

Tom Wood

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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Could you explain how you were commissioned by the Gallery to paint Baron Winston?

Well, I was commissioned to paint Lord Winston primarily because I'd already done a portrait of Sir Colin Dollery for the Royal Hammersmith Hospital, and he suggested that somebody who might be interesting to paint was a doctor called Robert Winston who, very possibly, if Labour got elected, was going to be made a Lord and would be a very important health spokesman. So I thought 'that's a nice idea' so I suggested it to the Gallery and they took it up as a commission really. So that's how that commission came about.

What are the elements in the background of the Baron Winston portrait?

In the Lord Winston portrait there are shapes in the background and there are sort of almost symbolic sort of associations with things. There's a sense of something that's either been there or might be about to be there. What I tried to do there was to set up a suggestion that the painting was kind of inbetween, sort of very much like he is I think. He seems to me to be somebody who sits in the middle, and people ... being a sort of a fertility expert, he's somebody who works with people in a sort of transitional period in their lives and I wanted the painting in some way to kind of embody that sense of transition so it's a kind of a sense of something coalescing, of something forming, coming together without actually having come together. I don't know whether it works or not, but it's a sort of a suggestion, of a potential, a possibility of something about to happen.

What significance do the paper bag and plug have in the Alan Bennett portrait?

In the Alan Bennett portrait there's this paper bag and a plug at the foreground of the picture. The paper bag is, I think, probably a bag of apples. The idea being that it represents some kind of traditional idea of shopping, some traditional notion of a world that's been, as it were, the past. The plug I wanted, it took me a long time to arrive at the plug because I kept thinking I wanted something to contrast with it and everything I thought of seemed to be electrical or mechanical in some way and the one common element that it had was it had to be powered, it had to have a plug. So I arrived at the plug with the idea that whatever it was attached to was outside of the picture in the space of the viewer, the viewer's space as it were, and that in some way whatever was there it would set up a question so that the viewer would maybe decide for themselves what the plug was actually attached to and could in some way complete the picture for themselves, in that way.

Do you realise just the one portrait or several portraits of your sitters?

When I do portraits I occasionally do several portraits, sometimes I only do one portrait. When I do several portraits it's often because I'm dissatisfied with the first one or I feel there's another aspect to be explored and that the sitter themselves, in a sense prompts another response from what I initially felt. So when I painted Prince Charles I ended up doing three portraits because I felt there were many facets really to be explored. So given the opportunity I will probably do more than one but sometimes the opportunity, because of time and all the rest of it, means you have to condense everything as best you can into one.

How do you build up the surfaces of your paintings?

I build up the surfaces of my paintings with oil and wax glazes and plenty of scumbling. Because I often go backwards as much as I go forwards I'm always revising my decisions and hesitating over various bits, painting bits out, coming back, re-establishing them and inevitably it leaves a trace or residue on the surface. So what you see when you see that painting, all that surface sort of texture, is really the evidence of all those indecisions.

Could you explain the sense of mystery and leaving things unexplained in your portraits?

Often in my portraits, and particularly the Prince Charles one, I leave things sort of open-ended and I kind of allow for other explanations to be included. What I try and do very often with a portrait is allow the viewer to almost complete the narrative, complete the story. I want a sort of narrative space within the painting, which allows for the inclusion of the viewer, so it's very important to me that those things aren't fully explained, that they aren't very obviously pieced together into a very simple and linear sort of narrative. It seems to me that people aren't like that, people are much more complex, people are full of sort of, loose ends and uncertainties and insecurities and so on so we don't have these nice complete, convenient narratives and I want to create portraits, which in a sense, manifest that quality of incompleteness.