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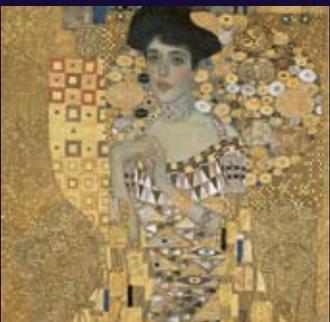
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Tess Barnes

Substantial portraiture

With a subtle technique and a bulging contacts book, portrait painter Tess Barnes' latest project provides a unique snapshot of the 21st century's most inspirational female figures. Words: Martha Alexander

A **S A STUDENT**, Tess Barnes was one of very few painters in her degree show. A contemporary of Damien Hirst, she graduated at a time where the weird and the wonderful were the order of the day. The irony is clear: she stuck to her traditional forte and because of it, became unique.

It is, of course, not simply this choice that sets Barnes aside as an artist. Her style is hugely distinctive – defined by colour, non-conventional backgrounds and a skill for working in a variety of mediums with equal aptitude.

Her forthcoming exhibition – *50 Women of Substance* – at the Mall Galleries is greatly anticipated not least because it features some of the most successful and inspirational women of our time. The likes of Rebekah Wade, Kathy Lette, Stella Rimington and Zandra Rhodes have been captured by Barnes and grouped together to demonstrate what women can – and do – achieve.

“At the beginning I wasn’t a feminist,” says Barnes. “It was just a way to celebrate women in their amazing careers. I admire women so much more now. I hadn’t fully considered how absurd the ongoing inequality that women experience in the workplace is. Equal pay is often not a reality, but you can’t hide away from the issue – it should be confronted.”

A substantial collection

It was after the birth of her first daughter 15 years ago that Barnes first started to think about creating an exhibition of women. Her second daughter was born three years later, and Barnes began to wonder how high-profile women managed to juggle a pressurized career with the strains of motherhood.

“I started with a judge. I was very lucky to meet Nina Lowry because I used to work in a bar opposite the Old Bailey and I met a few of the journalists who introduced me to this lovely woman. Then I came across Katherine Hughes at Oxford University and I thought: ‘I could create an exhibition of women’. I didn’t know how many, but then it sort of snowballed.”

Barnes picked all the women herself, though often on the recommendation of friends or associates. She asserts the importance of the clear distinctions



ABOVE Paralympic athlete Tanni Grey-Thompson, oil on canvas, 81x61 cm

OPPOSITE Tess Barnes paints TV presenter Carol Vordeman in her studio

“I didn’t choose these women because of any celebrity status. It’s about their outstanding contribution to society”

between the notion of success and the cult of celebrity – making the title of the exhibition extremely apt.

“I am not into celebrity. I am interested in people and how they have succeeded. I did not choose these women because of any celebrity status. It’s about their outstanding contribution to society.”

After Lowry, more and more women got involved in what would become a high-profile event, not least because the beneficiary will be the charitable organisation Breast Cancer Haven.

Barnes speaks highly of – and in a genuinely informed way – about each and every one of the women she has painted.

She is full of entertaining anecdotes and notes the differing attitudes towards sitting and the difficulties that can arise.

“Expression is so important to me and my work that I encourage chatting and movement from my sitter. The best sitters are people who forget they are sitting for me. I find there is a barrier around people who pose.” She contorts her face into that of a startled rabbit to illustrate her point.

Art critic and former Barnes sitter Sarah Kent agrees.

“Tess can capture a likeness with enormous fluency and speed, and because movement doesn’t disturb her concentration, you don’t have to ▷

THIS PAGE The Sun editor Rebekah Wade, oil on canvas, 86x76cm
OPPOSITE Designer Zandra Rhodes, oil on canvas, 71x97cm



freeze into the kind of mummy-like stasis that kills an image.”

Barnes claims she had an easy rapport with all her sitters and they have heaped praise on her in return for her skill and professionalism.

Katherine Hughes – Principal of Somerville College, Oxford, between 1989 and 1996 – highlights Tess’s wish for an ongoing dialogue between sitter and artist.

“One of her many gifts is the ability to provoke a response in others, of shared curiosity and pleasure. Her portraits are true dialogues, unmistakably from her brush, but seeking, not manipulating, the identity of the subject. Her personality is as creative as her skill in the interest and communication in her work.”

