

Sir Jonathan Miller

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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Is this a public or private moment?

You might want to say that a public portrait is one which confronts the public, where you present yourself to the public and I certainly don't think that this is what's going on. Stephen has caught me in an un-public posture, thinking un-publicly, private thoughts, if indeed I am thinking about anything at all. It might strike the spectator as slightly pretentious, a sort of Rodin penseur. That certainly wasn't the way in which I thought of myself. I wasn't presenting myself or nor did I imagine I was presenting myself as a thoughtful person accidentally caught by a passing portraitist. I simply settled down because that was the most comfortable position to maintain hour after hour.

Do you consider the portrait to be a performance?

It wasn't a performance but of course there is a sense in which every time you, as it were, submit yourself to a portrait you are performing for a portrait painter and that there is some aspect I suppose of what's going on there which is a performance for the painter and then indirectly for the public who is going to witness the result. That wasn't uppermost in my mind but it's inevitably a component of any portrait that a portrait is in fact a still moment or an extended moment of a performance for others. But even looking in the mirror is a performance as well, you're performing for yourself. I think one composes one's face when looking at oneself in the mirror, to perform for yourself perhaps even in the expectation of that being the face that you would like to present to the public if they were behind the mirror looking at one. Inevitably I think someone from outside, someone looking at it and looking at me and knowing something about my history would say 'oh well, he is in fact performing, it is in fact a production of some sort'. And I suppose I would have to admit there was some element of presentation of self in it. I've always been embarrassed by being in what I believed to be a frivolous and silly business perhaps I chose a position which counteracted or contradicted that and said 'well, I may be a frivolous showbiz ninny, but actually I'm quite serious really'.

Does it capture your character well?

I know it's me and I can see certain aspects of me which are gloomy in fact. I do fall into periods of gloom and it looks like the gloom that I feel, though as I say I don't know what my gloomy look looks like because I don't look at myself when I'm in a state of gloom, I don't confront myself in the mirror and say 'my God how depressed you are and how depressed you look'. When I'm depressed I don't find myself looking at myself. I mean I think, what I like about this is not simply that it is a picture of me but that it actually might be of interest to someone who might not have the faintest idea of who I was, they might just like the way in which it was painted. I think most of the portraits that I enjoy are a) because they represent someone who quite clearly and unarguably was alive and conscious at the time that he or she was painted but also there is something about the way in which the artist has negotiated with the canvas and puts stuff on to the canvas in order to represent a person.

What do you like about Stephen Conroy's work?

Well, I've never been particularly interested in the conventional sort of academic portraits that one sees hanging in the halls of Oxford and Cambridge colleges and I'd always rather admired the slightly raunchy style of Conroy's pictures of sort of clubland, Glasgow gangsters sitting in pubs and dim light and also I liked his painting. At a time when painting seems to be in decline we seem to be upholding the whole business of actually putting paint interestingly on to a flat service.

Where you interested in being portrayed?

Because I'm interested in painting, I was interested in talking to him in the times when he would allow me to talk. How did he go about it? How did he start? What was the starting point? I was intrigued to find he didn't make a charcoal sketch on the canvas first of all, he didn't sketch the outline nor did he do a grid. He seemed to start straight in with the oil painting on some particular part of me and I asked him what he started with, he told me that he always started with the corner of an eye and somehow the face crystallized out from the corner of the eye. That seemed to me very intriguing, and it was very counter intuitive for me – I'd always thought what you did was sort of have plumb lines and grids and so forth so that the whole thing was in proportion. I was interested to find that as he went on he was constantly readjusting my size, and the size of my face, rubbing things out, but that was something only that I learnt by hear say not by look see. I never saw him working on the canvas which finally landed up at the Gallery and I gather that he went through several versions of the one that he did at the Gallery as well. He is very meticulous and almost pedantic about what he wants. He was about seven or eight feet away, I was sat like that and the canvas was up there and this Velasquez appearance from time to time as he dodged round to have a look and then back to his work. One of the things that interested me about painting and about the perceptual activity of painting is this alternation of looking, there are different sorts of looking, there's looking at what you're painting and looking at what you're doing as a painter. So that the glance swung round the edge of the canvas, when you are the subject of the scrutiny, is different from the glance that goes back, behind the canvas where you are not looking at the person, you're looking at the representation of the person and how it's going to go on.