



REALITY

MITCH GRIFFITHS



FOREWORD

It is astonishing that a painter like Mitch Griffiths exists for he has no right to. His pictures are figurative, minutely finished and, in the larger oils, as compositionally complex as any figurative paintings currently being produced. If you believe those with authority in contemporary art matters, those who can see better than the rest of us, Griffiths's painting is neither intellectually stimulating nor emotionally engaging. His style of work, we are told, is pointless, and not what we should be expecting of a serious painter in the 21st century. These authorities are, of course, wrong, deeply wrong, and in the future viewers of art will have far more idea of the way we live now and what tortured our thoughts from Griffiths's work than ever they will from any Turner Prize winner.

Fortunately there are those among us whose eyes are neither blinded nor blinkered by Modernism, or its latest twin offspring, Careerism and Opportunism. We are still able to appreciate the worth of a figurative painting, which is well made by an honest and unpretentious craftsman. We do not have to be told by anyone else what Mitch Griffiths's paintings are about because for the patient observer they explain themselves. They require no expert interpretation. We can see and interpret them perfectly well for ourselves. As a painter Griffiths is well aware that some of the mysterious pleasure of looking at paintings is the necessary quest for clues and meanings embedded in them.

Griffiths's work has on several occasions achieved notice and honourable mention at the BP Portrait Award, the main event for figurative painting staged annually at the National Portrait Gallery. His works make a bigger splash there than most, not only because they are not visibly based on photographs (over-reliance on photography is always a bad sign in an artist expecting to be taken seriously as a painter) but also because he is not scared to state clearly his intentions and objectives. His pictures are legibly packed with detail, the insights bluntly honest. Also, and significantly, his pictures stand out because of their large size. Griffiths accepts big challenges whereas few participants in the BP Award attempt even a single full-length figure. Indeed, there may be only one other large work in the gallery and certainly only one other picture in which numerous interacting sitters have been attempted. Such complex compositions are tricky to conceive, plan, resolve and execute and they are well beyond the ambition, commitment and energy of most: they are also, it would seem, well beyond the ability of most.

Think about it. When we are asked, as we are so regularly by the newspapers and other art authorities, to worship the greatest living figurative painters in Britain (and I'm thinking of one ancient nocturnal painter in particular) there is rarely more than one person depicted, two on a good day. Now look at Griffiths's "The Inebriated Nation". Here are nine almost life size figures unified in one scene. And they are not just stood in a line like beauty contestants or ranged in a row like an audience. They are energetically reacting, each in their own way, to a central action and still the composition holds its ground. This is the kind of complexity that was common in many Old Master paintings but would defeat all but the most skilful contemporary figurative painters. The ease with which this canvas appears to have been brought off belies the failed compositions that Griffiths admits preceded the finished version. All artists work in this way, building up from weakness or failure, making hard-won achievement appear effortless.

Griffiths's success is all the more astonishing given that he is self-taught. He studied graphic design and then illustration but was taught almost nothing of use to an easel painter. This is a sign of the low esteem in which figurative painting is held in art colleges. Griffiths has had, of necessity, to make his own way both artistically and commercially. The same is true for many of today's figurative painters, many of whom are approaching middle age before they master the skills necessary to succeed in figurative work. In the Renaissance a painter like Griffiths would have been indentured to a master at, say, 12 years old and by the age of 20 would have worked his way through a comprehensive grounding in the science and chemistry of painting. He would have observed on many occasions his master conceiving, orchestrating and executing his religious scenes to the extent that he was now participating in the actual painting of lesser figures and perhaps even painting approved copies. He would almost certainly have been making his own forays into a personal style based on what he had learned. Such a comprehensive grounding is no longer possible and artists like Griffiths succeed in spite of a training system that militates against them.

Aside from their obvious technical dexterity, what do Griffiths's paintings say? Obviously he is trying to convey something more than merely his formal abilities in painting. Narrative is equally unfashionable in a figurative painter but Griffiths remains undeterred. He expresses his anxieties about modern life in a symbolic and illustrative way. One can expect no more of any artist than that they give convincing form to their observations of the everyday such as it appears to them. In "The Inebriated Nation", for example, he uses familiar religious iconography to express his concerns about the relatively recent ubiquity of public drunkenness. He has chosen not to paint the undignified urban scene of those who parade nursing tins or of the shameless displays of raucousness, aggression and vomiting so habitual in our towns. Instead, he opts for the more interesting approach of echoing an Old Master biblical scene of self-sacrifice with its implication of cruel, needless death and loss. It is a bold and ambitious picture.

The one reason more than any other why you should take Griffiths seriously is that he is not prepared to compromise his commitment to painting better and more expressively for the purposes of appearing fashionable and popular or for making quick sales of shallow work. Like many painters he works quietly and assiduously, edging closer to virtuosity, accepting and enjoying the quest for improvement. Make no mistake, he is an artist to watch and follow.

