* 1971 <http://www.theartwolf.com/self-portraits/bacon-self-portrait.htm>

⁷ Oxford Dictionary

The Installation;

'One expects new understandings of artistic authorship to appear in artistic collaborations, understandings that may or may not be consistent with the artists' solo productions before they take up collaborative projects. ⁸



In some ways the installation of this portrait has also had a nomadic metamorphosis. The first draft of the installation started with the largest pattern centre stage, representing social conditioning, a pattern with a hard tactile quality and a strong visual language of conformity that Karen should fit into and yet the fabric has flaws, it is not 'perfect'. In Karen's words there was a juxtaposition of vulnerability and strength. The remaining pieces, some of whom display the beginnings of a new manipulation or a subversion of the material, were displayed either singly or in groups in a fairly conventional approach.

The off cuts, the remnants of the drawings, were scattered under the table, a space Karen has claimed as her own, a hidden space for experimentation. In some ways I sensed these were the 'true' portrait as they captured the essence unconsciously of what had consciously been made and thus represent the possibility of a new direction. However, I had kept them under the table...

At this point the portrait took its next step. Following long conversations with Karen and Sally we started to play. The off cuts under the table were discovered and questioned and both Karen and I invited Sally to install them. Slowly, piece by piece they took over the walls. The larger, more formal pieces were moved aside and these small, intimate objects took their place. The Patterns took on a 3 dimensional form and the large pieces were reunited with their partners in their own space, inverted and reflected.

⁸ Green, Charles. *Third Hand : Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2001, pg x



Is this still a portrait of Karen? I believe it is. The recognition of the off cuts by being given a place of importance represents the potential of Karen's ability to metaphorically create her own new pattern; she interpreted it as a visual representation of the power to change her pattern in any way she decides.



One further exciting realisation then emerged, just as this is a portrait of both Karen and me, the installation has sustained the paradoxical nature of portraiture to also become a portrait of Sally, the collaboration has widened, the gaze has deepened, the examination of the sitter has broadened, the nomadic practice has continued.



Initial installation: A portrait of Karen and Annique



Final installation: A portrait of Karen and Annique with Sally