

John Beard *Self Portraits and the Rock*

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John Beard is an important contemporary painter whose struggle to maintain a dynamic tension in seductive images that investigate the structures of representation comes to a head in his recent Self-portrait series and the latest paintings of the Rock and the Sea.

The series began with a large number of studies of an isolated rock off the coast of Portugal made while John was living in Sintra, near Lisbon in 1993. This rock, surrounded by sea in all its moods, seemed to entrance him for several years. In the "Adraga" series it first became clear that the rock had become a figure or a head. John makes no concessions to mimetic suggestions of anthropomorphism, it is simply the intensity of the focus on the singularity of the form that makes an inanimate rock into an identity.



John Beard *Adraga* 2006
oil and wax on linen
250 x 250 cm

In recent years he has made a number of portraits, mostly of himself. The heads fill the canvas vastly bigger than life, but curiously not monumental in the sense that large-scale political portraits can be with their assertion of dominance. The paintings have great presence, but the imagery has been layered over and over with scumbled screens of paint so that the image is almost invisible. At their best the likeness seeps out at you almost like something seen in the dead of night. It looms up at you then recedes. In part this is a kinesthetic effect of light on the surface that requires the viewer to move with the work and the direction of the light. They are more alive to variations of lighting than most pictures I have seen.

I was looking at this self-portrait again the other day and it is something special and I would say 'new' in painting. From a distance in certain lights it appears to be a slightly modulated black monochrome but as you approach it the form of a face appears. It is not that it is a vague or sketchy image on the contrary it seems almost hyper real but on the verge of disappearance. I feel as if it captures that thing where something seen peripherally at twilight seems to be so powerful because it takes the form of memories, dreams strongly affective while fugitive. It reminds me of Berger's "our faces my heart as brief as photos" or words to that effect.

The paint texture is barely visible although it is very dense - in some ways this seems to be delivering perception with invisible means - paradoxically however it comments on the material trajectory of the exhibition because the image and the material (while so subtle as to be imperceptible) are totally synchronized.

Beard is a painter of the late 20th century whose subject is as much painting itself as the objects he renders. In the history of portrait painting there is a fascinating debate that goes back to the mid 19th century. This is the question of authenticity of the image. It is not an issue of faithfulness to the illusion, but to a kind of presence that is realized through the facture of the work. For example the processes that compound our awareness of the paint as material and how this might function as a metaphor for the primordial matter out of which consciousness arises. This expression of process and touch also emphasizes the close proxy presence of the sitter to the viewer¹. When Beard manipulates the image and the viewer into a dance with the light he is pushing this tactility to new heights.

¹ Paul Barlow describes this process in his discussion of Watts and Millais in an essay on the National Portrait Gallery in a book of portraiture edited by Joanna Woodall at the Courtauld Institute London