

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

## **Sarah Ball: Portraits as Encounters**

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I would like to be able to identify my soul with that of my model, but I always find an impenetrable mask.

—Eugène Delacroix<sup>1</sup>

The unexpected encounter has long inspired artworks, films and various forms of literature. Think of the young Pip in Charles Dickens's 'Great Expectations', 1861, whose meeting with Magwitch in a graveyard on Christmas Eve changed the course of his life. Or of Gwyneth Paltrow in 'Sliding Doors', 1998, who experienced two parallel lives by simply catching a train or missing it. Chance obviously informed these serendipitous junctures, and no doubt each of us can single out examples that have had a similarly decisive impact on our lives, for better or for worse. Few of us can freeze memories of such moments in time though, be it attached to a person, a place or an accident.

Portraiture at its most insightful arguably does what the mind alone cannot – memorialising a person in a lasting way. Beyond being a marker of presence, a portrait also captures an encounter – between the artist and their subject. This is where Sarah Ball and her new series of works come into play. The artist's portraits operate as ciphers for a split-second rendezvous with an enduring appeal. Calling on serendipitous timing, she turns her canvases into sites of other encounters – for us as viewers.

Ball's portraits provide glimpses into the daily lives of strangers. Oleksandr, Oscar, Masha, Sol, Inez and Elliot are some of the characters cast by the artist on the streets of Britain or found within social media's ubiquitous archive of faces. An instinctive pull, inspired by an attitude, a facial expression, a hairstyle or an outfit first drew Ball to this heterogeneous crowd. Without any prior knowledge of their lived experiences, she interrupted her subjects, stopped them in their tracks and took a quick snap. Ball's people are real, they are made of flesh and blood and have lives of their own, but their representation becomes something other.

## **Portraiture in the First-Person Age**

Of all the artistic genres, portraiture is the one that people intuitively recognise most easily, or so they think. Portraits of landmark figures, family groups and loved ones usually set the tone for what

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<sup>1</sup> Eugène Delacroix to Bruyas, quoted in 'Les Chefs-d'Oeuvre du Musée de Montpellier' (Paris: Musée de l'Orangerie, 1939), p. 43.

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

we assume a portrait is. At their most basic, portraits represent people, but that does arguably not suffice to qualify a portrait as such. A portrait is at once a memorial record and a penetrative device, and the latter function in particular brings us back to Ball's work and why it is so timely in this first-person age.

While Ball's portraits on the surface appear to fulfil the artist's own curiosity, on a deeper level they address a broader issue that can be expressed as the following question: what is the aesthetic and societal function of portraiture today? A loaded question, which brings to the fore different facets of what portraiture is and how it makes itself manifest in an age in which social media allows all users to perform a version of themselves for the benefit of the camera and their followers. While Ball does not set out to explicitly tackle social media's conventions of self-(re)presentation, she obliquely acknowledges how selfie culture has meant that personal archives have entered the public domain and are no longer confined to photo albums or dusty drawers.

For an artist like Ball, who has made this public archive the starting point for many works, social media is ripe with possibilities for inspirational encounters. While Instagram's hyped visibility of the self extends our understanding of portraiture – including its methods and meaning – Ball recalibrates the calculated effects of Instagram by reframing the found imagery through painting. Her often unknowing subjects are carefully posed, inviting us to look at them directly and deeply. Take 'Sol', 2021, a young person with platinum hair and a voluptuous pink top: what do we really see when we look at the image? A young woman with a hipster edge, might be one simple answer. But is that what Ball is getting at, or is there more to it than just a record of physical attributes?

Sol – but also Oleksandr, Oscar, Masha, Inez and Elliot – gives voice to one of portraiture's most insoluble conundrums: the relationship between likeness and the painter's visual language. A single stylistic register is applied here to all subjects, unifying them into a single cohort, even though they each carry a different story. Presented within closely cropped compositions, Ball's figures are set against flat planes, which reinforce the timeless nature of these portraits. At once muted and enticing they offer us narrative mysteries; close enough for us to apprehend and distant enough to never fully grasp. Collectively, they are a seductively impenetrable bunch.

Transcending likeness, Ball's portraits encompass a sense of intrigue that first lured her to her chosen ones. Selfie culture, which compels its devotees to narrate their lives in the most minute and intimate detail, is unravelled through the artist's careful re-staging of each character. Masha, with a plain cloth bonnet carefully tied under the chin reads like a figure from a different era. One can easily picture her in a seventeenth-century Flemish interior holding a milk pitcher near a still life laid out on a table. Elliot in turn, with their marinière top, errs between an East-End hipster

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

walking out of a co-working space and a sailor returning from a faraway land. By contrast, Laurent and Seyon are the epitome of contemporary cool; they are surely working in the creative field. Through these portraits Ball conjures a different world, one which invites contemplation and sets our imagination free to rewrite each character's story, over and over again. An exercise in creative writing seems called for here.

From a conceptual perspective, Ball's portraits push against the grain of a fast-paced and image-savvy society that we have become all too accustomed to. On average, we each consume hundreds, if not thousands of images per day. Such a high daily intake means that very few images stay with us, as the great majority are only ever viewed in a cursory fashion. In a quest to find subjects worthy of pictorial reinterpretation, Ball puts herself through this image deluge to source those ripe for a memorable encounter outside of social media's overwhelming presence. The selection process is itself telling of Ball's ambition to create portraits of moods and emotions rather than a record of physical attributes.

