When is a portrait not a portrait?

Director Charles Saumarez Smith explains why the National Portrait Gallery's newest exhibit consists of DNA inside a picture frame

LAST Christmas I bought myself two books on contemporary art in order to keep myself up-to-date with what was happening in those parts of the art world that I rarely reach. One was a new edition of a book by Louisa Buck, who writes about the wilder shores of contemporary art practice. Called Moving Targets: A User's Guide to British Art, it is a kind of Good Food Guide to Shoreditch. I had already been mildly irritated by the first edition when I found that the National Portrait Gallery was not mentioned. In this updated version I discovered that the listings now included the British Museum, the Natural History Museum, the National Maritime Museum and the Science Museum, but not - still not - the National Portrait Gallery.

Even though the NPG boasts the BP Portrait Award, which awards a prize of £25,000 to a young painter; the John Kobal Award, which showcases the best of contemporary photographic practice; and a collection that includes the works of Andy Warhol, Gilbert and George, Paula Rego and David Mach, none of these merited even so much as a footnote in a guide to contemporary art.

The other book was called Art London and was a listing of 80 gallery spaces in London. Was the National Portrait Gallery included ? It wasn't.

The experience of reading these two books caused me a slight sense of unease. The National Portrait Gallery does not pretend to be, and never has been, on the cutting edge of contemporary art practice. Its responsibilities are towards documentation and it is at least as much an institution of public history as of contemporary art. But, just as it has a duty to show a broad range of historical individuals in terms of who it represents on its walls, so it is expected - I think, rightly - to show an equivalently broad range of work by contemporary artists.

As a result of this experience and of recognising that many of the artists, who were, until recently, regarded as part of the avant-garde, are now mainstream, the NPG has, over the last year, collected a small body of work that is intended to represent the art of the last decade. This includes the purchases of a self-portrait of Tracey Emin inside her beach hut, and portraits of Blur by Julian Opie. But the first to be commissioned (jointly with the Wellcome Trust) is a portrait of geneticist Sir John Sulston by Marc Quinn, which went on public display yesterday.

We first met representatives of the Wellcome Trust to consider possible sitters. Sir John Sulston was at the top of everybody's list, owing to the importance of his research on the human genome.Then the question was who should undertake the commission. The Wellcome Trust was sympathetic to our desire to consider a new generation of artists. We were aware of the fact that Quinn had well-developed interests in science (his father is a physicist), as well as in the human body. We were, of course, also aware that Self, a sculpture that consisted of a cast of the artist's head made out of frozen blood, was one of the iconic artefacts of the New British Art movement, first exhibited in 1991 and a key work at the Royal Academy's 1997 Sensation show.

I hope that Sir John Sulston will not mind being reminded of the fact that he was initially wary of the suggestion of Marc Quinn as the artist for his portrait. This was partly because he is profoundly conscious of the extent to which contemporary science is essentially collaborative and that his discoveries are the result of large numbers of people working together at the Wellcome Trust Sanger

Centre outside Cambridge. He was uncomfortable with the proposition that he alone was to be commemorated.

And he needed a bit of persuasion that Quinn was the right person to undertake the commission. We arranged for Sulston and the artist to meet over dinner and they talked animatedly into the night. Even then, Sulston remained unsure.

Quinn himself was determined that the work should be abstract. I explained that the National Portrait Gallery depends for its existence on the idea that it provides recognisable likenesses for future record, although the gallery has on a number of occasions stretched the definition of recognisability, for example, in Stephen Finer's portrait of David Bowie and Patrick Heron's portrait of AS Byatt. Quinn was adamant. I was insistent that, whatever work he produced, it should, at least, be accompanied by a photographic record of Sulston. Quinn, though reluctant, agreed.

The final result, A Genomic Portrait: Sir John Sulston, was delivered to the gallery just before the July meeting of the Board of Trustees. It is determinedly non-representational, consisting of a small sample of Sulston's DNA, but framed in order to make it signify as a work of art. It is to be exhibited initially with a great deal of information about the development of the Human Genome Project and the promised accompanying photograph. But the Trustees took the view that the work could stand on its own, without the photograph, as a particularly appropriate form of commemorative record.

Just as Dennis Gabor, the inventor of the hologram, is commemorated by a hologram, so Sulston, who has been responsible for the greatest recent developments in the understanding of the fundamental constitution of the human body, is commemorated by fragments of his own genetic code.

The Telegraph 19 Sep 2001