



ANDY COLLIS

The Human Touch?

EXHIBITION DATES 27 March - 13 April 2013



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA





After hearing a speech by Prince Albert 'suggesting a portrait gallery to commemorate scientists and technologists whose innovations brought about the modern age'¹, the influential philosopher and historian, Thomas Carlyle, proposed a National Portrait Gallery for London (which eventuated in 1856), and noted that,

*Prince Albert's original proposal was an attempt to humanise modernity: to see the new machine age in terms of people. . . . A portrait gallery of great technologists would paradoxically celebrate and counteract this process. . . . the makers of modern production would become recognisable as people; a modernity with a human face.*²

In this sense, the portrait gallery valued images that both reflected, celebrated and sustained human touch, in defense of the onslaught of the machine.

London's National Portrait Gallery website states that the original rule pertaining to only having portraits of those that had been deceased for at least ten years, was changed in 1969, 'in order to encourage a policy of admitting living sitters.'³ Therefore the 'working from life' clause maintained in the criteria of present-day portrait competitions, while often assumed to be following a long established tradition encouraging a certain type of portrait, was only closely stipulated after 1969, perhaps when the use of photographic sources became so controversial. Nonetheless to a public 'in an increasingly complex and impersonal society. . . [portraiture offered] the prospect of a direct and intimate relationship between one individual and another. It links us to the value of humanity itself while affirming the irreducible complexity of individuality.'⁴

Sarah Howgate, author and contemporary curator at London's National Portrait Gallery, says with regard to selecting portraits,

*What's really important is that the portrait has to speak to you-you have to sort of feel that you're coming face to face with a person and that's a really important criterion.*⁵

Clearly, while avoiding the vagaries that words such as 'spirit' and 'soul' evoke, Howgate is nonetheless acknowledging that something encapsulating a real-life connection is desirable from a portrait, and this would seem to be far more difficult if the source is second-generation – not itself 'alive' as such.

Humans now inhabit a world where diverse visual and literary information about all aspects of universal human activity and beliefs are introduced, exposed and explained through both the interactivity of technologies and/or the relative ease of travel to witness and evaluate at first hand for oneself. We sometimes maintain 'deep' and 'valid' relationships, via technology, with others far distant from us – sometimes with people whom we never actually meet in person. What can be distilled about the real person represented and transmitted this way, and how does that affect how we might represent these valuable relationships through portraits?

This exhibition demonstrates the value of artist and sitter 'collaborating' in the enterprise of making a portrait as something of a concrete remembrance of time spent together, alongside works that take account of intervening communication technologies that necessarily affect the representation of human contact sustained by such technologies.

- Andy Collis, March 2013

¹ Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture*, 221.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. 226.

⁵ Sarah Howgate, "Judging the BP Portrait Award 2012: Sarah Howgate", National Portrait Gallery, London, 2012. Video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ck30jbaHbw>



LEFT

Andy Collis in his studio with portrait subject Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton

ABOVE

Andy Collis
Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton:
A Dingo Took My Baby
2012
oil on canvas
180 x 150 cm

FRONT COVER

Andy Collis
Daniel
2010
oil on canvas
180 x 240 cm

BACK COVER

Andy Collis
My Daughter, Annie-Rose: Aged 14
2009
acrylic on canvas
91.5 x 76 cm

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