

Practice in Context. Dissertation Proposal. Portraiture, Domesticity & Emotion.

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‘Portraits ... (are) truthful accounts of the artist’s special insight into the sitter’s inner or ideal self.’ (Woodall, 1997). I have always found people interesting. I observe people around me as they occupy themselves with their day, gaging emotions, and responses. This is valuable when I paint them as I enjoy reflecting on external stories and personalities. Painting is just a form of celebrating this, celebrating the person on the canvas.

In this essay, I will define my practice using three key words, supported by images. I will also be quoting other artists and thinkers to conclude with a question I intend to use for my dissertation.

Portraiture

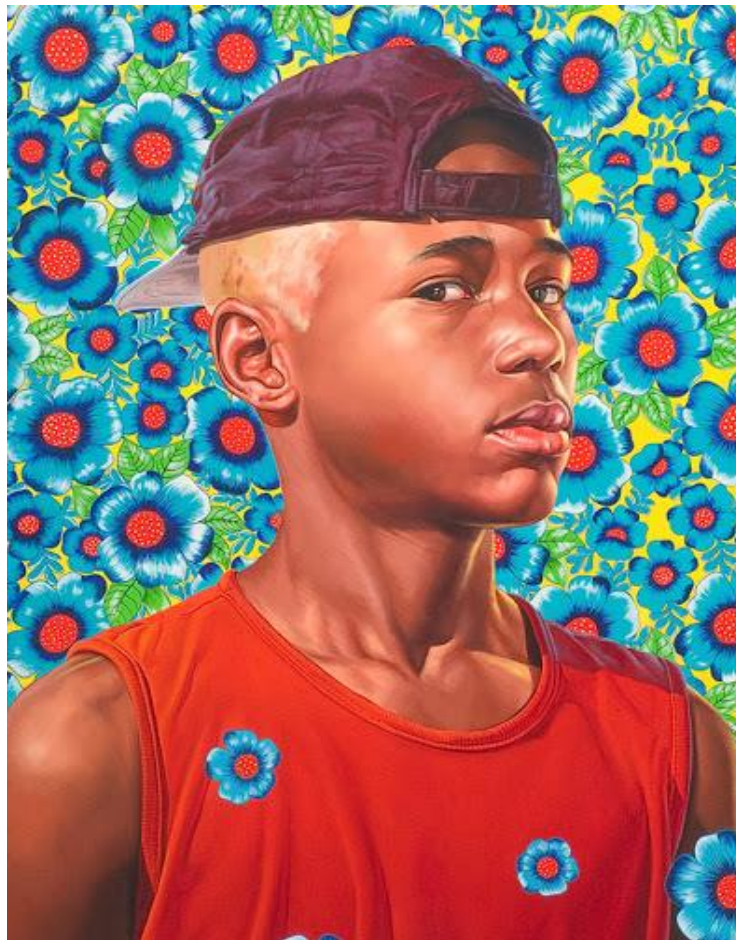


Figure 1 (Wiley,2008)

I enjoy painting those of importance to me. Family and friends often being my chosen subjects, allowing my work to feel personal. Furthermore, it acknowledges them to be perceived as relatable. They are not seen as impersonal, as significant figures are. Untouchable by us, almost illusory. I desire those I paint to look approachable, those you would pass on the street. Conveying significance to those that are relevant in my life. Portraiture allows for 'ideas of identity as they are perceived, represented, and understood in different times and places' (West, 2004), constituting it more widely appreciated.

Figure 1 is a portrait I greatly admire, as the artist's approach contains elements I attempt to emulate in my own practice. Kehinde is accomplished in presenting those we would usually disregard, in great significance. Adopting styles frequently reserved historically for Royals, for sitters he locates on the New York streets neighbouring his studio. He confronts our culture of idolising certain figures, by reminding us that there are many who are deserving of a painted portrait. Not to be limited to those with societal leverage.

Additionally, Wiley is energetic in conceiving art that honours people of colour, in a category that has been dominated with white-only subjects in the past. We are forced as viewers to question our own morals. Diversity is on the threshold to becoming familiar in the art world, and Wiley is a key figure in this development. Artist Lynnete Yiadom Boakye also questions these historical ideologies. Her work encouraging viewers to 'project their own interpretations, and raise important questions of identity and representation' (Tate Britain, 2020). By painting fictitious people, the viewer is fully reliant on their own opinions.

Furthermore, Wiley's process of handling paint holds experience, and produces a beautifully authentic outcome. His ability to capture facial tones within the skin, produces a faithful finish. Additionally, he embraces colour, bright pigment being used in the majority of his works. Similarly, Yinka Shonibare welcomes the use of vibrant African textiles in his work. After discovering its cultural richness, it became 'his medium and his message' (Sontag, 2009), allowing his race to weave into his artwork in an organic way, like Wiley. This allows them to intertwine the theme of street culture further into their practice, and distance themselves from art history, where colours were regularly muted and subdued.

