

The Pennant Interview with Artist Louise Pragnell, Portrait Painter, at her Studio 28th January 2015

Good morning Louise, it is very kind of you to make time for Pennant readers, and to let us into the studio and mind of a gifted artist. Did you always want to be an artist? Do you remember your first picture from which you stood back and asked others, “Wow! Would you like to admire it?”

John, thank you very much for coming, that’s a very flattering introduction: I probably always did really want to be an artist, although as I got close to adulthood I probably got more anxious about the idea when I realised that

painting the teapot and getting lost in the reflections from it, and my reflections in it. Everyone else had gone home and I was there and thinking ‘Yes, that looks really good like a shiny teapot, I’m really good at this’. It was that first feeling, exciting.

You said you parents were dubious, when did they first say “Wow Louisa”?

They were always complimentary about my work and said I’d got talent: it was my father, and I completely understand his concerns, he didn’t want me to

always doing cartoons – caricatures of people (which is actually more relevant to my career in portraiture than teapots!). She reminded me that when I was ten I did a whole series of caricatures (less than flattering) of my mother in different moods and outfits etc. For example; ‘getting ready to go out with rollers in’ and ‘just woke up’ and ‘Angry. Just got out of the bath but there’s no towel’... The teapot moment I described just now was when I realised I could actually paint with oils and do ‘realism’.



Louise at work

money was a useful thing to have in life, and it is very difficult for a lot of artists to make a living. Both my parents were fairly dubious, but that aside, I always loved it, even if I wasn’t painting or drawing, just making things, creating things, it wasn’t until I was a teenager that I got singled out as having the potential to pursue it. You ask about the first picture that I stood back from. I didn’t ask other people to admire it but it was for GCSEs, I was about 15, it was one of those school still lifes, a brown teapot and some a horrible plant, and an orange or something. I remember

be always dependent on someone or get lost down the Bohemian route: I totally understand that now, especially with two children, I had some serious convincing to do that I still needed to be a student in my mid twenties and there was a bit of reservation about the idea, and it was when I came back from Florence after six months and I showed my father my work and he said “Yup” - he’s not one for [over exuberance].

In terms of being an artistic child – more of a ‘light bulb’ moment was that my mother reminded me, I was

I’m bowled over by the bit in your biography that reads completed her classical training in Florence. How long did you spend, a year in Italy? How did it work, in Italian and how did you know when it was ‘complete’?

It was just over a year, I’d come from Edinburgh College of Art. I’d studied fine art, these days they don’t teach drawing, they won’t teach you how to paint somebody sitting in front of you, they’re very worried about

suppressing individual expression, and after five years I was desperate to get someone to tell me about proportions and how to begin a project. I’m not saying you absolutely have to be trained to be a successful artist, of course you don’t, and to hear some rules ‘that’s right, this is wrong’, was good. I did an introductory course at the Florence Academy which was a couple of months and they teach the sight-size method that was used for teaching classical realism, a technique that was used by the likes of Sargent, Reynolds, Van Dyck, and Velasquez. Completed? A bit

misleading, well, I gave myself a time limit, I was 24 or 25, I didn't have the funds for more and you can get stuck in a place like Florence, and I was feeling I was studying for ever, there's a set of rules that you can learn which are a great help because once you have them you're not trying to reinvent.

Did you have gifted tutors?

Very much so, exciting to be taught by someone showing you their tangible skills. Which I didn't have in Edinburgh with everyone doing installations, ideas and concepts. In Florence the tutors were all very naturally talented; very strictly, probably too strict, not to use blue and the like – the classical palette is very limited, Rembrandt had a very limited palette, very few colours, but it's about mixing them together. I still have a fairly limited palette but I have introduced blue!

What is a portrait? I sense that it's much more than a picture.

