Pure Subjects

By Philomena Epps

2022

> Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard.
> But I think, "Oh bondage, up yours!"[1]

With their gaze fixed on the viewer, the person in Sarah Ball's painting 'Laurent', 2021, appears assured, confident. Their visage has been carefully made up, with contoured cheekbones, blusher and a beauty mark. Full, matte lips are pursed into a subtle pout. Long black eyelashes are neatly set off with liner, while their eyeshadow, in a shade of cornflower blue, has filled their eyelids up to the browbones. A patterned scarf, suggestive of vintage silk fabric, is artfully tied around cropped brown hair. With their head turned at a three-quarter angle, a golden earring hangs from the one visible lobe. Hand resting under chin, their fingers tug slightly at the collar of a black Adidas sweatshirt identified by its trademark three white stripes.

As with all of Ball's recent paintings, Laurent has been isolated from any context, placed within a void, as though existing in a purely imaginary space. The artist's subjects are set against monochromatic colour planes, so that "the blankness makes the portraits devoid of a particular time or setting, and there are no other clues to the person at all."[2] Each painting is simply titled with the sitter's first name. Playing with themes of self-expression, sexuality and identity, her subjects predominantly read as androgynous or gender non-conforming. Over the last couple of years, Ball has primarily used social media to find the individuals she wants to paint, but lately she has started street casting, and also painted one of her daughter's friends. She may stop someone walking down the street or working in a café and ask if she can take their photograph, which she will then use to paint from – the work defined by that singular fleeting snap. The flatness of Ball's style alludes to this indexical process; borrowing a phrase from Roland Barthes, they become 'Total Image'.[3]

The neutral backgrounds allow for the idiosyncrasies of Ball's chosen subjects to be enhanced, through focusing on the details of their personal style. Hairstyles, piercings, tattoos, clothing and accessories are all accentuated. While these bodily modifications or material adornments may provide an anchor for the viewer about how these individuals outwardly portray themselves, any deeper assumptions remain tenuous. With Ball pushing at the edges of representation as a coda for

---

[1] X-Ray Spex, 'Oh Bondage! Up Yours!', 1977.
[2] All the following quotes from Sarah Ball derive from her conversations with the author.
[3] Roland Barthes, 'Camera Lucida' (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984), p. 14.

identity, there is no further indication of her sitters' inner psyche. In Jean-Paul Sartre's 1943 influential essay 'Being and Nothingness', he asserts that "[to] put on clothes is to hide one's object-state: it is to claim the right of seeing without being seen; that is, to be pure subject."[4] This idea of seeing without being seen, of being pure subject, encapsulates the ambiguity at the heart of Ball's paintings, and the tension between intimacy and distance within the genre of portraiture.

When writing about David Hockney's exhibition of portraits at the Royal Academy of Arts in 2016, Tim Barringer suggested that the artist's use of a "carefully controlled format [gave] the project the air of a scientific research project; a laboratory test in which portraiture itself [has been] placed under sustained investigation."[5] Ball evokes a similar logic in her work by exaggerating the figure-ground relationship – a technique she admits to being "obsessed with". While her square canvases might elicit comparisons with the format of Instagram, they also evoke photobooth snaps and traditional headshot photography. Akin to the quintessential head and shoulders framing of those images, Ball crops and limits her depiction of the subjects' bodies – although she elongates her perspective with *Frans* (2021) to show the constellation of intricate tattoos that decorate their torso. Alongside Hockney, there is an affinity between Ball and the work of Alessandro Raho, who sets his subjects against comparatively pale or colourless backgrounds. As Michael Bracewell has argued, "[Raho's] combination of quotidian presence, figuratively depicted, and its seeming isolation within pictorial 'nothingness' [evokes] a sense of the sanctity of human life."[6] Bracewell's words recall Richard Brilliant's cogent analysis of portraiture, writing in 1991 that "the oscillation between art object and human subject, represented so personally, is what gives portraits their extraordinary grasp on our imagination."[7]

The intention of a portrait as a threshold to discover an essential truth about the sitter has endured over centuries, with artists perpetually compelled to represent the human face. The formal stillness of Ball's portraits brings to mind the work of Renaissance painters, artists like Domenico Ghirlandaio or Sofonisba Anguissola, and by Johannes Vermeer and figures associated with the Flemish Baroque. "I'm inspired by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painting, in addition to the unknown allegorical painters of the British school," Ball has noted. One prominent feature in Netherlandish portraiture is the static, three-quarter pose. This tilting of the face, and slight turn of their torso, allowed the viewer to see the whole visage (albeit at an occasionally unrealistic angle), and replaced the popularity of

---

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology (London: Routledge, 2003 [1956]), p. 312.
[5] Tim Barringer, David Hockney: 82 Portraits and 1 Still-life (London: Royal Academy of Arts, Harry N. Abrams, 2016).
[6] Michael Bracewell, 'The Art of Alessandro Raho', in Alessandro Raho (London: Lund Humphries, 2011), p. 20.
[7] Richard Brilliant, 'Introduction,' in Portraiture (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), p. 7.

the profile view, which had derived from the design of ancient coins. Ball can be seen to emulate this posture in paintings like 'Lilith' or 'Elliot', both 2020.

