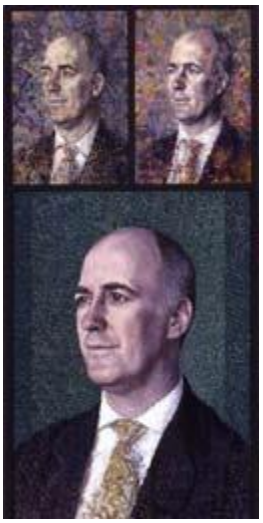
It's nothing like me!

As he left the National Portrait Gallery, Charles Saumarez Smith agreed to sit for his portrait - and decided to let a film-maker record the painter in action. Little did the three men know what they were letting themselves in for ...



The perfect mandarin: Tom Phillips's portrait of National Gallery director Charles Saumarez Smith

The sitter: Charles Saumarez Smith
I approach the screening of Bruno Wollheim's documentary about my portrait by Tom Phillips with a certain amount of anxiety. This is partly because of the recent tradition of fly-on-the-wall documentaries, beginning with Molly Dineen's admirable programmes about the Zoo, which are almost invariably unflattering to their subjects, and partly because the period of my life which the film covers - the 10 months from when I took up the post of director of the National Gallery in July 2002 - already seems long ago. In the first half of the film, there is a sequence of me talking about my hopes, attitudes and expectations of the portrait as the underground train goes in and out of tunnels on the East London line that is like a Hitchcockian dream. It feels as if it was in the 1940s, particularly as I am shot shortly afterwards walking behind Gilbert and George.

However, the aspiration remains as it was when the three of us first embarked on the film: to document and record the ostensibly simple process of painting a portrait. When I was director of the National Portrait Gallery, I was approached routinely by film-makers wanting to document one of the portraits that were commissioned by the board of trustees on the gallery's behalf each year. Either I would not allow it - the process was already sufficiently complicated without the intrusion of a third party - or the sitter would not allow it, recognising that it might spoil the delicate relationship between artist and sitter.

But when it came to the commissioning of my own portrait as a leaving present, it felt churlish not to allow Bruno to record it. It provided an opportunity to record the full process, from first sitting through to finished result, with all the moments of frustration and tedium in between.

Bruno has done exactly what he set out to do: to record the gentle psychodrama of two individuals spending a long period of time together with an extremely unclear set of expectations as to what sort of image would result. The film includes the discussion about the appropriate size of portrait, the extent to which I was permitted to express views on its progress (to begin with I was, but settled into taking it as it was), the way in which Tom used an initial drawing to tease out some of the difficulties inherent in representing my face (this was the bit I didn't like), my gradual recognition that it was better to accommodate myself to the process without trying to interfere, the passing of the seasons as winter drew in, and the extent to which one's personality is, or is not, laid bare through the process of depiction. Unfortunately, the editing of the film has meant that it necessarily concentrates on the few moments of unconscious comedy at the expense of the endless hours sitting on a hard chair looking out

of the window. But it remains true to some elements of the process, particularly the reciprocal challenge inherent in any portraiture and the complexities of the relationship between artist and sitter.

Bruno thinks that the finished portrait is a subtly ironic, slightly teasing modern take on the tradition of the official portrait and that I am made to look deliberately like a bank manager. I am not so critical of the portrait, because I like the quality of mild idealisation, its glacial and cerebral quality, as of the perfect mandarin. It seems to me to be more about memory than likeness. But this is perfectly appropriate for a portrait painted for the National Portrait Gallery.

Maybe it is true that, because we were being filmed, we were both unduly reticent, slightly too aware of the presence of the cameraman. Maybe, in the end, too much of the life of the portrait has gone into the film.

The painter: Tom Phillips

Portraiture is a risky business. Getting it right is a triumph over the uncertainties and anxieties of artist and sitter. Catching a likeness is not a problem, but any transcendence of mere likeness calls for a close collaboration where fears and vanities give way to patience and trust. To invite a third party to portray the portraying is to add another risk to a fragile situation; to be victims not so much of a fly on the wall but a fly in the ointment.

Charles Saumarez Smith and I should be hardened cases, one of us a practitioner for 40 years and the other the nation's most recent portrait tsar. Yet on my side nerves were heightened by the fact that Charles, as the new director of the National Gallery, was surrounded by portraits at the Titian/Velasquez/ Holbein level, and that I, as a trustee of the National Portrait Gallery, had to make a picture of their hugely admired ex-director to set before my colleagues on the board.

