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The Human Touch?
What is the value of the artist/sitter relationship
to contemporary portrait painting?

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of
Doctorate of Philosophy
in Fine Arts to The University of Newcastle, N.S.W., Australia.

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Statement of Originality

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Abstract

‘The re-emergence of all figurative art as progressive and groundbreaking’\(^1\) since the last quarter of the twentieth century continues to manifest itself through portraits of individuals external to the artist as well as through the artist’s self-scrutiny, self-portraiture. In Western art, a portrait made by an artist of another person, the ‘sitter’, remains a unique artform in that its production is necessarily dependent on the co-operation and collaboration of both parties, often artist and non-artist; two divergent worlds coming together on which, nevertheless, an artwork relies.

The interest and cultural value afforded portraiture is evidenced through newly established twenty-first century portrait galleries, collections and prestigious portrait prizes, garnering huge public and media interest, impressive monetary awards, sponsorship and submissions from highly reputable and, often, high profile painters. This gives assurance to uncertainties concerning portraiture’s valued status as art\(^2\), countering suggestions of marginalization within contemporary painting,\(^3\) and affirming that ‘portraiture has held its own’ despite the turn away from it, generally, through twentieth century abstraction.\(^4\) However, though ‘performance art, body art, video art, photographic manipulation and appropriation, along with other innovations…encouraged the return to figuration’,\(^5\) the submission and acquisition protocols of both new and long-established portrait galleries and portrait prizes heavily demand the portrait be in the specific medium of \textit{paint}. Furthermore they more often than not categorically stipulate the physical meeting between artist and sitter as mandatory for purposes of making the

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1 Wendy Wick Reeves, (Ed.) \textit{Reflections/Refractions}. Washington, DC. Smithsonian
5 Reeves (Ed.), 8.
painted portrait. This research investigates the argument that the practice of painting, and that the painting is, at least partially, painted from life, appropriately serves the conveyance of shared experiences and observations made over a period of time shared between two parties; that a physical meeting, which can be described as *human touch*, is of significant value to the expression of the artist’s ideas, the practice of painting, and as a unique testimonial of both parties relationship for that period of time.
The Human Touch? What is the value of the artist/sitter relationship to contemporary portrait painting?

Introduction

The Archibald Prize, Australia’s longest-standing and ‘most prestigious art prize’ for portraiture, awarded first place in 1975 to John Bloomfield for his portrait of film director Tim Burstall, (see Chapter 2:1 (iii)). That the artist had never met the sitter but had worked solely from a magazine photograph contravened the rules of the competition, which specifically state that the portrait ‘must be painted from life’. The prize was withdrawn from Bloomfield and given to another artist whose submission was worked from life. The rules were famously upheld and have not been changed, other than to make the specific requirement of ‘painted from life’ even more legally binding. Moreover, though twenty-first century portrait competitions have been newly established, some by national portrait galleries, stipulation to *paint from life* remains a pre-requisite for submission of work and, in most cases, for the acquisition of portraits for national portrait collections.

In light of the current healthy practice of figurative painting in contemporary art, encompassing diverse approaches to portraiture, these findings lead the researcher to consider the reasoning for the insistence on adherence to this particular rule for submission of portraits to national portrait collections or the majority of significant portrait prize competitions. The aim of this research is to

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explore in depth the assumption underlying many of these prizes and galleries that a portrait ‘painted from life’ generates a certain desired outcome for the portrait that could not have otherwise been achieved. The pre-requisite working method implies that a perceptible quality is transferred to the portrait by this act of human engagement between artist and sitter, and that work done from mediated imagery – namely photography – does not. However, the ‘John Bloomfield Scandal’ seemed to challenge the value of painting from life, suggesting that the ruling was becoming anachronistic as early as 1975. While exceptions are occasionally made – such as with London’s National Portrait Gallery’s acquisition in 2012 of Marlene Dumas’s posthumous portrait of Amy Winehouse, painted from a photograph9 – the Gallery’s ‘Acquisition and disposal policy’ still states ‘that portraits acquired should in some way be authentic records of the appearance of the sitter, ideally done from life10 and in any case not a modern copy’.11

