



Mark Milroy. *Portrait of Douglas Crase*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 33 x 27 inches.

Douglas Crase

MARK MILROY
PAINTS MY PORTRAIT

People should wait to be famous before having their portraits painted. It's only polite. Although in that case how does one account for certain memorable examples of the postwar era, including Fairfield Porter's early portraits of poets James Schuyler and John Ashbery? They weren't famous then. I suppose they wanted to be, which raises the question: Is it sheer vanity that motivates a sitter?

The predictable answer is yes. The English critic Michael Archer, author of *Art Since 1960*, wrote once that the very mention of portraiture made him snort with derision. If we must have portraits their subjects should at least be famous—the celebrities painted by Elizabeth Peyton, or morally didactic figures re-imagined by Gerhard Richter—subjects that arguably elevate an artist's work to the status of history painting. Better yet would be a video feed of random pedestrians in Trafalgar Square. But for an individual sitter, warned Archer, to have your portrait painted was a “preposterous bit of self-aggrandisement,” and the artist who functioned as a “jobbing portrait painter” had nothing at all to do with contemporary art.

Behind a sneer, of course, there is usually fear. Surely I felt a kind of fear when Mark Milroy announced he should paint my portrait and showed me a postcard reproduction of his work. I hesitated. Or perhaps my preposterous vanity hesitated, because this Milroy didn't look like the Porter portraits I admired. For one thing, I had no idea who it was. Proud, handsome, the subject was nonetheless anonymous to history. Later it would be possible to construct a genealogy of the portrait's style, but my first attention stumbled on its unexpected visual heft. It was more material than virtual, as if Porter (to say nothing of Peyton and Richter) could be placed lovingly in the pantheon, there to be acknowledged without being followed.

Something in the pose of the anonymous subject also implied that sitting for one's portrait was not the same art event for the sitter

as described by the critic. For the sitter it was perhaps an investigation—an individualized instance of conceptual art—which promised to succeed despite the fear of self-aggrandisement. Or indeed because of it. Aren't you supposed to go in the direction of your fear? In fact, it suddenly occurred to me that deciding not to sit for your portrait because portraits are an exhausted tradition would make no more sense than deciding not to have sex because your parents and grandparents have already done it. Besides, it would get me admitted again to an artist's studio.

By the time he proposed my portrait, Milroy was painting from his studio in a nineteenth-century barn in northeast Pennsylvania. For a dozen years he taught drawing at the National Arts Club, while his work appeared in independent galleries in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Sag Harbor. Living in Manhattan, raising one son and expecting another, but facing a merciless rise in rent, he and the writer Kelly McMasters decided to move their family full-time to the farmstead they had purchased earlier to have a place in the country. The township where they would now live was twice the area of Manhattan with a population of 656, or fifteen residents per square mile. From the porch Milroy added to their farmhouse you could hear, on a cold autumn night, more coyotes than that.

The romance of the place did not disappoint me (it might have been *Home in the Woods* by Thomas Cole), although I wondered as I parked the car and Milroy came forward from his studio in the barn if I had disappointed him. His face fell, just for an instant. I had been told to wear whatever was comfortable, and because I spend the better part of my life in nearly identical work shirts had worn one of those. Comfortable it was, but no doubt austere compared to the striped crimson vest worn by the subject on his sample postcard.

As we entered the barn my confidence recovered. Milroy was converting the structure himself, and had chosen to emphasize its dramatic lift of space. There was a window where the hayloft door would have been, so the north light fell from a great height to suffuse this distant workplace with its uniform glow. Since our first item of business was to agree on the portrait's size, I was invited to look at several finished canvases: a richly hued head-and-shoulders

of New York publicist Lauren Cerand, an ambitiously scaled portrait of a mother and daughter, *Anita and Nora*, and the perfectly sized, three-quarters view of slouching choreographer Stanley Love, whose posture betrayed the resting energy of a feral cat.

