



Portrait of an artist scaling the heights

Over the centuries, many of history's most ambitious and talented painters have attached themselves to royal or Papal courts where they've turned out umpteen portraits of their powerful patrons. Look at Goya and Velasquez whose genius transformed the Prado into a family album for the Bourbons. Look at Holbein who, having painted Henry VIII, was kept flat to the easel recording his succession of wives. And look at our own beloved Clifton Pugh who, having exhausted our *Who's Who*, now hotly pursues a variety of world leaders. He's already done Golda Meir, is scheduled to paint Prince Philip and has high hopes for Chou en Lai. He's come a long way, our Cliff, since his portraits of crows and wombats.

There are those cynics who see Cliff's career as resembling that of a big-game hunter. As the late Wocka Grummet grumbled: 'Instead of stuffing lions and moose for his study, he paints dukes, archbishops and Prime Ministers.' But is this entirely fair? Aren't there a number of unlikely explanations?

For example: whenever he was painting a saint, El Greco would borrow a ratbag from the Toledo lunatic asylum to use as a model. Very pragmatic that. Or is it eclectic? Either way, El Greco had the good sense to realise that saints and lunatics are very closely related, and that lunatics make wonderfully intense subjects. Well, in my experience, a high percentage of politicians and public figures are also mad as cut snakes (paranoia and delusions of grandeur being among the more common symptoms) and are, therefore, equally attractive to the artist's eye.

And there's another possibility. It's not necessarily that Pugh finds the faces of the ordinary uninspiring. He may be concentrating on the mighty out of concern and kindness for his less-established colleagues. For it leaves them free to practise on the working class. Because, with nonentities who's to know if the likenesses are rotten? Then, as they grow in both artistic and social schools, such artists can graduate to the social pages, to the captains and the kings. So it's not fair to brand Clifton as a social climber. He's more of a mountain climber who's daubed his quota of human molehills and is now ready to scale the peaks of celebrity. I mean, you don't expect an Edmund Hillary to go around climbing piles of gravel and sticking flags on humus heaps.

Another thing in Cliff's defence. He comes from a long line of portrait painters who specialised in the mighty. There was Lorenzo del Pugh who painted the Medicis, Anthony van Pugh who painted Charles I of England and Fritz Von Pugh who specialised in kaisers. And we mustn't forget the portraits of Flemish aristocracy by Wilhelm Poo the Youn-

er. For all his obsession with the powerful, it's interesting that Clifton isn't one of your swinging painters. He has a distinct Left-wing bias. It's true that he's painted Archbishop Mannix and the odd Governor-General. But his real preference is for the prominent Labor politician. Take his portrait of Gough for the cover of *Time*, his daub of Don Dunstan for the lobby of the Adelaide Art Gallery. And then there were his paintings of Tom Uren and other prominent front benchers. He's become the Frans Hals of the ACTU, the Rembrandt of the Trades Hall.

But I'm fascinated to know what happens when the subject of one of Clifton's political portraits comes a gutser in his career. Is the portrait of Cairns turned to the wall? Or does Clifton re-use the canvas for a portrait of his successor, just as Madam Tussaud's melts down the heads of world leaders when they no longer figure, so that the wax can be recycled?

So great has been his success, that a Pugh portrait is now considered the greatest honour available to anyone in public life, preferable to having one's head on a coin or postage stamp. 'Any dill can feel the Queen's Wilkinson on his shoulder,' said an emotional Whitlam at the unveiling of his portrait in King's Hall, 'but only the chosen few have been touched by Clifton's brush.'

However Pugh's very success has caused severe personal and political problems, particularly for those he's rejected as subjects. Take the recent suicide of Amy Vanderbilt. It's believed that she threw herself from her Park Avenue apartment when she learnt that Pugh had given her the thumbs down. Meanwhile Henry Kissinger tells me that Pugh is partly to blame for the continuing crisis in the Middle East. Apparently the Arabs are furious that Pugh painted Golda Meir while refusing to do Faisal. 'I'm trying to persuade Pugh to have an even-brush policy in the Middle East,' says Kissinger, 'otherwise another war is inevitable.' But at the time of writing Pugh refused to consider the proposal, even

if the Arabs do threaten to cut off his supplies of oil paint.

For Clifton has fatter fish to fry. He is preparing to tackle his masterwork, the first official portrait of the Almighty since Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling. 'But then,' Pugh explains, 'I'm the first artist of Mike's magnitude since the Renaissance.' Apparently it's all being arranged through Harry M Miller. Clifton will incorporate his great portrait in a new ceiling for Jim Mollison's Canberra gallery, a fresco blending biblical and political scenes. The first segment of the epic work would depict the Almighty reaching down to kindle life in the reclining figure of Gough-Adam. In the next scene Margaret-Eve has been led up the garden path by the serpent and hides her nakedness in a clump of tea-tree. 'I'm unsure about the model for the serpent,' says Pugh. 'But it's a toss-up between Phillip Lynch and Bill Hartley.'

Later Gough reappears as the saviour, surrounded by disciples drawn from his fourth Cabinet. 'Tom Uren will be St Peter,' says Pugh, 'he's got a good, honest, fisherman's face.' As for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Pugh proposes using Kep Enderby, Jim McClelland, Lionel Bowen and Moss Cass ('Moss Cass looks very Old Testament,' observes Pugh). Meanwhile Clyde Cameron is anxious to play Judas Iscariot and Don Dunstan has volunteered to be Doubting Thomas. I asked whether the Almighty would be visiting Pugh's studio to pose for this masterwork, this apotheosis. 'No,' said Pugh, 'I'll be working from visions.'

In conclusion, I took the opportunity to ask Pugh how he goes about painting one of his famous sitters. Take, for example, Golda Meir. 'Well,' said a reflective Pugh, puffing on his Petersens, 'I started by giving her a rub-over with a wire brush. Then I filled the cracks with spackle and used a bit of primer . . .'

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