

You and Your Kind

Joel Ely: Paintings and objects 2001-2011

For over a decade Joel Ely has been getting inside his subjects in ways that can be subtle, skillful, unnerving and absurd. Whether it is a portrait, a painting or a sculpture, his work has perfect finish, warm affection and an unsettling ambiguity that starts off as a sliver of doubt but soon undermines whatever you initially wanted to believe.

Although it's a convention as old as portraiture itself for elements of the composition to hint at the subject's personality, Ely orchestrates this more deftly than any other portraitist I know. Take the elegant picture *Vaishali with Flamingo*: a study in cool, poised beauty. But when I see her grip around the neck of the flamingo, aesthetic admiration suddenly takes a back seat: exactly what is her relation to the exotic bird and just how familiar are they? Likewise, *Sebastien* looks like any young man with attitude who's thrown his shirt off, but the mere position of his fingers turns my expectations inside out. There's warmth in the colours of *Annie Playing to Mandrake*, and an absurdity in the puppet doggie who, true to witchcraft convention, has been used to pull up the mandrake root to which the subject plays. But centuries of malevolent association cannot negate the charm of this ukulele strummer.

I discovered Joel Ely in the National Portrait Gallery's annual BP Portrait Award. The first time was seven years ago with his image of Nicola. Sometimes mute portraits communicate more than one can expect, and the flaccid, dead cephalopod she brandished made sure I kept my distance. Two years later, someone named Kiko looked eager to befriend me, as if to make up for Nicola's previous fishy distance. His open welcome was pleasant enough, but the artist had sown suspicion in me and I wasn't completely sure that exotic Basque food ingredients were *all* Kiko had in his hands.

The fascination with communication goes beyond merely livening-up pictures of people. There are clear attempts to explore the nature of it, how it works, and sometimes the utterly absurd futility of it all. Presenting paintings of deep sea creatures that communicate via colour and light reminds us that speech and body language are not the whole story. *Attempting to Explain How the Kraken Returns* isn't just a rumination on inter-species communications, but a wider comment on the inherent difficulties of empathy and understanding.

The early sculpture *You Wouldn't Would You?* is a manifesto, with a chicken wearing rabbit drag. Or maybe a rabbit showing off his inner chicken. Whatever is happening, it's a reminder that this particular conundrum is both simpler and more ridiculous than we and our kind possibly realise. Just what kind of person hides inside the *Thinking Bear Outfit?* Nobody I actually know. Maybe you do?

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