

NEXT GENERATION SELF-PORTRAIT TALK

by Philip Vann

Piano Nobile Kings Place, Monday 6th June 2016, 7.15pm

I'd like to welcome you all warmly to this first exhibition of the sixty-six self-portraits, acquired over the last six years or so, for the 'Next Generation' Collection, following on from the one hundred self-portraits acquired between 1956 and 1972 by the writer Ruth Borchard. I feel, in a way, I am surrounded – and transfixed – by the mysterious faces and paradoxical presences of painterly friends and family.

I was lucky enough to meet Ruth Borchard around 1999, and was struck by her intellectual curiosity, resilient character and what she called her practice of 'dowsing for talent'. Ten of the one hundred self-portraits she collected – by artists including Cecil Collins, F.N. Souza, William Crozier, Anthony Whishaw and Dorothy Mead – are on show here. Only five of the original one hundred self-portraits were by women – which invited this suitably terse response from Jean Cooke in 1966:

'Dear Miss Borchard, I am not a feminist but to have only 3 women painters out of 91 (so far) make [sic] poor odds so 21 gns it is. Are you going to come and pick up the painting? Yours sincerely, Jean E. Bratby.'

It is noticeable that of the sixty-six contemporary self-portraitists in 'The Next Generation' Collection – artists who have entered the last three bi-annual self-portrait competitions and exhibitions at Kings Place – twenty-nine are men and thirty-seven are women. So the odds have, thankfully, improved a lot!

To the original collection, two drawings have just been added: a marvellously delicate pencil self-portrait by Henry Lamb, and a quite early, small yet monumentally rugged charcoal self-portrait by David Bomberg.

Ruth Borchard wrote of her original collection: 'One fact often surprises viewers of the collection – this is the variety within the limits of the subject. One subject only, one generation, one nationality – yet an incredible diversity.'

Actually, it is not quite true that the original self-portraitists were just of one generation, and actually their backgrounds were often (though by no means always) immensely diverse. But Ruth was right to talk about the incredible diversity of approaches within the limits of the one subject – self-portrayal.

'The Next Generation' Collection also shows a huge eclectic diversity of approach within the set limits of distilling a likeness of oneself through painting or drawing – each picture a meditation on the nature of identity, both personal and universal. Without singling out individual painters – who range from one of teenage years to octogenarians and beyond – approaches range here from the visionary to quotidian poetic realism; from the the subversively political to the often disquietingly psychological; from the challengingly apocalyptic to the tentatively intimate and contemplative in tone – and often contain disparate elements of all these things. There are even a few paintings literally portraying a multiplicity of selves.

Ruth wrote in the sixties: 'I would like to see the one barrier broken through in English painting. This is the careful avoidance of human drama as subject matter. The drama, the excitement is confined to the surface of the canvas, to the handling of form, to intensity within the medium. Why cannot we have paintings, also, like Goya's? Why not the cri de couer, also, in what is being painted? This I find in Anthony Whishaw, Kenneth Brazier, and a very few others only. Perhaps the re-emergence of figurative painting will bring this in its train.'

Throughout the new self-portrait collection, this cri de coeur is at once insistently and subtly present – it is there also in the way the pictures are painted. The careful avoidance of human drama as subject matter has been broken through in these new paintings through what we can confidently call a 're-emergence of contemporary figurative painting' – wonderfully palpable and visible all around us here this evening in so many paintings of visceral painterly vivacity as well as those that are at once searchingly metaphysical and intimately moving.

I would like to quote these perceptive words from Francis Bacon, most apposite here:

'If you think of the great Rembrandt self-portrait in Aix-en-Provence... you will see that there are hardly any sockets to the eyes. It is almost entirely anti-illustrational, and when [you think] of the... so-called brutal painting of a Jackson Pollock... Abstract Expressionism... of course all that had been done by Rembrandt in a painting but it had been done with the added thing that it was an attempt to record a fact, which was Rembrandt's own appearance.'

'And to me, therefore, must be much more exciting and much more profound. Inevitably, he's trying to do something much more difficult.'

Now some quotes from some of the artists here, and a few notes about their self-portraits:

David Caldwell writes: "Self-portraiture is a unique genre. The concentration and unselfconsciousness that solitude allows is not available in other portraiture. Alone with oneself one is allowed to look deeper and longer into one's eyes; to scrutinise every aspect of the subject without the imposition of any brief. Also, one knows the subject inside out.'

Shani Rhys James observes that her self-portraits are full of 'sweet melancholy...it's that reflective thing when you are just unguarded, caught in the mirror. It's not really myself... it's more a psychological state of me... different aspects of me but also of other women. I start off with myself; loosely there is a sort of semblance to me... you're looking at the painting becoming... skin or flesh.'

