

Exercise: Commission a portrait

I have decided to commission a portrait of my wife, the poet Moniza Alvi. This memorandum outlines the details that I will pass on to the artist I choose to undertake the work.

I looked at the work recently commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery and at the contemporary artists who had been chosen for the work. Looking at their work I came up with the following shortlist of 4 artists to consider.

- Justin Mortimer
- Michael R. Taylor
- Jennifer McRae
- Tai-Shan Schierenberg

Size of painting to be commissioned: 1200mm x 9090mm approx.

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description of subject

The poet Moniza Alvi will be the subject of the commission. She has published seven collections of poetry and has been shortlisted for the T S Eliot prize on three occasions.

The final decision on how to portray the sitter will be down to the artist; however the selected artist will need to be aware of the following. Books are a major part of Moniza's everyday life and this could perhaps be recognised in some way in the portrait. Commenting on Alvi's writing style, the writer Darryn Rees-Jones says "Much of Alvi's work engages with a surreal or fantastical world of fractured and partially recovered identity". The artist may wish to consider this description and how these qualities may be reflected in the finished portrait.

Alvi is from a mixed English / Asian background but has lived nearly all her life in England, nevertheless the Asian heritage is an important part of her background and her writing. Again the artist may wish to consider how this may be best portrayed. There is a number of possibilities for this, perhaps a globe used to symbolise this or presence of Asian art or books within the portrait. These are just two suggestions of how symbols could be used to signify the importance of her heritage.

Moniza Alvi has had a lifelong interest in education, whether as her first career as a school teacher or later as a university lecturer or workshop leader for poetry. This again is something that the artist may wish to consider and how it might be represented within the finished portrait.

Shortlist

As mentioned at the start I had shortlisted four artists for this commission. I did this by studying work of theirs on display in the National Portrait Gallery. All four have painted portraits of writers and this was a particular reason for shortlisting them.

Justin Mortimer

<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw08237/Harold-Pinter?LinkID=mp08056&search=sas&sText=justin+mortimer&OOnly=true&role=art&rNo=0>

Mortimer painted this portrait of Harold Pinter. It is interesting to note how Pinter has been portrayed in a sea of books with a bright red background.

Jennifer McRae

<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw69347/Michael-Frayn?LinkID=mp60143&search=sas&sText=jennifer+mcræe&OOnly=true&role=art&rNo=0>

Michael Frayn was the subject of this portrait by Jennifer McRae. She has chosen a three quarter length portrait in a very spare style.

Michael R Taylor

<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw09645/PD-James?LinkID=mp07823&search=sas&sText=michael+taylor&role=art&rNo=1>

Taylor's portrait of PD James is interesting for the visual clues he uses to say more about James's work and style.

Tai-Shan Schierenberg

<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp08052/tai-shan-schierenberg?search=sas&sText=schierenberg&OOnly=true&role=art>

Schierenberg has two, quite different, portraits in the NPG. John Mortimer is shown sat in an armchair with paintings around; Seamus Heaney is portrayed head and shoulders in a very pensive way.