



Portrait of Alan Rawsthorne

Isabel Rawsthorne

Not on display

Title/Description: Portrait of Alan Rawsthorne

Artist/Maker: Isabel Rawsthorne

Born: 1972-03

Measurements: h 360 mm x w 260 mm

Accession Number: 50700

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Portrait of Alan Rawsthorne is an unusual work for Isabel Rawsthorne (1912-92). She frequently painted portraits, but often at a remove or distance from the subject. Rawsthorne usually articulated the spaces her figures inhabited and rarely painted them alone, preferring to include another person or their own reflection. *Alan and Barbara (Double Portrait with Window)* (1967) is also in the Sainsbury Centre and is an example of a typical portrait by Rawsthorne. *Portrait of Alan Rawsthorne*, by contrast, is painted almost life-size, on a canvas just big enough to fit the head. This tight cropping excludes a view of the environment in which the subject stands and the space it occupies. It also has the effect of painting a close-up view of a person, seen, not from a distance, but from the tip of their nose.

Several of these compositional departures from her usual approach can be explained by the subject matter of this work. Rawsthorne was usually interested in capturing the living quality of her subjects but this work was painted of her husband, the composer Alan Rawsthorne after his death. Indeed it was likely painted from a death mask which was made, at her request, by her friend, the artist Roy Noakes. [1] A similar death mask can be seen on the wall in her home from photos taken when Alan Rawsthorne was alive. [2] In some ways, this explains the tactile nature of the work's execution: its thick layers of paint stand away from the surface of the canvas, forming the face almost sculpturally. The tight scale and small size exaggerates the objecthood of the painting: it is too small to get lost in the image so we are constantly aware of the edge of the canvas and the limits of the object. Its nature is small, portable and tactile. Carol Jacobi also notes an illusion where the face jumps into figuration when viewed at certain angles, further emphasising the interaction required with the object. [3]

The physical quality of the work also plays an important role in the representational qualities of the painting. Rawsthorne frequently meditates on the contrast between the flesh and bones of the body and the experiencing of encountering the spark of being within it. [4] Whereas her portraits usually involve her subjects interacting with other figures and appearing as sparks of being which stand out

from empty surroundings, *Portrait of Alan Rawsthorne's* shows the subject from so little distance that the not only does the painting seem like a physical object but the subject does too. The head is not removed from us but is an object with which we can interact. There is an absence of the movement, the dynamism and the spark which often animates her other paintings, instead, the figure is absolutely reduced to flesh. This work, therefore, not only shows how Rawsthorne handles the subject of death but also demonstrates, the ways in which Rawsthorne is able to paint life so effectively in other works.

Georgia Kelly, April 2023

[1] Carol Jacobi, *Out of the Cage: The Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021), p. 338.

[2] The death mask can be seen in a photo of Alan Rawsthorne taken in his and Isabel's home in the 1960s in the Tate Archive, TGA 9612.4.1.21 (London: Tate Gallery Archive).

[3] Jacobi, *Out of the Cage*, p. 338.

[4] For example, Rawsthorne wrote about her interest in the contrast between the physical body and the human beneath it in Isabel Lambert, "A world of movement" in *Dancers in Action: Drawings, Paintings, Stage Designs* (London: The October Gallery, 1986). Exhibition catalogue. Note that Isabel Lambert is the name under which Isabel Rawsthorne exhibited.

Further Reading

Suzanne Doyle and Karen Southworth, *Isabel Rawsthorne 1912-1992: Paintings, Drawings and Designs* (Harrogate: The Mercer Art Gallery, 1997). Exhibition Catalogue.

Carol Jacobi, *Out of the Cage: the Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021).
