

## Boo Ritson

### *Portraits*

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To describe the photographic works of Boo Ritson as 'striking' would be a negligent understatement: as well as arresting the visual senses, their syrupy appearances almost wrench the gut, and certainly have the ability to raise a grin on the faces of even the most cynical viewers. Her highly stylized aesthetic that characterizes her recent works involves re-photographing paintings made onto the subjects themselves, which are typically real people. At least that is one way to describe how her works are made; in this complex blend of photography, painting, sculpture and performance art, her oeuvre could be described from various perspectives, contextualizing it within numerous disciplines of contemporary art.

In much the same manner as Cindy Sherman, the physical representation of demographic and cultural stereotypes is the subject of Ritson's portraiture. Similar to Sherman, Ritson has built up a cast list of characters from popular culture – the 'extras' such as her plump Vegas *Slot Player* as well as the leading roles, like the *Godfather* and the *Pimp*. However, unlike Sherman she has used friends and family as sitters rather than herself. Dripping in bright paint, the portraits are quite an explicit expression of the superficiality of surface appearances, and how quickly we can identify an individual's role: We are prompted to guess at their theatrical or cinematic character, but this technique alludes to wider sociological concerns. Ritson has even manipulated the gender of some of her subjects, which emphasises how we have been trained to form assumptions based upon surface appearances so hastily, overlooking even the most primitive aspect of someone's identity.

Ritson's use of cultural motifs, contrasting colours and use of irony seems to echo 1960s pop art. Also, the simple, playful approach of the artist is quite refreshing and accessible. Whether we remember it or not, most of us have – as children of course – got paint all over ourselves quite deliberately at

least once. The carefully managed expressions of the sitters can't help betraying at times, the folly and eccentricity to which they have agreed to take a part in.

Whether deliberate or not, Ritson's decision to use photography as the ultimate realization of these works cannot avoid confronting the medium critically. The inevitable limitation of the two-dimensional nature of the photographic image as a means of representation is highlighted by sculptural and tactile quality of the subjects depicted. Also, the excessive quantities of paint which are used to 'colour-in' the surfaces onto which they are applied, saturating and obliterating the natural textures of the objects depicted, thus simplifying their physical appearance seems to criticise the way that we have learned to identify universal signs and form ideological judgments, via the lens-formed image.

Furthermore, the 'cleanness' of the cropped photographic studio image bears little resemblance (one would imagine) to the messy and chaotic process of applying the paint upon the sitters and creating these characters, just as most studio portraits are designed to conjoin a particular ideology that may not in fact be a fair representation of the sitter's character.

Certainly deliberate though, is the photographic style adopted by Ritson: The neutral pastel background, head-and-shoulder crop, asymmetric lighting, dead-pan or faintly smiling expressions of the sitter are typical conventions within formal photographic portraiture. The conspicuous 'passing-of' of these images as studio photographic portraits adds further texture to the camouflage that masquerades the individuals behind these stereotypes.

In addition to her portraits, Ritson has produced studies of food held within her sitter's hands. These works – in which the preoccupations of Martin Parr and style of Salvador Dali collide – play on the rhetorical cliché, repeated particularly in DIY and interior design shops, "doesn't that colour just make you want to eat it!" These works are Ritson's most stomach churning and could do for iced doughnuts what *Super Size Me* has done for Big Macs. The sense of gluttony that (quite literally) oozes from these works seems in opposition to consumerism and reveal another aspect of Ritson's portraiture: The saturated, hyper-real colours (often primary colours which are exploited to their full potential in their form as inkjet prints) have a certain graphic quality, echoing the logos of multi-national corporations.

It might be easy to forget the fact that these photographs are masquerades in themselves: Ritson's background is in fact not in photography per se, but in sculpture, completing a MA in the subject at the Royal College of Art in 2005. In light of this, the importance of the production of the painted subjects must be observed, although in a work of this nature, documentation in a form such as Ritson's photographic prints is fairly inevitable. However, Ritson has been able to transcend a simple documentation of these temporary sculptures and in doing so, has raised various intriguing questions about the nature of the photographic portrait.