

Andrew Tift immortalise

25 May — 2 September 2018



Exhibition guide

“When we talk about portraiture, we often talk about “immortalising” somebody and I have always been very aware and conscious of the strong link between portraiture and mortality, life and death.”

The New Art Gallery Walsall is delighted to present this major solo exhibition by Walsall artist Andrew Tift. The exhibition will bring together brand new work, combined with selected works from the artist's past practice and comprises paintings, drawings, sketchbooks and for the first time, a series of photographs. Focusing around the genre of portraiture, it is a consciously eclectic show bringing together commissioned portraits, personal projects with specifically chosen sitters and more experimental work in which the artist has challenged himself both technically and conceptually, pushing the boundaries of portraiture and reflecting on enduring themes such as the cycles of life, the passing of time and the persistence of memory.

Andrew has always been fascinated by portraiture. Friends and family and even Max, his dog, are immortalised through his work, yet he also seeks out characters of interest from all walks of life. His subjects have included Native American Indians, hippies, Vietnam veterans, Japanese motor industry workers, Black Country steel workers, Mafia members, musicians and Cosplay punks. A chance encounter with members of the Kavern Motorcycle Club in his local pub has resulted in a compelling and varied series of portraits. His talent has also attracted a series of important portrait commissions of personalities such as Tony Benn, Lord Carrington, Neil and Glenys Kinnock, Ken Livingstone, Cormac McCarthy and Eric Sykes.

Within this exhibition, the central gallery focuses on works that reflect on life and death, the transition of time and the power of memory. Two

older works are included which have strong emotional connections for the artist but which resonate with all of us. *There's no Substitute* (1993) shows Andrew's late grandparents in their Bloxwich home. Its complex composition and symbolic references recall the interior scenes of 17th century Dutch painting. His grandfather would save money by buying fruit which had just started to turn and he is shown here cutting away the decayed parts of the skull-like apple and preparing to eat it. In contrast, a bowl of artificial fruit is seen on the left. Just underneath it is his grandmother's artificial leg. Her disability rendered her housebound and she is shown almost entrapped within the room beyond. The contrasts of natural and synthetic forms imply that we can never really compete with nature. This is a tender and compelling double portrait with more than a hint of sadness. Andrew felt some urgency to paint it due to the frailty of his elderly relatives.

Later, he was to paint *Memorial Painting* (1997-8), a poignant diptych lamenting the passing of his grandparents. It combines an image of their empty living room with a range of objects once found there, each resonant with personal memories and associations. It presents a powerful portrait of loved ones without recourse to their physical appearances.

Probably the most ambitious work in the exhibition, *22 Years Later* (2016) extends a dialogue from an earlier painting, *The Obscurity and Revelation of Andrew* (1994). In this earlier work, Andrew presents himself in the domestic setting of his bathroom. Playfully engaging with religious iconography and ideas around identity, his face is obscured in the first panel through the soap on his face. In the second panel, his face is now exposed and a range of objects that were covered by towels is now revealed, reinforcing the subject's identity. 22 years later, Andrew revisited this work to create the aptly entitled *22 Years Later*. The artist again employed the diptych format, the domestic setting, dramatic lighting and the intense gaze of the artist. The setting is now the artist's studio at his home. In the background of the first panel is a range of objects evoking the passage of time including many that trigger specific memories for Andrew and his family. These include a scan of his daughter

Scarlett, her umbilical cord, the first photograph taken after her birth, a soft toy and a drawing she made of her parents after walking in the woods. In reference to time passing, Andrew also includes his own wrist watch and a mantle clock acquired on his honeymoon. There is also a portrait study of his late father and a cactus given to him by his grandfather in 1990 which he has kept alive ever since. A postcard of *The Obscurity and Revelation of Andrew* is also included. In the second panel, the artist's face is now obscured by a skeletal mask and he has retreated into darkness. Snuffed candles provide an additional reference to death. Like many of his works on this theme, this epic work is inspired by great art from the past; in this instance Piero della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ* (after 1437) and James Ensor's self-portrait *The Skeleton Painter* (1896).

