

# conversations on *Portraiture*

Over the centuries representations of men and women, as both two dimensional and three dimensional forms, have been a subject for art in all cultures. The impetus for making this kind of art is varied, for example:

*Conveying likeness*

*Commemorating family*

*Portraying character or personality*

*Portraying self*

*Reflecting position and power*

*Recognising professional achievements and careers*

*Political and social satire*

As you look around the Gallery you will see many examples of *portraits*, from various periods, reflecting the different styles, executed using a range of mediums. Throughout the 20th century, artists were especially focused on experimentation with form and medium in their attempt to more effectively express how they felt about themselves, their acquaintances as well as key figures in society.

## Likeness

When viewing a portrait the viewer would generally expect the work to tell them how the subject looks, what the person does, their position in society, thus recording the information for posterity. The way that this information is presented will, to a certain extent, effect the fuller understanding of the individual. The artist may, for example,



Richard Gunning *Self portrait* oil on canvas 1990

## Self Portrait

“For an artist who works from direct observation, the self portrait offers particular challenges in that first you must work from a mirror rather than straight from the motif which offers certain technical challenges, secondly and most importantly the demand to be objective when depicting yourself is probably harder than when tackling another subject matter.”

Richard Gunning, 2004

impose their opinion about the subject on to the work. Even photographs may not be entirely unedited. The photographer, through controlling the lighting, setting and props, will tell the viewer what he thinks of his subject. The viewer also has a part to play in the interpretation of a likeness. For example they may be looking for confirmation or reinforcement of an opinion of the individual.

The subject may also wish to be portrayed in a particular way. After all, the portrait will be preserved for centuries and possibly reproduced so the subject would most likely want to be shown in a favorable light.

## Family Portraits

Family portraits, as historical documents, are of immense value. Before the invention of the camera, sculptures and paintings were the only way to record how people looked. They showed others where they lived, their possessions and even their pets! Often such portraits were commissioned works - paid for by the family or the subject. In such cases certain constraints would inevitably be placed on the artist.

## Self Portraits

This is a favourite device of artists, mainly painters and occasionally sculptors, wanting to record personal interpretations of themselves and their motivations. The self portraiture form obviously offers an interpretive freedom that may be lacking in a commissioned work.

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Produced by the Art Gallery of Western Australia with the aim of making art more accessible for visitors

# conversation points

**Realism** : Traditionally portraits were intended to provide a recognisable likeness of the sitter and project a heightened image of the person or subject. The 'reality' of the subject, something of the inner person and their milieu that reflects on their personality, may also be presented by the artist. Through deliberate posing, selected visual treatment and candid interpretation, the viewer can be given a sense that they 'know' the person.

**A National Archive** : Do you think it is important for State and National art galleries to have portraits like this in their collections? What use might future generations of Australians make of this particular work of art? Richard Gunning is a West Australian artist, born in 1961. Would you think it is of value to students studying the history of art? Does this painting tell you something about both the artist and the subject of the portrait?

**Mood** : Richard Gunning is looking directly at the viewer. How does this make you feel? Do you feel uncomfortable? Can you tell what the artist is thinking? The artist however states that he deliberately played down the expressive content and concentrated on the process of creating the artwork. Do you think he achieved this?

**Colour** : Notice how the artist repeats colours to create a unity over the surface of the painting; the acid green on the face and shirt, the ochre in the background and in the face and hair. Would you consider these colours to be naturalistic? Colour is also used to establish mood. The artist was influenced by French painting and in particular, Impressionism which is reflected in his use of exaggerated colour combinations.

**Style** : This is the manner of expression that the artist uses when depicting his subject matter. How would you describe the style of this painting? For example how does Gunning apply his colours? How do these colours make you feel? By examining the painting closely, can you tell whether the paint is thick or thin or what kind of brush has been used to apply the paint? Would you call this a realistic representation of the artist? The artist was working intuitively at this stage, letting influences emerge rather than setting out to work in a particular style or method.

**Light source** : Where is the light in this painting? How does it affect the way the portrait is painted? Look at the shapes and colours. The artist shows the light through blocks of colour and changes of tone, making the colours darker or lighter. This also heightens the illusion of a three-dimensional painting of a person on a two-dimensional surface.



**Space** : How important is the background in a portrait? What is its function? Richard Gunning painted this portrait in his bathroom under artificial lighting which might explain some of the colour combinations. The background is quite neutral allowing the

**Composition** : The portrait is placed centrally on the canvas creating a symmetrical composition. Certain shapes are repeated such as triangles and curved lines to create a unified, balanced whole.