It was an intimate exhibition, curated for an audience of one. But it set in motion the kind of experience you can have at a crowded retrospective when the aesthetic on view locks suddenly into place as if you'd been preparing for it all your life. These weren't the faces of restrained transport one sees in Porter's latter-day transcendentalists. Nor were they faces of anguish, apathy, or incipient necrosis as rendered by the expressionist and realist artists to whom Milroy is sometimes compared. Placed next to those previous examples, the individuals in his paintings would appear to inhabit, as the saying goes, another planet. If the paint was expressionistic the faces were not. They had the fated caution of animals, making me think I had entered not so much a studio as a cabinet of specimens at some alternative stage in our natural history.

Sitting for your portrait is said to be a collaboration, or a contest of wills. The painter Michael Wishart likened sitting for his friend Lucian Freud to undergoing delicate eye surgery (this was before lasers). Milroy favored the collaboration approach, explaining several times that we would work together to make the portrait a mutually satisfying event. I'm afraid I suspected on the spot that his words were rehearsed. It's true I was consulted. We had no sooner got started than he asked what color were my eyes and I thought, *huh?* This guy can't distinguish the color of my eyes and I'm going to let him paint me? Until on the instant I had to suppress a smile, remembering the orthopedic surgeon who, as he directed me to remove my jeans so he could examine a trick knee, asked gravely, "Are you wearing underwear?" Each was creating a record: the surgeon against a harassment charge, and Milroy, not against getting the color wrong but against insulting my untaught sense of color. He must have had subjects who believed their dim eyes were blue, or dishwater hair blond, before they saw otherwise in the finished portrait.

Martin Gayford, whose book *Man with a Blue Scarf* was about sitting for Freud, made the interesting observation that to sit for a portrait is like returning to youth. It affords the luxury of long hours in which to trade ideas, jokes, and stories. The appeal of such a luxury perhaps varies with the personalities involved. The feminist writer Naomi Mitchison, sitting in the 1930s for Wyndham Lewis, remarked that she would have sex with him so she didn't have to listen to his opinions. Schuyler recalled that Porter rarely spoke. Milroy, however, talked freely and did his best to make me reciprocate. We compared tastes and shared complaints. On one occasion he looked out from the easel, brush poised, and asked did I look more like my mother or father? Since he'd never seen either of those individuals I hardly believed the answer could help him. Father, I replied, although alas I have my mother's smirk. She would try to smile and all she could do was smirk.

"I think I've got the smirk," he said in wicked triumph.

But no matter how animated the conversation, it was still not a collaboration. I took a plaid shirt to the second sitting, thinking to make up for my monochrome first impression. Milroy wasn't interested. Apparently, he had accepted my mail-order wardrobe as a challenge. This was all as it should have been. I wasn't standing over his shoulder to create a self-portrait by proxy. I wasn't staging a self to be portrayed.

The genteel skeptic will interject that there's no self to be portrayed, anyway. It is customary now to believe that consciousness is contingent, fragmentary, multiple, to the point that the individual is less a reality than a social construct. The curator Donna De Salvo reflected on this changed perception prior to an exhibition of portraits she installed at the Parrish Museum. "Portraiture is an incredibly complex topic," she said. "A lot of it doesn't even have faces in it anymore." And that was 1995. The self has hardly recovered its authority in the meantime.

Artists and critics seem oddly proud of this devaluation of their subjective being. Some have been happy to discredit the self as a way of discrediting expressionist painting, or lyric poetry. For a while, they discredited it so forcefully one could be forgiven for

wondering who was the enemy, and where the argument. Had they never read "Self-Reliance"? Or were they so taken in by secondhand intelligence they didn't realize that the notorious essay with the ironic title was a lesson in how to evade self-interest and rely, instead, on our common origin. Ashbery is the poet who restated the lesson most usefully for our time. "We must learn to live in others," he wrote; "they create us."