It's capturing the essence of someone, sounds pretentious; striving to do the impossible, to capture the truth of someone; it's a very long philosophical debate; it's for loved ones, rarely the sitter; I have more in mind how the subject is seen by others, those close to them, those who work for them; how someone sits, how they hold themselves, their mannerisms, all these little indicators towards their personality; it's about the right physical proportions, the physical likeness.

Now you are a portraitist at the very top level of British society. How do you approach a subject, what do you start with? Do you tell them to dress in a particular way? Photos, sketches?

I've quite often never met the person before, so I have a getting-to-know-them meeting, maybe have lunch with them, then do a sitting where people



are often very self conscious, it's a strange thing to arrive somewhere and have someone stare at you, they feel embarrassed, or feel that having a portrait painted is quite pompous. To start with I try to get an idea of them before I put pen to paper; sometimes I might pretend to be sketching, or I'll actually do a bit of sketching, they'll sit here and I'll sit behind my easel, more often I go to them, get them comfy, less

aware of sitting: people are very aware of themselves and stiff. I advise them on dress and try to keep clothes as simple as possible unless it's a formal military portrait, in which case, what they're wearing is very important, so as not to distract from the face. I have to tread very carefully because I don't want to impose myself too much on people because I'd like them to be themselves.

I imagine a sitting is quite a difficult thing to get right, how do you do it with children, are they easier or do they have trouble sitting still? You capture so much life in your children's portraits and I have seen that you have painted your own daughters. Were they excited?

Children are a completely different process, usually done at home, the TV sometimes has to get involved, but I have less sittings. Two sittings, sometimes one for a charcoal drawing, as opposed to four or five for say, Nick Houghton, but with an adult, you really need to get conversation going, get to know them, but children, they speak for themselves. I'm very limited as to what I can do with them sitting in front of me so you have to work from photos. With adults a lot of it is from life but with children more from photos as they don't sit still. And back to what is a portrait, it's proportions that count, what are the right portions, (L looked hard at JMB's nose here), proportions across the face, our nose, our ears and eyes, it's that that's got to be right.





of my own since 2012. You have to have something unusual for a competition and that needs work on its own rather than a usual commission. It's got to have narrative.

Tricky question. How much would it cost for my 'Grandnipper' Alexander to be painted? (We danced around this question and it looked like a picture or a new car to me).

What else would you like to tell our readers?

Portraiture is a very long standing tradition in England, people abroad wonder how you make career out of it, other countries don't have the same, it's unique to this country. It's a thriving market, two years waiting list shows a huge demand. I've been lucky in my choice of subject it's a huge market. In landscape the market is pretty saturated, supply exceeds demand. The British, the English are great supporters of the arts and appreciate creativity, especially in London. The portrait is so much more than a photo, photos only capture a glimpse, 85%, not the 99% that I try to capture. Oils are durable, people pass them on down the generations, person to person.

Thank you so much Louise for letting us into your world. Before we go to lunch, may I offer you this elegant Forces Pension Society porcelain mug, either for tea, or coffee or even brushes? Thank you for giving us your time.

Who would you like to paint, who are you hoping will ring up and enquire or is that a secret? But if it's a secret are there ambitions which revolve around particular personalities? The Queen? The PM's wife, Sam?

The Queen, of course, Samantha Cameron? Yes, probably. Prince Harry would be a good one; I might be pursuing something more in the theatre, theatrical people, I did a painting for the BP Award in the National Gallery which was this man in drag, in a Jean Paul Gautier dress. Vivien Westwood I would love to paint, she's a bit of an icon for me and pretty dramatic.

And is the life of portraitist a calling, a career? What next, what happens when you get to the pinnacle, if that isn't where you are now?

Calling? Portraiture is generally agreed to be the most difficult medium. Anyone or everyone can be a judge and have a view and that makes it difficult. Landscape or abstract is much more subjective.

And where to from here?

I love, I really enjoy meeting people and the better I get the more interesting people I paint, so it's good to keep going with bigger names in my portfolio, prizes help, but I have two year waiting list. I started out with panic that I wouldn't have enough work, but now I've had no time to do anything

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