

Andrew Tift

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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What are you interested in portraying here?

What I'm trying to find out about the people is just to see them as individuals - a very intimate, personal interpretation of what they are, what they're like, more about their physical appearance rather than any kind of internal state, it's very much about the tangible rather than the intangible it's very sort of objective painting rather than subjective painting. A lot of artists talk about trying to find the soul of the sitter and this kind of thing, I'm not interested in that side of it really, it's purely about the physical, it's purely about the tangible. I've always been interested in objects and the relationship between objects and the sitter and the way the objects can represent, reflect and reinforce the sitter's identity. In a similar way, if you're familiar with the Holbein painting of 'The Ambassadors' in the National Gallery, I was very aware of that painting while I was doing this portrait because they both very sort of statesman-like figures, both ambassadorial type figures, it's a double portrait and they both use those objects in the same way that they reflect, reinforce the sitters' identity. As time goes on the objects in some ways will become more important than the people as the Kinnocks gradually fade into the annals of history, I'm talking a hundred years time sort of thing when people forget who they are but I think they will look at the objects, make interpretations on the objects, even though some of the objects are very ambiguous and open to a lot of different interpretations I think that will be peoples' link into the painting.

Why did you choose a domestic environment?

We're all very used to seeing the public side of the Kinnocks when Neil's got his suit on and is delivering speeches but this portrait is very much the private side of the Kinnocks, I think that was more what I was looking for in this portrait. It's very much the domestic, the relaxed, the informal portrait. We thought it would be best to set the painting in their home in Wales, quaint little rural village that they live in rather than the place in Brussels because we thought it was more personal, it was very sort of impersonal their place in Brussels, so we thought a more homely environment would be better. We just sat down and discussed what we thought could go in, personal things, things which relate to political history, things that are related to their political achievements. Glenys especially was very keen on the grandchildren and putting pictures of the grandchildren in. I think she was more into the idea of the whole thing, although Neil was interested as well, I think he's not that bothered about art and he's not that bothered about necessarily having his portrait painted really, but I think Glenys really did sort of put herself into choosing the images and she was going around the house, pulling things out, you know, going upstairs and getting things and presenting them to me and we sat having a look at them, so I think Glenys really was the main inspiration on a lot of the objects.

Can you talk about some of the details in the portrait?

The bananas were from this triangular trade-war that was going on recently they were very specifically 'Geest' bananas, they're from the Caribbean and Glenys was really sort of behind their campaign, and as a consequence of this America wasn't buying Cashmere jumpers from Scotland as a knock-on effect of it or something but it's all been resolved now but Glenys really wanted that 'Geest' label on the banana. The bowl was from a holiday to Italy, the bananas are in. I like the idea of having the mobile phone, it gives the portrait a specific space in time, its very much 1990s into the 21st century. Then there's a little ceramic clock, that's almost become a little sort of 'kitsch' joke within the family because it's the clock tower that's in Tredegar where Neil lived, where he was born, and it's a really kitsch, trashy looking ceramic ornament but they kind of love it and hate it equally. On the top of the fireplace there's a series of very small teapots that Neil bought

for Glenys as a Christmas present and they're all in aid of Oxfam so it's all kind of going to African charity and they're kind of art teapots: Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Modigliani, Klimt and Matisse. Then if you look on the shelf there's a little statue of Nye Bevan and I was very concerned to make sure that was over the right hand side of the image because otherwise if it was closer to Neil it would have looked like Nye Bevan was kind of pointing down at Neil saying 'this is the chosen leader'. You don't know what a lot them do mean, it's almost like a little secret locked into the painting. For example the chair that Neil is sitting on is his mother's chair and it's almost like a family heirloom. Apart from a select few people, the Kinnocks and me and some other people, there's really not that many other people who would know that, it's like a little secret that's in the painting.

Is it a double portrait of two equals?

Well, obviously I see them very much as a partnership and they're depicted side-by-side. I think it's inevitable that Neil will always overshadow Glenys in some ways but I think Glenys is also a very impressive woman in her own right as well, especially even more now. I just wanted to separate them slightly so they were equal, side by side they were equal, but Neil has got this very direct glance with the viewer so the viewer's got a relationship with Neil, he's looking at you, you're looking at him. But Glenys is more sort of detached and she's kind of looking out of the window, it's almost kind of like a Mellow Bird's moment, she's really sort of pondering, almost kind of in thought in some ways. I think in the end, Neil's still got the main prominence but they're still kind of side-by-side there, very much in the sense of a partnership.

How did you realise the portrait?

Well I had the one sitting in Brussels with them and then I had about five sittings in Wales with them, a lot of it was conversation based. I took a lot of photographs when I was in the Welsh home, I probably took about five hundred photographs, and then I made a lot of sketches as well and I did some preliminary paintings as well before I started doing the final painting. And then I did a series of roughs, and my roughs are very sort of detailed roughs and the whole painting evolves from that final rough, it's fine-tuned and fine-tuned and fine-tuned to the nth degree so I know what's going where, exactly where on the canvas. In a sense it's completely and utterly contrived, there's nothing left to chance, I know exactly what the painting is going to look like before I've even started.