

Stuart Pearson-Wright

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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How did you initially approach John Hurt?

I just happened to see John Hurt wandering across the road with a young lady and I just walked straight up to him, sort of ran across the road to him and apologised for interrupting him and introduced myself as a painter and said that I'd very much like to paint a portrait of him if he was interested. I turned up a few evenings later with all my transparencies and a little picture that I'd done on gesso of a man that works in a chip shop over the road and I showed these things to John Hurt and I think he was quite taken by them and agreed there and then to sit for a portrait. I didn't think twice about stopping to ask to paint him because I so desperately wanted to paint him because he's such an interesting man and someone whom I respect so much and someone who has the most extraordinary face.

Was John Hurt a good sitter?

Painting John Hurt was a wonderful experience because he engaged with the process so much. The first reason was that he actually trained to be a painter initially; he went to art school before going to drama school, so he was very interested in what I was doing. It really was a meeting of minds and I do feel that, I felt at the time that John Hurt was examining me as much, if not more so than I was examining him and that's what was so enjoyable about the process. We were sort of meeting each other head-on almost. He has a very direct gaze that's confrontational in a non-aggressive way and it's that that makes him so enjoyable and engaging to paint. Some people don't engage with the process at all, they're entirely concerned with other things that are going on in their lives at the time and that will come across. I think the direct gaze is a result of the interest that John took in the process and the interest that he took in me as well. And John Hurt has a particularly wonderful form of vanity I think that makes him the perfect sort of person to paint, because it's not a sort of self-loving nor a self-loathing vanity. He has a very profound sensitivity in observing people himself and I think that's what marks him out as such a, to my mind, brilliant actor.

Where did your technique evolve from?

I've always been taken by the technique of the Flemish masters and started to try and work out how they put their pictures together and I began to develop a technique that was a sort of synthesis of little snippets of information that I picked up about the Flemish Old Masters and the Italian Old Masters. Unfortunately I'm not very good at researching these sorts of things because I don't really know where to begin. But the technique I've developed involves priming a piece of oak with gesso which is a mixture of rabbit skin glue and ground chalk and this is painted on both sides of a piece of wood and then polished down on one side to an ivory-like surface and on to this I then paint an undercoat in a monochrome which is a sort of earth green colour, so I work out all the tonal values. I like to come to terms, to come to grips with the actual surface of a person's skin which necessitates working in some detail and working on gesso allows for that because there's no grain that one gets with a canvas or a linen, the smooth surface allows for working in great detail.

Do you work very close to the sitter?

I tend to sit very, very close to the sitter, that's partly because my eyes aren't up to all that much, I've got quite acute stigmatism which is one reason why I have a tendency to elongate faces because my vertical field of vision is much stronger than my horizontal field. So I do like to be very close to the sitter, it's the sort of wide-angled camera lens effect. Because I think if one distances oneself from the sitter one gets a very sort of

perhaps general overview of that person as a distant object, whereas I am interested in the results of the confrontation. You have a chemical reaction of sorts between a painter and a sitter and that's one reason why I think it's very important to work as much from life as possible and to avoid using photographs, for me personally, because working from photographs one doesn't get that sort of ... there's no human interaction there.

What interests you in people you portray?

I don't think I'm interested in exposing someone in an unpleasant way. I'm interested in really what makes them human and I think that that's as a gross generalization, it's a sort of vulnerability - I think we try to hide vulnerability all the time and I'm interested in vulnerability because that's what draws us together as human beings. It's often been remarked that I make people look old, older than they are or else that I make them look sad, melancholic and that could be a projection of myself in some way upon the sitter, I'm not entirely sure. Or maybe it's because I'm looking for something in particular, maybe I'm looking for melancholy, maybe I'm trying to find a person's melancholy, I'm trying to find what makes them vulnerable and I'm trying to draw that out and paint that perhaps because it's something pronounced in my own psychological make-up. So there is a physical projection on to a person and there's also, I think a psychological projection on to a person and I think that's really what makes portrait painting interesting because it then becomes a sort of, the painting becomes a strange synthesis of one person's, i.e. the sitter's physical and psychological make-up, and the painter's, it's sort of like a cross-breeding, it becomes quite sexual in a strange way because the painting is a sort of offspring, it's a result of this interaction between painter and sitter.