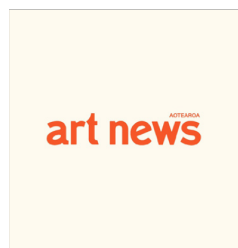


Erin Griffey, *Peter Stichbury: Between Matter and Spirit*, Art News New Zealand, Spring/Summer 2021



Erin Griffey explores a painter of beautiful souls.

The title of Peter Stichbury's recent show at Michael Lett, *Ecology of Souls* (25 August – 30 October 2021), signals that his seven works—six paintings and a bronze bust—are not portraits but 'souls'. The show not only complicates artistic genres—are they portraits of narrative paintings?—but also complicates ideals of beauty. The figure that acts as the show's centrifuge, *Elysium (Tasha Malek)*, stands guard amongst the other souls. She beckons and awes the viewer with her arresting gaze, forthright posture, and chiselled features. Her male counterpart, *Elysian Field*, is conjured onto the canvas in whip-sharp outlines and modelled in smoky grisaille. Representing the ancient Greek portal to the blessed afterlife, *Elysium* and *Elysian Field* join the other subjects and their stories in a richly fertile 'ecology', not of the land, but of the spirit. This dynamic, which is played out between matter and spirit, goes to the heart of the role of the artist and the art work.

Art critics have described Stichbury's works as portraits, implying that they are traditional paintings that directly represent a subject. Clearly, they engage with portraiture conventions, with their traditional materials, head-and-shoulders format, and use of names in titles. As a case in point, *Elysium* includes as a parenthetical subtitle, the name Tasha Malek, the Kenyan model for the face. But the essential historical foal of a portrait—to produce a natural likeness of a named individual—is of no concern to Stichbury. He exaggerates and modifies facial features, and the sharp pattern outlines and sculpted interior planes of the clothes and faces obfuscate physiognomic likeness. The figure—as the title insists—is first and foremost *Elysium*, and parenthetically, Tasha Malek. But, if likeness is not Stichbury's goal, casting the right face for his aesthetic and his stories is pivotal. His signature look, widely commented on by critics, includes flawless skin, manicured hair, and wide eyes fixed to the middle distance.

If this template of beauty is evident in these works, *Elysium* is notable in being his first Black figure. The sculptural modelling of her face and the warmth of her skin, coupled with her apparent standing, angled posture, distinguishes her from Stichbury's other figures, creating a more active encounter with the viewer. Her closely cropped hair also positions her in a more androgynous space than his other female figures, as if genderless in her beauty, all powerful in controlling the gateway to *Elysium*.

Stichbury's works hover at the threshold between portraiture and history painting, between representation and imagination, between this world and the next. They take on a function different from the traditional ones of portraiture (to commemorate a specific virtuous individual for posterity) and of history painting (to enlighten the viewer through representing a narrative). In the early modern period (1400-1700), a hierarchy of genres deemed history painting the most noble for the artist, since depicting stories from the Bible, mythology, and history was thought to require imagination. Portraiture, by contrast, was relegated, as it was thought to involve simple mimesis, or copying from life, without the artist having to create a narrative. Naturally, the best portraitists defied these parameters, probing their subjects' characters. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres was one such virtuoso, whose paintings combine a relentless pursuit of the physical beauty of his subjects and a probing of their characters. Stichbury has acknowledged Ingres's influence on his work. Portraits such as *Joséphine-Éléonore-Marie-Pauline de Galard de Brassac de Béarn* (1825-1860), *Princesse de Broglie* (1853) showcase Ingres's abilities to articulate beautiful human and sartorial form and to visualize character. De Broglie's well known shyness is evoked in her limpid, folded arms; her lips gently curving in self-consciousness. In her exquisitely wrought and styled domestic setting and her lavish fashionable clothing, she comfortably occupies—governs—a charmed world (and us).

If De Broglie's ecology is that of elite French society, Stichbury's figures inhabit a crossover world. They are hybrid in habitat and form. This involves abstraction on a number of levels—between model and archetype, portrait and history, paint and spirit. The stories woven with oil paint into the exquisite linen canvases are ones about death experiences and out-of-body experiences. These subjects were, quite literally, experiencers, but what we see captured in the canvas is an arresting stillness, the state of having experienced. As hybrids, they embody particular people and their experiences as well as broader existential questions about the soul, the afterlife, the permeable boundaries between present and future, matter and soul. One subject who crosses these boundaries is Jessie Sawyer. Sawyer has vividly recounted her experience of death and her vision of heaven after a medical emergency. Her recollection is sensorially rich, bright, warm, and peaceful, and the canvas evokes these sensations in its misty blue-and-pink background, stilled gaze, and gentle expression. With no suggestive flicker of movement in the body, it is as if she is captured at precisely that moment of encounter, of experience, where the body is still, but the mind—the soul—is all seeing. In representing this experience in paint, Stichbury makes it permanent, everlasting. As an artist, he gives her inner experience a life force, but he also embodies her with his signature look. This is not intended as a portrait of the real Jessie Sawyer, but as a Stichbury beauty cast in the role of Jessie Sawyer's transcendental experience, a living history.

Abstractions of embodiment are also at play in *The Reincarnation of Marty Martyn II*, which represents—reincarnates—the body of Marty Martyn. The subject is the childhood experience of Ryan Hammons, who had vivid memories—many verified—of his previous life as Martyn, a Hollywood agent and bit-part actor. The appearance of the 'reincarnation' depicted in the painting is preternaturally ageless, neither the age of Hammons when he experienced the feelings of reincarnation nor the age of the historical Martyn, who died at age sixty-one. The two delicate daisies tucked above his ear suggest the paired living souls of Hammon and Martyn.

The sculpted bronze bust of a man, pointedly titled *Soma*, which in Greek means 'body', provides another vessel for the rich dialectic between body and soul. Three dimensional and warmed with life by the medium of bronze, it draws inspiration from ancient Greek sculpture. While bronze sculpture may be a new departure for Stichbury, ideas about embodiment remain central and arguably more closely interrogated. This is, insistently, matter, the site of the soul. In this sense, *Soma* seems to function as a counterpart to the *Elysium* and *Elysian Field* figures. Unified in their Ancient Greek ecology, they sing their siren song, luring us seductively with beautiful souls—on the edge between soul and body.

The sculpture recalls the role of the portrait in ancient times as a surrogate for the physical body. Egyptians saw statues as inhabited by the life force or *ka* of their subjects. Since portraits throughout history have been invested in the commemoration of their subjects for posterity, they are intended to bridge time, to preserve both the appearance and the life force of their subjects. In this sense, too, as artworks, they quietly engage with the importance of the artist in influencing artworks with *ka*, with life after death.

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