Nicolas de Largillière
(1656-1746)Marie Thérèse Blonel
d'Harcourt, date
unknown

Largillière was French but seemed to have some of the qualities that I enjoyed in the art that was being made in Britain. It turns out he studied in England and worked in the studio of Peter Lely for a while. The woman's pose and accessories are very suggestive in a voluptuous way. Despite her solidity she seems to flow through the painting with the foliage and sky. The frame is pretty impressive too.

ARTIST AND COLLECTOR

Julian Opie is one of Britain's most successful artists and also an avid art collector. He explores the link and resonances between his work and those in his collection as they are brought together in a touring exhibition

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Only fairly recently did I notice that it was possible to buy art I admired. I collect works mainly because I really like them, but also when they seem to offer me a clue as to how to go about making my own work, or simply when I see a reflection of my current interests. I move from one idea to another quite instinctively without a destination or overall narrative in mind, I follow that which sparks my interest. I make whatever seems suddenly possible with the tools I have to hand, tools of understanding as much as techniques of making. Sometimes I see possibilities in the world around me and sometimes I see them already processed in other art. Art, in museums and galleries, in books and on the internet, is itself part of the surrounding world, part of nature.

Like most people I don't look at any one artwork for very long. I move at a fair pace through exhibitions, art fairs and collections. If I like a show, I usually reverse and look at everything

again. Living with a work of art is the same, only endlessly repeated. Each time I notice the work, I am again completely engaged and excited by it. As it is not a process, like a film or book or piece of music, I don't become bored of looking at it. It is possible to own a film, a book or piece of music without buying or keeping it, simply by consuming it. Art seems different to me. Owning it allows repeated viewing.

When I see something I can draw, I feel a connection and a strong desire to use it and to have it. In a way I feel it is mine already, because I can see and value it. This extends to works of art. As soon as I see a work that I feel I understand, that I can engage with, that is in some sense beautiful, I want to obtain it and put it somewhere so I can look at it repeatedly to further engage and understand. Now, after a few years of collecting other artists' works, I know some of the areas and people I am most interested in. Like the making of art

itself, collecting reminds me of prospecting. Some perceived sparkle makes you start to dig and then a seam can be followed. Seeing how incredibly alive some of the Fayum portraits from Roman-period Egypt are has drawn me into that particular period of portraiture and then further back into older Egyptian periods.

I first noticed people as possible things to draw when standing at railway stations and observing rows of people on the opposite platform. Seeing them flattened out and from a distance, I could

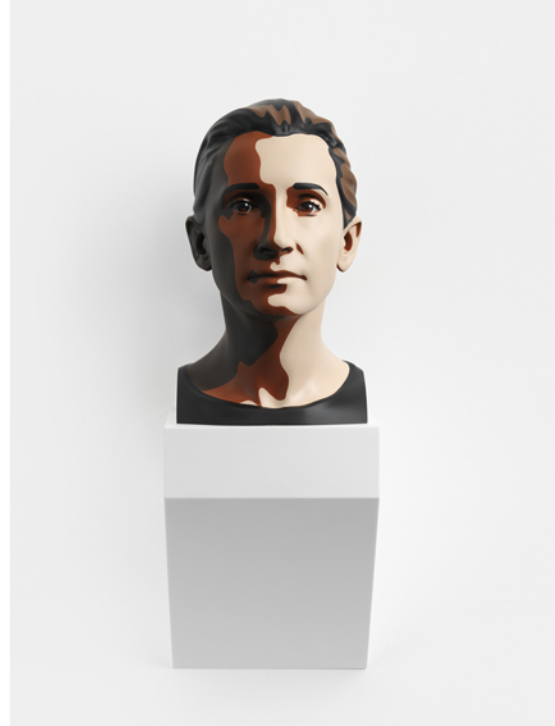


Julian Opie
Aniela bathing 4, 2013
A song is about neither words nor music but a perfect relationship between the two, the meaning lying somewhere in between and beyond. Subject matter and materials in a painting have a similar relationship

KRAKOW GALLERY



Julian Opie, *Julian with T-shirt.*, 2005. LCD screens are now so flat and high resolution that they are quite similar to paintings or prints. Like the portrait in the haunted house that moves its eyes, there is a humour to movement when it's unexpected



Julian Opie, *Delphine 2.*, 2012. When I am working on the 3D heads I look at a late Egyptian plaster head I own that retained its painted surface, and I imagine someone 2,000 years ago picking up a paintbrush and knowing what he was doing.

