

Canvases to be Nervously Adored

James Hurrell

When we meet a new person for the first time and nothing is spoken, what are the factors that affect our first impressions-that make us feel either hostile antagonism, empathetic loyalty, or dull indifference?

Sometimes in a visage we find something that triggers within us deep visceral affection or sexual attraction. If such 'chemistry' is purely visual, and not olfactory or aural, then is it the formal arrangement of facial components that strikes a chord, or some little detail that reminds us of someone else? Maybe it's a surprising asymmetry that appeals, or an intensity of gaze that seems so utterly special and bestowed only on us?

Peter Stichbury is an Auckland-based painter. He graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland in 1997, went on to do a postgraduate degree, won various awards and never looked back. He is highly regarded for creating stylish, satirical portraits of his own generation, rendering them with startling precision. Many of these acrylic works show him contemplating the theme of female beauty and the nature of sexual and social desirability.

Stichbury's reputation has grown over the past decade through a series of exhibitions of his work at Starkwhite in Auckland. Dense in their references to magazine, television and film culture-as well as art history-his works have attracted collectors who feel so passionately about the artist's hybrid depictions (the physiognomies come from several sources) that they often acquire several, feeling such affection for the works that they become like members of their own family.

There have been two particularly important exhibitions of Stichbury's paintings over the past year. The first was *Less than Absolute Zero* at Starkwhite in October 2007, in which significant changes in his practice were evident. A series of twelve heads, alternating between grey-hued works and those with a richer chroma, explored incredibly nuanced expression as well as clichéd stereotypes. Like *Mad* magazine covers, these graphically flat visages were as if cartoonist Dan Clowes had merged with painter John Currin. They marked a shift from Stichbury's earlier intense portraits of wide-eyed, glamorous women towards an interest in character-more often male-rendered as illustration.

The other notable exhibition of Stichbury's work was on show at Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts in Auckland in July 2008. Titled *The Alumni* and comprising 30 portraits under the banner of a class reunion, the show was a reasonably large survey of the artist's work. Most of these were completed before 2007 and included a number of faces painted on bowling balls.

The exhibition drew out the elaborate personas that Stichbury concocts for each of his paintings, including the highly inventive names he gave his fictional subjects, such as Debbie Bloomquist, Vernon Frisbie or Herman Brittle. The visual details-including facial peculiarities, garments and other body ornaments-were wrapped around little narratives that the artist decided on before he started painting.

Stichbury first came to prominence with his early portraits of young women. Confidently poised, erotic and radiating privilege, these Paris Hilton-types are oddly, though not always, vacant. The portraits exploit the glamour templates of magazines like *The Face* or *Vogue*, and the women do not have a strong sense of individuality.

Stichbury's method when painting these faces is to render highly sculpted heads, with chiselled facial features, glistening irises and glossed lips. Their large Bambi-like eyes are invariably spaced far apart, with meticulously rendered eyelashes. The head shapes tend to be triangular, with large foreheads, pert chins and small ski-jump noses. They look slightly mantis-like, as if out of an animated Pixar production.

The result is a strange tension between their allure-large eyes, succulent mouths, silky skin-and their subtle insect-like attributes. Their plasticity and size make them loom larger than life, as if poised to burst out of the picture plane

and hover in real space in front of you. It's a kind of sexual confrontation but also threatening, with the wasplike faces suggesting a kind of vagina dentata.

Stichbury constructs the portraits by combining the facial features of models in fashion magazines with images found on the internet, or with his memories of certain high school classmates. He is attracted to generic types, those popular clichéd categories of glamour and personality that individuals get casually sorted into, such as nerd, hottie, egghead, jock.

Some viewers might see the female portraits as ciphers for vacant personalities typical of a certain class, or as a send up of the conventions of magazine glamour, while others will consider them as simply a meditation on all surface appearance. Perhaps a handful see the portraits as genuinely individualistic-true studies of authentic personality-even if the sitters don't actually exist.

Others find Stichbury's faces desirable-like the museum guard who once told the artist that he'd leave his wife for one-suggesting that the canvases are a kind of fetish surrogate for the beautiful women they depict. In an article published recently in *Frieze*, Jennifer Allen writes about people who are 'objectum-sexual'-meaning 'emotionally and sexually attracted to objects'. She cites as examples the German woman who so loved the Berlin Wall that she married it, becoming Mrs. Eija-Riitta Berliner-Mauer, and-more confrontingly-her own amorous fixation on Wim Delvoye's excrement producing artwork, *Cloaca* (2000).

