BIGGER PICTURE

Christopher Allen

Doug Moran National Portrait Prize
Juniper Hall, Sydney. Until December 17.

Nicholas Harding: 28 Portraits
National Portrait Gallery, Canberra.
Until November 26.

Once, it seemed almost a miracle that art could capture the appearance of a man or woman, allowing them to live on in effigy for centuries after their disappearance.

Consider some of the popes, for example, that we know so well: Raphael's Julius II, Titian's Leo X or Velazquez's Innocent X are more vivid images of their subjects than any photographs of recent pontiffs.

The Renaissance looked with even greater wonder at the portraits of the ancients: here were living effigies of Julius Caesar or Cicero, Hadrian or Marcus Aurelius; but then the art had been lost with the fall of the Roman Empire, and for almost a thousand years no true portraits had been made. The ancients still lived, but a millennium had come and gone, leaving barely a visible trace.

That continued to be true for the mass of humanity until the development of photography more than 1½ centuries ago. From the middle of the 19th century, it becomes increasingly common for people of all classes to have at least a few photographs taken during their lifetimes, and the rate of photography increases enormously when smaller-format and shorter-exposure cameras made photography accessible to amateurs.

In the second half of the 20th century, amateur photography went through a period of explosive growth and corresponding technological turnover, with successive formats of black and white and then colour photographic prints and slides, and with albums and projectors for storage and display.

All of that was swept into obsolescence by the development of digital photography as a means of taking images and the web as a virtual place to store and display them.

In the past few years the camera itself has been threatened with extinction by the smartphone, which not only can take pictures but also can transmit them instantly to other devices and to websites. The most popular subject remains portraits, so that even the famous sites that tourists feel compelled to visit become merely backgrounds for selfies. Consequently, today virtually every adult in the world has countless images of their own features; but this bulimic consumption of superficial imprints of the self seems, if anything, to have eroded our sense of deeper identity.
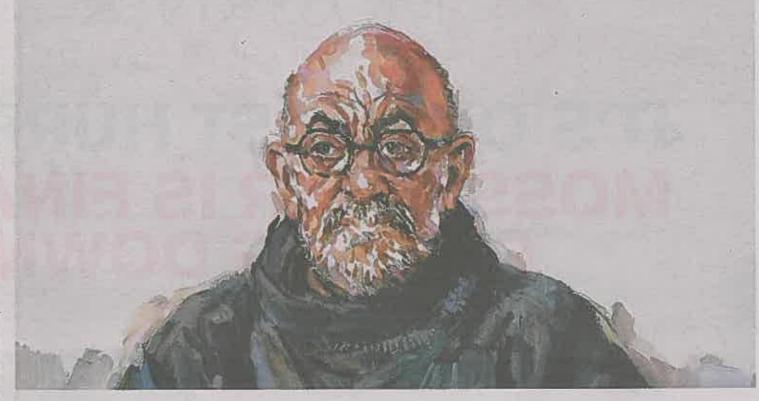
Perhaps the central problem is that, in the age of social media, photos are largely intended as a form of self-display, and the audience for these pictures is not confined to friends but also extends to strangers. So they are not thought of as a vehicle for finding or recording some sort of truth about ourselves but as a means of presenting a certain image to the world.

Some of the consequences have been frequently discussed, particularly the tendency to present one's own life as constantly glamorous. Photographs in general, even unintentionally, tend to give a misleadingly cheerful impression of their subjects because they are so often taken at happy events when everyone is smiling. But with new media in mind social events themselves become little more than photo opportunities, chances to pose and to perform.
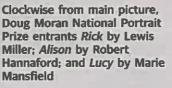
Because the overwhelming priority is to look beautiful, flawless and happy, smartphone photographic applications now include filters and editing features that can automatically remove flaws and blemishes in the way that once had to be done manually and painstakingly by experts, a treatment accorded only to images of models and movie stars.

But what of the effect on the art of portraiture? At the deepest level, the new digital photography and its social applications have tended to derealise the image, so that we come to think of the picture of someone as a surface with no depth. This is why it has become so easy and natural for painters to copy a photograph —

Clockwise from main picture,
Doug Moran National Portrait
Prize entrants *Rick* by Lewis
Miller; *Alison* by Robert
Hannaford; and *Lucy* by Marie
Mansfield

they barely reflect that the image before them represents a three-dimensional body, or that there is a bone structure beneath the flesh, let alone that there is above all a human person, with a history that has helped produce the face we see before us.

Great portraits are, in this sense, like a form of archeology in the way they venture past the surface to discover what deeper reality and what history lie behind and manifest themselves in the visible face; this process is the opposite of the staging of self, predicated on obliterating the past and the wounds it has left marked on the features.

That process, as I have often observed, requires the artist to spend time with the sitter, becoming acquainted with and attuned to them, as well as studying their features in movement, from different angles, in different expressions. Of course, in practice artists also may use photographs as references, especially if the sitter can give them only limited time in the studio. But excessive reliance on photography always comes at a price, as we see every year in the Archibald and indeed in the Moran prize as well.

The worst abuse of photography, however, is one of which I only recently became aware: we have always known that some painters project photos on to a canvas and trace their contours. But now it is possible to print a photographic image directly on to canvas and then merely paint over it, giving it a top-dressing of oil paint. Once you are aware of this trick, it becomes

hard not to see it blatantly in any picture that looks too slickly hyper-realistic.

The results are always trashy and would presumably not actually win any respectable prize, but the effect can appeal to the inexperienced, as we have often seen.

I would suggest that portrait prizes amend their application forms to require a comprehensive disclosure of the process by which each painting was made, and pictures suspected of cheating in this way should be inspected by qualified conservators.