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imagine a way of drawing them. I see echoes of this flattening out of people into lists or friezes in ancient Assyrian stone panels and Egyptian tomb paintings. Roman and Greek carved and painted scenes also use this trick. Many individual figures seen flat-on create a pattern, a movement and a kind of story. A frieze highlights the sameness of people but also their differences. An image becomes a process, even a place, as you move yourself around the same space that the figures inhabit.

A chance encounter with (and purchase of) a 'School of Godfrey Kneller' portrait opened up the whole of 17th- and 18th- century portraiture for me. The painting caught my eye due to its powerful purposefulness and sense of being an object, as much as the fact that it was an oval portrait and I was making them myself at the time. The painting was pretty cheap and obscure. When I started to investigate where it had come from, however, I began discovering a

world of art parallel to, but quite separate from, the contemporary art world. I have always loved wandering around museums and knew the big names of the period. In a loose way I was aware of Joshua Reynolds and Anthony van Dyck and had enjoyed their paintings. Then I started looking at Godfrey Kneller and Peter Lely, Cornelius Johnson and Thomas Hudson. The list of artists kept growing as I found one who taught another or competed with another. Each of these artists were distinctive and yet had a lot in common. As the decades of the 17th and 18th centuries rolled by, different artists and styles appeared. I began to understand the period in a way I had never done before. Dates fell into place, along with regents, wars, disasters, inventions and the role of artists working in nearby countries. Not just the outstanding geniuses like Peter Paul Rubens and Diego Velázquez, but also numerous brilliant, exciting artists I had never heard of, describing a whole world,

evoking a whole scene.

My portraits are not really paintings, although they sometimes look like them--they mimic paintings. Perhaps they are sculptures of, or models of paintings, or stand-ins. I hope they have a powerful connection to reality, an ability to evoke it. We know the visual world largely through observation. A work of art is an object that observes that process, that intercedes and bridges worlds and yet must exist within the reality it discusses.

I have found it hard to resist obtaining every artwork that seemed to vibrate with a sense of connection and presence, jumping from one artist to the next, moving from the early 17th to the late 18th century. Compared to daily needs some of these things are rather expensive, but seen as a process of swapping my artwork for someone else's, it makes more sense.

Old Masters take you to very different venues than contemporary art.

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Cornelis Johnson
(1593-1661)
Portrait of an Unknown
Gentleman, 1631
Johnson is particularly
known for placing the
head close to the centre
of the canvas, lower
than most artists would.
This has a very odd and
endearing effect.
The English paintings
have a modern sense of
realism, but at the
same time hang on to
the formal, decorative
Elizabethan style.

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art from 2,000 years ago, however, fill me with awe and excitement. A sense of time travel is involved. With these works I felt I could get some real if dim sense of a completely other world for the first time--the ancient world, the beginning of civilisation. I don't know what our period is, but it is not the beginning. I bought a small, crouching marble Aphrodite and set about learning more about the whole period, moving from Roman statuary and portraiture to Tanagra Greek figurines and on to all things Egyptian. It is actually very hard to find objects from this far-off time and quite rightly nearly all of the great pieces are in museums. Peter Lely owned a full-scale version of the little Aphrodite I have, the Lely Venus in the British Museum; he also owned over 20 Van Dyck paintings (but it's not a competition).

