

Sara Rossberg

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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Where did the sittings take place and how did the portrait proceed?

Anita came to my studio and I talked to her for a while and basically I had one initial meeting, quite a long while about two hours. Then I worked on the painting and she came back towards the end and sat for me, to work from life for a while and then I finished it off afterwards.

Who chose the head and shoulders format?

The decision to focus on the head, mainly on the face, was an almost logical conclusion, because the commission was for watercolour, rather than acrylic which I normally do, and the medium of watercolour limits the size - you work on paper and to focus properly on the face I need to enlarge the face to a certain degree, it had to be at least slightly bigger than life size. To get any more in it would have had to have been very big and totally unsuitable to my approach and at the same time she's not exactly known for running the hundred metres in under nine seconds. She's a person whose fame is based on mind, brainwork and that is reflected in the face.

How did you get Anita Roddick to pose?

It's very difficult to stop people posing or just to get them to relax so I try to move them around. I think it probably started on her standing looking out the window, while I moved around her and just generally changing the pose, and I was trying to make sure that she never got the feeling that this was going to be it.

Could you explain your interest in paint and other materials you use?

The physical aspect of the paint is extremely important to me because it's central to what I am doing. The paint is actually the vocabulary of my language. As a whole my work is very un-literal and totally un-narrative, I try to put everything into the material that I use and the way I use that material and let that part of it speak, rather than being descriptive in any other way. It comes out far more in my regular work where I use acrylics in a very unconventional way, but even in watercolour or in pencil drawings the relationship between the paper surface, the texture and the pigment, the way it sits on it, that is really what I am interested in and that's what I put everything into, that has to be what's special about the picture. In a way I wasn't that interested in giving the face a special expression but the way the pigment was forming that face on the paper was the way I was approaching it.

How are your paint surfaces built up?

The main interest, why I use acrylic in the way I do goes back to my early days with paintings, where I started out using the old master technique of egg tempera layered with oil washes. The main interest was in the layering and building up and what that does to paint and the appearance of paint. So now I build up paint often just containing the acrylic medium to a very large extent and add very little pigment, sometimes just to colour it. Then I build up layers after layers of different colours and hopefully you can still see through to the bottom layers and often when I have layers that are several millimetres thick, sometimes 5 millimetres thick you can still, in parts, see the pencil drawing on the primer surface of the canvas. In part, I find that incredibly important when you get this immense vibrance of colours and I go through a whole range of translucency, semi-translucency, the crystalline surfaces, it's almost as if you are making colours that you can't get out of a tube.