Wiley nourishes street culture in his portraits, maintaining it to be a key feature of his practice. The way in which the sitter poses, holding the authority of someone we would expect to see in prosperous attire, we are surprised to recognise street wear in its absence. The viewer is refreshed however, and reminded of how changing times diversify the approach to portraiture.



Figure 2 (Authors own image, 2018)

Pictured above is Figure 2, Self Portrait, aged 2 – Author's own image. The subject holds an intriguing expression of curiosity and distraction, which I wanted to challenge myself with. Furthermore, she too wears apparel foreign in the field of portraiture. A wrinkled paper hat from a Christmas cracker sits crooked upon her head, encouraging the viewer to recognise an item that holds nostalgia.

The subject also wears pyjamas, allowing a sense of sentimentality as we are reminded of our own childhoods. Nostalgia is often disregarded in art, as it is thought to be novel. However, it 'has recently become associated with a more positive connotation of pleasure and is regarded to be a coping mechanism' (Koneke, 2010). Encouraging the viewer to relate to the piece, forming bonds and allowing feelings of happiness and security.

By painting 'ordinary' scenes, I hope to engage with a larger audience. Art can reach out and be enjoyed by many people globally. Whereas before, it felt only to be appreciated by an intimidating, small sector of people.



Figure 3 (Lartigue, 1904)

‘Photographs are a common object of nostalgia and often feature close ones’ (Routledge, 2016). Figure 3 shows a young boy holding a similar expression to the child in Figure 2. Photography also being a vital part of my practice, allowing me to study expressions that are short-lived and difficult to replicate. Photos are vital in contemporary portraiture, allowing everyone to take portraits, meaning these moments are captured frequently and without prejudice. Lartigue’s piece also links into my next theme, domesticity, as this moment of playing in the bath is one we have all experienced.

Domesticity

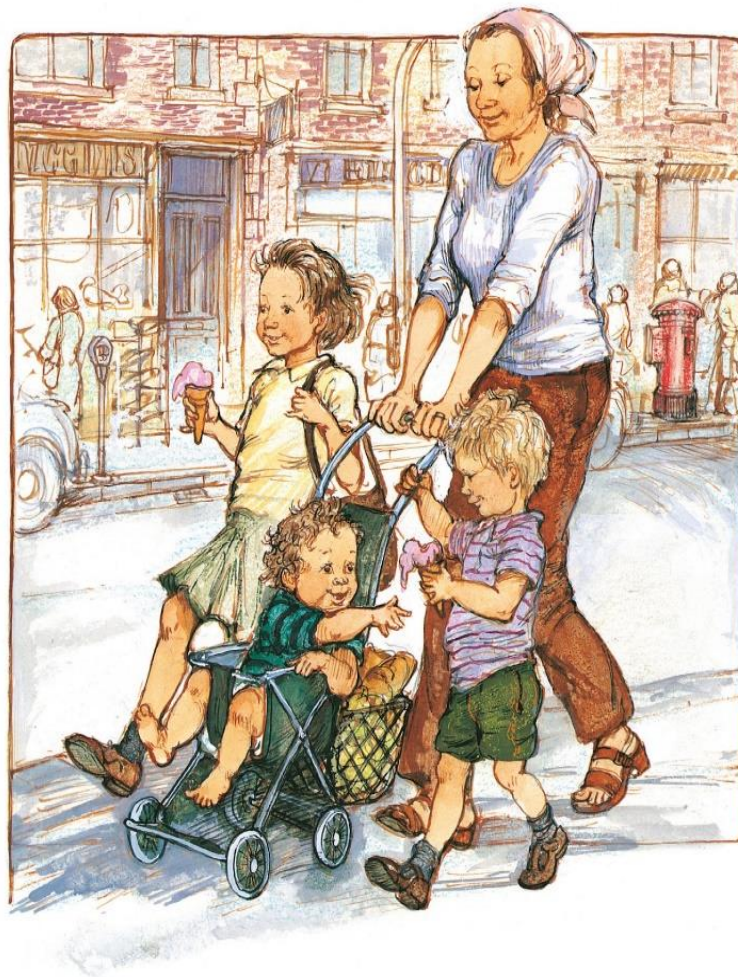


Figure 4 (Hughes, 1977)

I would currently consider domesticity to be the foundation of my practice. Since beginning portrait painting, I regularly use family members as subjects, their faces being the ones I am best acquainted with. Home life contributes to this as I am interested in the prosaic around us, studying washing up liquid bottles and old bikes. Things we all possess, but often forget. Similar to portraiture, those I depict are not familiar to the audience, but by painting them, I hope to bring them focus, just as I do household commodities.