David Lee

Editor, 'The Jackdaw'

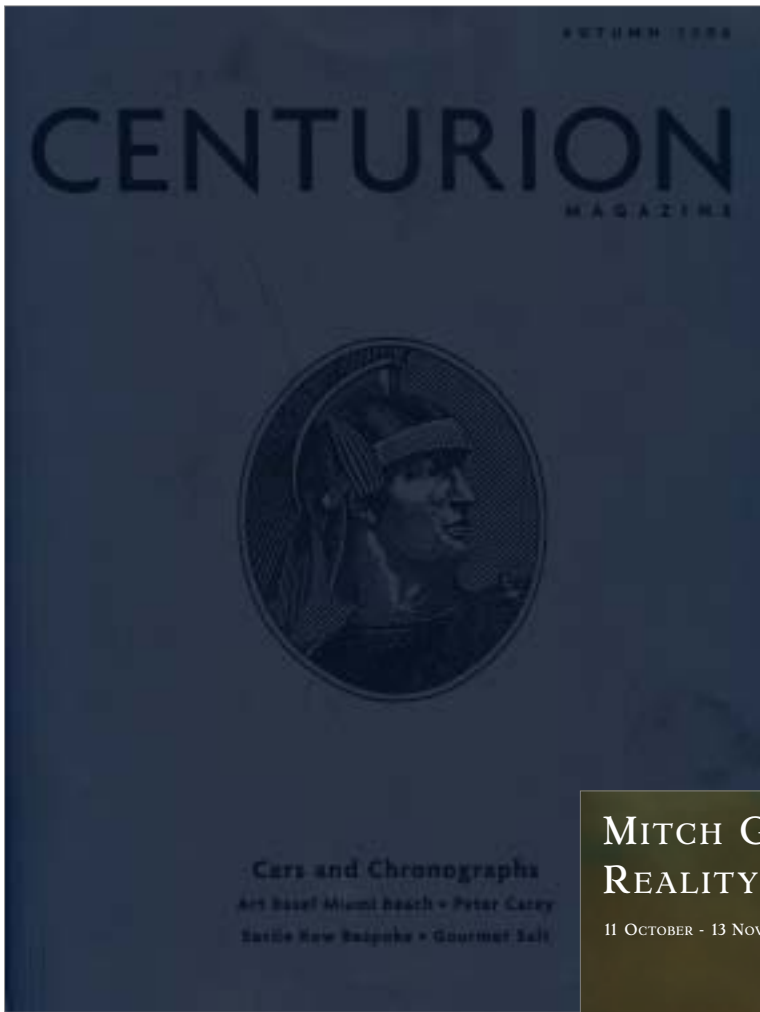
REALITY

MITCH GRIFFITHS

MODERN PAINTERS



AMEX CENTURION



MITCH GRIFFITHS REALITY

11 OCTOBER - 13 NOVEMBER 2006

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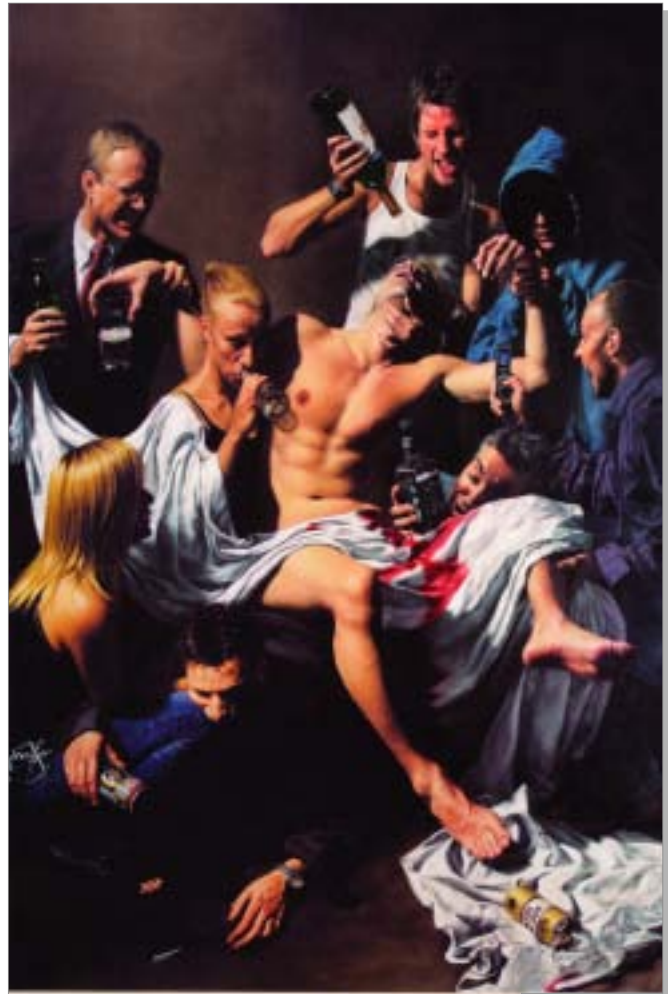
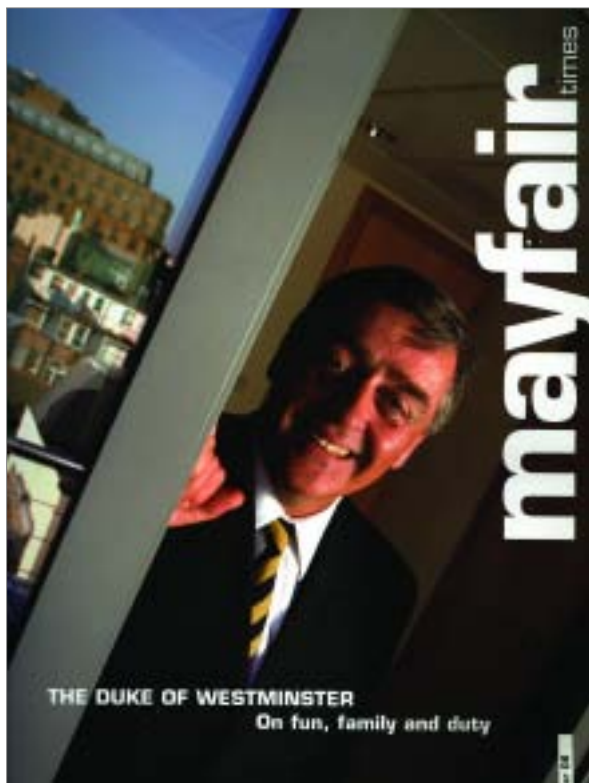
MITCH GRIFFITHS