Since, overwhelmingly, portrait commissions and portrait prizes, (see chapter 2:2 (i)) require working directly from the sitter – some even require counter-signing of a witness to declare as much – the research investigates the aforementioned London’s National Portrait Gallery’s correlation of this required working method as an ideal to conveyance of authenticity. The researcher defines authenticity here comparably with that of Richard Handler, assistant professor at the department of Sociology and Anthropology, Lake Forest College, Illinois, who writes,

I take ‘authenticity’ to be a cultural construct of the modern Western world… authenticity is a cultural construct closely tied to Western notions


10 Emphasis added by researcher.

of the individual... 'The individual' has a central place in our understanding of reality.\textsuperscript{12}

Acknowledging Alexis De Toqueville\textsuperscript{13} and Louis Dumont\textsuperscript{14}, Handler says it is this individualism that manifests itself in the shaping of a collective culture, stating, 'the bonds uniting authenticity and individualism remain tight in both common sense and anthropological ideas about culture.'\textsuperscript{15} Lionel Trilling notes that a concern for a display of sincerity within Western society, to be taken as indicator of one's authenticity, leads to role playing 'with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic.'\textsuperscript{16} The research therefore investigates and evaluates the extent to which individual authenticity, 'which has to do with our true self, our individual existence, not as we might present it to others, but as it 'really is'\textsuperscript{17}, apart from any roles we play', is facilitated through the intimacy of the one-to-one artist/sitter relationship, through the process of their painted portrait. The researcher thus investigates the method of painting from life, necessitating considerable direct interaction with the sitter, as revelatory of the authentic identity of the sitter predominantly while acknowledging the ineluctable artist's own personality embedded in the process.

Ultimately, this exegesis contends that a portrait painted from life, in which there is a substantial artist-sitter relationship, maintains a significant intrinsic value and does indeed affect the artistic outcome of the resulting works. Australian painter Wendy Bills\textsuperscript{18}, calls the quality achieved by portraits painted from life 'the human touch':

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Richard Handler. \textit{Authenticity}. Anthropology Today, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Feb., 1986), 2-4 Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Alexis De Tocqueville, 1835. \textit{Democracy in America}. P. Bradley, ed. 2 vols, New York. 1955.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Handler, \textit{Authenticity}, 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Handler, \textit{Authenticity}, 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Wendy Bills is a full-time professional artist, living and working in N.S.W., Australia. She exhibits through a number of N.S.W. galleries. Wendy was a finalist in The Portia Geach Memorial Award for portraiture by Australian women artists in 2011 and 2013. Wendy Bills, Artist, \textit{Wendybills.com}. www.wendybills.com/index.html
\end{itemize}
this ‘human touch’ cannot be achieved by simply copying a photograph... Photographic portraiture only represents one moment in time... When portraiture is done from life a bond develops between the sitter and artist over a number of sessions. This eventuates because of the intimacy of the occasion where two people spend several hours in the company of each other... The artist attempts to provide an audience with a painting that resembles the subject, as well as revealing characteristics of that person that they have conscientiously observed over a period of time.  

Taking from Bills, this exegesis argues for value of ‘the human touch’ in contemporary portrait painting – the notion of a shared experience in real time, being fixable and translatable beyond that time, through the medium of paint. Furthermore, this research argues that the specificity of paint, as opposed to other mediums – such as photography and film–is apt to convey this intimate experience of time spent between painter and sitter for the purpose of making a portrait; that the time spent between artist and sitter is, in some significant way, conveyed within a painted portrait. By comparison, this research also suggests that other artistic media generates different kinds of portraits, with different purposes, not necessarily concerned with conveying something of the shared experience of the artist and the subject – for example, a studio shoot with a photographer and a fashion model creates a qualitatively different outcome than that of the fashion model Kate Moss sitting for many hours with the artist Lucian Freud. The research therefore explores the nature of the relationship developed between the portrait painter and their sitter through the consideration of historical and contemporary discourses on portraiture, analysis of the rules of a range of portrait galleries and prizes, and consideration of interviews with practicing portrait painters. Importantly, this research includes a significant practice-as-research component, investigating the central themes of this exegesis through the researcher’s studio practice.

