

Picture the Poet – Fusion Digital Gallery audio transcript:

Introduction by Paul Moorhouse

Welcome to 'Picture the Poet'. I'm Paul Moorhouse, Twentieth Century Curator at the National Portrait Gallery.

It is a pleasure to welcome you to this exhibition of nearly fifty photographic portraits from the National Portrait Gallery's Collection, which as you probably know, is a collection of portraits of men and women who have contributed to British history and culture.

This exhibition is about a very special kind of person, we are talking about poets: poets who are alive and working today. And of course poets are not just people who make rhymes; they are people who see the world in a very particular or unusual way. They typically see familiar things presented in a surprising or slightly odd way; they draw out the magic in ordinary things; and they sometimes look at the expression on a person's face or something in nature and they re-present it to us and make us think a little bit more deeply about it.

Poets also make connections, they draw our attention to similarities, the way things look, or sometimes there are associations between things. One of the most famous lines in poetry says: 'O my Luve's like a red, red rose', making a comparison between two usually distinct things. Some poets concentrate on imagination, they focus on the role of fantasy. Poets often like to write about reminiscences, things that have happened in the past, and they remind us about our own memories and feelings too.

But the common thread between all these different types of poetry is words. They concentrate on the rhythms in words, the sounds, the images in words, they bring out the music of language.

This exhibition is a portrait about all these different kinds of poets and as you would expect these portraits also very diverse; they bring out all the different individuals: young, old, men, women, some are serious, some are smiling. And if you look at them you can see the different strategies that have been used.

Some portraits present the poets in close up; other portraits concentrate on the context, they present the poets in a certain setting, sometimes it is a private setting. Some poets are presented in a public setting. Other portraits again are more abstract; they use light and shade and colour and shape, to tell us things about the sitter. Benjamin Zephaniah's portrait, for example, by Donald MacLellan uses light in a very striking way to make a point, in emotional terms, perhaps, about the sitter.

So portraits tell us a lot about people, but this needs careful looking. There is a lot to be discovered here about these very special people and these portraits contain a lot of information. Look very carefully and ask yourself 'what are these portraits conveying?'