Shirley Hughes, a children's book author and illustrator, approaches domesticity charmingly. My childhood was laced with my mother reading me these stories, appreciating the drawings throughout. My mother enjoys these books as they echo ordinary living. 'Their houses are never quite tidy, and people are always busying away in them' (Rowlands, 2020). She found comfort in being able to relate to the imperfections the works honoured. When pursuing new pieces, I try to consider this. For example, leaving under-drawing lines in the background of paintings, allowing the viewer to consider the process to the finished result.

Figure four is an extract from Hughes' widely acknowledged book, 'Dogger'. A representation of her ability to emulate a domestic setting within a noncomplex drawing. 'The illustrations bring to life the postures and expressions of the wonderfully simplistic, but all-encompassing, world of a child.' (Hunter, 2004). The parent-child liaison we see however, is disparate to previous art movements.



Figure 5 (Sassoferrato, 1600s)

Historically, Madonna and Child is the most eminent symbol of the parent-child relationship. This religious perspective of mothering is idolised as one of calmness and serenity. 'The Christ Child appears as a typical, healthy baby. Mary is shown as a radiant young mother' (Master Art, 2020).

Hughes challenges this notion. Figure four reveals a mother with her three children, but there are many 'imperfections' held within the scene. Two ice creams sit melting in the older children's hands, whilst the infant reaches towards one. We anticipate mess, a reminder that conventional life includes fallibilities. The mother continues looking upon her family with a gentle smile, one comparable to those within Madonna and Child paintings.

Domestic settings currently feel further profound. Restricted to our homes and families, Coronavirus has produced indisputable negative effects, but we are reminded of the importance the 'mundane' holds. The virus has become an 'opportunity to build and strengthen...family relationships' (Gillet, 2020). Parents are devoting days playing with their children, enveloped by a natural untidiness that comes with existing.

Days spent simply living with those important to us, we are compelled to seek beauty in what we have, as there is nowhere else to look. Domesticity may become more commonplace in art after this period, as we have all experienced it in such a potent manner. I am hopeful it will, as I enjoy seeing art that can be empathised with by many, reminding us that the everyday is worth celebrating.



Figure 6 (Mulleady, 2019)

Another artist exploring home and family life is Jill Mulleady. Discovering her work in the 2019 Venice Biennale, I found her presentation of people to be unique as she focuses on 'New Objectivity and Social Realism' (Mulleady, Jill Mulleady: Allegories of Now, 2019). Unusually, there is no attempt at making the children appear overly sweet or innocent in Figure 6, painted just as she may have observed them. They are curious and occupied, and we are encouraged to empathise with the carer.

There is an abundance of activity and it feels crowded. This stress we sense, would too be felt by the mother governing the situation. Furthermore, the woman's face is not in full view, encouraging us to relate to this situation as if we are the ones to solve it.

The viewer is exposed to mess and chaos, a reminder of how our lives can feel at times. Perhaps there is a superfluous of 'perfect' art, beautiful homes and effortless relationships where we believe that moments of stress are personal to just us. Art can assure us that these events are customary. Figure 6 remains an appealing one, with interesting composition and intense colours, the content is just unfamiliar to what we expect in an art gallery setting.

Emotion

When producing portraits, I aim to consider emotion throughout, and by including an obvious feeling, empathy can occur between subject and viewer. Depicting emotion is easiest when painting children as they are more candid in comparison to adults, where we learn to conceal ourselves to appear less vulnerable. I try to capture childlike innocence when painting them as this deserves to be reflected on and captured, especially as historically it was not often explored.



Figure 7 (Jameson, 1626)

Figure 7 by George Jameson is a good example of this. We are presented with three similar looking subjects, two of them being children, dressed correspondingly. Donned in conservative, restrictive dresses, they appear to be uncomfortable, a sensation we relate to when gaging with the scene. To see them posed in a sombre demeanour would have made them appear eloquent in 1626, but drives us to feel almost sympathetic for them today. The girls look mature, in the way they are dressed, and the way they are atomically presented. Their hands look too elongated for a person of their age, their fingers resembling ones we would expect on someone a decade older than themselves.

Their faces are similar in this way, lacking the childhood roundness most have during infancy. Jameson decides to make them slenderer, paralleling their mother's portrait quite closely.

This may be 'because of the expectation of the time, children from wealthy families did not really experience a time that we would now consider a 'childhood'" (National Galleries Scotland, 2018). They were expected to behave and dress as miniature adults, and thus were painted so. Furthermore, portraiture centralised firmly on the wealth and status of the buyer during this time, encouraging a strong emphasis on luxurious clothes and goods, which Figure 7 presents clearly.



