

G. Hurley

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gavin hurley

Born Auckland 1973

BFA Elam 1998

Lives in Auckland

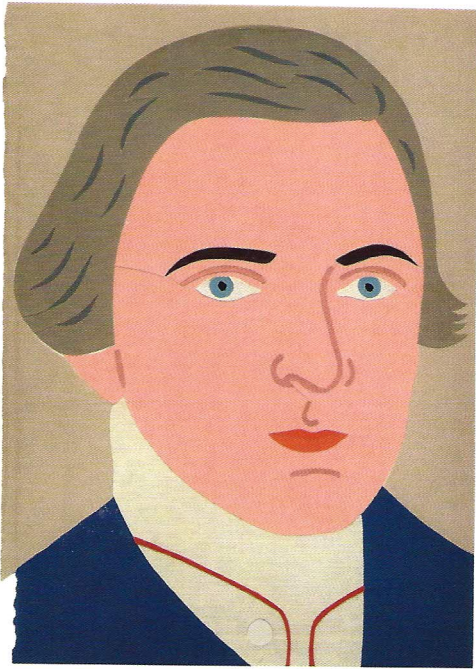
There are not many portrait painters to be found on the contemporary art scene. Depictive realism is not high on the agendas of artists who want to be recognised for their ideas, rather than their technical ability. Gavin Hurley bucks this trend. For a decade he has been painting portrait heads, but not quite in the classical manner. His predecessors are Ferdinand Leger, Andy Warhol, Alex Katz and American naïve painters, rather than Rembrandt and Rubens. His aim is Post-Modern irony rather than immortalisation.

Hurley's technique is to prepare coarse-weave canvas by painting it black and rubbing over it in white. The result is a frottage effect, with the white weave pattern raised on the black. He then proceeds with the painting. In some places the underpainting comes through as a faint inflexion on the surface colour. In other places he obliterates the underpainting, but achieves a two-tone effect on the surface, still using the weave to achieve this. In other places he will flood out the surface in one colour only, with no tonal effects (this is always in a limited area, such as hair, where cross-hatching would not look right). The artist always leaves a little bit of the ground painting visible, often just in the corners of the eyes, so the discerning viewer knows it is there.

Hurley's colour is always muted — dull greens, pinks and aquas, greys, black, and off-whites. Backgrounds are plain. Visages are pale and impassive. Edges around eyes, eyebrows, lips, beards and the heads themselves are sharp. Freckles and lines are omitted, the only minor facial features being the furrow in the middle of the upper lip and the rise of the chin. The paintings have a slightly fifties, dated air.







Hurley also makes paper collages, the cut edges fitting in seamlessly with his hard-edge style. This stylistic consistency makes a work by Hurley immediately recognisable across a crowded room. Picking the subject may be harder. We feel that they may be famous and we should recognise them, but we seldom do. Many of Hurley's faces are taken from old school photos or are 18th-century characters gleaned from images in overseas folk museums. Perhaps the most familiar were in his *Sad Captains* series of 2004, including Captain Cook and Lord Nelson.

Although a portrait may sport a detail as prominent as an eyepatch, Hurley's faces never show the slightest twitch of emotion. The carefully painted eyes stare at or past us, and the closed, faintly pursed lips are those of someone who has been asked a question, knows the answer, but isn't going to reply. Each painting becomes an enigma, a face in the crowd that is frozen in time.

Like Giorgio Morandi and his small collection of still-life objects, which he spent a lifetime painting, Hurley continues to explore his self-restricted territory without flagging.

Above: *Sad Paper Captain*, 2008. Paper collage, 380 x 280 mm.

Right: *Feeling*, 2008. Paper collage, 360 x 270 mm.

