

ELEPHANT

LIFE THROUGH ART

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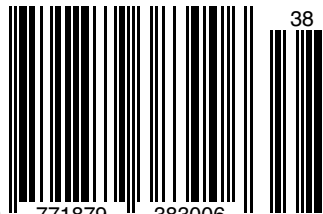
Interviews with
Ai Weiwei
Tracey Emin
Yasumasa Morimura
Eva Vermandel

WHAT'S BECOME
OF HIM?
Recasting Masculinity

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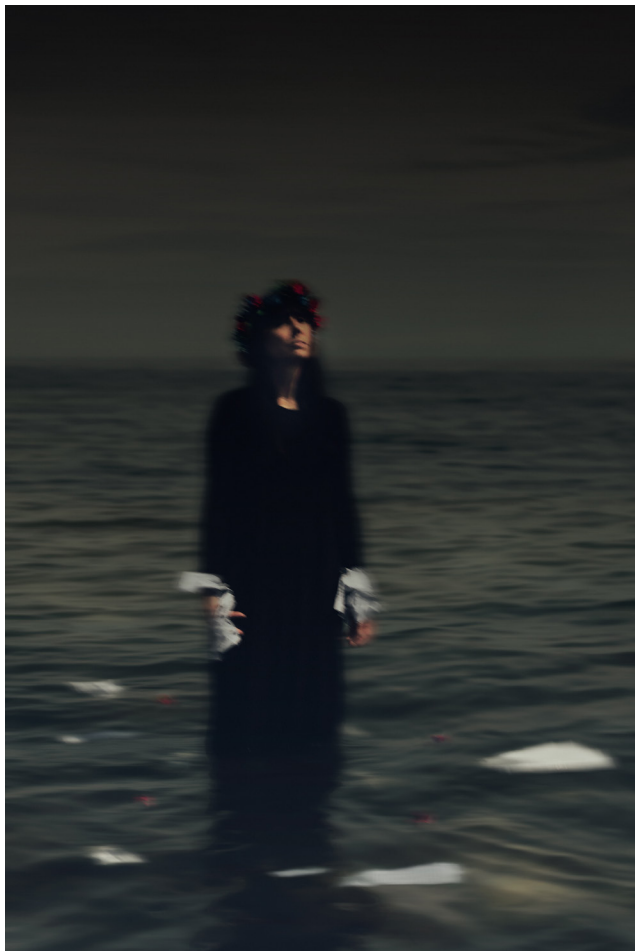
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W O M A N W I T H A B L A C K D R E S S

Aching back; cricked neck; feelings of exposure and vulnerability — posing for an artist can be challenging work. Anna McNay decided to accept not one but two opportunities for an original artistic portrayal, working on a psychological photographic portrait on the British coast with Diogo Duarte and sitting for an expressive painting by Wendy Elia. Here, she shares her enlightening yet somewhat gruelling experiences.



As an art critic I spend my time looking at works of art. With portraits in particular, I find myself asking what exactly it was that the artist was trying to capture — that age-old question of physiognomy versus psychology: Which is more important? And does the finished work say as much about the artist as it does about the sitter?

When approached by the photographer Diogo Duarte to become a muse for one of his psychological portraits, I am intrigued. As someone who is notoriously impossible to pin down for appointments, I find the idea of a photographic portrait somehow more manageable than the painted ones I have repeatedly declined. Somehow, however, as the idea for documenting the experience in writing develops, I find myself asking the painter Wendy Elia whether her request to have me sit for her still stands. And so it comes about that I am simultaneously to be photographed and painted.

Diogo has an established methodological procedure. We are to meet twice: first to talk about me; second for him to present his suggested concepts. In between times he will send me some further questions to answer. This is somewhat daunting, given that I don't know him well beforehand, but the minute we meet — after work at the British Library — I feel at ease. He shows me existing examples from the project. These are radically different from one another, making clear how much he is concerned with capturing something individual in each subject. We get talking about me and focus immediately on my various health histories. The hour flies by and is fun; afterwards, however, I feel embarrassed about quite how much I've shared.

The initial process with Wendy is different. Given that we were friends in advance, we chat a bit by email and bounce ideas back and forth, largely struggling to pin down dates, as she wants as many sessions as possible while I want to give the bare minimum. We finally reach a compromise, whereby I commit to two single days for planning and sketching, and three full weekends, so that she can mix her paints and not have them dry, and “get into me” — a scary thought! Wendy is keen to situate herself in the school of Lucian Freud, asking if I've read Martin Gayford's *Man with a Blue Scarf: On Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud* (2010). She also believes in feeding me on every visit, as the social aspect after the sitting is part of the experience, and an integral part of getting to know one another. After a couple of visits I realize just how enjoyable this part of the day is — not least because Wendy really puts herself out to cater for me — but also because sitting is bloody hard work, physically and mentally exhausting, and some time afterwards is necessary to come back down to earth.

On the first day I turn up at Wendy's studio with various changes of clothes. We spend time looking through a book on New Objectivity – not an era I am fond of, but Wendy thinks it's relevant since she is, at this point, still trying to talk me out of wearing my usual dark eyeliner on the grounds that I will end up looking like a clown or a whore. I am adamant that my eyeliner is key to how I see myself, while she repeatedly curses it. Wendy usually paints her subjects undressed, and she is keen to have me wearing as little as possible. I have taken along vests and a waistcoat, meant as under- and over-layers, but she wants me in one or the other with nothing as a buffer. By the end of this first sitting, during which we try out poses and outfits and she makes sketches and takes photographs, I feel exposed and vulnerable, and, exaggerated as it might sound, somewhat violated. Wendy asks how I found the session, noting I seemed "relaxed" – a clear example of how disparate reality and illusion can be.



