

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Telegraph
From Bambi to gay icon: how artists are depicting Chris Whitty
Alastair Sooke
29 April 2020

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Image: Shades of Shrigley: a Post-It note portrait of Professor Whitty Credit: SOCIAL MEDIA INTERNET

There are faces that, for artists, demand to be immortalised. Think of Ingres's famous likeness of the portly Monsieur Bertin, in the Louvre. Or Velázquez's wily Pope Innocent X, beloved of Francis Bacon. Supposedly, Leonardo da Vinci used to get so obsessed with odd-looking strangers in the street that he'd follow them for

hours until he'd surreptitiously sketched their unusual features.

For all his merits (and who could fault his reassuring calmness and authority?), the government's chief medical adviser, Chris Whitty, isn't such a man. He looks lean and brainy, yes – like a highly alert tortoise, head fully extended from its shell – but, in truth, he has the faintly anonymous mien of a grey-suited mandarin. In another life, he would be an accountant or perhaps a professor of Middle English. There are forgettable portraits of eminent men like Whitty in universities up and down the country.

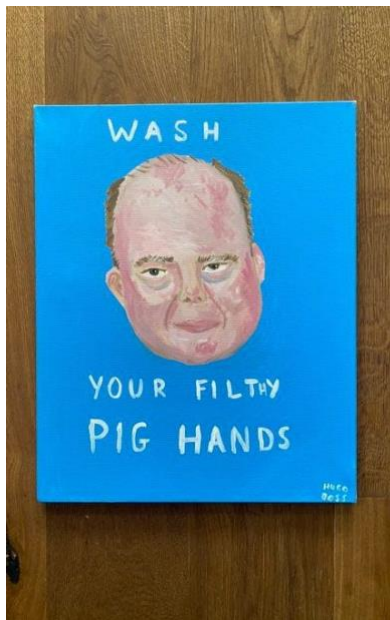


Image: All the rage: Whitty has inspired scores of artists on social media CREDIT: SOCIAL MEDIA INTERNET

There is nothing forgettable, however, about the legion of homespun likenesses of Whitty that has surged forth on social media. Who needs pollsters to enquire after the public's psychological state when we can use these portraits of Whitty as a barometer instead? Mostly tongue in cheek, they suggest that, six weeks in, laughter hasn't entirely given way to tears.

In one, Whitty appears, ironically, as a master of revels, or possibly a gay icon, a conical blue party hat atop his pate. A papier-mâché mask, meanwhile, like something left over from a Mexican festival, flatters him with Bambi's eyes – though, curiously, it could also pass for a portrait of Cpt Tom Moore. The hesitant distortions of a pair of black-and-white line drawings remind me of David Shrigley's dark, comically awkward cartoons. In a smartphone snap, two NHS workers hold aloft – what should we call it? – "Whitty bunting", which, via Warholian repetition,

nimbly expresses the epidemiologist's current ubiquity on our television screens.

As for the disembodied head in comedian Joe Lycett's caustic painting, which has hogged the limelight (earlier this week, it was featured on Grayson's Art Club on Channel 4), it is, surely, a dead ringer for Matt Hancock.

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For all the humour, though, cracks are also appearing, frustrations beginning to show. A (modelling clay?) bust of Whitty imbues him with the determination of Churchill. But the eyes – red-rimmed and puffy – are a touch maniacal, accompanied, perhaps, by a grim smirk. “No lifting of lockdown for the likes of you!” this fatigued figure, like a harassed headmaster, seems to hiss. Let’s hope, before the government’s next review of its social-distancing measures, Whitty manages to get some sleep.