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MAYFAIR TIMES



We're all branded now

BIS-BRAND LABELS are put under the spotlight in Holcom Gallery's latest exhibition, *Reality*. The show brings together new paintings by Mitch Griffiths that consider the influence of consumer brands on 21st-century society.

Drug abuse, sexual deviance and self-harming are all explored through Griffiths' large-scale works, with the artist's paribotish pointing firmly at the big boys of business. The picture *21st Century Boy* depicts a Mousie-looking man dressed only in Calvin Klein underpants and a crown of credit cards. His torso is marked by cuts, and a Coca-Cola trademark has been seared in to his skin. *Cutting Edge* shows a girl being a (sensored) feminist, her jumper branded with 'Drug', underlined by the distinctive Nike tick. *Hezbollah Nation* (pictured) speaks for itself.

While the subject matter may be contemporary, Griffiths' painting style harks back to that of the Old Masters, with a particular nod to Caravaggio in both lighting and composition. The paintings appear at the next pageant for it.

Reality runs from October 11 to November 12 at Holcom Gallery, 29 Bepton Street, Tel: (020) 7481 7441.



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Who is at fault, the artists or judges?

The four paintings short-listed for this year's GP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery are not the best of the GP on show. We should be questioning the suitability of the judges



ROBERT SCHINDLER, 1904, by Paul Gauguin

THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY'S GP PORTRAIT AWARD is a curious thing. It is a prize for a portrait painting, but the judges are not artists. They are a group of people who are not even artists themselves. They are a group of people who are not even artists themselves. They are a group of people who are not even artists themselves.



ROBERT SCHINDLER, 1904, by Paul Gauguin

JUDGES OF THE GP PORTRAIT AWARD are a curious thing. They are a group of people who are not even artists themselves. They are a group of people who are not even artists themselves. They are a group of people who are not even artists themselves.

'The convention of appointing a judge from the sponsoring body is about as foolish as requiring the donor of a kidney machine to decide which patients should receive dialysis'



ROBERT SCHINDLER, 1904, by Paul Gauguin

I AM NOT SURE THAT THE CONVENTION OF APPOINTING A JUDGE FROM THE SPONSORING BODY IS ABOUT AS FOOLISH AS REQUIRING THE DONOR OF A KIDNEY MACHINE TO DECIDE WHICH PATIENTS SHOULD RECEIVE DIALYSIS.

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ROBERT SCHINDLER, 1904, by Paul Gauguin

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portraiture and narrative, is the triple self-portrait by Mitch Griffiths more self-mocking allegory than portrait? It is, in its ugly way a work of substantial authority, technically more than competent, and damn it though many will fix its references to ancestral painters, Caravaggio among them (the Seven Deadly Sins in place of the Seven Works of Mercy), it should have been short-listed for a prize. Phil Hale's portrait of Robert Schindler is, if not a proper portrait, certainly a proper picture, far superior to those short-listed. Paul Lisak's study of a troubled priest — another acknowledgement of Caravaggio's idiom — is a brave and painterly attempt to explore the pattern of the long half-length without being overwhelmed by its conventions.

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Further galleries opening

29 New Bond Street, Mayfair, London - opening November 2006

24 Bruton Street, Mayfair, London - opening Summer 2007