Throughout the history of portraiture, likeness has often been superseded by idolatry, influenced by the politics of the time – with artists required to enhance their subject's appearance, character, or aspects that spoke of their social standing. A notorious example is the 1588 'Armada Portrait of Elizabeth I'. The queen's elaborate performance of monarchy consciously goes against traditional gender roles. As "a weak and feeble woman" with the "heart and stomach of a king", she modelled herself on a divine androgynous ideal, influenced by the transcendent characters celebrated in classical ideology and poetry.[8] From the depiction of her crown, pearls and ringed finger, to the specific way her hand rests on the globe, countless elements were carefully inserted to convey her unwavering dominance and virginal marriage to the country, blurring imperial masculinity with chaste and cerebral femininity. With Ball withholding so much contextual information about her subjects, it is hard not to project a similar symbolic reading onto her portraits, however futile, leaving us wondering what someone's choice of necklace or shirt collar may mean about them.

Ball's painting of 'Seyon', 2021, notably recalls Vermeer's work, with her palette of blue, gold and white strikingly suggestive of the colours used in his 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' (1665). There are also parallels with the clear crystal earring Seyon wears in their left ear, especially because the original oversized pearl was not real but likely made of varnished glass. Vermeer's lustrous rendering of the earring is matched by the soft light that glimmers on the anonymous girl's face and parted lips, where Seyon's pronounced bone structure in Ball's work is equally radiant. The protagonist in Vermeer's painting that followed 'Study of a Young Woman', 1665–67, also looks directly at the viewer; like with 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' he has set her in front of a black background, and as with Ball's approach, she is isolated from any specific spatial context. Both of Vermeer's paintings can be situated within a larger series of tronies (mugs), which were a common genre during the Dutch Golden Age. Rather than a focusing on likeness, tronies were impressionistic character studies that typically relied on an exaggerated physiognomy or costume features. Not "intended as records of the appearance of a particular individual; they capture, rather, a particular kind of face, suggestive of a certain type of character."[9] While Ball is not creating tronies per se, her desire to only paint a particular individual or certain type of character – notably those that unsettle the binary expectations of gender (re)presentation – makes for a compelling comparison.

[8] Elizabeth I, 'Speech to the Troops at Tilbury' [1588], in The Norton Anthology to English Literature, Eighth Edition, Volume One, edited by Stephen Greenblatt (New York, NY: M.H. Abrams, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), pp. 699–700.
[9] Karl Schütz, 'The Years of Vermeer's Maturity 1660–1665', in Vermeer: The Complete Works (Cologne: Taschen Books, 2021), p. 82.

Ball's recent work is also suggestive of her own autobiography, although this is not made visible to the viewer. She has felt inspired by her own teenage experiences, coming of age listening to records made by musicians like Pauline Black, David Bowie, Chrissie Hynde, *Siouxsie Sioux* and Poly Styrene, music she still plays in her studio today. These confident and innovative figures were her role models, and by extension Ball was influenced by how they experimented with their gender expression and revelled in their difference. "They were beyond exciting, they celebrated their individuality, and demonstrated that identity was something you could create and nurture," she has said. "This individuality is what I see in the people that I paint."

Some philosophical texts that deal with the ethics of looking and visibility suggest that by representing an individual, the artist takes on some kind of accountability for their image. In her writing on Emmanuel Levinas's theory of 'the face' and 'the Other', Judith Butler argues that "to respond to the face... means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself."[10] One prominent way in which Ball takes responsibility for her subjects is through intensifying their unavoidable and penetrating gaze. The level of eye contact they seek is certainly psychologically charged, if not confrontational, preventing them from being viewed as passive objects. "The look that they give you makes you look at yourself, as if that person is looking into you," Ball has remarked. This looking happens at two levels – with these individuals in the portraits being 'seen', literally by being visible, but also 'seen' in the proverbial sense, both validated and acknowledged by the process of witnessing.

For Ball's latest body of work, debuting in her first solo exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery, the immediacy of the gaze is intensified by the monumental scale of the paintings. By rendering these figures larger than life, the everyday scale is ruptured, as are the usual power dynamics, with the canvases assuming the position of spectatorial dominance instead. The focus on the face has allowed the artist's style to become more fluid and open. While earlier series were occupied with the minutiae of clothing or accessories, these new works are pared back, almost abstracted. The timeless quality in these portraits has also been amplified as elements of their appearance – such as Masha's headscarf and Elliot's sailor suit – do not necessarily signal contemporary fashions but could allude to characters from art history. In paintings like 'Inez', 'Oscar', and 'Sol', all 2021, the details of their garments have been erased and reduced to swathes of soft, muted colour – mustard, cream and peach respectively. This shift in emphasis creates freedom for Ball to work on their poised expressions, their wide, unblinking eyes, their unblemished, dewy complexions and rosy cheeks. "It is all about the face," she notes. "The less you put in, the more is revealed." Whereas none of her subjects know each other, when their portraits are installed together, albeit temporarily, they seem

---

[10] Judith Butler, 'Precarious Life' (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2006), p. 134.

part of a powerful community. Ball has referred to herself as a "collector" of people. These individuals occupy her mind for much longer than the studio process: from the fated and decisive encounter in which she initially finds a subject, through the painting period, until she hangs a finished canvas on the gallery wall. It is then that the relationship is relinquished, ready for the painting to initiate a tête-à-tête with the spectator.

Text included in 'Sarah Ball' published by Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.