

Chantal Joffe,  
*Self-portrait with Esme  
at bedtime*, 2018

# Face to face

Claire Wrathall profiles four artists bringing contemporary flair to portrait painting, an art form that continues to thrive in the age of photography

**P**ortrait painting is doomed,' wrote the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, an advocate for all things modern, in 1922. 'When the time arrives that photographers have learned something about portraiture in its deeper sense, and when the public is weaned from the stupid superstition that a thing painted is necessarily better than a thing done through the new medium,' he predicted, the painted portrait will become 'obsolete'.

His first observation proved right: artists do create portraits by means of photography. But that hasn't extinguished the urge to make, commission or collect contemporary painted portraits. Indeed, far from replacing painted portraiture, photography has come to play a part in its creation, both by releasing the subject from hours of dreary sitting, and enabling the artist to capture details otherwise inaccessible to the naked eye.







Chantal Joffe, *Self-portrait with Esme at bedtime*, 2018, Oil on board, 38.5 x 46.2 x 3 cm, 15 1/8 x 18 1/4 x 1 1/8 in. © Chantal Joffe. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London/Venice



[ ARTISTS IN FOCUS ]

Chantal Joffe in her studio with  
*Rosanna*, 2018. Opposite, from top:  
*Esme (First Painting)*, 2004;  
*The Squid and the Whale*, 2017



This page, portrait: Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London/Venice. Opposite, from top: *Esme (First Painting)*, 2004, Oil on board, 29.2 x 21.8 x 2.3 cm, 11 1/2 x 8 5/8 x 7/8 in. Chantal Joffe, *The Squid and the Whale*, 2017, Oil on board, 84 1/4 x 59 7/8 x 2 3/8 in. © Chantal Joffe. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London/Venice



# Chantal Joffe

Born St Albans, Vermont, USA, 1969

Chantal Joffe's first portrait of her daughter, Esme, shows her wrapped in a shawl on the day she was born. Joffe works from both life and photographs, but on the day itself she 'wasn't really in a fit state to paint'. So the portrait was made a month or so later, marking the start of a series that continues to record her daughter's life. 'Being pregnant was a fantastic subject,' she says of the self-portraits she painted at the time. 'And suddenly there was this baby, and babies are so visual. I had a caesarean, and when she came out she was a dark purple. "Wow, what a great colour!" I said, even in the midst of all the horror.'

The painting is not an idealised image of a mother's love for her newborn. As Joffe points out, the face is 'all puffy and bloated'. Her paintings have a quality redolent of German expressionists such as Max Beckmann, though the influence she cites most is Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907), who also made self-portraiture central to her practice.

Joffe's portraits rarely seek to flatter, so she finds 'having the person there really hard a lot of the time': working from photographs puts the subject at a remove. She alludes to Francis Bacon's line about wanting to 'distort' the subject 'far beyond the appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of the appearance', and praises Alice Neel for 'not caring how [her subjects are] going to feel'.

She is still painting Esme, now 14, but as her daughter develops, she 'gets harder' to capture. 'I'm working on three paintings of her at the moment. And none of them looks like her,' says Joffe, who loves the way Esme is changing as she paints. In some ways, it is easier to be objective about herself - 'I don't care what I look like. I'm after an honest, almost brutal quality,' she says - and she finds the ageing process gripping. She also paints her oldest friend, the artist Ishbel Myerscough, and says it's hard, because she can't really see her getting older. 'She still looks to me the age when we met, which was 19. It's like that Nancy Mitford quote,' she says, alluding to a line in *The Pursuit of Love* about how one's friends are 'held like flies, in the amber of that moment' when you first meet them: 'click goes the camera and on goes life'.

Although she occasionally paints her partner, Esme's father, Joffe's subjects tend to be female. 'Some men are interesting to look at,' she says, 'but most of the time I think women are more interesting-looking. I can imagine my way into women in a way I can't with men.'

Biography and autobiography are the forms of writing she most loves to read, so they surely have some bearing on the way she thinks about painting. She strives to 'think as' her subjects and identify with them, but ultimately, she suggests, her work is about herself. 'Maybe I am a bit self-obsessed,' she admits. 'But if you are trying to be truthful you do expose a lot of yourself. It's a way of owning the moment, of holding onto a moment.' Her paintings are not 'autobiographical so much as memoir'.

[www.victoria-miro.com](http://www.victoria-miro.com). [www.heimread.com](http://www.heimread.com)

