

Germaine Greer

Video Interview Transcript

This interview is from a Channel 4 TV series called 'In Your Face' (available on DVD), made by Christopher Swayne and Bruno Wollheim, produced by Coluga Pictures.

Do you think the artist should still paint portraits?

In the case of most artists I would say, take a photograph, project it on the wall, draw around it, whatever, but I didn't ever think of that with Paula because I knew it had to be an encounter, it would be a record of an encounter.

What do you like about the portrait?

I like everything about this picture. I like the way it's composed, I like its lack of flattery. I think it looks like me in a way that a photograph wouldn't look like me because it seems to be in movement all the time, it seems to flicker and that's not my energy so much as Paula's energy but it's interesting that the two energies intersect. I think it's a very truthful portrait of me, I get letters all the time saying 'how could you let anybody do that horrible picture of you, you don't look like that, you are much more attractive than that, blah, blah, blah'. The whole point about it is that it's not attractive, it's actually aggressive and it's difficult as a woman and conscious all the time of the duty to attract on the one hand and the impossibility of attracting on the other because you can only be found attractive, you can't actually do anything to make yourself attractive, and somehow this picture leaps all of that and gets into a different place. Gets into where my intelligence might be or my intelligence of some sort of organising principle of my life. It's got lots of my deformities in it, none of them has been left out I don't think. My shoe is even broken, which is pretty typical. It's my favourite dress, my very first proper dress when I had some money, it's an old Jean Muir and it's very beautiful pink. The colour's not quite the right colour because the dress is actually raspberry, a very soft raspberry colour but Paula wanted the strong colour, the blood colour which is better, and as typical of people with dark eyes she's exaggerated the Anglo-Saxonness of my eyes so they look much brighter and bluer, greener than they are. I love it.

How did the portrait evolve?

She started off doing a sort of Kit-cat composition which would have been a half-length I think, with a roughly pyramidal structure, which is usual and it just didn't work at all. And she worked on it, I think we went for more than one sitting, and she worked on it with this original drawing and then threw it away.

Who suggested the pose?

So here is this little figure pounding away with these great thick chinks and then scratching it on and because she works on prepared paper laid on aluminium you can't have too many pentimenti. You can have some, but not many. So the first one went west.

So I suggested the pose because it gave a point of reference to get the bits in proportion. In Paula's own work she doesn't worry about that because the distortions of proportion are part of the expressivity but it's difficult to justify that in a portrait, so it was my idea to pen me into this lozenge within a square because then you had to get me in there somehow so I took the pose, which was actually a pose I could keep because it was long. There were seven sittings I think altogether.

Do you find the pose an unusual one?

I selected the pose and because the pose is so odd, but it's not usual to paint portraits of women in their past middle age, menopausal women, not to make some sort of obeisance to their beauty or their sexual relationships even. We would have to look for a different iconic language probably, I couldn't sit like a dowager queen with a bible in my lap or something.

Did your clothes help you keep the pose?

The clothes that permit the greatest physical freedom are the clothes most concealing so that Arab women can actually sit in the most ungainly of positions and the most comfortable where they've actually got their pelvis spread and their belly resting on their thigh and so on. And of course in western society, we free women are constantly thinking of what we are doing with all of this and so I find it quite interesting that that's a kind of harem posture really and it's interestingly enough a posture you wouldn't adopt if there was a man around. It's a very non-gendered pose really, it shows no awareness of an observer apart from the person who is getting me into a picture frame.

Is it a flattering portrait?

There's nothing that says a portrait has to be kind. A portrait that is kind is condescending. The last thing I would want is for Paula to condescend to me and that is the last thing she would think of doing. I mean that's the thing about this portrait, it's sort of two equal egos met in the making of this work and that's the wonderful thing about this picture, the face flickers all the time and what I feel in it is this intelligence beating about behind the face. That's not a mean achievement you know, and it's a great flattery to me. To flatter me by making my skin look good or my tits look good or my legs look long or whatever would be neither here nor there but to flatter my intelligence in a portrait is just ... peachy!

Do you read any sexual symbolism into this portrait?

Everybody said, 'oh but look you're actually making a hole where your vagina would be', yeah so? King Henry VIII wears a codpiece, so? Lots of portraiture does that, consciously or unconsciously. Even apparently the most decorous portraits, if you think of something like Titian's Young Man with a Glove, he's actually pulling a pommel of a sword through the furred lappets of his coat and he's wearing a kid glove which is split, showing the skin on the back of his hand. It's one of the most sensuous pictures ever painted, to me it's full of sexual promise, especially as the young man's eyes are languid, and he's a kouros, he's a boy and boys are meant for amorous play. So for all of his kind of manly attributes, it's still about the same old thing, 'why are you looking at him?' And his eyes are averted from you and portraits roughly divide into two sorts, ones where the subject is looking at you and one where the subject is looking away. In this one the subject is looking away but her

vagina is looking at you.

Do you find it a sexy image?

I would have hated a sexless portrait, that would have been horrible really and in a way submitting yourself to the portraiture procedure is allowing someone to castrate you if they want to.