Figure 8 (Hayzer, 2019)

Geoffrey Hayzer, a contemporary artist, opposes this historical concept of portraiture. In figure 8, Hayzer embraces natural childhood behaviours and mannerisms. The subject looks away from the viewer, captivated in something we are unable to see. This is not uncommon demeanour in children his age as they discover things we ourselves may not notice. The artist appears to have entered the mindset of the subject which is interesting as we 'hear about children, their behaviours, their preferences, their misdemeanours, from the perspective of adults who ...(have) observed them.' (French, 2019). His mouth sits open slightly, as if to speak, perhaps in question as he looks intrigued. This emotion is lacking in older childhood portraiture.

In contrast to figure 7, Hayzer paints the subject in informal clothing. 'Harry' wears a school polo shirt. Top button undone and wrinkled collar, we are nostalgic of our own childhoods. The material is lightweight in the bends and creases presented, a substantial contrast to the stiff cloth worn in Jamesons' portrait. The subdued, pastel colours used in 'Harry', further brings the viewer a feeling of tranquility and innocence. And the light pouring from a nearby, unseen window, allows a sense of timelessness and stillness, something we regularly experience as children.

A surface holding what appears to be a bowl and other objects stands behind the sitter. Hayzer has studiously muted these items to draw further attention to the boy and his expression. I aim to adopt this outlook on composition in my own practice, as I believe people should be celebrated more over our wealth or societal status. Also, another contrast to figure 7 is created in how objects are incorporated in the space, behind, rather than next to the sitter.



Figure 9 (Rowlands, 2019)

Modern portraiture seems to consistently acknowledge emotional being as a considerable part of the process. A general shift forming from art honouring wealth and instead celebrating a diverse range of people. We are no longer insistent on capturing stern expressions, instead allowing for a more relaxed approach, and permitting looks of inquisitiveness and confusion. In a way, our works have become less 'perfect', but this further encourages communication to occur between sitter and audience.

Pictured above is one of my own, recent paintings which I hope captures a range of emotions that are commonplace in children of a young age. As we constantly learn in

our first years, expressions like this, filled with confusion and contemplation are frequently come by. I found painting this unusual expression quite personal in contrast to a smile or sombre face, as it forced me to reflect on why these emotions are felt. And how although as adults we may feel this way, we rarely allow ourselves to reveal it.

Dissertation Question

By exploring these key words, I can begin thinking about what I wish to research and write about in my final year. Portraiture is so significant to my practice; I feel it necessary to continue reflecting on and learning about its relevance in art. Both on a general and personal sense.

Domesticity also links well with this as I generally focus on presenting those I live closely with, their lives becoming very familiar to my own. Also, by displaying work I believe to be relatable, I hope to reach a further range of people who may be able to empathise to art that includes aspects similar to their own lives.

In conjunction with this, my interest in childhood portraiture awakens nostalgia in the viewer and a sense of normality. Hopefully subsiding the pressure art can place on being reserved only for the upper-class or wealthy.

Finally, emotion links into both these words. Emotion I believe is one of the core aspects of a painting, allowing for relatability and interest. It is something we feel at most ease with in domestic settings, such as our homes, where we generally have a stronger sense of comfort and vulnerability. I hope all these aspects can compose into my final dissertation question next year.

Perhaps my research title could be, 'How does the inclusion of domesticity in portraiture affect the viewers ability to relate to the art?'. So I can continue to explore all these themes with a main focus on the aspect of comfort and a feeling of how 'safeness' can affect us. I also intent to further research into the lack of domesticity in art historically and the impact that children have in portraiture.

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Figures List -

Figure 1 – Wiley, K. (2008) Randerson Romualdo Cordeiro (Online). Available at :
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/kehinde-wiley-randerson-romualdo-cordeiro>
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Figure 2 – Authors own image (2018)

Figure 3 –Lartigue, J.H. (1904) Lartigue in his bath with his hydro-glider model
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Figure 4 – Hughes, S. (1977) Extract from 'Dogger' (Online). Available at :
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Figure 5 – Sassoferrato, (1600s) Madonna and Child (Online). Available at :
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Figure 6 –Mulleady, J. (2019) Kids with Slime (Online) Available at :
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Figure 7 - Jameson, G. (1626) Anne Erskine, Countess of Rothes, d. 1640. Wife of the 6th Earl of Rothes. (With her daughters, Lady Margaret Leslie, 1621 - 1688 and Lady Mary Leslie, b. 1620) (Online) Available at :
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Figure 8 –Hayzer, G. (2019) 'Harry' (Online) Available at :
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Figure 9 – Authors own image (2019)