How simple and beautiful that formula is, and hard to follow. Stating it, however, one begins to understand why sitting for your portrait can become an individualized instance of conceptual art. One sits for a portrait as for a translation. One sits to be othered. *Je est un autre*, your portrait will say, as before your eyes it escapes its occasion.

David Hockney maintained that portraiture is an instinct. "It cannot be taught," he wrote. Others believe it's a fallacy to imagine that a painter can reveal the complications of a subject. If we think it possible, so the argument goes, this is only because we've learned to read the conventions of the craft. An abundance of paint means intensity, tangled paint means complex emotions, and so on. The Neo-Expressionists of the 1980s gave this kind of art a bad name—they were proof positive of the "expressive fallacy"—and no one, unless it is disguised as ceramics or rope-work, has dared to like it since.

I suppose that is why Milroy's work first caused me to hesitate. He uses a lot of paint and rarely thins it, until his canvases become as physical as you sense his perception of the sitters must be. One never finds in his work the flat, affect-free surface meant to glorify the mechanically reproducible while remaining aloof from the mess of human biology. His colors slip and accumulate, often right to their edges. Yet none muddies the color adjacent. In this way, his paintings reflect the temporal slippage of lived experience, but without dissolving into any skeptical disregard of the boundaries that inhere, sometimes sternly, in physical fact.

One might expect from the expressive physics of his surfaces that Milroy flings himself at the canvas. That wasn't the case. He painted intently, but with an air of directed husbandry. You could

imagine him leveling a door. At the same time, the man did love his paints. Turning *ut pictura poesis* on its head, he once spoke to me of the lure of writing. "Often I wish I could write," he said reflectively. "But then I know I would just want to be in the studio with my paints; it happens with everything." The dedication was shared by the whole family. At a later sitting, his two-year-old son, Angus, selected one of the costliest sable brushes from its place on a painting table, brought it carefully across the studio, and handed it to me. When I thanked him he removed his Yale baseball cap and solemnly offered me that, as well.

A fear of painting is not new. Tom Hess, the admired editor of *Art News* in its glory years, anticipated the aversion as long ago as 1953. "Ever since Van Gogh," he wrote in the renowned *Paints a Picture* series published by his magazine, "sentimentality has been the curse of the painters, who took the liberty to distort." Hess was writing about de Kooning, and his thesis was that de Kooning had found a way around expressionist self-pity by rendering the contorted figure with his broadly gestural brush. Porter, somewhat later, was said to find a way around realist exhaustion by realizing the vision of Vuillard through de Kooning's handling of paint. Milroy, according to this approach, can be said to outflank expressionism by containing its intense choreography in the diagnostic grace of the neglected English painter Cedric Morris.

Given the forthright sympathies of his work, it should be no surprise that Milroy discovered an affinity for this painter whose portraits occasioned a near riot when they were exhibited in London in 1938. "Humans I regard as an unpredictable species of animal," Morris once said, which no doubt explains why his portrayals provoked the outrage. Like Milroy's, his subjects neither seek nor expect pity. Their self-containment is expressed in their forward attention, a pose traditional for gods and emperors but familiar as well to anyone who was ever stared down by a cow or cat. The same pose is favored by Milroy. In his early *Joan Hornig*, the subject appears in a nimbus of hat and flowers as if she were a detail, from some contemporary *Primavera*, of the goddess Flora. Fate in such an image replaces motive. On his iPhone, Milroy showed me the

abrupt frontality of Morris's fiery portrait of the novelist Mary Butts, remarking with approval, "Doesn't she look like something from outer space!"

