CAN A ‘PORTRAIT’ PAINT A THOUSAND SCHOLARLY WORDS?

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INTRODUCTION: FACING THE BLANK CANVAS

Painting a portrait is as much about the sittings, about becoming acquainted with them and drawing them as it is about the painting. Nicholas Harding, Archibald Prize entrant, 2003

Faces are the most interesting things we see; other people fascinate me, and the most interesting aspect of other people – the point where we go inside them – is the face. It tells all. David Hockney

Faced with the brilliant white of a blank canvas, the traditional portrait artist may use a wash of colour to set the tone and mood of the artwork. Colouring the content of this paper is an underlying desire to interrogate the possibilities for enhanced understanding of the educational phenomenon that frequently finds women educators leading changes in art education. As a woman, visual artist, educator and fledgling scholar, finding an arts-based research methodology, portraiture, that uses some characteristics of the portrait artist’s practice to shape the use of qualitative research approaches is exciting and challenging. Arts-based research methodologies have broadened the domain of qualitative inquiry to include/incorporate art forms and respond to the view that the arts provide a special way of coming to understand something and how it represents what we know about the world (Eisner, 1993, Barone, 2001, Diamond, 2002, van Halen, 2002). However, while portraiture offers the possibility for revealing phenomena through the use of reflective and responsive means, the analytical phase in doctoral studies routinely takes a literary form with visual documentation performing what may be considered an illustrative role, rather than evidence of critical inquiry (Fox, 2001). Similarly, most arts based research continues to use a mode of communication that is language-based (Sullivan, 2006).
Returning to visual art practice after a hiatus of many years I realised that my practice was a site of considerable intellectual work requiring much rigor as I strove to attain technical mastery, understand subjects in new ways, make use of imaginative transformation and communicate deeply felt aspects of self and knowledge that were otherwise hidden, perhaps even unattainable. Questions that vexed me even as I revelled in the pleasures of creating were: ‘What is the point of doing this work?’ ‘What do I want to say?’ ‘How can I use these skills in a worthwhile way?’ These questions eventually led to my doctoral research project. Seeking to reconcile those divisions of artist/researcher/teacher I began to use the artistic practice of portraiture to assist with understanding the experience of women who are forging changes to the provision of arts education in different contexts. The challenge now is to incorporate practice-based research (Sullivan, 2005, 2006) without allowing the portraits to become merely decorative additions to the thesis.

Precedents in, and arguments for, the use of portraiture as a legitimate research methodology in educational research do exist. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005), a sociologist investigating effective high schools sought to create a methodology ‘that might capture the complexity and aesthetic of human experience’, (p. 5). Hackmann (2002) identified thirteen (of 40) doctoral portraiture studies in educational leadership that included projects focused on qualities of exemplary educational leaders in case studies investigating instructional reform. In a similar vein to my proposal to extend the methodology in a way that complements the ‘thick descriptions’ characteristic of portraiture, Dixon et al (2005) introduced a series of portraiture studies where researchers’ personal and professional connections are articulated so that their inherent positionality and subjectivity are exposed. These projects blend music and poetry with rigorous data collection and analysis methods ‘to capture the attention of broad and eclectic audiences’ (p. 20). Similarly, I seek to extend myself to my/our audiences through portraits that include the voices of the research participants, and include alternative ways of communicating insights gained during the project.

**BLOCKING IN THE MAJOR FORMS**

Underpinning this study are notions of portraiture - What do we understand by the term ‘portrait’? The Macquarie Dictionary (1997, p. 1671) provides two of relevance:
**portrait** noun 1. a likeness of a person, especially of the face, usually made from life. 2. a verbal picture, usually of a person.

These limited definitions provide little indication of the complex, multifaceted, involved and involving processes that occur during the creation of portraits within the fields of literature, research and the visual arts. If, as might be reasonably assumed, a ‘good’ portrait is revealing in some way then surely portraits providing significant revelation are the result of in depth and detailed investigations.

