

Selfish- Portraits.

Andrew Bracey has aphantasia, which means he has an inability to form or recall anything visually in his mind; there are common properties with prosopagnosia. My basic understanding of this condition is face blindness, when one does not recognise or retain memory of faces. The reality of what the condition actually means in relation what Andrew sees and subsequently recalls I do not know or understand. So, when asked to take part in an offshoot of his Ph.D. research I could not proceed without questioning prosopagnosia, aphantasia, portraiture and syntax of language.

What exactly does Bracey see when looking at faces and what does he retain? Has he developed strategies to remember enough to put face, name, voice, context, and location to person? Does he categorise faces? What are those categorisations? Is there a difference in remembering faces of real people, which come with voice and a real-time context, and with remembering a facial representation in portraiture?

In November 2021 Bracey showed 45 paintings based on self-portraits by other artists. Displayed, almost in a scatter formation over two walls of the gallery, was an array of bright, almost garishly coloured loose copies of portrait paintings, ranging from historic to contemporary. From Artemisia Gentileschi to Van Gogh, Agnes Martin to Barkley L Hendricks.

Bracey invited a number of exhibition viewers to select one of these appropriated portraits (of an artist unknown to them), to then research the chosen artist's biography and work and then write a short review, describing the chosen artist's work and reason for selection.

However, I can't stick to a brief or rein in my mind to a task without conflating, misinterpreting and questioning. So I have gone off brief.

In the email inviting me to participate Bracey called this collection of work *Self-ish Portraits*, but the exhibition hand-out and wall text said *Selfish Portraits*. As a dyslexic I distrust my reading of words. I interpreted *Self-ish* as meaning something that resembles another thing, but not terribly accurately. Whilst *Selfish* means to think of oneself over others, to lack consideration or regard for others over concern for personal pleasures or profit.

The former fitted with what I saw and my interpretation of what Bracey was attempting to do. And a quick Google check kind of confirmed my understanding; *ish* is a suffix meaning 'having the character of'. The alternative, *Selfish*, throws up another whole set of meanings, which I was not sure how to begin unpicking.

In his description of these paintings Bracey says ‘*I started making Self-ish Portraits [at this time] and went in with a sense of not-knowing and finding out through doing...*’. I found the exercise in selecting which portrait I was going to research and write had a similar methodology, starting without knowing, and finding through doing.

Initially I wanted to choose a portrait by a female artist. Women artists are under represented in collections and art history, so I wanted to use this opportunity to extend my knowledge of them. And I felt drawn to faces I could relate to.



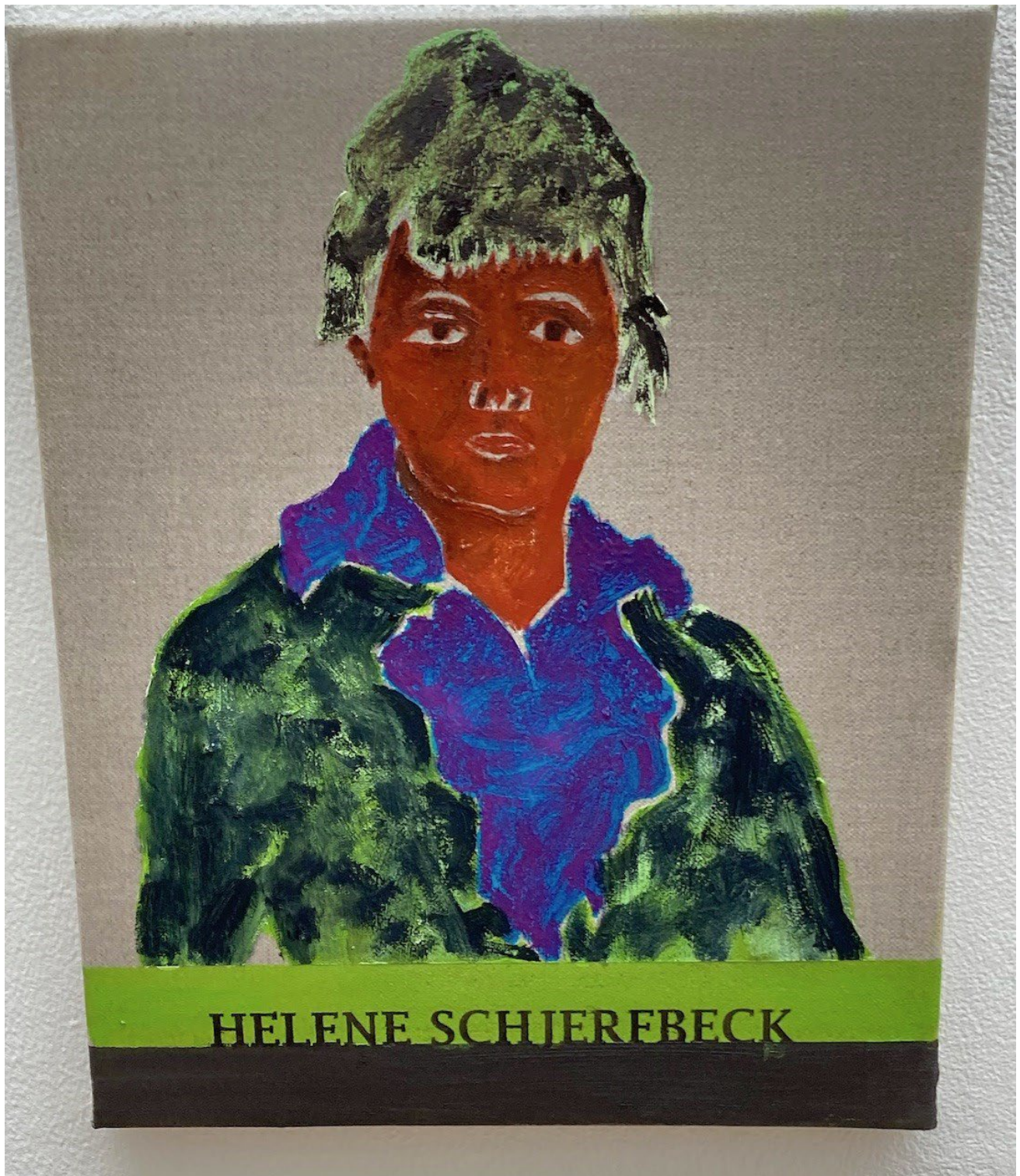
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AMRITA SHER-GIL