This work is a powerful meditation on mortality and the passing of time. However, it is also a compelling self-portrait of the artist. He appears focused and meditative with his hands held as if in prayer and his paint-spattered apron alludes to his artistic practice and to the blood, sweat and tears that have gone into his painting over the years. A restricted palette of black and white enhances the drama and intensity of these carefully constructed compositions. The technical execution as ever is breathtaking.

Whilst many of these works are tinged with darkness, there is also a reflection of hope for the future with the coming of new life into the world. *Madonna and Child* is an extraordinary portrait of Kasi, a tattoo artist from Birmingham. At the time, Kasi was in the early stages of pregnancy and though this was not yet clearly apparent, she is shown with her hands held protectively over her unborn child. This work becomes aligned with a rich artistic tradition of representations of mother and child. Andrew was also inspired by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's portrait of *Madame Moitessier* (1844-56).

Betty (2017) is an intimate and touching portrait of Andrew's former neighbour, who sadly died while Andrew was making the painting and so she never got to see it completed. When Max the dog chased the family cat out of the house, it took refuge with her and eventually just stayed. Through the connection with the animals, Betty developed a close relationship with the Tift family. Betty is seen standing in her kitchen with a range of objects and images around her. The interior of her home had not been updated since the early 1970s and so it retained a strong sense of the past. Andrew chose in this case not to



Andrew Tift, *Betty*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 81.5 x 91.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist

change anything and recorded the kitchen interior exactly as it was. Andrew frequently seeks to reinforce the identity of his sitters by providing detailed references to their lives and their character and this is especially a feature of his more formal portrait commissions. His portrait of Ken Livingstone was commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery. During a series of sittings with him, Andrew discovered that, as he had a young family, his personality was not stamped on the interior of his home. However, as a keen gardener, his garden provided an entirely appropriate setting. Livingstone is presented as a "man of the people" by placing him in this unremarkable suburban context which features compost bins, roof racks and a satellite dish. Livingstone wears his traditional cream suit and his tie from the successful 2012 Olympic bid. A personal touch for the politician is that his mother's ashes are scattered at the base of the tree on the right.

This portrait is incredibly detailed and took 13 months to paint. Similarly, politician Tony Benn is seen sitting in his Holland Park home. Looking relaxed, wearing an old cardigan and smoking a pipe, Benn is seated on a chair that belonged to his hero, Keir Hardie. A mug of tea sits on a pile of boxes beside him. On the shelf to the rear are busts of Hardie, Robbie Burns, John Wesley, Karl Marx and a miner. Other objects include a plate commemorating the miner's strike and his late brother's RAF wings. In other portraits, such as the series he made of Kitty Garman in 2006, the setting is edited out altogether enabling the artist to focus on the character and animation of the facial features. Andrew's first ever visit to an art gallery was when he was seventeen years old and he had seen a poster promoting the Garman Ryan Collection which was then housed in Walsall Museum & Art Gallery on Lichfield St. The poster showed a reproduction of Lucian Freud's *Portrait of Kitty* (1948), his former wife and daughter of Sir Jacob Epstein and Kathleen Garman, who along with her friend Sally Ryan, gifted this remarkable collection to the people of Walsall. Freud had painted the young Kitty in profile and in 2006, after Andrew had visited the now elderly Kitty in her Suffolk home, he also created a portrait that clearly alluded to Freud's portrait. Recalling the visit, Andrew remembers seeing works by

Goya and Epstein on the wall and as he and Kitty chatted about Freud, Francis Bacon and John Minton, a cleaner was vacuuming the carpet, a carpenter was mending the door and a "Meals on Wheels" delivery arrived. Andrew took over 400 photographs of Kitty which he used to create a series of portraits. A triptych showing her as animated and thoughtful won the BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery in 2006. It was partly inspired by John Freeman's insightful and probing interview style from the TV programme, *Face to Face* (1959-62). Both the triptych and the profile portrait were subsequently acquired for Walsall's collections.

Andrew's portrait drawings are also created without distinct backgrounds, enabling full focus upon the face. He employs a range of media including pencil, charcoal, ink, graphite and etching tools to create highly detailed representations of his sitters. He resists associations with photography by adopting creative strategies such as combining highly detailed faces with a much looser approach for the rendering of the clothing. He has also adopted a swiftly painted border created with a Japanese brush and ink to frame the portrait.