In between meetings with Diogo, he sends me nine probing questions: If you were a painting, which painting would you be and why? Describe the last dream or nightmare that you had. Can you describe a perfect day – real or imagined? When we meet again he presents his ideas: the mainstay of which is that he wants to "plant" me somewhere, slow me down, create a space of stillness in the apparent speed and chaos of my life. One idea was to plant me in the ground, like a tree, but his preferred suggestion is the sea – using a long exposure so that the waves blur, offering a sense of redemptive cleansing from my past, but also a calming of the motion and whirlwind of my present. To this idea, we add numerous symbolic elements: a bespoke floral crown made of poppies, periwinkle and sodalite – each laden with personal meaning; pages of writing, copied from some early body-image-related art critical writing;

and the location itself, selected as Joss Bay, near Margate, where I had my first art-related job at Turner Contemporary, but which also sites a number of pivotal memories from my earlier life. A long black dress is sourced, to flow in the waves.

The experience of the shoot itself is wonderful. The sea is blissfully warm and standing with the sun on my face, awaiting instruction, is calming. The only impediments to enjoyment are the increasing crick in my neck, from tilting my head backwards, and the seaweed, of which I am fairly phobic. Diogo's directions are few and far between – head up, look left a little, stay like that! He describes how he has an image in his head before we set out, but then works to let go of this and really be in the moment – almost dissociating.

I show Wendy some of the action shots from the photoshoot and she comments how Pre-Raphaelite it all looks. I feed this back to Diogo, who is intrigued, and responds that although he tends not to dissect his work, he too has found himself reminded of JW Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott* (1888), adding: "As a pre-pubescent boy, I really wanted to live inside his paintings and be one of those women. Perhaps Waterhouse's creations are seeds that have been inside my brain since then and only came out now with the right muse... We also talked a lot about death, love and nature – in a way it seems to me now like it's the only place I could have gone with your portrait." While I'm not sure it is how I think I present myself, I certainly don't take it amiss.

Clearly Diogo is not alone in his view; when I return to Wendy's studio, she too has migrated from New Objectivity to something of a Romantic pose, hands positioned in a manner reminiscent of a Julia Margaret Cameron photograph, head similarly tilted to the seaside pose (it should be noted that neither of us has, as yet, seen Diogo's finished piece). Responding to the time constraints, she has closed in on just my head and shoulders, keeping the backdrop plain, much simplified from her usual style of work. Arriving for the fifth sitting, however, I am horrified to discover she has restarted – entirely from scratch! To my eye, not much has changed, except that my expression seems a little more flattering, less glowering and harsh – it is more recognizably an Elia painting, which isn't something I mind at all. For Wendy, however, the difference is enormous; as she says, she can at least "live with it".

After the first sitting, I was pretty much crippled for the week – my osteopath said I might as well have played the whole of Wimbledon; from then on, we are careful to take more regular breaks, and I have a battery of

recommended stretches. During the sessions we listen to podcasts – something I never otherwise would make time for – and we learn about many things: philosophy from Nietzsche to Kant, Paula Rego’s Desert Island Discs, and TV director Jill Soloway’s lecture on the female gaze, among them. As Wendy studies me, so I study her; our gaze is mutual. Is she trying to work out who I am – or perhaps just how I am? She describes the process as being like alchemy – breaking down what she sees into parts and using chemical substances to recreate them and build up a whole again. As the days pass I grow to look forward to our sessions, this enforced time out of my life, and the opportunity not only to listen and learn, but also to look and learn.

When I meet with Diogo to see his finished work there is an incredible sense of suspense, as well as a mounting panic about how to react if I don’t like it. But I needn’t have worried because the piece is absolutely beautiful – oddly painterly, in fact. It is actually nothing like what I was expecting – much darker, almost fearfully so, but a sense of calm nevertheless prevails. Somehow, despite my being totally irreligious, and not especially spiritual, a profound sense of spirituality radiates from the image.



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Previous pages from left
Diogo Duarte
Resurrection, 2018

John William Waterhouse
The Lady of Shalott, 1888

This page from top
Wendy Elia, Portrait of Anna
McNay, 2018

Julia Margaret Cameron,
Prayer, 1872



Diogo asks me for a title and all I can think of is Resurrection – as if the subject – I – were being born again into a new life.

Wendy ultimately has to finish her painting using the photographs she took – I see it at my final sitting when she is nearly done. I like how it has developed – even the freckles she has taken artistic licence to sprinkle across my face and arms. My one uncertainty is what she calls the “Grünewald” hand – aptly referencing the horror of the sixteenth-century German artist’s religious iconography. Tilted at an angle that would be impossible without breaking my wrist, it is an odd mauvish colour and looks to me both arthritic and dead, the other, beautiful hand striving to hold it in place. I don’t know quite how to interpret it, whether it says something about my medical struggles; whether, if so, I want it to do so; or whether I feel as if its very existence might now conjure such reality into being.

Looking at the two finished portraits I do certainly see myself, but I also see a stranger. I set out thinking that being the subject of this process would help me understand what it is that an artist seeks to capture, but as it turns out I have learned that there isn’t necessarily any one aspect to be sought after, and as the subject or muse I am perhaps least qualified to judge the outcome. Despite having experienced the dichotomy of feeling one thing and being read as feeling another, aesthetically, at least, truth remains in the eye of the beholder.