Of his disorientatingly wry self-portrait *Crowd*, Jiro Osuga says, 'By replacing all the faces in the crowd with my own features, it speculates on what it might be like if you could become other people. Would you attain a heightened state of human compassion... putting yourself in the shoes of others and viewing the world from their perspective? Or would you be very lonely, the equivalent of being the only person left alive on the planet. The painting doesn't pretend to have the answers.'

Of her scintillatingly dark self-portrait, Julie Held says, 'I'm at a flower stall outside Oxford Circus Tube Station... I suddenly had a memory of buying flowers for my mother years before when she was ill in hospital. No longer was it a lovely dark sky but it became a luminescent cobalt blue in my imagination and suddenly against the background of blue all the flowers seem to come to life, and I had a glimpse of the ones I wanted, and I tried to retain that moment in the painting.'

In her self-portrait with lilacs, the late Dora Holzhandler's countenance is preternaturally still, poignantly serene. When discussing the nature of her art, she would state, quite simply, 'It's all in the face.'

Her own perspective on portrayal was summed up by these lines from the Zohar, a key Kabbalah text, which she had studied: 'For the masters of the inner wisdom, the features of the face are not those which appear outwardly but those within formed by intense forces... When one looks at the face of such a man, one is moved to love him.'

Leslie Marr, who, like Anthony Eyton, has pictures in both the original and new self-portrait collections, says he is intrigued by the art of Chaim Soutine, 'the vigorousness and wildness and freedom to do what he likes. I don't see his portraits as extreme distortions – they are super-likenesses. It's interesting to put his paintings (if unconsciously) side by side with Cézanne's – everything Cézanne puts into his paintings is absolutely right; there is nothing superfluous, nothing left out; a great process of selection has taken place.'

Celia Paul says her searingly tender *Self-Portrait, May (2010)*, is the first of three, the other two being June and July 2010. I extended the theme in 2013 when I painted five self-portraits... To exhibit them in a row creates an unsettling effect... are they all the same person or are they sisters or friends? The idea has a personal significance for me because I am one of five sisters: my identity has always been defined by my resemblance to one or other of my sisters. In a wider context, women are so often defined by labels: wife, daughter, sister, mistress, Muse. When looking in a mirror women are questioning who they are and what place they have in the world.'

In her twenties and thirties, Marcelle Hanselaar travelled widely, with trips to countries including India and Afghanistan, encountering danger and threatening 'situations where you find yourself becoming very calm. There is nothing you can do; no running away or smart talking can help. It just happens. There's something about bodies which are centred which is absolutely wonderful. In my 2008 *Self-portrait with exploding chest* I am centred, as are indeed many figures in my paintings. I am a peaceable person but I'm intrigued by the human potential for violence, individually and collectively.'

John Keane's small, intense 2013 *Self-Portrait* comes from his Fear series of 2012/13. He says, 'There were a number of large-scale portraits derived from [Soviet] NKVD mug shots, which I had been profoundly struck by when first I encountered them. Of course these were individuals who, once arrested, would know pretty much what their fate would be... The series was a meditation on Fear, and undertaking the representation of these people elicits a kind of intimacy or empathy in an (inevitably futile) effort to imagine their states of mind. In a presumptuous but I hope not disrespectful exercise I tried to imagine myself in their shoes. This resulted in a large self-portrait that would hang with the others as though I were another anonymous victim. Some smaller versions of these portraits were made using inkjet transfer on linen and one of these is the one acquired for the collection (which, of course, I am honoured to be amongst).'

Thomas Newbolt's preferred procedure of painting in twilight has an affinity with what mystics call the *via negativa* – the desperately hard-won way of ascertaining the truth of things by facing what they are not. He says, 'Each mark changes who the painting looks like: in a self-portrait, the reflection does not show me as I appear to others; in a portrait of an imaginary person a final likeness is meaningless. The face usually arrives during a battle with the face part of the painting that, at first, is left as provisional and, finally, turns out to be definitive.'

Examining the background to his numinous self-portrait, Fred Crayk says, 'I paint self-portraits for two reasons. The first is entirely practical and possibly mundane: I'm always available as a model. The second may be slightly more profound – I want to get to know the person I know least... that is, myself! Knowing oneself is virtually impossible. Montaigne, in his *Essais*, I think, bears this out. Trying to catch the visual facts that make up your person is a fairly faulty way of doing this. The process is riddled with pitfalls and illusions one has about oneself. The religious iconography in [my] self-portrait is perhaps a way of neutralising all these misconceptions.'

