

Tai-Shan Schierenberg

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.

Could you explain how the sittings with John Mortimer proceeded?

Because John Mortimer is a very busy man as most of my sitters are, he only gave me two sittings of two hours and I did two small oil sketches of his head, one from the front on the first sitting and on the second sitting one in profile.

What aspects of John Mortimer most interested you?

The aspects of John Mortimer that most interested me were of course his physical bulk, he's a very extraordinary looking man. But as far as his psychological make-up goes, I didn't know the man at that time, I knew a few of his works that I'd seen him on television. So I had really to rely on what I could see in his face and his body and I do believe that our history forms us and can inform an artist. So I relied on my eyes really, so I can't say I'm consciously aware of any aspect of him. I just hope I was quite a good medium and a non-judgmental conveyer of John Mortimer as a person.

Could you talk about the objects hanging on the walls and their role?

The objects in the background of the painting weren't put there as props really, they just happened to be there and help with the whole composition of the painting. On the right hand side is half of a painting in which I am one of the sitters, or I was a self portrait, and on the other side is a dead chicken that I found in Norfolk which is my mascot as it were – it comes from studio and studio - and over the top was an old pipe, an electricity pipe that was from the building that had been sort of left there, and redundant, and these sort of all helped in pinning down John Mortimer in his place as it were, and help with the composition.

Did John Mortimer see the portrait before it was completed?

John Mortimer first saw the finished portrait at its unveiling. And I remember with shock having struggled with this painting, getting to the door of the National Portrait Gallery and seeing John Mortimer get out of a taxi and you think 'Oh my God, it doesn't look anything like this guy'. He seemed delighted but he has never actually said to me 'I really like this painting' but he did me the honour of using it on the cover of his book, 'Murderers and other Friends', his autobiography in 1994, which I thought was a very sweet gesture and he has always been very supportive of the painting and my work.

What particularly interests you in the materials you use?

I really love the yumminess of paint, I love manipulating and seeing what it can do and the accidents that occur. It often helps a painting to have a medium like that that can suggest things that I would have never imagined or I could never have thought of or done as a logical progression in my technique. As a painter sometimes accidents happen and the paint oozes out of the back of the brush in a slightly different colour which suggest a different light, a different facet of the face. And the possibilities are endless. It's a great ally to have paint, when one's painting, it sounds obvious but it's so malleable. When I studied at art college, there was a new spirit of painting that was all about paint and I admired artists like Auerbach and De Kooning and Soutine who manipulated the paint and made very exciting things happen so that was a part of my vocabulary I learnt at art college.

Is it difficult balancing this interest in materials and representing the human figure?

As a result of my love for paint and what it can suggest I found myself in a bit of a dilemma where on the one hand I tried to be very specific about the person I was painting, trying to get the personality as closely as possible. On the other hand the love of paint wanting to make a beautiful abstract surface and exciting accidents happen and so what has happened in recent years, so to be able to combine these too different ideas, I've actually blown up my heads like the one you can see behind me so I can be precise at the same time as being painterly. And that's one way of marrying all my different ideas together.