In investigating the rules of portraiture galleries and prizes, this research limits its analysis to western Anglophone nations, England, America, Canada, 

19 Wendy Bills, e-mail message to the researcher, May 20, 2012.
Ireland and New Zealand, because they share a discursive context around the terminologies used within the Australian context of the researcher.

Chapter 1:1 focuses on key artists and works in the historical development of observational portrait painting. It demonstrates the extent to which the concern for mimetic likeness is balanced with idealisation or conveyance of spirituality, often reflecting Western, predominantly Christian, religious beliefs. That chapter examines portraitists’ relationships with powerful and/or influential individuals –clergy, royalty, aristocracy, emperors or collectors – reflecting on their negotiations and inventiveness with the form to ‘market’ their sitters/clients to an audience, aspects of which have shaped a workable template for much portraiture that is commissioned, selected or purchased by today’s portrait galleries and prizes. Case studies also suggest developments in paint technology enabling desired mimetic representations in an attempt to offer an authentic record of the time spent between two parties.

Chapter 1:2 will show, through selected examples, the impact of printed reproduction techniques on the role and purpose of portrait painting, up to and including the beginnings of photography. This suggests that reproduction and publishing of an image affects the relationship between artist and sitter. This chapter takes into account the sociological, conceptual and philosophical shifts affecting the role of the artist in society as forerunners to twentieth century modernism. Case studies suggest the changing purposes of the painted portrait to serve specific aims and objectives of both artist and clientele, who nonetheless see mutual value in the collaboration of the making of the portrait.

Chapter 2:1 considers why paint tends to remain the medium of choice, as stipulated prerequisite medium for portrait submissions to portrait galleries and portrait prizes. This is informed by an investigation of the relationship of painting to photography and their inherent, constituent qualities and uses. This embedding of the mandatory stipulation to work from life and in the
medium of paint, investigated in Chapter 2:2, draws on primary source material – direct consultation, via email and interviews, with practicing painters, their sitters, gallery curators and authors. This material provides personal perspectives on the value of a portrait to be painted from life. Arguing for the value of painting from life, the chapter contrasts this approach with that of certain painters who prefer to work from mediated sources and/or away from the sitter.

Chapter 3 will argue the value of the artist/sitter relationship, by considering the practice of recent and contemporary artists whose works rely on this relationship. Lucian Freud is particularly important here. Freud’s methods and techniques, and the importance he places on observation from life, significantly influence the studio practice of the researcher. This section also reflects upon the experience of a portrait sitting, from both the artists’ and sitters’ perspectives.

The latter half of Chapter 3 will analyse the researcher’s studio research through painting, in tandem with the ideas explored in this exegesis. Through examining the processes and outcomes of actual portrait sittings, light is shed on the value of human interaction and a developed relationship with a sitter. Alternatively, self-portraits or portraits constructed from photographic source material, absent of the physical sitter, explore how practical, aesthetic, conceptual, and formal considerations vary to portraits made from life. Through its absence, such works suggest what is afforded by direct observation and experience with a sitter. Within the two main approaches, the studio practice-led research and the written research will be shown to become interdependent.

Exploring these diverse approaches to making a portrait of an individual through practical research methods directly informs the assessment of the central questions underlying this research:
Considering certain key historical and contemporary painted portrait practices what differences can be discerned between portraits painted from life and those that are not? And in what ways can those differences be characterized?

What arguments are there for the continuance of the working-from-life clause for submission of painted portraits to portrait galleries and portrait prizes?

What role might the specific medium of paint have on the artist-sitter relationship, as opposed to the use of other kinds of media?

What can the researcher’s own portrait painting practice contribute to the knowledge and debates surrounding the value of painting from life?

Through the researcher’s studio practice, what can we learn about the ways in which the personal relationship between artist and sitter impacts upon the end work produced? And, conversely, what can this practice tell us about the ways a portrait sitting might impact upon the personal relationship of the artist and sitter?

In light of these questions, this exegesis argues that ‘the human touch’ – articulated through the continuance of the working-from-life method and using the medium of paint for the making of portraits – remains a relevant and vital practice in contemporary art.