

Face-painting

The portrait, like its subject, continues to intrigue, says **John Mackay**

One person you should never annoy is a portraitist. Lucian Freud famously recalled a sitter "of repulsive appearance" whose excessive vanity soon became irritating. "So I thought, right! And I made him even more repulsive than he was. He was made of soft green flesh, and I got him to wear a pullover that made his neck bulge out in a horrible way."

A salutary tale, and there are numerous other instances of sitters' displeasure on seeing their likeness (or lack of it) depicted on unforgiving canvas (see *The List*, p37). In truth, though, exponents of the noble art of portraiture have a devilishly difficult job. Not only must they chart the outer map of a person, but also tease out that most elusive of threads: a flavour of their personality; some essence of their being; what makes them tick. Whichever way you phrase it, how do you describe it in paint?

This question has preoccupied, and continues to preoccupy, countless artists. And not only this, for a fully rounded portrait will also consider something of the world the sitter inhabits: whether it be the grand piano of Alfred Brendel, or the culture of adulation that surrounds David Beckham and his wife Victoria (see *The Big Picture*, p1). As Sandy Nairne comments in his introduction to *'The Portrait Now'*: "The portrait remains central to artistic practice as an essential way of exploring the world through representations of the people in it."

Published to coincide with the National Portrait Gallery's 150th anniversary year and the 'Icons and Idols: Commissioning Contemporary Portraits' exhibition, *'The Portrait Now'* showcases over 90 contemporary portraits from around the world, focusing on work from the early years of the 21st century. Alongside painters there are photographers, sculptors and video artists, as artists of all mediums attempt to figure out the eternal mystery that is the human face and what lies behind it.



There is an unsparing depiction of comedian and entertainer Ken Dodd, his splayed hand dominating the foreground, while Jonathan Yeo's interpretation of Rupert Murdoch makes the media tycoon appear almost avuncular. But sitters, of course, are not exclusively famous and insights can be still more penetrating when we are not distracted by celebritydom: the quiet force of Anthony Williams' 'Robert, Anne, and Henry Tann' speaks volumes about complex family dynamics.

And it is clear that in a world of flitting trends, the portrait will continue to engage its audience – and to be a hugely successful art form for those who practise it well – because it examines an endlessly fascinating subject: ourselves.

The Portrait Now, by Sandy Nairne and Sarah Howgate, National Portrait Gallery Publications/£20 PB, ISBN 1 85514 358 5/160pp
We have six free copies of 'The Portrait Now.' Postcards marked 'Portrait' to Jacky Wood at the A&I address on page 3

David Cobley, Ken Dodd 2004, oil on linen, 91x1107cm © David Cobley/National Portrait Gallery, London.

MASTERING THE ESSENTIALS

The first two titles in Cassell's new Masterclass series sound full of promise says **Jacky Wood**

Draw like Da Vinci? Paint Like Monet? Yes please! Unfortunately it's not that easy, and those who aspire to be Great Masters may find that these books merely scratch the surface of their ambition.

For Da Vinci, Susan White has certainly done her homework. Exhaustive (not to say exhausting) detail is shared on every aspect of his technique and tools. Fortunately the modern equivalents are also described: toothpaste and PVC substituting nicely for rendered chicken bones and saliva as a ground for metalpoint.

Since Renaissance drawing was never conceived as pure art, the generously

illustrated examples are mainly sketches, doodles, anatomical studies and detail drawings by both artists (White is an exhibiting Australian artist). Practical exercises offer a chance to test the techniques, though two are based on downloading a computer image of Da Vinci works without clear source references.

James Heard's 'Monet' has a lighter approach, with less reading and more doing. Discussion of Monet's career and oil techniques accompany exercises based on seven of his best-known works. They may fall short of the originals, but these are accessible step-by-steps (though an instruction for 'The Magpie' "to mix...a dull orange...to paint the pale orange roof" is curious when the roof is manifestly blue). That's the Impressionists for you!

Carping aside, if you fancy your chances as a Great Master, these reasonably priced books could set you on the right road.

Draw Like Da Vinci
 by Susan Dorothea White
Paint Like Monet by James Heard
 Cassell Illustrated/£14.99PB
 ISBN 1 84403 444 5/1 84403 445 3/144pp



Susan Dorothea White, Betraying Chalk for Conté 2005, 21x16cm.