

John Keane

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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What approach did you take in order to paint the portrait?

I said to her, and this is a method that suits me, that I'd really only want to photograph her and work from a photograph. As far as I'm concerned and as far as she is concerned, being a very busy person, not someone who likes to sit around for a long time, the approach that suited both of us best and so she came to my studio, I photographed her here - well I wanted to photograph her in the surroundings, in the studio I'd be doing the painting. And from the pictures I took I selected basically one in particular that I thought represented something that I wanted to use. That photograph I took of Mo was of her in my studio with me, talking to me, responding to me so it's not a photograph someone else took somewhere else. So there is a very sort of personal thing but involving both of us.

What particularly attracts you to the paint medium?

To me paint has very much to do with substance and surface, it's where the substance of paint dissolves into image and vice versa that sets up a kind of tension in the surface is what I like about paint and it's exploiting that that I find intriguing. You don't get that with a photograph, a photograph is essentially flat, it really has no surface. It's a kind of a sort of Teflon surface that you nothing will stick to in a way. To me it's the substance of paint that is something that I enjoy exploiting, exploring the possibilities of it and where that is combined with imagery albeit from a photograph that intrigues me. I like to work on a firm surface rather than a canvas stretched on a stretcher which flaps around but I like a firm surface to work on so the canvas is stapled to the wall, primed and this is acrylic on linen, so the background of the canvas is actually the canvas colour, it's not primed in white or anything. I then drew blown up the image drawn on to the raw, primed canvas and then the painting process starts.

Why did you choose the large scale?

We wanted to do a headshot but make it have quite an impact. I like to work on a certain scale just because of the relationship to the hand, to the size of canvas, to the size of brush and so on. I generally like what is often considered quite a large scale rather than head and shoulders, hands and all that kind of thing, the face is what intrigues me most. Because she has an individually and particularly unique history and a history of her illness - the way her looks have been transformed by her illness, and indeed overcoming her illness, and that is very much reflected in her features and that's really what intrigued me.

How does Mo Mowlam still see herself and how do you see her?

She still sees herself as being young and attractive and slim - the way she was before she was ill and you can imagine that must be, well - wake up every morning and find that you're rather different from what you used to be - but in a way it's also been one of her defining characteristics as well. One of the things that endears her to the general populace I think is although conventionally she may not correspond now to the young, attractive person she used to be but nonetheless there's another perhaps more personal attractiveness that has come through and that everyone is aware of. One shouldn't leave out, in fact it's probably one of the most important things, is a kind of a sense of humour, a sense of irreverence, which again how do you put that into a painting? But I hope in a way that's implicit, I don't know if it's the twinkle of the eye or whatever. There was an incident here in the studio when she was here, when the phone rang and she leapt over to it and picked up the phone and said 'John Keane's studio'. And I hope there's a degree of intimacy as well rather than aloofness. I think like I said before, when you meet her what you see is what you get - she's a very direct and forthright individual and I hope that that will come through in the painting as well.