TWO FACED

The Changing Face Of Portraiture

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The Changing Face Of Portraiture

'THE PERSON PORTRAYED AND THE PORTRAIT ARE TWO ENTIRELY DIFFERENT THINGS'

Jose Ortega Y Gasset

Timothy Saccenti

01 / Danger Doom.
Photograph.
Original size_20" x 30"

ONE / FOREWORD

By Gavin Lucas_Creative Review

It used to be that image makers were an elite group of skillful craftsmen who plied their trade to those who could afford to employ their particular skill sets. Today we are all image makers. With our mobile phone/camera/web-roaming gadgets permanently at the ready, we can shoot (in the photographic sense) anyone we like, including ourselves, whenever we like. Thousands upon thousands of freshly snapped images of friends and family are put up on websites such as Flickror MySpace on a daily basis or sent in messages on mobile phones – or simply deleted from our digital tools. In short, image making has become everyday, commonplace – throwaway even. But while most of us have or have access to image making tools, not all of us have an eye for compositional perfection or indeed any other skill associated with the professional image maker.

Despite the increase in the number of ways we can capture likenesses in the last hundred years or so, the role of the portrait artist remains the same: Portrait taking or making is the art of capturing the sitter's physical likeness and imbuing that likeness with his or her personality.

"TWO FACED", then, is a celebration of portraiture in the 21st century – split into two sections. The first is dedicated to showcasing a selection of contemporary portraiture produced in various mediums by a host of well known photographers and artists such as Rankin, Simon Henwood and Stella Vine.

In the second section, Firth has assembled and paired up leading image makers to produce each other's portraits. And these are not necessarily specialist portrait artists. Rather, Firth has selected a range of creatives who work across a variety of media to contribute to "TWO FACED". Illustrators such as Marion Deuchars and David Shrigley who work primarily with pencils and pens; graphic designers like Michael C Place and eBoy who produce vector based graphics on their macs; artists including Ian Wright and Paul Willoughby who might use spray paints, brushes, tape and a range of other materials to create their work; and even filmmakers Shynola are among the creatives who have produced portraits for this book. So how did each image maker respond to their subject and to their task? What will each image reveal about the sitter and also about the artist responsible?

"TWO FACED" thus, is not simply a collection of snapshots, or images to be downloaded and subsequently discarded, but an art project that celebrates the notion of cultural exchange as well as the talents of some of the most in-demand image makers of our time.

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THREE / PORTRAIT OF THE DESIGNER

By Adrian Shaughnessy

I've always believed that our faces are guides to our inner beings. A face is like a good guidebook to a city we are unfamiliar with: it doesn't tell us everything, yet it tells us most of what we need to know. But how reliable are faces as a guide to personality? Are our faces maps of our psyches, or are they random arrangements of flesh and muscle predetermined by DNA and the amount of alcohol we consumed the night before? Can you have a sweet and smiley face and yet be miserable inside? Can you have a sour face and still be a happy human being?

Our faces are our signatures: something that is indelibly us. Try swapping Elvis Presley's face with Michael Jackson's face: can't be done. Both of these iconic figures are defined by their faces. Yet faces are paradoxical: we can easily misread them. We must beware of shallow, impulsive readings, or over-reliance on immediate impressions. A pretty face, with regular features, might, on closer inspection, reveal an inner cruelty. A clumsy, irregular- featured face, may, with careful study, reveal intelligence and vision. To be viewed as accurate guides to the minds of the individuals they 'represent', faces require close and informed scrutiny. The ability to 'read' faces – to discern their inner meanings – is the core skill of the portrait maker.

In daily life, we learn to read faces in the same way a portrait artist prepares to make a portrait. We look for signs and hidden meanings. We scan continuously for indications of concealment, for signs of warmth, for hints of aggression. The smallest facial tick sends out a signal. We may not know what that signal is telling us, but we note it and file it in a complex system of mental folders that we use to build up a psychological profile of the people we meet. Of course, the face isn't the only way we

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create an understanding of someone: language, gesture, posture, movement, even personal hygiene, all reveal essential components of a persona. But the face reveals the most. This is why at an early stage in our development as human beings we learn the importance of controlling our facial muscles. It's a pivotal moment in the growth of an individual when he or she takes full control over the previously autonomous zone of the face. I was a late developer in this area: I was a teenager before I discovered that I could control the muscles in my face. I realised – slowly – that I didn't have to reveal what I was thinking. But I could achieve this only if I was able to retain control of my facial expressions.