MARIE LAURENCIN



However, I found this was putting too much of a sense of me into my selection. These painting were by Bracey so I wanted to choose one that reflected that fact. All art has the authorship of the maker regardless of the subject, so I was looking for one that really spoke Bracey to me. I looked at these two.



But neither seemed quite right then my eye alighted on Ignacio Merino.



Bearded, with a loose rumpled jumper, this was Bracey Merino.

Peruvian artist, Ignacio Merino (1817-1876) was educated in Paris from the age of ten to degree level. He briefly returned to Peru as director of Academy of Drawing and Painting in Lima. Merino specialised in a painting genre called *Costumbrism*, the depiction of everyday life, customs and mannerism of Peru. He also created paintings inspired by European historical themes and literature, such as Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott and Miguel de Cervantes. Few of these later themed painting seem to exist or be viewable on the internet.

In 1850 he was given an opportunity to study with Eugène Delacroix, and returned to Paris where he remained for the rest of his life. An exhibition in Paris of his *Costumbrismo* painting is believed to inspire Jules Verne's novella *Martin Paz*. The reason seems somewhat obscure given the convoluted plot and ethnicity of the novella's characters.

Merino died of tuberculosis in 1876. With no family or heirs he ceded his estate, including 33 paintings, to the Municipality of Lima. In 1925 the Pinacoteca Municipal Ignacio Merino was founded to house this bequest.

There is little to be found about Ignacio Merino's life and works. This says much about the perspective of western art history and possibly is a consequence of the huge volume of paintings in the world for which there is now little appetite.



And what of Bracey's blind interpretation of Merino's self-portrait?

Bracey's methodology in creating the *Self-ish Portraits* series paintings is to find artist's self-portraits, look at them, stop looking and then create the painting without looking again at the source material. He says he only returned to the original when adding the artist's name to the finished work.

All the paintings are the same size, and painted on dark, un-primed raw canvas. The majority are painted loosely in a contemporary palette of colours, though they vary. Some are more realistic in tone, one painted solely in dark blue with white highlights. Each one has some element that makes the composition ping.

Every painting is united as part of the set by the two horizontal lines along the bottom edge. One black, one grass green onto which the artists name is stencilled in black capitals.

Bracey's Merino has the same high forehead and features framed by hair and beard as the original. The eyes look sideways and are a little downcast, not so much in sadness it seems as in cast of gaze and brow line. In Bracey's rendition of Merino's self-portrait the hair, eyebrows and beard are painted a stark white isolating and accentuating the head form. The Breton style striped jumper scrambles any attempt to date the original. This is a very successful –ish painting. It is, and is not quite Merino. This is Bracey's interpretation of what he remembers of the original. But as I said at the beginning, I am not sure what form of remembrance Bracey's mind has. Does he retain a general hue, a pixelated smattering of coloured dots that represent the form of a face?

I question what sort of face recognition and recall we all carry. I have no idea what I would remember of a portrait if asked to create one under the same conditions as Bracey has set himself. On viewing them I was impressed. Not only by the resemblance to the original composition, but also how competent a portraitist Bracey is with neither model nor source material to copy. I couldn't do this.

Returning to my semantic quiz, *Self-ish* or *Selfish*? Bracey is nothing but generous with his talent and joy that exudes from these paintings. They are however very *Self-ish*. They bear great resemblance to the original from which they are cribbed, but also express the hand of the author.

NB. Bracey plans to collate all text submitted to him into an exposition on the Research Catalogue hosted by the Society of Artistic Research. However I am not sure my text will conform.