

Paton, Justin, *Skin-Deep: Peter Stichbury and the art of appearances*, **Art & Australia Magazine**, Spring 2011

art
& Australia

Skin-Deep: Peter Stichbury and the art of appearances

Written by Justin Paton

What's that noise you hear? It's the sound of the human face, multiplying. This very second, on the social networking website Facebook, more than a thousand images are being uploaded. Before you've finished reading this paragraph, another 15,000 or so will be added. Four million more will join them in the next hour. Estimated total for the next month: a cool 3 billion. Of course the subjects of these images will vary. There will be unidentified sunsets, pets asleep in odd places, someone's new sneakers, and much much more: a colossal digest of stuff that humans think is interesting or, at the very least, not totally uninteresting. But there are no prizes for guessing what most of these photographs will portray: faces, faces, faces.

In Peter Stichbury's 2010 exhibition 'The Proteus Effect', viewers encountered an exquisitely rendered painting of an unexpected face: that of Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg. Stichbury is best known in New Zealand as a painter of the blank and the beautiful - of people who are, as Ben Stiller's hilariously clueless male model Zoolander puts it in the 2001 film of the same name, 'really, really ridiculously good-looking'. Indeed his characters are so dedicated to looking good that they're clearly no longer good for much else. By contrast, what seems to fascinate Stichbury about Zuckerberg is that - like another soft-featured titan of the information age, Bill Gates - he doesn't look famous. In the portrait Stichbury has made of him, Zuckerberg has an indoor tan, doughy asymmetrical features and an expression that seems to say 'I'm a zillionaire, no big deal'.

It's a face that might belong to anyone - but it doesn't, it belongs to someone. And that flicker from anyone to someone is what Stichbury is trying to capture: the suddenness, in the internet age, with which global fame can settle on a single person, a single face. Though 'Zuck' looks composed enough at a distance, up close you notice how Stichbury has subtly unsettled his features, nudging mouth, nose and eyes just far enough from their 'proper' places to make the mood of the portrait hard to place. It's as if this face is still composing itself, still learning how to be 'Mark Zuckerberg'. In a real-life twist that is too perfect for anyone to have scripted, an electronic image of Stichbury's painting found its way to Zuckerberg himself, who replied with two short lines (he's a busy guy); 'Haha, interesting. Does that even look like me?' This is not just a very good question for Zuckerberg to ask about his portrait. It's a question that goes to the heart of Stichbury's strange and singular mission as a portrait painter. He is an artist obsessed by looking, likeness and the play of appearances - by the way portraits, far from simply looking like their subjects, can take on artificial lives that seem to eclipse the real lives and real faces of their subjects. With 'The Proteus Effect', he locates these anxieties firmly in what we might call the Age of Appearances: the age, that is, of cosmetics, plastic surgery and, above all, of social media - when everyone, it seems, has become an artist of their own identity and appearance, frantically tweaking, re-touching and amplifying their online identities. This new online life is hailed by advocates as a triumph of democracy through technology, with the internet granting awesome powers of 'connectivity' and self-realization to the formerly groping and cut-off citizens of the world. But to confront the other portraits in 'The Proteus Effect' was to encounter a very different point of view.

Hung alongside Zuckerberg's mild and imperfect fizzog were faces of nearly oppressive flawlessness. There was a chiseled Donald Draper type 'Roman', a waif-model named 'Bregje Heinen' and a riveting youth called 'Bernard M.'. They all have hair like sable, clear veinless eyes and skin that doesn't sweat. As you might guess from those details, Stichbury is an awed admirer of the portraits of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres ('halfway through making a show his book makes its way onto my table to mock me', Stichbury told me recently), and he sets down his new characters with extraordinary patience and technical cunning. Every contour is razor-sharp, every tone fastidiously graded. Each brush mark conceals the traces of the one before it, like a criminal backing out of a crime scene. On first appraisal the resulting paintings exude clarity and a kind of calm. The longer one looks, however, the odder everything becomes. Very quickly one registers, for instance, the preposterous size of Bregje's head and eyes, as if they are robbing nutrients from the inconsequential body hanging below. Rather more slowly, the play of shadow and light around Roman's eyes discloses the shape of his skull beneath the skin, a device Stichbury might have borrowed from the formidable German new objectivist Christian Schad. Meanwhile Bernard M., whose name comes from a character in Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel (1932), has a face as burnished,

