

Gavin Hurley
Salty Yarns Of The Sea

June 2006
Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland



DRAWING A BLANK:
HEAD SHOTS FROM HISTORY
by Hanna Scott

With the head shot, everyone is shown to be a celebrity, and celebrity itself is revealed as a form of cultural embalming.

– Ralph Rugoff



Bless The Beast, 2006.
Oil on hessian, 555 x 695mm

Like mugshots and identikits, Gavin Hurley's portraits are too close and personal to be heroic. His synthesised historical characters have a glass-eyed, impassive stare. They are petrified in that wax-model way of looking out from the past. Well preserved in painted layers, they confront the present by staring back at the viewer. Alternately intense, vapid, sullen, macho, Hurley's portraits conform to a condition identified by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe of "contemporary subjectivity", a condition cultivated by blankness. He writes, "In the contemporary context blankness is eloquent rather than the absence of a message, the condition of a subject whose fashionably blank expression, formerly known as a lack of expression, is neither communicative nor incommunicative but rather bring the two as close together as they can get."²

A blank sheet of paper is a powerful metaphor in cinematic circles, with a distinct legacy. Silent filmmaker Rouben Mamoulian used a lack of facial expression to prompt infinite speculation about a character's mind-set. In *Queen Christina* (1932) he reportedly gave actress Greta Garbo very specific directions: "Have you heard of tabula rasa? I want your face to be a blank sheet of paper. I want the writing to be done by every member of the audience. I'd like it if you could avoid even blinking your eyes, so that you're nothing but a beautiful mask." Those comments are echoed in 1963 by Alfred Hitchcock who said that the face is much easier to read when it is a blank sheet of paper, asking his actors to eliminate redundant facial expression. Hurley's collage portraits draw on this legacy. Made with pages recycled from old books, they resonate with a filmic flashback effect where a character's back-history of anecdotes, gags, fairy tales is reduced to a visual token, attached to a carefully neutral facial study.

Hurley's new paintings are genteel morality portraits of bye-gone subjects: celebrity head-shots from history. The lady friend in *Le Coiffure* is based on a real woman who – despite the sensuous curved upper lip and perfectly tubular neck Hurley grants her – was jilted by Casanova. Our own dubious celebrity



Second Mette, 2006.
Oil on hessian, 1350 x 1000mm

explorer Captain Cook is post-colonially cast in a doleful light by his naming as *My Sad Captain*. Hurley's dispassionate portraits are cultivated from historical sources, grafted from the flotsam and jetsam of consumer society which Hurley finds in flea markets, antique stalls and junk shops. Wearing their foibles on their sleeves, or as hairpins, Hurley paints his characters with a knowing sense that their blankness is a foil. Each mute character is built up, accreted in painted or paper layers as an antidote to a contemporary culture which already has too much history, too much information.

Like the Kuleshov Experiment in cinema, Hurley's works draw on found material. Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov conducted the experiment around 1918, inter-cutting a blank close-up of a Tsarist matinee star with footage of a plate of soup, a girl, a child's coffin. The audience attributed an entire vocabulary of emotions and moods to the re-appearing face, even though in each case its expression did not change at all. Hurley, like many other contemporary artists, exploits this effect of emotional projection in his dispassionate character studies. Roni Horn's diaristic portraits use near identical close-ups, juxtaposed with other imagery to suggest how a person can "feel" like the weather, or a landscape, or the environment – a technique that draws on the Kuleshov Effect. (Like Horn, Hurley also uses repetition, often painting the same character over and over with minute differences, prompting us to reconsider the context of looking, and the neglected art of seeing.)³

When you know Hurley's pictorial devices have a history, it prompts you to speculate on their ancestry. For instance, a found photograph of a floral anchor became a touchstone for his *Salty Yarns Of The Sea* series. The photograph is a marker of Hurley's particular form of historicism – one that he constructs from incidental visual footnotes. The ribbon claims the project for Greenwich Royal Hospital School, and ties up the bouquet with an innate sense of duty, service, bravery and time off for good behaviour. That anchor motif makes an appearance in *Girl With Anchors And Yarn* Hurley's portraits offer cult figures an afterlife, complete with pot-boiled memento mori relics and the accoutrements of maritime life. These characters are the undead. With these inscrutable personalities the cues are ambiguous. The anchors and rope coiled around the girl's neck could be a wistful allusion or an indication of foul play.