Charles was a very dedicated sitter, and both of us were reassured to learn that our observer was to be Bruno Wollheim, friend of artists and a person famously sensitive to their work. Our two-hour Friday sessions were passed in a mood of great geniality. But my problem was with what was happening on the easel, as false start succeeded false start. This is not unusual, but hardly what one wants on film. Charles's only request had been that this should not be a large painting; he knew from experience that a smaller picture has a better chance of remaining on view. My own instinct was to reflect that Charles is tall and thin by making a work that, even though it only showed head and shoulders, was narrow and vertical. What I seemed to end up doing, for I had no plan of action, was a series of miniatures whose own size perhaps reflected my preoccupation of the time - an exhibition of postcard portraits called We Are the People, which I was organising at the NPG itself.

After making about 10 of these, I started a larger panel in the same format, adding the small panels to top and bottom, thereby making an object that, shown on TV, would be only a thin vertical stripe in the middle of the screen. Bruno was very philosophical about this, but I was always aware that I had somehow subverted, if not sabotaged, his film. He was already faced with problems of poor light and cramped conditions in the studio. Had I unconsciously revenged myself on the intrusion by making life as difficult as possible?

Quantum theory has always been a bit beyond me but I do now understand about observation itself being a factor in the behaviour of particles, though in this case the particles also occasioned the state of the observer. Like the physicist, I can never know what the event would have been like unobserved, or what result was thwarted (or mercifully avoided) in the process.

The film-maker: Bruno Wollheim

"Two people in a room, one of whom is trying to be painted by the other." That's how Tom Phillips, early on in the filming, described his portrait painting. Since I was being allowed in, there were now three and sometimes four of us in Tom's cluttered first-floor room. An onlooker with a camera undoubtedly would change things, probably making it more of a performance, altering the peculiar intimacy of artist with sitter.

My colleague Christopher Swayne and I had been making films on contemporary portraits seen from the artist's and the sitter's point of view, but up to now, always after the fact. This official commission was a chance to witness the push and pull of the collaborative process over time, the nexus where the portrait is supposed to happen.

The portrait has a special place in painting because it involves not just the artist's skill and imagination, but the presence of someone else, and is judged, at least in part, on those terms. It is also a form of judgment of the sitter by the artist. Tom talked about good and bad sitters - about not just sitting still but offering something, perhaps the "trying to be painted".

Charles was never at ease while sitting, even though he had commissioned many public portraits. Perhaps his new high-profile job had made him more guarded. Tom, as the artist trustee, had been chosen for Charles, and perhaps the prickle of museum politics remained between them.

Tom Phillips is a redoubtable figure: a celebrated artist, fiercely competitive table tennis player and polymath (writer, composer, art historian, curator and collector). It was plain from the beginning that Tom enjoyed the situation of the portrait and the command that it brings. For all the bonhomie and joking that carried on through the sittings, a gentle one-upmanship bubbled away between the erudite artist and the scholar-mandarin. In any event, a psychological power game had somehow come into play.

Tom began with a dazzling repertoire of treatments and styles - of Charles's head and shoulders - first in pencil, then in oils on small postcard-size panels, all from life. During the initial four sessions of drawing, on the same piece of paper, tensions began to surface. Charles felt his depiction to be increasingly unflattering and didn't like Tom's exaggeration of his nose, while Tom felt Charles was trying to control the process.

As the weeks, months and seasons passed, Charles seemed to be more accepting, if rather disengaged, as if the 21 two-hour sittings had by attrition weakened his resistance. Tom had started confidently, but each new session he produced yet another small head that presented only a new problem. The possibility of failure started to haunt the project. In the end Tom appeared to produce the portrait as if by magic. I felt both relief and loss that this strange routine of ours was over.

The editing of over 50 hours of material was the archaeology, tracing the breakdown in trust and communication back to some of the early moments. I had been a privileged witness to an event that had taken a surreally long time to complete and had brought a deal of anxiety. Documentaries are rare when you can't predict the outcome and you become the slave to events over which you have no control. In a strange way, Charles and I had found ourselves in a similar situation.

I still don't know how artist and sitter feel about the finished portrait. I suspect they feel it failed: Tom wanting something more radical; Charles wanting to look less stiff and dry. I think the painting has a beauty. I like its almost Renaissance panelled structure and gem-hard surface. Perhaps there was a failure in the coupling, perhaps we were an awkward triangle. Certainly portraiture is difficult enough at the best of times. Time will make its own judgment on this strange corner of the honours system. Sargent famously said a portrait is a painting with a little something wrong about the mouth. But then portraiture may be interesting because it is about a form of very human failure.

The Art Show: Portrait is screened on Channel 4 on Friday.

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