The ability to dissemble is an essential life skill: if we can conceal our innermost thoughts, we can gain many advantages, especially in the competitive domain of business. Yet in other spheres, we gain advantage by allowing our inner feelings to flood our faces: when we wish to show a lover our emotions, or when we want to show a child that we are pleased with them, we let our inner selves, to use Violet Leduc's word, 'irradiate' our faces. But because we know that so much is written in our facial expressions, it is essential that we learn to control our faces. It is a basic survival mechanism. It is often said that some so-called primitive societies believe that if you photograph them you will capture their souls.

This doesn't sound primitive to me. It sounds sophisticated. Just think of today's celebrities: they live only to be photographed and catalogued in magazines and on TV. They have no life beyond the life encapsulated in the images of themselves: if they stop appearing in the glossy mags and the luminous dazzle of TV screens, they cease to exist. If this isn't forfeiting your soul, I don't know what is.

The pictures of celebrities that deluge our culture are portraits of a sort. But they are not portraits with any ambition to reveal psychological truths. In fact, they seek to do the opposite. Like much of the great formal portraiture of the past (paintings of aristocrats and royalty), they trade in falsehood and hype. Their defining characteristic is that they are driven by the subject, not the image-maker.

And it appears that we can divide portraits into one of two categories: there are those that are made to glorify or idealise the subject; and there are those that are made to objectify the subject. Most portraits – especially photographic ones – deal with the former. They exist to flatter the sitter. They connive with the sitter to project the image the sitter wants to project. Even so, the truth sometimes slips through. In the supermodel's beautiful features we sometimes glimpse cruelty and self-obsession, or, conversely, modesty and intelligence.

The other sorts of portraits are those that are made with sensitivity and psychological insight: these portraits, usually done by artists, eloquently reveal the inner reality of their subjects. Who tells a deeper truth: the painter Francis Bacon, or a celebrity photographer with an arsenal of Photoshop filters and a team of stylists? Bacon seems to tell a deeper truth, perhaps because he has no interest in flattering his sitters. It's almost as if he is not looking at the face but peering into his subject's soul: you find the same psychological penetration in Picasso's cubist portraits.

So – with this in mind, why would anyone turn to a graphic designer (not to mention commercial photographers and illustrators) to make a portrait of another human being? Isn't it a bit like asking a person to write a symphony just because they can whistle a tune? Graphic designers have opposite skills to most portrait makers. Graphic designers are problem solvers, or message carriers, or organisers of visual and textual information. They are rarely, at least in their work, concerned with psychological truth. After all, graphic design is the art of the surface. It is about instant communication: it is about now-ness and immediacy. And even when graphic designers claim that their work is about 'ideas', along comes commercial reality and demands that these ideas are instantly comprehensible. There must be no ambiguity or mystery. Graphic design is the art of the obvious.

But some graphic designers have a different view of graphic design; an alternative view that allows for ambiguity and mystery. Increasingly, designers are turning away from the traditional role of the designer – a conveyor of other people's messages – and looking within themselves to find ways to use their skills and vision to create graphic work that no longer conforms to the purely commercial view of graphic design. In order to pursue these ideas of graphic authorship, they require either a supportive client or the strength and vision to write their own briefs.

This is being done at a time when design is under greater pressure than at any time in its short history to be the mute servant of rampant commercialism. Many graphic designers no longer call themselves graphic designers. They prefer to be called branding consultants. Big design groups have eradicated the 'D' word from their vocabulary with Stalinist ruthlessness. Design in the marketplace increasingly looks as if it comes from a universal template: uniformity and blandness are the most desired qualities in graphic communication.

Hardly surprising then, that a growing band of thoughtful designers are questioning this one-size-fits-all approach and turning to more meaningful modes of expression. Hardly surprising then, that a new generation of graphic designers and image makers can happily, and with such enjoyable results, turn their hands to portrait making, as the work in this book amply demonstrates.

Johnny Hardstaff
By Eboy