Discreet friends will secretly want to know if I paid Milroy a commission for my "individualized instance of conceptual art." Others will ask outright. So the answer is yes, I certainly did. But this subject of commissions is vexed, and invites hypocrisy. Gayford confided in his book that Freud found commissions so distasteful he refused them—when of course that painter received from Gayford exactly the compensation he had in mind, which was lasting publicity. Porter's dealer, Tibor de Nagy, claimed that Porter wished only to paint his friends—when in fact that painter undertook portraits of his friends because he hoped the examples would attract paying clients. One who commissioned a portrait by Porter was the young Andy Warhol. Twenty years later, Warhol was turning out portraits himself. At his peak he could accommodate fifty clients per year, at forty thousand dollars each. The resulting two million in annual fees must have made him one of the great jobbing portrait painters of all time.

Confront it with facts, and the epithet "jobbing" thus shrinks to snobbery. Why not accuse the artist of living over a shop? The irony is almost poignant when the charge issues from someone who believes art should resist global capitalism. Everyone knows the engines of the art world are coupled to capitalist excess at its most egregious. So how can principled people, the same ones who are likely to favor sustainable agriculture, practiced and consumed on a human scale, regard with disdain a private transaction on behalf of sustainable art? We ought to reflect on what the commission truly represents in an art-world context. Artists paint portraits their clients are buying to keep. Surely, artworks meant to be loved and kept represent a practical, attainable strategy for circumventing the detested market.

Being the object of Milroy's perception, hours at a time, convinced me meanwhile that the infamous "male gaze" must be no fiction. If anybody had it, Mark Milroy did. "The human being in front of you has complications," he once told an interviewer for

Dan's Papers, the Hamptons weekly. "I want the complications." My plan was to stare back, fully aware that my image could be caught wide-eyed like a Mary Butts from outer space. I assumed I was thoroughly prepared. When I was finally allowed to see the portrait, however, my immediate impulse was to laugh. Since the painting (shirt included) was brilliant, since Milroy was regarding me quizzically and McMasters, too, was present, I managed to hold it down to a chuckle. But my old friend Chris Cox had been proved right. Years earlier, Chris wrote in passing in the *Soho News* that I was "as tall and thin and preacherly as a character out of Washington Irving." At the time, I was too young to laugh at myself. Now, after decades of striving to correct my fate, I had lived long enough to be amused.

Portraits are aesthetically intensified perceptions, and intense perception makes people nervous. They defend themselves in the case of a portrait by calling it a caricature. Critics who are ill-disposed toward portraits, as a genre, describe them as "verging" on caricature. They probably shouldn't use the term at all, verging or no, because a portrait can be a caricature only if you think it is a depiction rather than a painting. One never hears that Cézanne's hills are caricatures of hills, or Braque's guitars, of guitars. Nor was Milroy's portrait a caricature of me. He had perceived a figure in paint, no more capable of avoiding its fate than a mink, a rabbit, or a wolf.

However intense the artist's perception, one still has to wonder if it can be keen enough to portray fame, the way some seem to think it should. The critic Arthur Danto expressed the same good taste as Michael Archer, albeit from a different direction, when he once made fun of the rich who sought portraits by Warhol that would make them look as famous as Marilyn Monroe. Danto was a philosopher before he was an art critic. So I presume he was making a casual jest, rather than asking us to conclude, as a matter of philosophy, that Warhol indeed had rendered the fame of Monroe in paint.

Either way, his remark should indicate the presence among us of another fallacy—not about expressionism this time, but about fame. The fallacy can be detected by considering, as a kind of thought

experiment, how we might fit certain attributes to our viewing of an imaginary portrait. Imagine it's the portrait of a face we are seeing for the first time. "Look at that portrait," we say. "Look at how beautiful she is," we might justifiably add. Look at how thoughtful; look at how sad.

But imagine I said of the same portrait, "Look at how famous she is." It sounds nonsensical, but why? The attribute doesn't fit the category. Where on the human face did I see the fame? In what cast of eye, or lift of brow? It doesn't inhere in the physical person. It is only reputational; and it is a reputational fallacy to believe that portraits of the famous portray their fame.