To fall in love with a 'shit-producing' arrangement of bubbling tanks, tubes and pipettes is, well, a little strange. But it's really easy to understand why people might become enamoured with Stichbury's portraits-particularly his alluring images of women, which seem to encourage a gaga response in viewers.

Stichbury, however, is pushing quite a different set of buttons with his more recent portraits. The new works, which began to emerge in 2007, are less lustful (with no skin on show) and more about a kind of wry humour. They have a more graphic style and less tonal manipulation-not unlike comic book imagery or graphic novel covers. The personalities-usually male-are still generic as human types and even more immaculately detailed. The eyes, head shapes and bone structure don't dominate like they do in the women. Instead, Stichbury lavishes attention on an odd assortment of features, including whiskers, scratches, bruises, Band-Aids and even pimples. Again, the clothing worn by each subject correlates to a predetermined story.

The flatness of these works suggests that Stichbury is creating a geography of physiognomy from his own mental map. There is a definite sense of physical facial terrain that he is traipsing over with his little brush and paint pot, manipulating the pitted or creviced surfaces of the subject's epidermis. He is also exploring the possibilities of colour more thoroughly, with the delicate hues of the eyes much more nuanced in these works.

Stichbury's achievement is that he has given the skills of magazine or comic-book illustration the gravitas of studio painting so that the content of each image, and its formal 'abstract' properties, are considered worthy of sustained thought. Yet he has acquired a knowledge of the history of studio portrait painting that has become essential to his technical and conceptual practice. When one considers those portrait painters whose images Stichbury has spent time poring over, it is easy to see how the sculptural structuring of certain expressive facial features within his own style developed.

For a long time he admired the early works of Lucian Freud (b. 1922), particularly Freud's more graphic, less painterly, less fleshy period in the late forties and early fifties. In that stage of Freud's practice the eyes of his sitters were exaggerated in width, and their distance apart made a little horizontally wider for emotional intensity. Freud's series of portraits of Kitty Garman, his first wife, are especially pertinent as an inspiration for Stichbury, particularly with Freud's treatment of her large eyes and the individually rendered lashes that dominate her image.

Stichbury is also intensely interested in Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867)-Freud is too-and you can see in his work some aspects of the Frenchman's nuancing of expression-particularly with Ingres' beaming eyes, glowing skin and succulent mouths. The former seem to sparkle and be extremely alert, the skin exudes a light through its soft sheen as if spotlighted, and the pouting mouths are sensual, glisten and sometimes have a tautness of the lower lip, as if lightly chewed upon by the upper teeth. The mouths and upper cheeks, for example, of Ingres' portraits of Madame Aymon and Monsieur Marcotte hint at facial muscles that English language speakers are notoriously unfamiliar with, zones of epidermal activation our vocabulary avoids.

With Stichbury though, because the subject's eyes dominate, his cropping of the face is crucial. This makes the psychological significance of the model's expression-their 'inner light'-unrelenting and extraordinarily intense. Shoulders and chest are often not included (especially with women) and usually the viewer is looking slightly upwards. Occasionally the model is on a three-quarter angle. The artist is really zooming in, perpetuating a sensibility familiar with modern movie-making technology and as such, creating something totally foreign to Ingres who uses a static frontal stance and glowing face-along with a significantly decorated, clothed torso and hips, and fastidiously posed hands.

Stichbury's recent works are more multi-layered, being richly psychological rather than one-liners that generate a predominantly bodily response. The relationship to narrative has also flipped around: the works aren't simply appendages to some casually contrived text, but twisted the other way. It's the images that first attract attention, after which the artist, if so inclined, can articulate a verbal narrative that the image can support. The fabricated anecdotes are not pushed in your face.

Before he acquired a sophisticated computer, Stichbury was an avid collector of magazines-he hoarded hundreds-from which he sourced imagery for his work. Now, in a fitting reversal, it's Stichbury's own paintings that often adorn the covers of fashion and art publications-feeding back into the pool of resources that other artists, in front of computer screens or behind easels, might now linger over.

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