Technically speaking, the ability Barnes has in producing a likeness is not in doubt as the familiar faces of June Sarpong and Carol Vorderman flash past in pages of her portfolio.

This talent was first unearthed at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, after which she became “obsessed” with capturing people in paintings and

started painting herself in the mirror.

“I believe that practice makes perfect. Some people are naturally bent at doing something. It’s discovering it and wanting to do it.

“In the third year at Goldsmiths I had a really good tutor, Basil Beattie. He saw my portraits and asked why I did anything else. It was lovely and I began to realise that perhaps not everybody could do it so easily.”

Since then, Barnes has developed an approach to painting that is sensibly relaxed – perfectionism without preciousness.

“I think perfectionism is important to a certain degree,” she says. “On the flip side, it is important for artists to not be afraid of mess. I make some of my students cover a page with charcoal and mess it up a bit before they start their work.”

Any purism within Barnes does not extend to regulated measurements to aid accuracy when painting.

“I do not agree with precise, regulated measurement, because we are all lopsided. Our faces are not equal, so instead, I use levels and

spacing and that it is really important.” She covers half her face with her hand. “See! It is terribly unusual to find someone who has pupils that point exactly in the same direction.”

It is this enthusiasm and willingness to demonstrate that makes her such a sought-after teacher.

A sculptor of paint

In both pastels and oils, Barnes achieves a translucent glow, making her subjects appear warm and inviting without undermining the likeness and retaining a realistic portrayal of the sitter. With pastels in particular, Barnes says this is down to the products she uses and how she uses them.

“A desired effect depends on what you are using. I love Rembrandt pastels. I have always used them and they just really suit my style.”

It is with great care and featherlight handling that Barnes uses the colours. Through a great deal of gentle smudging, a flawless finish is produced.

As far as her oil painting technique goes, Barnes sees herself rather as a sculptor in terms of progress ▷





and goes on to explain that she forms a basic framework of where things should go, before beginning a lengthy process of moulding and remoulding.

“I used to start on paint immediately but now I use charcoal as it makes me more able to move things about. When I start painting it is in pale colours. I usually fill in the whole face and then do an outline of the body. I start off with the sitter’s right eye and do it vaguely. Shapes and shadows connect everything, and it is important to remember that. Then I move to the nose. The nose is said to be the hardest thing for painters to capture because it is just a protrusion. But it’s only shadow and light.”

Free landscapes

With fantastic results in portraiture in both oils and pastels, Barnes is no one-trick pony – a fact further cemented by her extensive landscape painting, which allows her to adopt a freer means of expression.

“For some of my landscapes, I don’t use a brush, just a palette knife. I greatly enjoy landscape painting, especially the scenes from La Rochelle in France where I have lived and worked in the past and continue to visit. But it is portraits that I find the biggest challenge and that is what I love about them.”

A portrait will take around eight sittings of approximately an hour each, but this can vary. Barnes is able to work from photographs, but stresses that she prefers only doing this as a time-saving aid or when the subject is a young child.

“I used to be against using photographs, but now I am happy to use them towards the end of a portrait or for babies. Ideally, it’s got to be up here in your head. You do need to get the essence of someone, you need to be with them and speak to them.”

Her words echo those of another portrait artist, Jane Bond (see issue 251), whom Barnes cites as the painter she would choose, should she have someone paint her own portrait.

However, Barnes admits she has “thousands” of self-portraits, but concedes the image “will never really be me because it’s reflected in a mirror, back to front.”

Despite this, it is hard not to wonder whether this exhibition should be renamed *51 Women of Substance* – with Barnes’ reflected image taking pride of place at the end. 



Profile

Tess Barnes trained at Goldsmith’s College London, where she obtained her BA (Hons) degree in Fine Art.

She has exhibited extensively, most notably at the National Portrait Gallery, where she has been twice selected for the BP Portrait Award exhibition.

In 2006, she was made a fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts.

Her latest project, the *First Direct 50 Women of Substance* exhibition, runs from 25 February to 1 March at London’s Mall Galleries, before touring the UK.

View more of her work at www.tessbarnes.com or call for commissions on (020) 7924 4279.

ABOVE TV Presenter June Sarpong, oil on canvas, 86x71 cm
INSET Tess Barnes’ self-portrait