One problem with the Archibald Prize is that the judges, in selecting their finalists, are clearly more concerned with variety than with quality: each year the finalists include several good pictures along with a lot of indifferent and some very bad ones, while good portraits that were knocked back turn up later in the Salon des Refuses or the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize. Indeed, that happened this year, when Tim Storrier's slightly bemused portrait of McLean Edwards, rejected from the Archibald, won the Moran instead, a handsome and lucrative consolation prize for the artist.

There are several other respectable portraits in the Moran, including Robert Hannaford's of his wife, Alison; Graeme Drendel's of his wife, Wendy; Peter Wegner of his frequent model Graeme Doyle; and Marie Mansfield's of Lucy West-Sooby. Perhaps the most striking and intense is a head-and-shoulders portrait of Rick Amor by Lewis Miller. All of these have the authenticity that comes of personal encounter and, interestingly, most of them have made this explicit in the brief accompanying artist's statement.
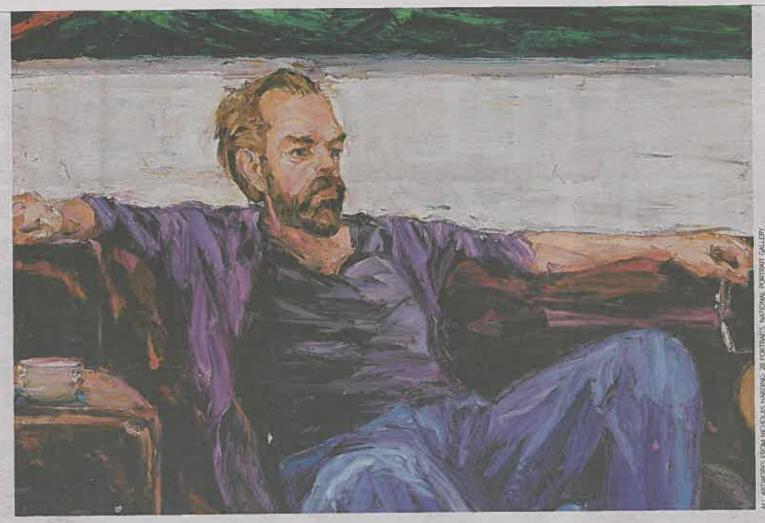
In contrast, the portrait of Paul Capsis is purely mechanical, animated by lurid colour and light-manipulated for dramatic effect.

I leave readers to draw their own conclusions about Kathrin Longhurst's colossal face of Alex Perry. Glance at her website if you have a strong stomach: here, though, just note the suspect way the top of the ear turns into the side of the face as though the painter had never looked at a real ear and its characteristic structure, and the anatomically deformed shoulder.

It would be interesting, too, to know how Nick Stathopoulos had produced the spectacularly lifeless portrait of Isla Fisher. It's hard to believe he took up much of her time in sittings, although the label boasts that each hair has been painted individually.

If painting of this abject quality leaves the viewer feeling rather despondent, the small survey of the portraits by Nicholas Harding at

Clockwise from main picture, Nicholas Harding's *Hugo at Home* (2011); one of the *Sketches on Ten Airline Refuse Bags*; Geoffrey Rush (open sketchbook)

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the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra has exactly the opposite effect: it fills us with an infectious enthusiasm for drawing and painting, and convinces us that it is, after all, worthwhile to be interested in people and in the mysterious question of how to engage with them and to discover something of their inner life through and in the study of their external features.

The exhibition includes some fine paintings, several of which are in the NPG collection. The portrait of Hugo Weaving is a strong and striking likeness, as are others of Peter Weiss and Robert Drewe, his head bobbing in a convincingly watery green swell. Also notable and economical in their use of gouache instead of Harding's more familiar oil, with his characteristic impasto, are seated portraits of Anna Volska with her dog and the artist's mother-in-law, with flowers from her garden strewn at her feet.

But it is really the drawings that make the exhibition particularly vital, especially in a time when so many who claim to be portraitists can do little more than trace over a photograph, and sometimes not even that. The first drawings

that greet us are a detailed study of David Marr and a quicker but elegant and vivid likeness of Megan Washington. These sheets remind us that being able to draw a sitter directly from life is the foundational skill of portraiture. Without that ability, anything else is pointless if not fraudulent.

But inside there are even more surprises, including two studies for the painted portrait of

Weaving at one end, and at the other several drawings in sketchbooks of Harding's wife Lynne and son Sam, travelling or asleep after long international flights. We can see that the true artist is inexhaustibly curious about the world, about people, about the human form and the relation of inner and outer life, appearance and consciousness.

A small display case is devoted to 10 draw-

ings done in felt-tip pen on airline sickbags — three-quarter rear views, that tantalisingly limited perspective that we have on people sitting on a plane in the row ahead of us. One young man is sleeping; a young woman looks at her smartphone; others are awake, reading or presumably watching the screen on the back of the seat in front of them.

The ability to capture the appearance, but also the character, of casually glimpsed figures with such economy of line is clearly part of the daily practice that nourishes Harding's serious work as a portraitist. I have seen him at work and have even been drawn by him, so I know from first-hand experience how quickly and confidently he is able to seize on the defining forms of a sitter's features.

But perhaps the greatest challenge of all is revealed in a large folio open at a vivid sketch of Geoffrey Rush. For years Harding has been attending theatre rehearsals and drawing the actors as they perform. The difficulty of capturing likeness and feeling in constantly moving subjects is daunting, but it reminds us that the features even of the most disciplined sitter are never entirely still, never frozen as they are in a snapshot.