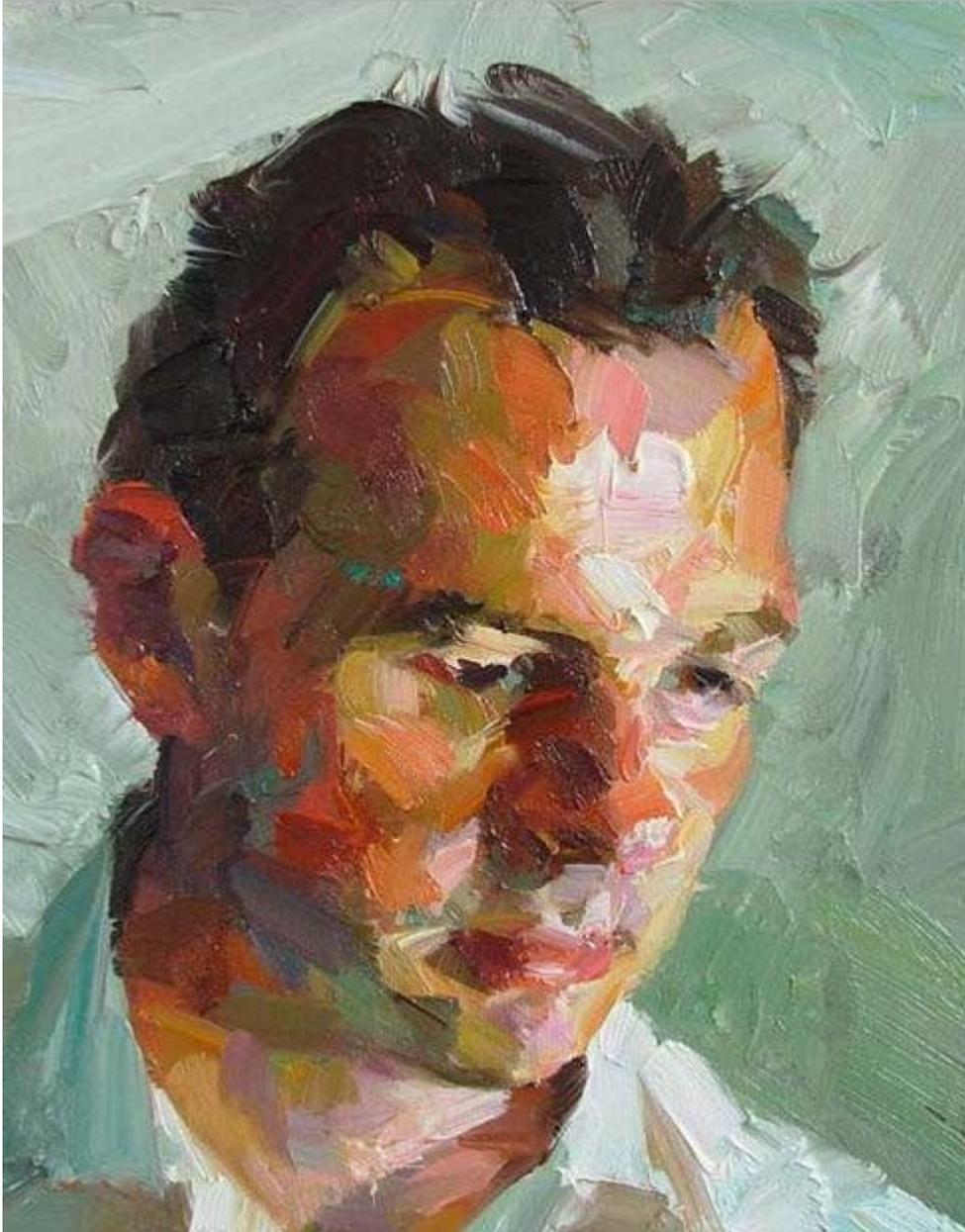


Paul Wright



**Extract from the book “Paul Wright: Painting” by James Pimperton,
John Hyman, Darryl McCarthy & Paul Wright, Published 2010**

Paul Wright by John Hyman

“I saw Paul Wright’s work for the first time at the BP Portrait Award show in 2006. The large, fleshy brushstrokes and the proximity of the subject in *Small Head* reminded me of Tai-Shan Schierenberg’s work, but Paul’s palette was self-consciously decorative—with flashes of turquoise, muted violet and brick-red in the shaded side of the subject’s face—and the mood of the painting was quite different from anything I had seen by Schierenberg. The veiled eyes and the diffident inclination of the head, the milky jade background and the silver light, which glances off the subject’s forehead, nose and lips, spoke in a quieter, more sympathetic tone of voice. The painting was further removed from the influence of Lucien Freud, less blunt in its appraisal of the subject, perhaps with less mettle, but more graceful and more painterly—a unfashionable trade-off, I thought, made with conviction.