### **The Workings of the Mind**

As the polymath Leonardo da Vinci once stated, “[a] good painter is to paint two main things, namely man and the workings of man’s mind. The first is easy, the second difficult.”<sup>2</sup> Such a description is particularly fitting when applied to portraiture and its ability to favour personality over likeness. While widespread perception has it that portrait photography offers a more ‘accurate’ representation of likeness, portrait painting has often been celebrated for its exuberant rendering of presence. Artists from the Renaissance to the present have deployed scale and a variety of conceptual devices to turn their portraits into conversation pieces, either withheld or explicitly proffered. Ball's oeuvre follows in this tradition, making plain what Elias Canetti eloquently described as “[t]he outer bearing of people is so ambiguous that you only have to present yourself as you are to live fully unrecognized and concealed.”<sup>3</sup>

To conceal and to reveal are two verbs that co-exist in Ball's pictorial lexicon. Earlier in her career she delved into archival documentary photography to uncover what physical appearance tells us of different people. Police mug shots and official identity cards became her source imagery for paintings of people who had been ‘classified’ somehow for official or governmental purposes. The societal compulsion to categorise was explored in these works, which obliquely acknowledged fraught anthropological histories, such as that of Alphonse Bertillon – a French police officer who in

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<sup>2</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, ‘Notebooks’, translated by Jean Paul Richter (London: Oxford Classics, 1980), p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Elias Canetti, ‘The Human Province’, translated by Joachim Neugroschel (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1978 [1973]), p. 150.

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

the late 1800s deployed photography to create an identification system based on physical measurements. A troubling system, to say the least, which corroborated the idea that a person's looks shape their inner self. To push against this perception, Ball revisited the photographs of those who had fallen prey to this problematic system of classification. The resulting portraits asked the viewer to acknowledge the people who had been subject to systemic stereotyping. The intimate scale of these works demanded close scrutiny and invited us to reconsider how we look at people.

In Ball's most recent body of work the scale has increased but the invitation to look hard and deep has remained the same. No cursory, Instagram-like viewing is allowed for when encountering the artist's panoply of faces. To achieve such a rich sampling of contemporary denizens, Ball has called on two invisible sources: herself and the camera. Of the two, the role played by the camera is the most obvious one, in that all of Ball's portraits take as a starting point a photograph. Under the camera's unblinking influence, the emotional immediacy of a living subject is partially tempered, allowing the artist to freely exert a greater control over her subjects. The inner states induced in the sitter when examined by a camera are somewhat reconfigured in Ball's flattened facial planes and perspectives. As part of this revisionist process Ball tackles what could be described as the sitter's 'true self' – a feeling or mood the source photograph supposedly captured. In her revisiting Ball makes plain that the 'true self' is a mere construction, as it is only ever relatable to one curious moment of (self-)perception. Time thus plays a role, underlining that a portrait is like a time capsule: it captures the present moment for the future. As viewers we will each encounter Ball's portraits at different points in time, adding a further layer to the portrait's existing timeframe.

It may not be obvious at first, but our responses – as viewers – differ depending on how the figures are presented to us. In other words, the artist's representational strategies dictate our reception and understanding of the depicted subject. In fact, central to a portrait's expressive force is the triangulation between subject, artist and viewer. In looking at a portrait, we take the place of the artist, but bring our own eyes to it. My reading of Masha as a character out of a Flemish painting, for instance, is informed by my knowledge of art history. A more mundane reading might think of Masha in connection to the celebrated dystopian television series 'The Handmaid's Tale', in which the enslaved concubines wear simple caps not that dissimilar from Masha's simple bonnet. Whether Ball had either of these references in mind is hard to tell. What is certain though is that how we understand Masha's portrait – or any other portrait for that matter – depends on how our gaze has been defined, refined and informed by our own experience and social background. Even as Ball fixes her sitters in a specific time and form, she opens her subjects to a range of possible meanings, enhancing their ambiguity.

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

A conduit for this powerful triangulation between subject, artist and viewer is the gaze. The identity of Ball's painterly people is determined by them directly looking at us, which invites a type of engagement normally not allowed for in exchanges weighted with psychological implications. Oscar, for example, challenges and seduces us with the directness of his eyes looking out. Ball's subjects are hot in personality, despite the mostly sombre palette. The articulateness of the way they look at us insinuates a fertility of expression, distinct from the signifiers that conventionally objectify the personality of a portrayed subject. In other words, the artist sets up the scene for a revelatory encounter, mediated by herself, and performed by the subject and the viewer.

With her painterly people Ball makes clear that portraiture is not just a matter of aesthetic proficiency: a good likeness alone does not make a portrait. Portraiture is first and foremost, a matter of psychological attunement. By temporarily stepping into her sitters' subjectivity, Ball is able to convey what it is like to exist as this person. Yet, she also ensures that her line-up of contemporary subjects remain adequately elusive; enough to engage and intrigue. Most important though, is the time of Ball's portraits, which is now – the now of our encounter.

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