*Portraiture as a genre in painting*

While a painted portrait is commonly thought of as ‘a likeness of a person’, this is a far too simple explanation for the ‘works of art that engage with ideas of identity as they are perceived, represented, and understood in different times and places’ that West (2004, p. 11) describes in her book *Portraiture*. It would be difficult to give expression to such ‘ideas’ without an understanding of the ways in which ‘identity’ is expressed and subjectivity constructed, as well as the prevailing codes and conventions - both technical and symbolic - of the painted portrait. Brilliant (1991) concurs that a portrait is created and understood via social practices: ‘[t]his vital relationship between the portrait and its object of representation directly reflects the social dimension of human life as a field of action among persons, with its own repertoire of signals and messages’, (p. 8). As any historical review of portraiture’s forms, functions and uses shows, it is possible to comment on how meaning is constructed when relevant contextual information is used (Brilliant, 1991, Freeland, 2007, Maynard, 2007, West, 2004). For example, portraits of ancient rulers (which appeared as statues, figurines and on coins and medals), ‘served to “display” the powerful as powerful, and thereby increase their power’ (Maynard, 2007, p. 112). The purpose, and thus the meaning, of these portraits was to establish authority; ‘likeness’ was less important, not least due to the fact that few people would ever see the original for comparison, than the intent to be made visible as the ruler. West (2005) identifies various functions served by portraits as: works of art, biographical, documentary, proxy or gift, commemoration and memorial and, as described above, political tool. Whatever the function of a portrait however, the fundamental aspect of the genre is the relationship between the portrait image and the human original (Brilliant, 1991).

The art of portraiture has often been preoccupied with how well the artist could capture the “essence” of the person and is closely associated with notion of the
individual. This concept of portraiture is generally aligned with Western art, and the notions of individuality that arose during the Renaissance were enhanced by development of biographical genres that increasingly articulated ideas about character and personality during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and subsequently further explored with developments of psychology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Brilliant, 1991, West, 2004). Portraiture as a cultural commodity documents changing conceptions of identity, and ‘in the postmodern era is a pictorial strategy for coming to terms with the conundrum of individual identity and a powerful means of exploring issues of representation’ (McPherson, 2001, p202).

**Portraiture as a written genre**

In literature, the term portrait refers to a written description or analysis of a person or thing (for example, Joyce’s *A portrait of the artist as a young man*, a semi-autobiographical narrative). A written portrait often gives deep insight, and offers an analysis that goes far beyond the superficial. Similarly, the qualitative arts-based educational research methodology called ‘portraiture’, offers in depth analysis of a subject. This type of inquiry is preoccupied with artistic representation or evocation wherein the researcher’s efforts are directed toward the construction of ‘a narrative that authentically portrays the central story of subject or site’ (Davis, 2003 p. 199).

Major aspects of portraiture research include emergent themes, relationships, contexts, voice and the aesthetic whole (Dixon, 2005). While portraiture shares some features with other qualitative research methods, there is a dimension that separates it from other ethnographic research as the investigator’s voice is purposely woven into written document reflecting the researcher’s own experience of the field (Davis, 2003, Dixon, 2005, Hackmann, 2002, Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). Dixon et al (2005) see the goal of portraiture as aligned with that of the social sciences, the essence of which is: ‘to (re)present the research participant through the subjective, empathetic and critical lens of the observer’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot cited in Dixon, 2005, p. 17). Conceptualising portraiture as method that blends qualitative and interpretive approaches such as life history, naturalist inquiry and ethnography enables the bringing together of ideas from phenomenology (e.g. participant experience) ethnography (e.g. that context is central), life history (listening to stories) and biography (focusing on individuals) to establish a rich and complex narrative (Davis, 2003, Ngunjiri, 2007, Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).
Lawrence-Lightfoot rationalised her use of portraiture to highlight school transformations because it enabled a focus on recognising ‘goodness’ rather ‘weakness’ - a perspective that Hackmann (2002) contends makes it highly suitable for educational leadership research. As a methodology, it aligns well with critical theory that purposely ‘seeks to expose structural and systemic problems that deny voice, access, power and privilege’ (Sullivan, 2005, p. 55). The transformative goal is intended to better position individuals to be able to challenge and change inequities and oppressions (Sullivan, 2005).

Interestingly, Lawrence-Lightfoot developed her methodological tools in part due to her experiences as an artist’s portrait subject and the lessons she learned from those experiences:

‘…they seemed to capture my “essence”; qualities of character and history, some of which I was unaware, some of which I resisted mightily, some of which felt deeply familiar. But the translation of image was anything but literal. It was probing, layered, and interpretive…the piece expressed the perspective of the artist and was shaped by the evolving relationship between the artist and me.’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 5)

These comments distil points of convergence between the art and the methodology: how a particular person is “captured” and the relationship of the artist and subject.

