

## The Brutality of Appearance: Antony Micallef's Self-Portraits

Paul Moorhouse

Among the 19<sup>th</sup> century's numerous technological innovations, the invention of photography in the mid-1820s must surely rank as one of its most radical. The capacity of a camera to record the appearance of the observed world marked a decisive break with the past, enabling visible phenomena to be preserved with a veracity – so it was believed – that eluded painters. Previously regarded as the custodians of depiction, artists wielding a brush suddenly seemed obsolete, a realisation that for many practitioners was doom-laden. Confronted with the evidence of the daguerreotype, in 1839 the celebrated history painter Paul Delaroche looked to the future and declared 'from today, painting is dead.'

Fast-forward to the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and Delaroche's remark has not lost its emotive significance. The relevance of painting continues to be contested in a world dominated by machine-made images, a visual profusion in which lens-based technology has itself been supplanted by digital means. However, the prediction of painting's demise now seems not so much premature as mistaken. Painting has not only survived but continues to find new forms of expression. This has in some ways involved a contradiction, calling for an artistic response rooted in tradition yet alert to the concerns and preoccupations of the present. That vital combination of different qualities has not only ensured the continuation of painting but, arguably, underpins the work of its most distinguished exponents. Significantly, the same paradoxical fusion of past and present defines Antony Micallef's art, a distinctive body of work in which an extreme immersion in the traditional medium of paint provides a context for concerns that are entirely contemporary.

Held in 2016, Micallef's most recent exhibition demonstrated that at the centre of his work lies self-portraiture. *Raw Intent* was an unequivocal gesture of allegiance to a genre whose historic antecedents run long and deep. By positioning his own image at centre stage, Micallef connects with a trajectory of activity in which, according to tradition, the artist examines his own appearance. Taking as its subject matter the sense of self that we each possess, and also the relation of personal identity to external physiognomic facts, self-portraiture proceeds from the premise that an individual's features are an index of character, the evidence of personal experience and, when accompanied by certain attributes of costume and possessions, an indication of achievement. A person - it is supposed - is how they appear. That idea links portraits by the genre's greatest masters, from Van Eyck and Holbein to Rembrandt and Velazquez, and, more recently - and no matter how abstracted - it runs through portraiture during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Picasso to Lucian Freud. By emulation, Micallef's self-portraits extend that trajectory – and then wilfully subvert it.

To an extent unprecedented in the work of any of these forerunners, Micallef's images of his own physical presence interrogate the connection between personal identity and external appearance. While maintaining an illusionistic intimation of space and background, his portraits present a figure as if it has been subjected to an intense trauma. Individual features, flesh, hair and bones are caught up within a maelstrom of activity that reduces each of these personal elements to an unrecognisable pulp-like mass. In some instances, flecks and spatters of pigment suggest a dynamic activity in process, as if the body is exploding. This spectacle is described and evoked solely through the substance and movement of oil paint, which has been applied with an extraordinary emphasis on tactility. Thick swathes and congested

smears are combined with fragments and skeins of pigment. A similar description could be applied to the work of certain earlier painters, notably Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, in which there is a corresponding sense of painterly 'attack'. However, the resemblance with these artists' methods ends there. Although their paintings are extreme in terms of facture, none of these older artists ever abandoned physical description completely. By contrast, in Micallef's portraits physiognomy is pulverised to such an extent that the subject is recognisable as a human form only because of a residual structure suggesting a head, shoulders and upper torso. In other respects the individual's characteristics have been completely obliterated, a situation previously unthinkable in portraiture.

In another respect there is a critical difference between Micallef's approach and that of these older painters, with whom he has an affinity. The work of Bacon, Auerbach and Kossoff has an expressive power that arises from the literal evidence of the paint itself. In common with these artists, Micallef also insists on the materiality of the medium. However, by implying the appearance of photography, he introduces a further expressive dimension. His backgrounds are painted thinly, and suggest a space rendered in soft focus. This is a vital distinction, and in Micallef's work it gives rise to a compelling visual tension. His dense textures and rich palette of pinks, reds and whites assert the sensuous substance of paint, and has a seductive beauty. Yet the same convoluted mass also intimates the look - as if rendered photographically - of raw flesh. His portraits assert themselves as extremely tactile paintings, and yet in a surprising development they veer towards their opposite: a precisely expressed image of a figure situated in space, casting a shadow, its appearance devastated. The fact of paint and the suggestion of photography are combined, generating a highly charged, if ambiguous, relationship. That paradox stands at the centre of Micallef's paintings, and is an essential aspect of their power to move and disturb the viewer. But what is the purpose of this strange mode of expression?

Some light may be thrown on this conundrum by considering photography and painting in terms of what they may each convey. Made in 1962-63, Andy Warhol's celebrated *Death and Disaster* paintings use newspaper photographs of horrific scenes as source material. But as those works demonstrate, the repetition and dissemination of such images - however emotive - drains them of affective significance. Removed from the original circumstances and recontextualised on the printed page, photographs may record appalling events yet appear surprisingly dead-pan. This poses a particular question for artists working in a mass-media age, which now includes the internet, where images of havoc are commonplace. The devastation wreaked by war and terrorism has joined reports of violence to individuals, whether by intent or accident, and the visual evidence is ubiquitous, providing news desks globally and the casual observer with a regular supply of visual material. Warhol's implication was that through repeated exposure the viewer becomes indifferent. But if images of such emotive subjects lose the capacity to move us, how can the stuff of everyday reality be represented with any sense of its original force?