Hurley's collages are made from antique papers which occasionally have

text showing through from the reverse side, giving skin just the right flesh tone of faded quality paper leaden down, blackened by steady, even type. His pages are already written, redeployed from their original purpose. Hurley's use of recycled paper draws neatly back to the metaphor of a blank page. The inexpressive face and the blank page merge. Hurley's works can't help but point out that the blank face and the blank sheet of paper are both already full of meaning, even if they only denote impassivity or the absence of a mark.

Hurley's blankness has a grain. The surface texture of linen plays across his subjects' faces, giving them the quality of tweedy hardcover books, the kind that are now relegated to second-hand stores. That bookish quality makes the faces appear as if they are emerging from the pages of history, as if they have been, not buried, but perhaps submerged, under the weight of it. Their eyes, cheeks, lips are all enmeshed with the same flat texture, the pallor of memory.

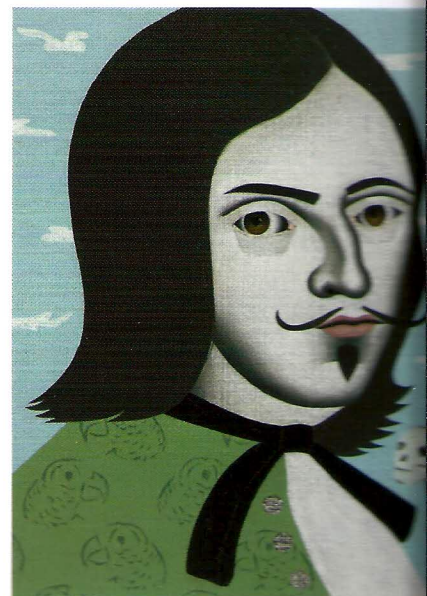
Over decades, blankness has been mined and in-filled to the point of no return by artists, actors, supermodels, puppet politicians. For contemporary audiences, the head shot is more likely to evoke a marketable individuality or brand than an essence or emotion. Hurley's women are full frontal, disembodied heads. Like ornamental busts or cameos, they are literally fragments. The men's more naturalistic three-quarter poses anchor them in pictorial space. Blankness is associated with flawlessness. But Hurley's clip-art collage aesthetic is often more akin to a Mr Potato Head expressiveness than a sublime tabula rasa. These works suggest an operating mode where expression can be adopted from a prescribed range of emoticons, or a set of found props.

Hurley's portraits can be compared with the works of American painter of middle class blankness, Alex Katz, who much more readily adopts the props of fashion and the details of textiles in his works – the trappings of biography. Both artists use traditional conventions of portraiture. Like Katz, the inclusion of incidental props locates and individualises the sitter: the lap dog or hanky, fan or piece of drapery. But in Hurley's works, these props are not at the service of biography or resemblance, rather they are kitsch, clichés cribbed and collaged. Kuleshov-like, from remotely-connected historical sources. In contrast to Katz, Hurley's works are much more reductionist, paring down his props to fragments, symbols or types, which pushes his work

towards the more normative or typological works of British artist Julian Opie.

Daniel Kurjakovic, in his essay on Opie, *Possible Portraits*, questions what he can see in a figure, without resorting to either memory or to projection.⁴ Opie may be engrossed in digital technology while Hurley's method is more antiquarian, but Hurley's portraits, like Opie's, provide ample space for projection. Both artists exploit that contemporary condition of blankness as a space for subjective experience, as an indeterminate space for recognition that exists somewhere between seeing and knowing. Like stuffed animals, his portraits explore the possibilities of expressionlessness, returning a steady gaze, steadily. These mute, carefully neutral studies approach blankness precisely so that they can be used as a space for subjective experience.