Questioning modern portraiture practices, art educator Jagodzinski (2007) adopts an aesthetic-as-ethics stance, exhorting us to critically evaluate our motivations for maintaining the tradition in the post-modern era of the simulacrum. Historically, portraiture was the 'representational technology that "stole" the light of God from the Church and power from the Aristocracy by imbuing the sitter with a "unique" subjectivity and importance, as if two subjectivities were present: the actual representation of the sitter and his or her "unique" self perceived as the "soul" of the person, an ideal inner self that is aligned with God' (pp. 75-6). Extending his critique to photographic portraiture, through Lacanian psychoanalysis, and of digital portraiture, through Deleuze's notion of the time-image (as the phenomenological trace), Jagozinski questions the very "possibility" of portraiture in the era of machine-vision and argues for a rethinking of the practice along non-representational lines. A response to the disembodying effect of technological mediation has been a re-emergence of an emphasis on experience in the discourses on aesthetics. Grace
(1996) for example points to a shift from the traditional emphasis on representation towards the notion of aesthetics as a practice of the self, which focuses on the hypersensitivity of the body under stress as a common symptom in the late modern era. This proposal suggests possibilities for the application of portraiture as a methodology suited to my inquiry.

**FOREGROUNDING THE SUBJECT – SOME ISSUES**

Freeland (2007) raises philosophical questions regarding the proposition that portraiture encompasses two fundamentally distinct and contradictory aims: to reveal the sitter, and to exhibit the artist’s expressive skills and views on art. She claims both that a good portrait is expected to convey a person’s subjectivity, ‘an autonomous and distinct person with unique thoughts and emotions’ (p. 98), and that ‘[i]n the best cases the portrait is supposed to involve reciprocity’ (p. 97). In her discussion of how portraits can be “revealing” of a subject’s personality or “essence” she suggests four ways this may occur: by being accurate likenesses, testimonies of presence, evocations of personality or presentations of a subject’s uniqueness. Meskimmon’s (1996) feminist critique of self-representation within male social and discursive structures rejects this notion of “essence”, arguing ‘individuals are formed through their encounters with the world; there is no pre-existent essence that is the subject. We are formed by an elaborate interweaving of identifications with socially defined roles and expectations’ (p.13, my emphasis). Furthermore, the notion of a singular “essence” being discerned and captured on the verbal canvas denies the possibility of multiple stories or truths, and the positioning of the portraitist as the authority who decides what is relevant to constructing that singular truth (English, 2000).

Bearing in mind, also, Hackmann’s (2002) warning that any researcher is selective about what is included or not in reporting on their research, my methodology will incorporate the strategy of creative philosophic inquiry whereby the study into the nature of leadership in/through arts/education as demonstrated by teachers uses painting as a tool to question theories of representation and power in the construction of the subject. If we (the study participants) recognise that identities are partial, fluid and contingent on circumstances (for example, the capacity to perform leadership may be limited in certain contexts), then using portraiture as a tool to investigate notions of subjectivity and the performance of leadership as a form of agency will assume greater focus than the artwork/s as emblems of meaning.
Positionality, a concept that comes from feminist studies and, along with reflexivity and transformation, is important in critical theory, is made explicit so omitted voices and perspectives may be recovered (Sullivan, 2005). The notion of voice is examined at length by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) and is regarded variously as witness, interpretation, preoccupation, autobiography, as discerning other voices and in dialogue. Bloom & Erlandson (2003) further explore these notions by introducing the voice of the audience, and raise questions about how the reader interprets the written portrait, and the impact of their gender, preconceptions and personal history on their reading of it, and the disruption that the portrait may engender. This parallels McPherson’s (1996) claims that twentieth century portraiture (as art practice) ‘often entails a complex transaction between the subject and the implied viewer, in which identity and subjective consciousness are problematised’ (p. 200) and that ‘artists have turned to the portrait as an artistic device for investigating the boundaries between the private and public self and challenging assumptions about authenticity, authorship and representation’ (p. 201).

