

James Hunkin
Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery
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How do you go about a shoot?

I'm here today at the Royal Academy to photograph Sir Nicholas Grimshaw. This is part of an ongoing commission for the Royal Academy, photographing the academicians, comprising artists, architects, sculptors and so on and this project has been going on for some ten years now.

I limit myself to two rolls of film, medium format film, so that's 12 exposures per roll and that's one roll of film per location.

Today it was felt appropriate since Nicholas Grimshaw is new president of Royal Academy to come here and photograph him on location in a slightly official capacity.

James Hunkin: And then if you look out of the window Nicholas, what happens there?

We had two locations in mind, one was on the top floor by the lift or from the other end of it because of the light and the lines of the windows and the seating which is very simple so it allows the portrait to come through very well but in this case I was aware that Nicholas Grimshaw was an architect and that he works in a certain style and then one tries to bring in certain elements of what a person thinks and the way they work and what would preoccupy them. This can be quite subliminal but hopefully would come through.

Terrific, half way through

The other was to use a more formal setting and to use the magnificent rooms at the Royal Academy that are open to the public for a few hours a day.

I generally like to use more than one location or one setup if I can with quite contrasting backgrounds which then gives us the choice at the end of the day.

Can we try some pictures in this room now.

There's actually a reflection of a window in amongst the picture of the people there which I rather like, might be a bit of fun and one more.

Sir Nicholas Grimshaw: One more.

James Hunkin: Next door?

Sir Nicholas Grimshaw: You choose.

James Hunkin: Next door maybe with the mirrors.

Sir Nicholas Grimshaw: So if you tell me what to do.

James Hunkin: That's it, thank you very much indeed.

What interests you in slow exposure photographs?

The idea for the slow exposure portraits came out of the research that I did when I first started out learning the whole thing and I was very struck by the ambiguity and the depth and what was left to the imagination of the more painterly approach to portraiture and so I thought that one technique available would be to use slow exposures and then it was a question of experimenting and finding actually round about 45 seconds to a minute long exposures gave quite an interesting blur, not so that it was distorted like a Francis Bacon

portrait but it gave just the slight movement that there was a living, breathing person in the picture.

Terence Pepper (Curator of Photographs, National Portrait Gallery): So this is one of the very first portraits the Gallery acquired from you, taken in 1991 I think of Tilda Swinton, I was very impressed by this, it was very like a Julia Margaret Cameron picture.

James Hunkin: Yes, well she was a very big influence, maybe too much of an influence especially in those days.

Terence Pepper: She was famous for using very long exposures.

James Hunkin: Yes, that's right.

Terence Pepper: Is that what you did as well, how a long exposure is this?

James Hunkin: This would be about 45 seconds to a minute, I can't remember exactly - using a blue filter over the lens as well so that it keeps the skin tones very rich.

Where did the idea for the Faces of Science series come from?

The idea for the scientist portraits came from August Sander. I thought it was interesting actually to leave a body of work at the end of your working life cataloguing if nothing else the community of people around you would be an interesting thing to do as well as being a focus for just the practical side of gathering funding and so on.

How do you research your sitters?

Each set of pictures requires a different amount of research. The scientists that I photographed I decided that I would research the actual science and as much as possible try to understand some of the concepts that were being talked about and worked on. So I read some biographies and I read the current thinking on physics and maths and so on - not that I understood all but a small percentage of it but it gave me a bit of a background so I could at least express some genuine interest when I met the people concerned - but in terms of individual portraits and biographies I shy away, I don't find it's very helpful personally. I think in fact it can even get in the way.

What are the stories behind some of these Faces of Science portraits?

The relationship between the portraitist and the sitter is completely unique to the time and the portraitist and the sitter. That's obviously a very evasive answer in some ways, but I think it's true. For me anyway, my experience is that I like to just meet somebody for the first time and react instinctively to who they are and then react and use what skills I have to tell their story or tell the story of that moment between the two of us as honestly as I can. It's a very elusive thing and I sometimes miss completely and sometimes surprise myself in a contact sheet that something will be there, equally I can believe that I have taken a good portrait and find absolutely nothing on the contact sheet.

The portrait of Leslie was one of those portraits that came about from a discussion previous to the actual sitting and she told me that she was inspired by the colours that she sees in her research and working with computer modelling and so on, she's a chemist, and so she suggested a row of graffiti that she knew in Edinburgh as a backdrop which we used in the pouring rain and it just happened to work well I think.

Well a picture of Angus here up in Dundee, I only had a limited amount of time and it was one of those slightly panicked situations. I wanted to avoid a lab environment as much as I could but here I was and I was lost for ideas and I was trying to explain what I wanted to do and then eventually he told me that he actually juggled and then there was a sort of connection in my mind, in my desperation, that actually there might be some image that if he was juggling in the lab, that actually it might be a striking, thought provoking image.

The picture of Tsou Sheung Tsun came about really completely serendipitously, I happened to photograph her in Oxford and with mathematicians it was quite tricky because they tend to inhabit a world of ideas rather than a physical world and I knew that she worked on non-repeating patterns and that was about it so I turned up and I said well is there anything in the local vicinity perhaps that we could use as a backdrop that could link with the work that you do and the ideas that you have and she said actually as it just so happened there was a café patio five minute's walk away which perhaps we could use since the paving stones were all different and interlocked in a non-repeating pattern, so wiping the sweat from my brow we then toodled off and there was nobody around and I stood on a table and she sat very quietly and very patiently while I photographed her.

Is there a difference between a good portrait and a good picture?

Yes, I think there is a difference between a good portrait and a good picture. I would say that the good portrait was somehow engaging and true to the sitter from my perspective and sometimes one sees on a contact sheet a very handsome picture that has nothing to do with the person involved or at least very little to do with the person involved. Picking out the picture from a contact sheet or transparencies is a very simple thing in a sense that one again instinctively reacts to something that makes sense and rings true. Often a good picture will spring out or a good portrait will spring out but often one has to look and look again and find the picture that is most representative of your memory of who you met.

This is Jim Al-Khalili who is a theoretical nuclear physicist and part of his work involves work on halos and I just happened to see this archway and I quite liked the way the light is above his head but you're not sure Terence...

Terence Pepper: Well I think there maybe more scientific pictures on the right-hand sheet here and would you consider choosing one of these?

James Hunkin: Yep, I mean that one for me is probably one that I would consider, the structure is quite strong.

Terence Pepper: Strong structure and it's got a halo as well.

James Hunkin: One of the very few lady engineers working for the Jordan team or any Formula 1 team, she's actually a serious engineer.

Terence Pepper: With the racing car, what's all this about?

James Hunkin: Being glamorous is part of the problem really because she looks like she might be at some sort of motor-show showing the latest GTI.

Terence Pepper: So you think a long shot rather than a close up is better to show her?

James Hunkin: I don't know, I don't know, the one that I thought was a nice sort of compromise was this one here which actually has the car but then also has the various aerodynamic bits and pieces in the background.

Terence Pepper: This is the best strip here, OK, thank you very much.