1. Ralph Rugoff "Head Shots" in *Circus Americanus* London/New York: Verso 1995, p190.
2. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe *Beauty And The Contemporary Sublime* New York: Allworth Press 1999, p116.
3. Roni Horn has said, "as we go forward into the so-called 'information age', paradoxically we recognise less and less, because we value experience less and less." See, www.contemporary-magazine.com/profiles68
4. Julian Opie *Portraits* Zurich: Codax 2003, p196.



Little Buddhaener 2006
Oil on mession, 455 x 355mm

GENERALS AND PARTICULARS

by James Robertson

Gavin Hurley paints portraits, yet no body ever sits for him. A portrait painter once removed, he sources his sitters from existing images taken from art history, history books and old school yearbooks. Hurley develops his compositions using collage and a cut-and-paste look carries over into the finished paintings, with Hurley "dressing" his canvases like mannequins or barber's blocks. He interlocks discrete shapes – representing facial features, hair and items of clothing – identikit style. He avoids naturalism, combining tonally modelled areas with areas of flat unmodulated colour or pattern in a manner ultimately derived from synthetic cubism, particularly Fernand Leger's. This brand of cubism saw a more colourful interplay of painting and collage, a search for "the literalness of the pictorial ground". This mix is at the heart of Hurley's knowing picture-making. His bold oil paintings and modest paper collages inform one another.

Rendered in frontal or three-quarter view, faces are pushed up close to the picture plane with little illusionistic space behind. Backgrounds are either uniformly coloured or scrubbed, or decoratively patterned with faux wood grain. Any sense of space comes from the subject, the delicate angle of the nose, the thickness of the neck, the occasional drop shadow from a collar or falling hair. Hurley also suppresses psychological or narrative depth. The result is an affectless graphic treatment, naïve but flattering, quirky yet formal. Hurley pursues evenness and exteriority while avoiding the exhaustion of either dogmatic abstraction or retrograde figuration.

Hurley prefers subjects from times past, be it a decade or centuries ago. While earlier paintings presented images of old school friends as children, the latest paintings are more overtly anachronistic, looking back to 18th century seafarers, worthy explorers and wicked pirates. Hurley plays up the clichés. In *Girl With Anchors And Yarn*, a woman, maybe the pirate Anne Bonny, Calico Jack's lead lady, takes on the appearance of a ship's figurehead, with a necklace of anchors. A young James Cook is promoted to Captain, and, if his iconic authority was in doubt, wears a badge to prove it. A swarthy Spanish buccaneer looks shifty. *Second Mate* wears a striped navy shirt, current mod fashion as much as pirate garb. His eye patch suggests soap-operatic evil machinations.

The 18th century was the time of Queen Charlotte, Mozart and Beethoven, copyright law, and the spread of artists' prints and physiognomies, which lead to silhouettes (a big influence on Hurley). Philosophers wore wigs and women white leaden cosmetics. Europe continued its colonial expansion with Captain Cook (one of Hurley's recurring motifs) and piracy was rife on the high seas. Revolutions rocked America and France, in an age that earned George Washington (another Hurley favourite) dollar billing and cost a young Marie Antoinette her head. All these developments are echoed in Hurley's works, and yet ironically his treatment of them is modern, even post-modern.