Andrew does not paint or draw from life. Instead, he takes hundreds of photographs of his sitters whilst getting to know them better. He

then uses these within his studio to develop the composition and to complete the work. Photography has always been central to his practice yet, until now, it has served only for the crucial preparatory stages and for documentation. (His documentation is extremely thorough and includes stage by stage progress of key works). For this exhibition, Andrew is presenting a series of photographs entitled *Doppelgangers* (2016-18). This body of work emerged after making papier mâché masks with his daughter Scarlett. Andrew created his own series of crude masks for friends and family using collaged representations of their own faces. These are then worn by the sitters (including the artist himself) who pose for increasingly complex scenarios. Andrew enjoys the play between two and three dimensions and the strange irony of masking the subject's identity with their own identity. The resulting images are at once humorous, sinister and surreal.

Further experimental works include *Chrysalis* (2017) and related works in which the human body becomes fragmented. Ray, the sitter for these works, told Andrew that his full body tattoo had been instigated by the death of his parents and that tattooing had become a coping strategy for him. The idea for this pose was to suggest a kind of metamorphosis in the transformation of the body from chrysalis to butterfly, from

emotional turmoil to a position of strength. The pose was also inspired by Van Gogh's *Sorrow* from Walsall's Garman Ryan Collection.

For the first time, Andrew has also experimented with landscape painting which he refers to as "portraits of scenes". *Can you promise never to repeat what I'm about to tell you...?* (2017) depicts a boat and a rundown cabin set against a stormy sky. Painted in sepia tones, it alludes to 19th century photography or the enigmatic scenes of painter Edward Hopper. Its absence of activity and evocative title suggest an allusive and mysterious narrative.

This exhibition represents an ongoing journey for the artist, where he continues to be driven by an interest in the potential of portraiture to express his respect for friends, family and those he is drawn to, and to explore enduring themes of the cycle of life, the passing of time and the power and persistence of memory. We are delighted to be able to present this exhibition to reflect on what the artist has achieved over the course of his career but also to anticipate where this journey may take us to next.

Deborah Robinson

Head of Exhibitions

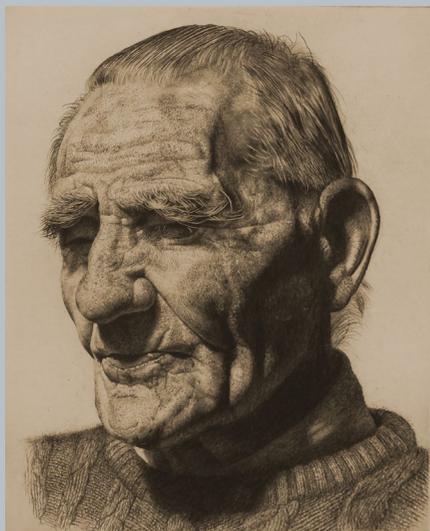
(with assistance from Andrew Tift)

Publication

A fully illustrated publication will accompany the exhibition with an essay by Charlotte Mullins. It is available for £20 from the Gallery Shop.

Limited edition print

A limited edition print by the artist has been produced to accompany the exhibition and is also available in the Gallery Shop.



Andrew Tift, *Inner Peace*, 2018, polymer etching, 42 x 36.2 cm (unframed). Edition of 50

Special Exhibition Price £150

In Conversation

Thursday 26 July, 6.30 – 8pm, £3
Join the artist for a talk about his work.
Please book at Reception
or call 01922 654400.

Adult Workshop

Drawing Masterclass with Andrew Tift

Saturday 14 July, 10am-4pm

Join Andrew Tift for a one day workshop exploring his method, materials and practice, followed by an introduction to self portrait pencil drawing. Further details about this workshop can be found on our website.

All materials provided. No previous experience required. Lunch not included. £35/ £30 concessions, students, unwaged, 60+ (per session). Places are limited and must be booked and paid for in advance on 01922 654400.



Please do share your thoughts about the exhibition on social media using the hashtags
#andrewtift **#immortalise**
#newartgallerywalsall

The New Art Gallery Walsall
Gallery Square Walsall WS2 8LG

01922 654400
thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk



Walsall Council



Supported by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**