

The thinking thing

Cian O'Neill views Gerhard Richter's portraits
National Portrait Gallery, London until May 31

The work of Gerhard Richter looks so easily achieved that it would make an ape wish he could paint, for even the simple human being can be persuaded to try jogging should an Olympian make it look easy, or, for that matter, in the remotest sense useful. Post the development of the photograph, painting started to look less useful and Richter's portraits, produced mainly from photographs, mock at the photograph by showing the consciousness in visual game-playing during the process of reproduction that the camera can never emulate, as it is inanimate. In sum, a Richter portrait looks as good as a photo, but is better because it is a thinking thing.

He was born in the RAF resort town of Dresden in 1932 and was thirty years of age before he took to painting from photographs. They were taken mainly from family albums, and that is important as it set a not wholly impersonal content for the paintings resultant of this magpie image-collation which renders it distinct from that of PopArt, which was founded purely in the borrowed images of mass-media and advertising. Alongside Polke and Baselitz, Richter formed the 'Capital Realists', a quietly satirical group of painters based in early 1960s West Germany who favoured seemingly bland photographs as source material. Today one of the Big Artists, Richter is revered even by the more conceptually-inclined as he is by those who actually possess the *techné* that peers such as one-time unsuccessful shoe illustrator Andy Warhol so despised and sought to undermine using the corruption of glamour and disease of commercialism.

This is not to say that there are no areas of similarity: both favoured a 'cool' look in their work; didn't ever speak too loudly in their personal or public life; and spent time in the studio. There, however, the similarities end. Richter works without distractions in a vast clean studio space in uncool Cologne, whereas BlackHoleAndy signed his prints at the centre of a whorl of the fumbling drug addicts and desperate nutcases who were caught helpless in the gravitational pull of his NYC 'Factory'. Richter also quite likes women and paints them often, whereas Andy didn't seem to love anything but anybody else's carcrash.

The first of the women in this show at the National Portrait Gallery appears with an umbrella in a 1964 canvas that has a matt background counterpointed with shiny, thinned paint for the figure, the visual facts of which are perceptible from a small distance away but become almost abstract when seen from close up, like any ordinary photograph. The whole thing has also been 'smeared' laterally [as if it had been set on its side and left out in the rain] to blur the image as if an unsteady hand activated the shutter. Next to this one finds a tiny painted image of LBJ holding Jackie Kennedy at JFK's state funeral, as resembles a small postcard daubed over in the manner of painting-by-numbers. The grieving face of Jackie was of course one of Warhol's common-

er tropes and this little image by Richter, in a restricting scale he didn't and does not often employ, is of perhaps imitative lifelessness. Speaking of lifeless, Lee Harvey 'Oswald' [1964] gets his own large canvas on the next wall over, and, much to his discredit, doesn't really do much with it. Another learning-work, '[A]unt Marianne' [1965], shows how the touch for this kind of monochromatic, out-of-focus painting must be very slight indeed. As too much shadow is added to the face of the baby in centre-frame, it brings to mind no charming nativity scene, but rather the baleful stare of some rope-leaning pugilist. 'Horst with dog' [1965] is all Horst and no dog. There is some snarling kite in the shape of a Pomeranian caught in the frame, but you wouldn't bet on it barking any day soon...

It gets better quite quickly, however. '[F]amily in Snow' [1966], displays wonderously subtle modulation of greys, creams and, in one small area, muted ivory black. It reminds one of Renaissance-era silverpoint and as the 1960s went on, Richter started to evince more of his early, classical art-training. 'The Schmidt Family' [1965] leaves the wisping strokes of a round-headed brush visible and the lateral smears have diagonal cousins that add interest and action to the surface. In this work one finds also plain love of colour and indeed the wry, slightly salt tenor of the earlier work begins to change to sincerity. The last truly humorous picture in this show is that of 'Helga Matura with Fiancee' [1966], which depicts an attractive woman [using only shades of grey], perched on the arm of a chair that seats a rather smug boy of twelve. Whatever the backstory, the cheeky misrepresentation must be deliberate, for this painter couldn't miscue if he tried.

If proof of this were needed, one could round the corner, and bang! There it is, a portrait that, for want of finish, Vermeer himself would not have shunned. 'Betty' [1977] is left here by the curator presumably as some sort of payoff for sticking out these first two rooms of smeared whites and greys, and being produced out of a full colour spectrum palette it is like a bomb going off in the gallery. The gently attentive observation of it also brings in the personal tone quite forcibly. This is a portrait of the artist's ten year old daughter, and whereas earlier subjects were treated rather distantly, this welcome interlude piece glows with love. The next room jumps back to the game-playing of the 1960s. 'Woman with child' [1965] has a deliberately fumbled area of whites where the woman's skirt was to go and while it is daring, it is not necessarily moving. Richter has, very often it is reputed, repeated John Cage's line about having nothing to say and saying it. It may be more truthful to say that he tries to very quietly express his care for people but that his self-control fails rather spectacularly in the case of portraits of his children, or beautiful women. As such, this is a rare example of an artist failing to achieve a goal and yet in so doing, benefitting humankind.

Another example would be Damien Hurst not quite managing to make it out of bed.

The fondness for women is evident in this third and last room of early work. 'Liz Kerteige' [1966] is given the full Richard Avedon treatment and looks fairly happy about her simple, almost unsmudged portrait. 'Mao' [1971] has no smears at all, just totally assured tonal work in steely greys. The games have largely gone and despite the suitably jocular tone in the multiple-perspective double portrait of 'Gilbert and George' [1975], atmosphere becomes key. The strokes are more rounded, finished and invisible, the tenor very close to sincere. This reaches its apotheosis in the final room wherein one finds apparently easeful, poised portraits, many of which show young women / girls and simply exalt their beauty. The 1966 portrait of the artist's first wife, for example, is a love poem of violet purple and diluted sienna shadows that plays no games whatsoever.

In his portraiture the young Gerhard Richter was as much commenting on the merit of painting in the post-camera age as he was memorialising his birth-family in a purposefully impersonal way. It would seem that having a family of his own brought forth the emotional truth that was muted in his work up to that point. In '[S] with child' [1995] one finds a series of eight mid-sized paintings which show his third wife with his son and sum up his interests and previous work neatly: the smears, scrapes and recreated misprints of family scenes from the photo lab so typical of his early work; the almost 'old-fashioned' yet tingling and conscious later portraits that show the quiet love of the artist, father and family man. A family man, that is, who happens to use paint with such felicitous skill and intelligence that one wonders, quite naturally, what the use of a camera is if painting can be *this* good.

Betty
by Gerhard Richter 1988
Saint Louis Art Museum

