

Robert Fry

## Provisional Likeness

Margaret van Eyck is said to “speak” to us from the inscription lettered on the original frame of her portrait. “My husband Jan completed me on 15 June 1439,” she says, at the top of the frame; and below, “My age being 33 years.” Hers was a type of Renaissance portrait known as a “speaking likeness”, one that bears testimony to an actual encounter between a painter and a portrait subject. Such encounters weren’t inevitable in an age when distances were much harder to traverse: when Bernini was commissioned to produce a bust of the English king, Charles I, van Dyck, then the court painter in London, had to be commissioned to paint a likeness as a guide: the result was the famously strange *Triple Portrait of Charles I*, from 1635-6. But when an artist and sitter came together, something almost mystical was thought to occur: the artist trapped the sitter’s spirit in the amber of art so they might enjoy a kind of immortality. And, in Margaret’s case, the chance of immortality was strengthened by the significance of her age when the portrait was painted: she tells us she is “33 years”, the same age as Christ when he died. A mundane portrait sitting becomes a riddle of life, death and afterlife.

Robert Fry isn’t attempting to effect any mystical transports with his depictions, nor is he hoping to make his sitters speak to us - not because he doubts his facility, but simply because he’s a modern: for him, the soul’s vital spirit and the image’s power as a sign are two different things which have no connection. When he works, the clock ticks, flies buzz, thoughts turn in silence: look at the area of looping scrawls that supplies part of the backdrop in many of his new *Drawing Room Studies*, and you’ll see an allusion to time passing, and Fry’s thoughts circling, as he does the craftsman’s manual work of recording. It isn’t the spirit that Fry stresses, but the flesh; essences won’t be trapped in instants of grace. That doesn’t mean that, however, that for Fry the relationship between artist and sitter is without consequence - on the contrary, it is highly charged. But it has different implications: he comes from a family who are unusually finely tuned to encounters, exchanges and responses: his father is a Neuropsychiatrist, his mother a Psychotherapist. For them, the encounter of artist and sitter could never be a question of communicating spirits; instead it is a matter of chemical, behavioural interchange, a material question of cause and effect.

Fry's new pictures have their roots in a series of prints he made around 2005. That might seem curious, given the sparse and scratchy quality of those earlier etchings, the static in those encounters, yet it was whilst working on them that he began to become preoccupied with recording dual presences - in these early pictures, the presence of both artist and sitter. The sitter is arrayed before us: flattened, somewhat, but otherwise posed in a traditional frontal position; the artist, meanwhile, is squelched into the picture space at the bottom of the image. It is as if the viewer were looking down on the scene from a viewpoint near the ceiling – or, perhaps Fry's own spirit has loosed itself from his body, risen up and started to look down, just as the sick have sometimes described when they have flown close to death and returned. *Untitled 3* (2005) was particularly important in seeding the new work: in this image, Fry imposed his presence more emphatically than ever before, setting himself almost on the same stage as the sitter, his body resting on a similar chair. From here it was a short step to entirely abolishing the distance between the bodies in the pictures; but at this point, Fry put down his etching tool and took up his brush.

Etchings are a medium very accommodating to fragmentation and pictorial anecdote – just witness the work of satirists like Gillray and Rowlandson. But painting encourages a concerted intelligence, a binding of symbol and image. Hence, on canvas, Fry's figures have fused as never before: in *Drawing Room Study 2*, the forms of the two nudes are barely distinguishable in the tangle of limbs. And in several of the new pictures, the bodies seem to have come together such that one remains dominant, the other subservient: in *Drawing Room Study 7*, only the figure at the top of the canvas seems to have a head. In beginning to work with paint on canvas, though, Fry has done more than find a new medium for his study of portraiture; he has started to examine it within a new context and tradition. His earlier prints have the quality of the highly literary, anecdotal English art of the years before 1914 - albeit with a frenzied energy that is altogether contemporary (at times they recall some of David Hockney's early prints, which themselves looked back to Hogarth). But the paintings shift the frame of reference to that of modern European painting; in particular, they look once again at Cubism: passages in some of Fry's pictures are reminiscent of the studied and analytical approach that Picasso and Braque adopted when they first evolved the style in the early years of the last century. At the top of *Drawing Room Study 5* we see a figure who is bent over to the left; at the bottom of the same canvas we see a figure leaning back to the right: the artist's eye aspires to

record every facet of the object in a single image. Other recent pictures by Fry are reminiscent of Cubism in its last days. In particular, they remind one of de Kooning's *Woman* series: the Abstract Expressionist worked on them in the early 1950s, though he would go on negotiating the legacy of Cubism well into the 1980s, still looking at what it had to say about the flatness of the canvas and the volumetric pictorial space that might lie beyond it.

Although Picasso and Braque over-turned artists' understanding of how forms might be depicted on canvas, they were often traditionalists when it came to the sorts of objects they chose to depict. For Picasso, in particular, the nude continued to be a valued motif, holding out a link to tradition as well as a means of negotiating themes of gender and sexuality in his own time. Today, the nude can no longer be just so much furniture in the artist's studio, just another figure in space, and Fry's new work addresses this fresh context. He is intrigued and unsettled by how the nude, as a genre, has transformed the bodies of women into mere signs, so he pushes the process into hypertrophy, often using circles to highlight breasts and genitalia, emphasising their sign-quality as determinants of gender and sexuality. By this means, his figures are depersonalised, and they are further depersonalised by his habit of mirroring them across the canvas: we begin to suspect that one figure is flesh while the other is its reflection (though, rather as if funhouse mirrors had sprung up behind them, it is impossible to say which is which). In some of the latest pictures - works such as *Drawing Room Study C* - that process has gone further: on the top half of the canvas, the figure has been compressed and abstracted, rendered as a biomorphic landscape of curves; on the bottom half, there is nothing but a symbol of sex. And in other pictures, like [IMG\_3468], the figure itself has been pared down to a few, highly angular descriptive lines, and the previously legible symbols have become mere scrawls.

Fry's new work is about the problem of staging the nude at the end of a long tradition. He often leaves us with nothing but an abstraction of the body in an abstraction of a seat - maybe a body on a chaise longue, or in a bath-chair, or on wicker armchair in the light of a conservatory, with just a suggestion of light in the warm hues of the paint. Sometimes he strips away context altogether and shows only an isolated figure, like a body naked under a spotlight, gesturing, while time passes. But all of the pictures, as the titles tell us, are *Studies*: the time has passed when it might have been thought possible to capture the soul on the canvas; the time has passed when a figure's likeness seemed an uncomplicated thing - a true and honest

rendering of the individual; now, *Studies* are all that can be conceived – rehearsals for a final picture that can never be made.

Morgan Falconer