This is not to say, of course, that a painter can't add the indexical signs. That's what the swords, pearls, globes, and sunglasses are for. Among the reproductions I saw pinned to a bulletin board in Milroy's studio was one that made explicitly this point: the portrait by Cedric Morris of Paul Odo Cross, an art collector of Native American descent, whose background so much resembles an ancient petroglyph it could be a Gottlieb gouache before the fact. Likewise indexical roles have been assumed in Milroy's work by the rooftops of Hell's Kitchen that appear behind his subjects *Glen and Kelvin*, the chihuahuas held by his sitters in *Portrait of Pam and Josh*, even the light-flecked scurf that prefigures the emergent being of *Christopher Wolf*. Wrote publicist Cerand, who posted on her blog the first of two portraits Milroy painted of her, "Also the background is inspired by van Gogh's *The Postman*, which he didn't even know *that I love*."

My own reaction would be a lot like Cerand's as my eyes coursed over the painting that was to bear my name. In the background were distant hills, beneath an overcast sky that suggested summer haze or, nowadays, the unseen CO₂. One hopes it was not methane, for these were the shuddering hills of northeast Pennsylvania. I was surprised to see them as part of my portrait (bookshelves might have been the obvious choice), since Milroy couldn't know I had just made a pilgrimage to one of those hills, north of his studio by only half an hour. That was Kingsbury Hill, elevation 1,818 feet, which affords from the pioneer cemetery near

its summit one of the more stupendous views over the Delaware Valley to the east. Silence, even at that height, magnifies distance; the early settlers, who were from Connecticut, must sometimes have stood here half hoping to see all the way back home.

Because Frank, my husband, has Kingsburys in his family tree, we drove up to the cemetery to have a look. It was the same month Milroy proposed my portrait. The silence at the summit had been displaced by the thrumming tower of an exploratory well, the Hammond IV, drilled by the Hess Corporation in anticipation of fracturing the underlying shale to capture natural gas. This, of course, would be fracking. At the end of the year there were five thousand shale wells active in Pennsylvania, and another twelve hundred waiting for connection to a pipeline. One major pipeline crosses the Delaware, traverses New Jersey, and connects to a spur that dives under the Hudson to enter Manhattan at Gansevoort Street. By the following spring, thirteen hundred buildings in the city had made the conversion (mandated, by the way) from oil-fired boilers to the cleaner-burning gas now flowing in from Pennsylvania. Those buildings were soon joined by others, including the one where Frank and I have long had our apartment. We were assessed for the conversion. The subject Milroy portrayed, the one bearing my name, can protest fracking in Pennsylvania and return home to a hot shower in Chelsea fueled by the fracking he hates, and subsidizes.

Milroy's portrait of me was thus like those portraits in fiction that track ahead of time the subject's fate. I had become the Dorian Gray who made it possible to recognize what troubled and fascinated me that first day in the studio. The portraits I saw were not what I had in mind. The faces Milroy had perceived and painted were those of a species that must choose to live, if not in its own demise, then in the demise of the conditions and other species that have made its life on earth seem human. It is life by enforced complicity. In the long tradition of portraiture, the change of registry will of course be subtle. It is also complete.

Emerson asked in his magnificent essay "Fate" what he thought was a rhetorical question: "If, in the least particular, one could derange the order of nature,—who would accept the gift of

life?" He could not have known the question would come to sound naive. The familiar portraits of expressionist, realist, and our more recent didactic art have all implied that it matters whether the individuals portrayed once suffered, cared, or inflicted evil. Being deviations from a standard, they all but begged for the correction that would redress their fate. The subjects of Milroy's work could have no such expectation. They were, to borrow a term, hauntological: haunted not by the deficient past but by a certain future. In his remote studio in this imperiled place, Milroy was painting the faces of the first geological age to be initiated by a species that knows what it has done. The paintings he showed me—mine now belonged among them—were portraits not of fame but fate, which made them history paintings, after all.