

Mo Mowlam

Video Interview Transcript

This interview is from a Channel 4 TV series called 'In Your Face' (available on DVD), made by Christopher Swayne and Bruno Wollheim, produced by Coluga Pictures.

What do you like about the portrait?

I liked how he'd done my hair, which is a compliment, in view of the fact that I've got quite a big bald spot at the top but he managed to do what I do which is try and brush it across, I call it 'doing an Arthur Scargill'. I like the eyes, I thought it shows my determination but then shows I'm not a meany. So I think it's a very sensitive painting and I like the way it makes me look how I feel. That's how I feel, I feel you know, straight, eyes-forward and not over pretty. I do often sit like this and think, particularly when I was in Northern Ireland when I needed to sit down in the morning when I wasn't as tired as I was by the time I got home as to what the options were on the table, so in that sense I think it gets me very well. It makes me look as tired as I was when I left which I hope you see now that I'm not.

Do you find it a flattering portrait?

In fantasy terms, in dream world I still think I'm a young teenager with long blonde hair and that life is wonderful but I know that I've just hit fifty so that's me and I don't have any trouble with that. I loved my teenage years, I enjoyed living in America, I enjoyed teaching, I enjoyed politics but life goes on and you don't remain the same and I'm kind of happy where I am now, I don't want the problems of when I was a teenager again - those are difficult years for anybody I think. That's the me there is now and when I had the radiotherapy, not so much the radio, the steroids after, I became very fat, bulbous, kids used to say I was a cross between a Teletubby and Swampy the eco-warrior. So it was not an easy time because being fat is lumpy and difficult but I think this is more me and I'm more back to my normal size and shape now I've never since my teenage years been thin so I don't feel flattered or vanity or anything, I just feel that's a good portrayal of me.

Did he capture your sense of humour?

I am an ironic person I do enjoy a laugh, I do enjoy humour, he might have captured that, yes, I think he probably has because I can be incredibly serious and determined and I can equally enjoy life to the full. I'm a great one for practical jokes, which I love.

Did you have any expectations about the portrait?

I didn't have any great expectations and I think John got a bit of me from sittings but mostly from photographs because I'm not a very good sitter, I'm getting bored now! But I don't sit very well, I drive the hairdresser, when I have a haircut, 'mad' because I last about half an hour and then I say 'are we nearly done?' you know, like kids on journeys

'are we half way yet mum?', so I'm not good at sitting so that's why I think John was reduced often to photographs.

Are you proud of the portrait?

I am proud of having it here in the gallery and proud of what John Keane has done, couldn't have asked for better and it's one of those memorable things that will stick in my head as a recognition of what I did in Northern Ireland. I've got honorary degrees, I've got awards, I've got freeman of cities 'freeperson' or 'freemen'? I don't know. I've given lectures but having a picture in the National [Portrait] Gallery is just fantastic. Never believed it in my whole life that that would happen.