

Paton, Justin, Peter Stichbury: NDE, *Justin Paton in conversation with Peter Stichbury*, **Bulletin no. 172**, Christchurch Art Gallery, May - August 2013

**B.172**

### **NDE, Worcester Boulevard, Christchurch**

**Justin Paton: Your portrait paintings are finely worked and usually only a few feet across. How has it felt to make such a painting knowing that it will be blown up to billboard scale?**

Peter Stichbury: It feels slightly strange knowing it will be transformed into a huge illumination. All those small hairs and tiny details I've been sweating over will end up as scruffy foot-long gestural brushstrokes. I should really be painting with a microscope. Actually, once it's blown up, even the linen will look like the moon's surface.

**Have you made a public artwork before? Have you felt like a 'public artist' while making it?**

No, this is the first one. Making a show usually revolves around the relationship of each painting to the others and of the paintings to the given space, so a singular public artwork is a novel challenge. I think studio painting can look oddly disconnected when it's taken outside into daylight and forced to contend with the scale of nature and buildings. My particular kind of painting seems to need an internal architectural context to make sense, a quiet and protective incubator to exist within. Ironically one of the great things about this project is the opportunity to become unencumbered by the rules I create for gallery shows.

**What do you reckon it will do on the exterior of Christchurch Art Gallery that it might not do if seen on a wall inside it?**

I'm hoping that being the large outdoor transparency will give the painting a mirage quality, the feeling of a technological deity on a giant computer screen looking over the nearby streets.

**Though you're immersed in the tradition of portrait painting, you're not at all opposed to photography and reproduction. Indeed, you have occasionally tampered with your own paintings – cloned and altered them. How exactly do you do this, and why?**

After you've laboured over a single work for six weeks, it's liberating to digitally play Dr Frankenstein with the finished painting. Photoshop gives me the freedom to accentuate or degrade the image's beauty or asymmetry. I remember when they cloned Dolly the sheep at the Roslin Institute in Scotland, there were reports of biological mishaps and failures before a successful clone was rendered. I think there must be drawers and drawers of malformed animals hidden away somewhere. I quite like the idea of having incorrect or botched manipulated paintings, like the 'In-Valid' characters in *Gattaca* – though I do get to the point where I need to put down the digital tools and get back to the hard graft of the studio.

**We're used to seeing perfect faces on a vast scale, in billboards and advertising. Have you been thinking about those kinds of faces as you made this painting? Do you want your portrait to stand apart from that kind of imagery or to overlap with it confusingly?**

It is unavoidable to think about the overlap, but I explored these ideas extensively in my first couple of shows. Now subverting advertising imagery is like flogging a twice-dead horse; most people are complicit in the consumer/advertiser transaction. However, leading up to this project, I did try to take photos of a cosmetics counter light-box at LAX, but I found out that Chanel doesn't take kindly to rogue artists photographing a photograph of Brad Pitt. Maybe they thought it was industrial espionage...

**People familiar with your work will recognise the woman in this work; she's a model you've often used, called Estelle. But here you've refrained from naming her, and also left out the background details you sometimes include. Where is she? What's happening to her?**

She's in an in-between place, a transition from one reality to another. I was reading about neurosurgeon Dr Eben Alexander's near-death experience and then started investigating other people's similar experiences. The commonalities of their visions close to death are uncanny and they exist across religious beliefs, culture and time. There's the cliched beckoning light or tunnel and the person's loved ones welcoming them into the afterlife. Often there's a communing with a loving God explaining that it's not their time and they must go back to their body. Whether or not these recollections are true or hallucinations caused by neurotransmitters

or lack of oxygen in the brain at time of death is anyone's guess but the experiencers truly perceive that what they have gone through is real. When they recover from near death and return to their everyday lives they often report being less materialistic, more loving and altruistic in general.

**Where else have your internet searches been leading you lately? You seem to keep a close eye on some of the stranger developments in contemporary psychology, which feed the crackpot back-stories you give your characters.**

Hah, yes the back-stories can get somewhat convoluted and a little crackpot-ish. Their invisibility is a real paradox but I enjoy traipsing over a huge terrain. This year I've been researching ufology and its folklore, specifically Leslie Kean and Stanton Friedman's work on the subject. The mythology surrounding ufos or uaps (unidentified aerial phenomenon) is full of the most bizarre stories.

**There's nothing obviously bizarre about your portrait, but the eyes suggest she might herself have seen something very unusual. What's with that gaze?**

It's a middle distance gaze. A state of reverie, lost in thought. I liked the ambiguity it gave the character. Is she the 'angel' beckoning the departed to the afterlife or the person experiencing a vision or hallucination?

**Does the gaze have art historical precedents? I've seen that book on Ingres in your studio...**

The historical precedent in this case and with many of the Estelles is Lucian Freud's *Girl With A Kitten* from 1947 but I had also been looking at Antonello da Messina's *Christ at the Column*. I discovered the work of Domenico Gnoli recently. The way he painted hair was incredible, and I suspect his example has crept in somewhere too.

**Public art has to carry quite a burden of responsibility; it's expected to be all things to all people. Instead let's imagine just one person walking along Worcester Boulevard one night in June and encountering your work. What, ideally, do you hope they will see?**

I agree public art does carry quite a burden – often a need for approval revolving around sensation and visual punchlines. But I like that it can also be enigmatic and mysterious. A giant floating portrait close to the heavens will probably elicit more questions than answers. Who is this? Why do they have that particular expression? I'm hoping it won't make much rational or narrative sense but will induce an uneasy emotional response, like witnessing a UFO.