Francis Bacon, who also responded to the media explosion of the 1960s, was well aware of the implications of this question for painting. In an interview conducted with David Sylvester in 1966, Bacon identified a rupture between 'direct reporting like something that's very near to a police report' and, on the other hand, 'great art.'<sup>1</sup> For Bacon, there was an essential difference between the two. Direct reporting describes the literal appearance of things. By contrast, great art aspires to capture 'the violence of reality itself', that is to say the feelings experienced by each individual through being in the world. As Bacon realised, the difficulty is how to make art that conveys the intensity of reality.

Bacon was not hopeful that ‘in the attempt to make great art, anybody will ever do it in our time.’ However, his views on the nature of the task are illuminating. The essential issue is that our experience of the world is never simply visual, but inextricably bound up with the feelings aroused by a personal involvement with reality. Speaking to Sylvester, he explained this in the following way: ‘When I look at you across the table, I don’t only see you but I see a whole emanation which has to do with personality and everything else.’ Even when confronting inanimate objects, ‘there is the appearance and there is the energy within the appearance.’ Bacon understood that recording the look of people and things in a literal way simply documented their external characteristics, but conveyed nothing of the sensations and feelings that they inspired. This explains why a photograph may be horrific, but, being a mechanical replication, does not fully convey the visceral implications of the situation it describes. It is primarily a record of appearance. To convey a sense of reality as it is experienced, Bacon sought a way of evoking appearance together with ‘the sensation and feeling of life.’

This is illuminating in regard to the violence that informs Micallef’s treatment of appearance. In order to appeal directly to the viewer’s emotions and visceral responses, Bacon knew that it was necessary to resort to ‘deep injury to the image’, and the painter was uniquely equipped to achieve this. Whereas a photograph illustrates appearance, ‘only the texture of a painting seems to come immediately onto the nervous system.’ For Bacon, and in turn Micallef, the substance of paint is a complex vehicle for experience, a physical and expressive analogue for events within the body of the observer. The task is to find equivalence between shapes, texture and movement on the surface of the painting, and the sensations the artist wishes to convey. Inevitably, therefore, the manipulation of paint away from literal description and towards feeling involves injury: both to the medium and, as a result, to the image.

Micallef’s art may be viewed in the context of the developments pioneered by Bacon and others, taking its place within an artistic outlook that it both shares and, in its own way, extends. Finding his mature voice in the 1940s, Bacon echoed ideas explored by Alberto Giacometti. Working in Paris in proximity to existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Giacometti emphasised the importance of intense involvement with recording his private sensations. Based in London, Bacon was the progenitor for a group of artists, associated with the so-called School of London, whose ethos is essentially personally expressive. Although each forged a highly individual approach, Freud, Auerbach and Kossoff are linked by the particular view of reality that they advanced in their work. The world is seen through the lens of feeling. That philosophical view is the basis for their emphasis on painting as substance, and a shared conviction that only through a prolonged engagement with the manipulation of paint can the artist’s emotional responses be communicated in an affective tangible form. Proceeding in their respective directions, Bacon, Freud, Auerbach and Kossoff each found a way of representing the world that proceeded from a deeply subjective source.

In common with these older artists, that interior source is the context for Micallef’s work and its point of departure. But having been born in 1975, he grew up in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and belongs to a different generation. As a result, his art has developed against the backdrop of a radically changed world. The proliferation of reproduced images that gathered momentum during the 1960s attained a new, even more intense level of saturation during the time that Micallef attained maturity. The imagery that defines the contemporary world is

bewildering in its complexity. It ranges from what Micallef has described as the ‘frivolities of pop culture’<sup>2</sup> to the excesses and darker undercurrents to which the world-wide web is an open door. Yet, as before, the profusion of photographs has a bearing on the way we look at the world and experience it. More than ever we view our surroundings at a remove, through screens of literal representation that filter out deeper personal engagement. In these circumstances, the objective identified by Bacon returns with an even greater urgency. The artist must ‘unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently.’ But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century how is this to be accomplished?

This is the challenge addressed by Micallef, and his work provides a distinctive and arresting riposte. Responding to a world of selfies, he too has positioned his own image in the foreground. However, by contrast to endlessly generated, disposable images of a confected self, he has made his own features and body a site for prolonged and intense exploration. Through the medium of paint, the act of representing the self has become the expression of something that goes beyond appearance and plunges deeper. In his paintings, the act of stripping away layers of superficiality involves violence that is at once apparent and real: the image of a flayed figure is inseparable from the fact of paint applied to canvas expressively. His self-portraits are convulsed by raw feeling, and in that way they transcend the ‘frivolities’ of a world entertained by selfies. But there is a deeper purpose. Engaging with the tradition of portraiture, Micallef macerates in order to reinvent and renew.

---

<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent statements by Francis Bacon are quotations from David Sylvester, The Brutality of Fact - Interviews with Francis Bacon, 1975, reprinted 1990, Thames and Hudson, London.

<sup>2</sup> Antony Micallef in conversation with Paul Moorhouse, at the artist’s studio, London, 2015.