

Maggi Hambling

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

Supported by Deloitte

Why did you portray George Melly in three personas?

When you say George Melly a lot of images come to mind and one of the images that came to mind for me, was one of him in drag as Bessie Smith, which I'd seen in a colour supplement and I knew that must be part of the painting. The part of the painting which is George singing, obviously I have been to Ronnie Scott's and all over the place and experienced him on the stage singing, funny, sexy, camp, everything and this extraordinary voice that seems to be coming out of him better and better as the years go on. And the figure, the persona of George in the portrait that he and I refer to as 'The Professor', came about completely by accident because I'd gone to his house the night before we both started work and he produced from the wardrobe these extraordinary robes with a kind of floppy Rembrandt hat that went with them, and they were his robes as a fellow I think of John Moores Liverpool University and when he'd been given them, made the honorary fellow, they were bright emerald green and then in the wardrobe over the course of time they'd gone a very dingy brown and then when he produced them, that hot summer's night, they'd gone these wonderful shades of russet. He held them up in the air and said 'I don't know if you want to use these Mag' and I said 'Oh well, we'll bring them along and see' but they just fitted the thing. Because obviously it was very difficult to choose just three versions if you like of George because he's so many things, you know, performer, singer, broadcaster, writer, lecturer, fisherman, so many things but I chose just three.

How is a painting different from a photograph?

If you take a photograph, it's the record of the light and shade at the moment of the camera clicking, which is different from painting from life, from drawing from life which obviously goes on over a period of time and so it's a collection of many moments of response, many moments of observation which all have to be brought together in one moment which is the work of art.

What is the role of the portrait painter?

When I paint a portrait I try to empty myself completely so that I become a channel for the truth of the person I am painting to come through me on to the canvas, into the drawing, into the bronze. So I try to just be a channel so that the truth of the person can come through and what you have to deal with is the paint so for me it's very important that there's some life to the paint and the way the paint goes on because that's how you're going to make that person alive on a piece of canvas. And each time I try to paint an eye, it has to be as if I've never had to paint an eye before in my life, or a nostril. So everything is particular, particular, particular, it must never be generalised. There aren't any formulas, there aren't any answers, each time you do it it's jumping in at the deep end. The thing is to be, as Brancusi said 'it wasn't difficult to make a work of art, the difficulty lay in being in the right state to do it'. Tricky. When I painted George, I mean I wanted George to be there in the painting, that's what I'm talking about, making that person alive on the canvas, moving through the canvas, there for a second and gone, but there for a second again.

What do some of the elements in the portrait signify?

Well there are obviously three hats, Bessie's beaded cap, George's Fedora as the singer and the Rembrandt hat as the professor. There is another hat because a black bowler hat is sailing through the sky on the Magritte tie. There are a couple of fishing flies attached to the brim of George the singer's hat, which you might not notice at first. There are a number of eyes, obviously the six eyes of George, the eye in the ring on the camp hand

which he always wears. And I saw the buttons on Bessie's high heels and the buttons on George's spat which you could see when he was a singer, as sort of flirting away like two pairs of eyes at the bottom of the picture and there's another eye within the Rembrandt hat, the eye being not only what an artist uses all the time but a big symbol of Surrealism that George is always associated with. And he was very impressed with my painting of feathers, I don't think I'd ever painted feathers before, but he'd said to me you imagine the studio of Rembrandt or something and he'd say 'Oh give Maggie a ring to do the feathers', he was so impressed with the way I painted the feathers.

Was George a good sitter?

George was really there, the best people are the ones that are really there and it is very tiring to sit, even if you're just sitting on a chair, it's very tiring to sit just as it's tiring to work, and you are making the thing together. And the body language of somebody, how they get up, when they laugh, what they do in the breaks, all that is part of the whole thing. So George was fascinated. He watched it grow, I mean that's fine. I always say to people they can have a look, when we have a break if they want to as long as they don't say anything, which I realise must be quite difficult for them at moments but they're not allowed to say anything.