**Portraiture as collaborative enterprise**

The notion of reciprocity in portraiture refers to a characteristic that is particular to this art form, the relationship between the subject and artist. In portraiture recognition of the sitter’s identity is an essential element, however, due to the nature of the practice, very often the portrayal is required to indicate more than just likeness. In order to do this, the artist must have some understanding of the person, and in instances where portraits are commissioned, negotiate an art work that satisfies the requirements of the sitter as much, and at times more, than the expressive goals of the artist (Brilliant, 1991, Freeland, 2007, West, 2004). There will always be some tension between the expectations and requirements of the subject and the goals and interests of the artist, and this relationship exists within the research portrait also. In my inquiry, the collaborative exploration of notions of leadership are likely to entail experiences of self-portraiture to respond to ideas around the autobiographical ‘as a site of conflicting social discourses and definitions and a valuable starting point for the examination of the constructed and mediated roles of women through personal experiences’ (Martin, 1996, p. ii). Throughout our collaboration we will make art and interpret art so that we may add to or transform our understanding by presenting new ideas that help us see in new ways. An early exploration of ideas around the experience and challenges of leadership for one participant involved the creation of a collaborative verbal/visual artwork and recording the discussions that took place.
Possibilities for visualising these ideas through her portraits were explored as part of these discussions and resulted in a reflective response from the participant indicating that her understanding of self in the context of leadership was being consciously interrogated.
(Figure 1 and 2)

**Portrait as narrative**

Clearly, the portrait cannot be simply a matter of reproduction. The artistry in the portraiture methodology results from the literary traditions it borrows from narrative storytelling. It is an analysis that uses data collected from a variety of sources (providing the triangulation that ensures trustworthiness) where the researcher selects and arranges events and actions by showing how they contribute to the evolution of a plot which provides the thematic line of the narrative. There is an analytical development when writing the narrative as the researcher brings about an order and significance using the data, however, the result is not objective, but a particular reconstruction of the researcher (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, Smeyers, 2008). This interpretative activity removes this type of research away from the empirical paradigms that govern much of social science research and align it with arts-based methodologies. Often visual data is gathered and used to inform the construction of written portraits, but a danger in this approach is alluded to by Pink (cited in Sullivan, 2005) who claims that ‘[t]he idea that subjective experience can be translated into objective knowledge is itself problematic for reflexive ethnography. Therefore “analysis” through which visual data becomes written academic knowledge has little academic relevance’ (p. 63). Pink is referring to the idea that visual images carry meaning that is mediated by culture and cultural practices, and are therefore not a product that are easily isolated and contextualised. They will have different meanings for different people in different contexts. However, if it is the intention of the research (as in critical theory approaches) to instigate change through giving voice to those usually denied the privilege or through questioning assumptions/values that may be commonly held, surely visual data can have relevance? In the process of coming to know one participant early portrait studies explored her frustration with moving forward with her aspirations to further the cause of access to arts rich education for children. (Figures 3 and 4)
Art practice can be a legitimate form of research and education researchers need not rely solely on social science methodological conventions (Sullivan, 2006). Mixed method approaches (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), challenge the quantitative versus qualitative research paradigm. Following different, yet complementary pathways can create new knowledge (Sullivan, 2006). While the goal of my research is partly to describe, interpret or explain the phenomena under investigation, there is also, as Sullivan (2005) puts it, ‘a desire is to see inquiry as having the capacity to change human understanding’ (p. 74). Will extending the portraiture methodology through studio inquiry practices intended to provide possibilities for transformed understanding (introducing “complication” to the “plot” of my doctoral thesis) “paint” scholarly words/works? If art making can open up ‘a site of investigation from which other derivative practices can emerge such as critical and philosophical analysis, historical and cultural commentary and educational experiences’ (Sullivan, 2005, p. 74), then it is, at least, a possibility.
References


Grace, H. (ed.) 1996 *Aesthesis and the Economy of the Senses*, University of Western Sydney, Nepean.


Figure 1

Creating a collaborative verbal/visual artwork – exploring ideas around leadership accompanied by recorded discussion
Figure 2

Two iterations of the verbal/visual. The upper image was the initial creation that was subsequently torn up to create a second version in which selected words that resonated most strongly for the participant from the first iteration were used. This artwork included collaged gold thread, a strategy the participant frequently uses in her own practice as a metaphor for those unique aspects that bind concepts together.
Figure 3

The author working on an early portrait study where she is responding to the participant’s expressions of frustration about gaining support for arts rich education experiences for young people. (Photo: Michael Nieddu, Technical Officer, Visual Arts, Griffith University Mt Gravatt)

Figure 4

‘Sometimes it’s like kicking yourself…’ Study, 2009