Portraiture and the Human Spirit

By Ellenie Faith

Since homo sapiens began cave painting, we have depicted the human form. Some of the greatest examples of prehistoric art are statues and drawings of people hunting, crafting and praying. We have always known and felt our humanity and have tried to capture it throughout every age. But why? We are all humans and experience humanity daily, it is so familiar, so what's so interesting about it? Why has it always challenged artists in this way? Why do we keeping come back to this one subject, striving to better understand it? What makes portraiture so special?

In February of this year, I spent ten days at an artist residency working intentionally on portraiture. I challenged myself to create a portrait a day, from life, every day. Letting go of my attachment to perfection, I explored what it was that drew me so strongly to this art form. I spent hours each day sitting with my models, people of all ages, professions and walks of life. While I painted, I had long conversations with them. I found in this time they often shared about the life events that made them who they are. As humans we are constantly impacting and being impacted by one another. We experience life through our senses; we touch and change the lives of everyone around us every moment. A defining part of being human is that every word, experience and action can impact ourselves, and each other so intensely. We have skin that gets weathered by the sun and can be scarred by our interactions with the earth. We have faces that develop lines from how much we have laughed, cried or scowled over our lifetime. Our hair changes colour like the leaves on deciduous trees. And if someone decides to carry a baby into the world, their body is changed yet again, with stretch marks and other reminders of the gift they have given: the gift of being able to impact and be impacted by this existence.

We have an idea that the only faces of value are the faces of those socially deemed "beautiful". We are exposed to thousands of images every day of what we are told the right way to look is. Physical attractiveness has become an unattainable obsession only achieved by the few models and celebrities who make it to the magazine covers. However, if we look at the artworks of the old masters, it is revealed that what they held as beautiful and worth celebrating is far different to what we are being told is valuable now. Great portraiture depicts the physical features and the soul simultaneously. A painting can look exactly like a person in every way and still not be a good likeness to the sitter, if there isn't a glimpse of whatever it is underneath the flesh and bones. Our worth and beauty as humans is not tied to our looks, but to the depth of the soul beneath the skin. As a portrait painter who spends hours studying faces, I've learnt that we are not our exterior. Hot soup on a cold day isn't the bowl it's served in; it is the culmination of ingredients, cooking and creation. Just like us, we are not our lips or noses, but the conversations we have shared, books we have read, the people who have loved us and we have loved, the desires we have had, the choices we make and the things that have occurred that have been out of our control.

When we look at an old portrait from hundreds of years ago, of someone who lived in an entirely other world, spoke another language, with utterly different views to us, we are still able to relate to them. We can look at a painting and feel empathy for someone who is living life, exactly like we are. Even though their dress, their customs and beliefs are so far removed from us today, we can peer through that window of paint and see a layered, breathing, living human. They have hopes, dreams, fears, ideas, values and desires. Just like the painter who portrayed them does, just like you do. If art has taught me one thing, it is that we are all part of one collective human spirit. Our connection with each other runs so deep, that we can find similarities and relate to a person who was put in the earth hundreds of years ago. Their humanity and spirit have been retained and preserved through art. We can see their hands and faces and know there was someone who felt, who looked at the world through the same eyes that we are using to observe them. The painter is not just painting a depiction of another human, but also a reflection of themselves. We know behind that canvas was a person, capturing a moment that they got to share with that sitter. Imbedded in the brushstrokes are their trails, choices and feelings, which influence how they relate to their sitter. Although we have no idea what conversations they might have been sharing we know that they are filled with the same spirit we are. What it is to be human is our ability to connect, to relate, to come together, like to play Soccer on a battlefield on Christmas Day, like in the 1914 Truce. We crave one another.

I think that why portraiture continues to thrive and live on. Our desire for connection and need for each other is so deep we cannot help but reflect it in our art. We want to understand it better, even though we live it every single day. I believe in God as love and that exists in everyone. I believe when we hold a space for another to share their story, we are praying without even knowing it. In portraiture a spotlight is shone on an individual, whether a Renaissance king or a modern barista, there is a valuable human with a story to share.