Hurley's themes of 18th century chivalry and crime, vanity and ambition are the stuff of more recent Boys Own annuals and Western movie matinees. I am reminded of Alfred Hitchcock. Perhaps it is Hurley's

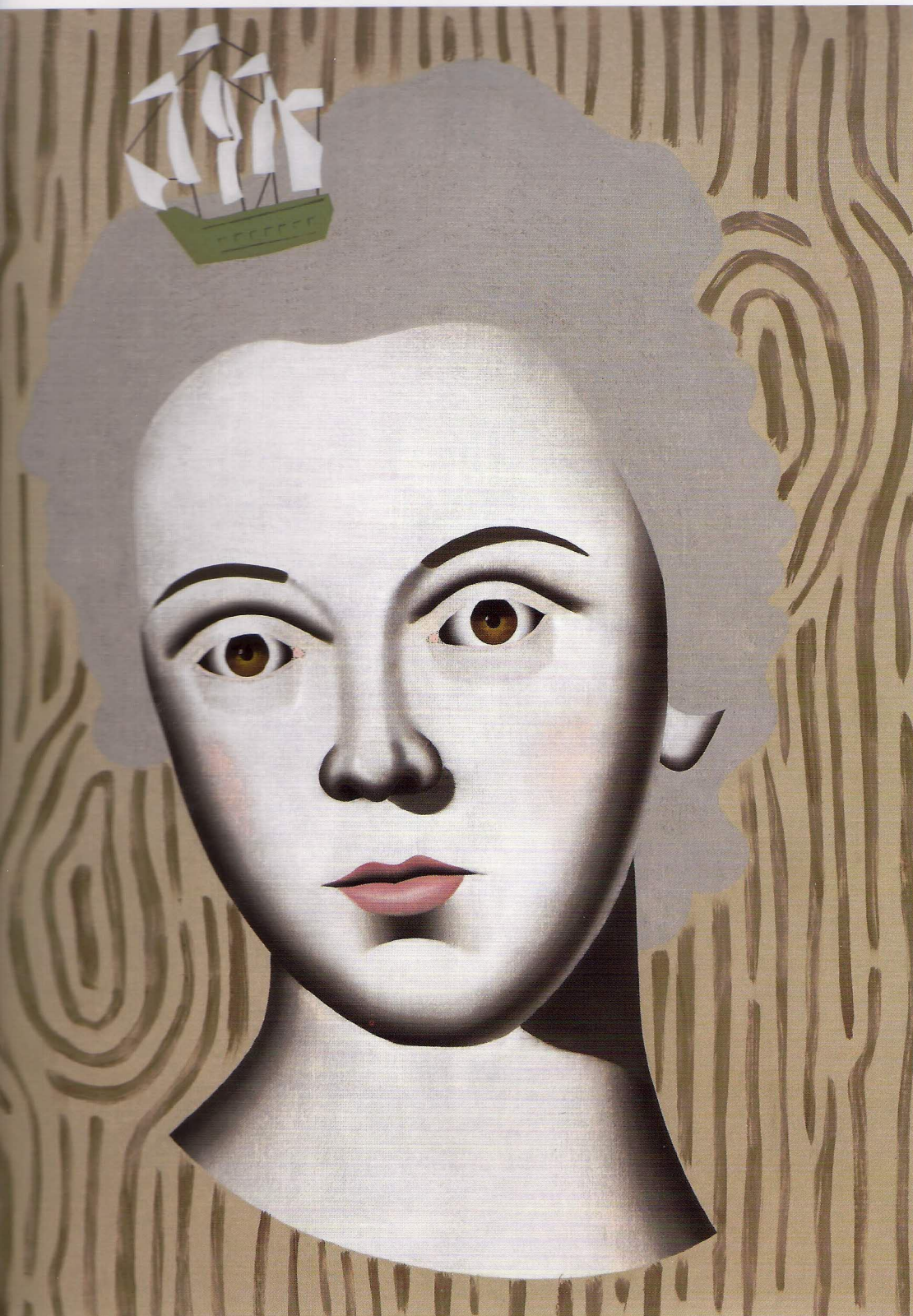
precise art direction. The textures, the open weave of the hessian and the delicate, patiently applied, thin layers of oil paint certainly recall Hitchcock's 1950s fashion and décor: the smoky off-whites, greys and half tones; the tweed and pressed wool. Perhaps it is their affectless look, which reminds me that Hitchcock demanded his stars not to emote. Hurley, like Hitchcock, prefers art direction to method acting. Imagine a stiff, starched and slightly wooden Jimmy Stewart on deck as boy scout, cowboy, private or pirate.