symmetrical and tyrannically unyielding as a Tutankhamun mask; if eyes are windows to the soul then his are creepily empty. (surely there's also a nod here to disgraced New York banker Bernie Madoff.) In Greek mythology Proteus is a shape-changing god of the sea, an allusion which makes perfect sense in an exhibition about surrogate selves. But what exactly is Stichbury getting at with the show's full title, 'The Proteus Effect'? It sounds like the title of a movie – a thriller almost certainly – about genetic modification and corporate skullduggery. And bearing this in mind, it's hard to return to the Zuckerberg portrait without feeling vaguely suspicious. Is Stichbury insinuating some less-than benign connection between Zuckerberg and his well-groomed companions, all of whom, as it happens, seem to share the same chilly grey-blue eyes? Is Zuckerberg, perhaps, the 'Proteus' of the title, a new god of self-creation and identity change – the man responsible for unleashing a tsunami of self-obsession on the world? Is it possible, even, to see something kelpy and sea-swirled in Zuckerberg's boyishly curly hair – a hint of the titular sea-god?

No doubt I'm over-reaching here, hatching a conspiracy theory of my own; but that doesn't dilute the larger point, which is that Stichbury's new faces are strange and strong enough to make a viewer go looking for connections and backstories, whether they are there or not. Whatever exactly it is, 'the Proteus effect' is clearly at its most virulent in a series of five seemingly identical digital prints, based on a portrait painting (also in the show) of one of Stichbury's favorite models, Estelle 5.1 introduces this face: blonde hair, flawless skin, huge anxious eyes. And Estelle 5.2 appears to be a straightforward repeat. Yet something's different, and a close inspection reveals the subtlest of alterations. One of the freckles on her throat has migrated to her cheek, the 'proper' position for a beauty mark (think Cindy Crawford, Marilyn Monroe), and what looked tall and patrician in the first Estelle's face has become squatter and more conventional in the second's. At the same time, the second Estelle brings out what was unusual in the first: something extra-terrestrial in the thinness of her neck; something rabbit in her shocked expression; something slightly gawky in the tilt of her ears. And so it goes, through three more versions, all the way to the blandly even-featured 5.5- as if 'Estelle' is a software program undergoing progressive improvements and de-buggings. The obvious thing to say of this series is that it's a commentary, a kind of distrustful gloss, on a cosmetically obsessed culture. With its succession of subtly adjusted faces, the series hints that fashion's dreams of the 'perfect face' can easily slide towards darker fantasies of human 'improvement', such as cloning and eugenics. Yet to leave things there is to overlook something that is, quite literally, staring us in the face – namely the fact that Stichbury did this. By duplicating his own work and then adjusting it digitally (creating a material 'clone' of his own original painting), Stichbury does something much more revealing and chewy than merely 'commenting' on the wider culture. He owns up to his own place in the 'appearance business' – his role as an inventor and fabricator of faces. Stichbury concedes that, far from being a disinterested observer of today's online shape-changer and self-fabricators, the portrait may in fact be the prototype for them all: in other words, part of the problem. Perhaps 'the Proteus effect', ultimately, is just the power of portraiture – the seductive, uncanny and undying capacity of painting to make people look the way they don't.

What Stichbury is playing with here – what he is tapping into and testing – is our hardwired responsiveness to the human face, which we are no more capable of resisting than we are of shaking off our own shadows. Despite the repetition, the extreme artifice and the unrelenting emphasis on surface in the 'Estelle' series, there's a part of me (and, I suspect, of every viewer) that insists on reading these portraits traditionally – imputing thoughts and feelings to the ever-multiplying Estelle, hazarding guesses about her (or their) inner life. And the key to this life, as so often with Stichbury, lies in the treatment of her huge clear eyes – the way they press outward from her drum-taut features and look off to our right, as if distracted by something we can't see. Needless to say, when all five prints are placed in order on a wall, these sideways glances have a fascinating cumulative effect – one that dramatizes Stichbury's anxieties about his own considerable gifts as a face-maker. It's as if the subject of each image, fictional though she is, can see what the artist is making of her in the next image. She is changing before her own eyes, and she's half-frightened, half-hypnotized by the sight: Does that even look like me?

Peter Stichbury: The Proteus Effect, Tracy Williams Ltd., New York, 10 September – 30 October 2010