Looking at other artists' work gives me clues in terms of materials, composition, subject matter, colour--everything really. But it also reflects what my interests are, making me feel connected, giving me confidence. When I am working on the 3D heads that require hand-painting, I feel some nervousness as to my abilities. I look at a late Egyptian plaster head I own that has retained its painted surface, and I imagine someone 2,000 years ago picking up a paintbrush and knowing what he was doing. Artists now don't really know what they are doing and have to invent or find this sense of obviousness and purpose for

Masstricht art fair instead of Basel, Philip Mould gallery instead of White Cube, the National Portrait Gallery instead of the Hayward. I go to both, of course, and I buy or swap contemporary work too, but I must admit the past few years I often feel more at home in the former. When discussing frightening medieval medical practices, one of my children said that people used to be so stupid, and I often come across bemusement from fellow art-worlders as to why I would be interested in this old stuff. The 'old stuff' is often afforded great admiration but little relevance. It is tempting to see the present as special, but it is also exciting to realise that the past was once today. To me, the art of different periods

brings those worlds parallel.

Looking for hard-to-find Old Master paintings I tried the art fair in Maastricht. The problem is that there is a limited supply. Contemporary art fairs are often places where you can quickly and conveniently find a lot of new things of varying interest. With Old Masters the galleries tend to show their most expensive and well-known works, with few discoveries or surprises. This was true until I turned a corner and went down the 'ancient art' section. Three hundred years ago the world was very different, but as a Londoner I don't feel so very far from John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe, who are both buried in Bunhill Fields just next to my studio. Worlds of

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Julian Opie, *At Home with Maria 4.*, 2011
The focus in a painting is naturally the face
and the eyes. By eliminating these, the viewer
is free to take in the pose and costume, to read
the space that is suggested, to see the whole as
a sign, an invention and yet to feel, I hope, the
reality of the image.

themselves.

I don't only refer to Old Masters in
these senses, it works the other way
around. Making art is in part a
conversation with people about whom
you can make certain assumptions of
sameness. I assume my viewers are
living in the same world as I am, that
their picture of themselves and their
surroundings is built of much the same
material as mine. What art looks like,
what we think we are going to see in
galleries and museums, what images we
have already seen, has great bearing on
how we see new art. What we see is
structured and defined by what we know,
and a lot of that is to do with art from the
past. If I hang an image of a face on a
wall in a white room, with spotlights and
a ticket collector outside, I am making a
lot of assumptions and connections
before we even start to look at the actual
qualities of the work. I have always
aimed to make my work with all that in
mind, as part of its meaning and premise.
If I make something that looks a bit like
an 18th-century painting or reminds one
of an information screen in an airport, it
is because I mean it to. This is a juggling
act and requires great skill and practice.
The ancient Egyptians could paint that
stark black eyebrow onto the white face
with casual purpose, so I should feel able

to do the same.

I don't have enough walls to hang all
the things I have bought. Sometimes I
buy something and don't hang it for ages.
This does not seem to matter; after the
heated frenzy of having found and caught
the work there follows a sense of calm. I
look forward to having it on view with
anticipation, a treat to look forward to. I
was dubious about making this
exhibition, there are some dangers in
comparing your work to work you
admire, especially from the past where a
sense of judgement and quality control
has settled. Group shows are often a
refreshing way to see your own work,
although it can pull you up short. In this
case, however, everyone is in the same
boat of the present day.

I argued earlier that it is all the same,
old or new, but the old has become part
of the world, part of us, we are made of
it; the new has to go through that process
for better or worse. That said, I have
found it surprisingly exciting to put
together this show. I have used much the
same methods to compose this exhibition
as any other, utilising my own available,
stored works as a resource, as well as the
walls of my home and studio. I have
drawn it out on a plan and tried to make
sense and variation and connection within
the possibilities of the architecture and



Jean-Marc Nattier (1685-1766) *Portrait of a Lady*
The dashing clothes and posture do more than
the rather blank features to evoke the sitter's
character and presence. To me, Nattier's pictures
are perfect and an epitome of a certain, doomed
moment

context. What is different is to do it with
other people's work and to treat my own
work as an historical resource, rather
than show the latest things I have made,
as I usually do.

'Julian Opie Collected Works', The
Holburne Museum, Bath, 22 May - 14
September. www.holburne.org; Bowes
Museum, Durham, 4 October 2014 -
January 2015.
www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk

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