Paul’s most successful portraits, many of them illustrated in this book, continue to explore the relationship that animates *Small Head*, between the decorative surface and the subject. In the earlier paintings, the brushstrokes tend to be relatively broad and fluent, laid down methodically. In the more recent ones, they are often taut and fissured, more varied in accent and in size. In *Two Halves*, for example, the head, dipped slightly to one side, and the partly open mouth, are quiet markers of an elegaic mood, but now the background is a neutral gray, intensifying the play of green and salmon-pink in the flesh-tones and the intense chiaroscuro, to which the painting’s name refers. Here, and still more in *Yellow Head* and *The Commuter*, the brushstrokes are more nervous and fissile, flickering across the boundaries of the subject in a way that recalls Alessandro Magasco, or perhaps the portrait of Malle Babbe by Frans Hals.

I contacted Paul soon after the BP show, after finding some more examples of his work online, because I wanted to commission a small portrait of myself on copper. I had commissioned a portrait of my father a few years earlier, to mark his eightieth birthday, and I thought he would enjoy being given one of me, for his eighty-eighth. Copper would intensify the luminous colours I admired in Paul’s work. And a small copper panel would fit comfortably on a shelf—or in drawer, if it didn’t turn out so well.

Paul accepted the commission, and I travelled to Leicester to meet him. His studio, in a large industrial warehouse, is spacious and well lit. A long row of portraits of family and friends was arranged on the far wall. We got on well and found a lot to talk about. I sat in a chair, which we moved from place to place, depending on how Paul wanted the light to fall. After the first twenty or thirty photos, I relaxed, and while he interrogated me with the camera I quizzed him about his work. He said he would travel to Oxford, if he wanted to see me or photograph me again, but in the event this wasn’t necessary. A couple of hours later, I was on the train again, on my way home. We

exchanged a couple of emails as the work progressed, and when it was finished, a few months later, Paul drove down to Oxford for the day.

As he opened the boot—the car was parked in the College Yard—he explained that he had made two paintings on copper. I was welcome to keep one or both of them, as I wished. He had also made a large painting on board, 36 by 24 inches. He explained that the work on the copper panels was fastidious and slow—painting, cleaning the paint off and then painting again, as the conception of the work slowly crystallized in his mind. By the time he was satisfied, he had formed the idea of a larger painting, more richly coloured, more rapid in execution and more tense in mood. He had made this painting very quickly, partly because he no longer needed to remind himself of my appearance; and although he had painted it for himself, I was, he said—with remarkable generosity—welcome to keep it too. But he warned me that I might not like it. It was quite edgy, he said.

Aimée had come with him, so they could see the city together, and after a coffee in the Senior Common Room, which is densely populated by portraits of Provosts, Kings and Queens, the two of them set off. I carried the paintings, still enclosed in boxes, to my room, and opened them with a friend. The paintings on copper were delicate and refined—my father was delighted with the one I gave him—but the panel was extraordinary.

It is hard to describe the experience of seeing a superb portrait of oneself—vivid and forceful considered simply as a work of art, immediately convincing as a likeness, and psychologically exact. There is something narcissistic about it, of course—which is pleasurable and uncomfortable at the same time—but apart from that, it is a peculiarly intense experience of the relationship between the medium and the subject, the relationship on which so much of the value and interest of painting supervenes. One wants to ask, How can *that* be *me*? A few years ago, I published a book in the philosophy of art entitled *The Objective Eye*. I chose as an epigram a remark Francis Bacon made in conversation in 1974: “The longer you work, the more the mystery deepens of what appearance is, or how what is called appearance can be made in another medium.” The spectator cannot experience this mystery in quite the same way as the painter—any more than music heard can be quite like music played—but when the spectator is also the subject, the mystery acquires a peculiar urgency and depth.

In the event, I chose one of the copper panels for my father, and I kept the large painting for myself. For a year or so, I didn’t know where to hang it, so I took it home and it leant against a wall in the spare room. Finally, earlier this year, I took it back to College, and hung it in the room where I teach, the room where I saw it for the first time. It is a high-ceilinged room with pannelled walls, in an imposing early eighteenth-century building. The painting is bold and arresting: it seizes and it holds the eye. But the room is large enough to take it. I hung it behind the chair I sit in, so that I wouldn’t be

distracted by it. As a result, my students can pass the time comparing reality and appearance, or two kinds of relationship between reality and appearance—it's hard to capture the mystery in words—when their concentration flags.

The portraits are the most important part of Paul's body of work to date. But his still lifes and landscapes display the same qualities—a subtle and attractive palette, an accomplished treatment of light and shadow, and increasingly spontaneous brushwork, which enlivens the surface and animates the subject at the same time. Some of the still lifes seem like controlled experiments: the glassy surfaces in *Two Friends*; the brushstrokes breaking the contour of the subject in *Tomato*; the delicate colour harmony on the outside of the bowl in *Double Portrait*; and so on. Each painting is self-sufficient, but seeing them collected together in one volume, comparing portraits with still lifes as well as with one another, reveals a great deal about the creative process involved in making them, and across the five years of work that is represented here, Paul's increasingly bold and energetic style."

John Hyman