

Alistair Morrison

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

Supported by Deloitte

How do you get your sitters to pose?

Getting subjects to pose for you is perhaps not as difficult as you might imagine. There is a tendency for people to always not ask for unusual things because there's perhaps a little bit of shyness or there's a feeling that you have to respect someone's wishes. I do feel that you should always, always ask for what you think is going to make a great photograph. You'd be surprised how often your subjects will actually want to go along with you because they feel that that photograph may be very different from the last one or two or three they've had to do. You're never the first photographer that they've had to sit in front of. The more you can entice them with a wonderful idea and express it well the better, and I think it is something that is not done enough and if you look at the success of photographs it tends to be when people have reacted favourably to an idea and they've really gone for it. And it may actually be an idea where you are putting them in a strange location, but you're not asking them to do anything strange other than just stand there. But if you express it well and you explain what you want to do, even if you're not quite sure of how the result will come out to give it a go and for them to trust that is the way forward and if you can get that then you can get people to do pretty much what you want them to do.

What was your idea behind the Lawrence Olivier portrait?

Part of the set of pictures that I do tend to just be head-shots and there tends to be a very good reason for that. A good example was my Lawrence Olivier photographs. I was very honoured to be asked to do his 80th birthday pictures which were just a couple of years before his death. He was very, very ill and I was invited to his home and his family were there and he very much wanted me to photograph him. At moments he was teasing me and saying 'why on earth are you doing this?' and I was saying it was to celebrate his 80th Birthday, and he was getting at me and asking me to direct him and not to be so shy, and it was a great experience. But it was also a slightly sad experience for me because this is the first time I had met him. I had always seen him as, you know, the sort of 'great young actor' and seeing him so frail I knew that what I really wanted to do was concentrate on his face, really to show his dignity, to show his expression and to me it was absolutely obvious that we should just stick to that. And so he had a dark top on and we had a black background and it was just about his face, his eyes, his serenity, his dignity and there was no need to show the frailty of his body and I particularly chose not to.