

Contemporary Artists Redefine the Portrait at London's V&A Museum

BY MICHAEL PRODGER | AUGUST 02, 2015



The portrait is art's ur form, the one in which every generation returns and tries to re-make it, literally, in its own image. "Facing History: Contemporary Portraiture" at the Victoria and Albert Museum (until April 24, 2016), shows a slice of the genre in the form of 80 prints and photographs from the museum's own collection by some 20 artists made over the past 20 years. It is, in composite form, a portrait of modern portraiture.

Among the artists on show are [Gavin Turk](#), [Julian Opie](#), [Thomas Ruff](#), and [Grayson Perry](#). There are also works from lesser-known practitioners such as Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Brian D. Cohen, and Cecilia Mandrile. What is most striking about the selection is how art-aware the modern portraitists are: there are variations on Frida Kahlo from Ellen Heck (11 of her "Forty Fridas" series of prints showing different women dressed as the Mexican painter), on Vermeer from Tom Hunter ("Woman Reading a Possession Order," a modern riff on a Golden Age woman reading a lover's letter by her window), on silhouette miniatures from [Julian Opie](#) ("Luc and Ludivne Get Married"),

on death masks from Brian Cohen (“Man with Eyes Closed – Walter White”), and naïve pre-photography colonial woodcuts from [Grayson Perry](#) (“Mr. and Mrs. Perry”).

Almost none of the images are straightforward representations. The artists are not really interested in the personalities of the sitters (Brian Cohen's picture, for example, shows a fictional character from the television series “Breaking Bad”) or in their physiognomies. These are not pictures of men and women with striking or demonstrably beautiful faces, they are not records of the great and the powerful, these are not images of sitters with rich or turbulent inner lives. These are exercises in portrait making in the style of Dutch *tronies* – the character heads painted after real people that stood for Everyman or for characteristics such as pride, humility, or fortitude, rather than individuals.

Cecilia Mandrile goes further than most in using stuffed doll forms with a blurred human face attached as emblems of migrancy — an entirely contemporary take on the social portrait. Meanwhile, [Gavin Turk](#)'s “Portrait of Something That I'll Never Really See” is a nice example of YBA trickiness — a close-up self-portrait of the artist with his eyes closed that is both an almost death mask and also a refutation of the old saw of judging a portrait's quality by the way the eyes follow you around the room.

The message of these, and all the pictures in this stimulating display, is that there are as many types of portrait as there are faces to sit for them.

“Facing History: Contemporary Portraiture” at the Victoria and Albert Museum is on view until April 24, 2016.

URL : <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1209075/contemporary-artists-redefine-the-portrait-at-londons-va>