Equally vogue and vague, Hurley perversely renders 18th century quaintness into the visual language of early modernism, evacuating history as much as celebrating it, probing what Joanna Woodall calls "the historical contingency of likeness." He is not after a specific direct likeness. Instead he uses characters to allude to an over-all period feel, and yet disrupts this by painting subjects from one period in the manner of another, hinting at the constructed nature of histories and problems of re-presentation.

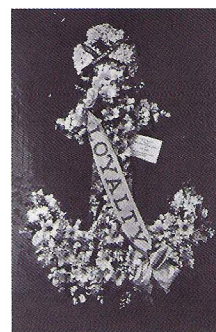
Leger is a perennial influence on Hurley, both for his style (Leger pioneered the formal conceit of combining flat areas and shallow modelled ones) and his content (Leger's everyman proletarian chic, his deco comic-book heroism). Leger's *Le Mécenic* – a psychologically vacant "portrait" of a generic French mechanic in profile in a black singlet, smoking, moustachioed, sporting a handsome anchor tattoo – is a touchstone for Hurley, who acknowledges his debt to Leger in a recent work *Bless The Beast*, which features Leger's parrot.

In 1771 Sir Joshua Reynolds' decreed, "A history painter paints man in general, a portrait painter, a particular man and consequently a defective model." By this measure Hurley is neither a portrait painter nor a history painter. He manoeuvres between depicting a certain person and a type of person, between specific and generic traits, the topical and the typical. He toys with traditional portraiture and its concern for verifiable likeness and the assumed elevation of the sitter. His paintings undermine the sitter's claim to fame, their authority and identity. He undercuts the cherished idea of distinct autonomous individuals by creating a genus, a makeshift assorted family of characters, a rogue's gallery.

In the 18th century, bourgeois humanist subjectivity and the cult of individuality were cemented with the rise of portraiture as public image. Hurley's work conjures up the 18th century as the great age of portraiture, but provides an antidote to its presumptive humanism. His work has more to do with the debasement of that tradition in Warhol's post-humanist silk-screened celebrity portraits. Hurley's portraits certainly recall those iconic, tightly cropped headshots on plain, monochromatic backgrounds; a look Warhol imported into his *Interview* covers. But even Warhol could be accused of being a court painter, documenting his own scene, whereas Hurley takes his refined style and applies it to a time not his own. Hurley treats the chronicles of the past as a magazine with shifting identities and historical guises. With wit and charm he plunders a bygone, swashbuckling era. He takes models from established fame, infamy or even anonymity and renders their faces anew, re-examining their currency.



Le Coiffure. 2006.
Oil on hessian. 1350 x 1000mm



Gavin Hurley is a full-time artist based in Auckland. He was born in Auckland in 1973. He graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, in 1998, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting. He has exhibited at the Anna Bibby Gallery since 1999, presenting the solo exhibitions *School Portraits* (2002), *Agent* (2003), *My Sad Captains* (2004) and *Effigies And Paper Dolls* (2005). *Salty Yarns Of The Sea*, an exhibition of paintings and collages, is his fifth solo show with the Gallery. He has been included in curated exhibitions such as *Portraiture: The Art Of Social Commentary* (Te Tuhi/The Mark, Pakuranga, 2003), *Mixed-Up Childhood* (Auckland Art Gallery, 2005) and *Birds: The Art Of New Zealand Bird Life* (Pataka Museum of Arts and Culture, Porirua, 2006). In 2004 he embarked on a research trip to London to visit the Greenwich Maritime Museum. In 2005 he travelled to New York in search of American colonial portraiture and folk art images. *Salty Yarns Of The Sea* features images sourced from these trips.