The momentary sighting of a bullfinch perched on Paul Bloomer's woollen hat – in his self-portrait – is followed by the

realisation that the bird is part of a background painting. 'Birds are for me symbols of freedom,' he says 'Bullfinches do not live in Shetland but one year after a bad gale thousands of them arrived. Blown off course, the red of their plumage glowed all the more brightly against the darkening autumn landscape, and I drew them with delight.'

Bloomer makes woodcuts – like this self-portrait – by drawing on large sheets of MDF with charcoal. 'The drawing is then fixed, then the cut line prints white – and what is left prints black – so in effect I am working from darkness back to light' – especially fitting for an artist living on Shetland where winters are almost unremittingly dark and bleak – and where summer midnights can be magically illuminating.

The title of Michelle Boyle's magisterially intimate self-portrait comes from James Elkins' 1998 book *What Painting Is*, a deeply considered and erudite exploration of the secret, sensuous alchemy of painting itself. Elkins writes: 'Consider what is happening in the paint [in Rembrandt's portraits], aside from the fact that it is supposed to be skin. Paint is a viscous substance, already kin to sweat and fat, and here it represents itself: skin as paint or paint as skin, either way. It's a self-portrait of the painter, but it is also a self-portrait of paint.'

Shanti Panchal's multi-layered, fresco-like watercolour *Artist and the Lost Studio* was painted in late 2014, when he was faced with the prospect of losing his north London studio. 'I felt I was being stripped naked of the things I had worked for over many years. Circumstances were forcing me to move – the studio was being snatched away from me.' The artist's nakedness here symbolises his vulnerability. He sits rather tentatively on a simple wooden chair of 'refreshing watery cobalt blue. I'm looking into the distance – into the uncertain future – but really it is a more inward look, accompanied by the hand's thoughtful gesture.'

On the table is a natural grey symbolic model of his studio, towards which a tiny figure of the baby Krishna stretches forward in plaintive supplication. The backdrop, a warm silvery grey, contains a convex mirror conjuring up the artist in bold silhouetted profile focussed in the act of painting. This self-portrait is a moving meditation on the pressing urgency of Panchal's studio predicament and the universal sources of his creativity.

Eugenie Vronskaya says, 'I often start the day in the studio with some very fast self-portraits as a warm-up. My work is also very autobiographical and in an indirect way I always paint 'self-portraits'. I guess it's the nature of many artists – a need for self-scrutiny, self-reflection, we spend far too much time on or own confined in four white walls or walking through countryside.'

Anthony Eyton says his perennially youthful 'self-portrait was not painted in one session, I was continually redrawing it over time to get it right. Overall continuous changes meant that the final picture took over twenty sessions to make. I have an ambiguous look here – my wandering eye was slowly scanning the whole space; my approach was not at all like that of a Rembrandt looking at you directly. The eyes in the face changed a good deal during the long painting process, the aim of which was very much to achieve depth and resonance of feeling.'

Suzanne Perlman's turbulently expressionist *Self-Portrait* was painted in a concentrated two-hour session looking at herself in the mirror in her studio. 'It was painted during a difficult emotional time for me. I found I had to get under my own skin. [Neither] a premeditated nor a descriptive way of painting, more an organic exposure of mood and feeling... it was a catharsis for me to express my feelings; you can't resolve them otherwise. It's about giving yourself away.'

Charlotte Hodes says that in her gorgeously intricate papercut art, 'A central idea is that of the female figure representing a kind of semi-permeable membrane through which anxieties and experience travel. The work is not so much autobiographical narrative but rather an attempt to create an interior reality and order from a female perspective. I use the scalpel blade to draw my line, layering painted and printed fragments of paper to give papercuts a strong physicality and, in some passages, a quality of filigree.'

Of her raw and vibrant 2014 self-portrait, Lucy Jones says, 'it was perhaps the slightly sideways stare (maybe a little disconnected) that gave me the idea of moving the hand to the left of the painting. The dark blue shadow figure I had had there at first, was wrong. I then somehow came up with this pinky red backdrop which I think works with the icy greys of the face and hands.'

Such self-portraits explore what she calls 'the awkwardness and ambivalence of looking and moving differently' – symbolised here by the eerie surreality of the separated hand.

About his dazzlingly dark 2011 self-portrait – in French peasant-like attire and almost medieval craftsmanlike demeanour – Greg Tricker says, 'I'm very much grounded but also listening to the angelic worlds. My eyes are half turned to the world but also turned to the angel – with a listening look.'

Hannah Webb expresses something of the exacting freshness of seeing oneself with pristine, unguarded eyes, when she says, 'when I'm looking this intensely at people, especially at myself, the thing I think about most is the amazing, astonishing condition of being alive and of being mortal.'

I hope you enjoy the show.