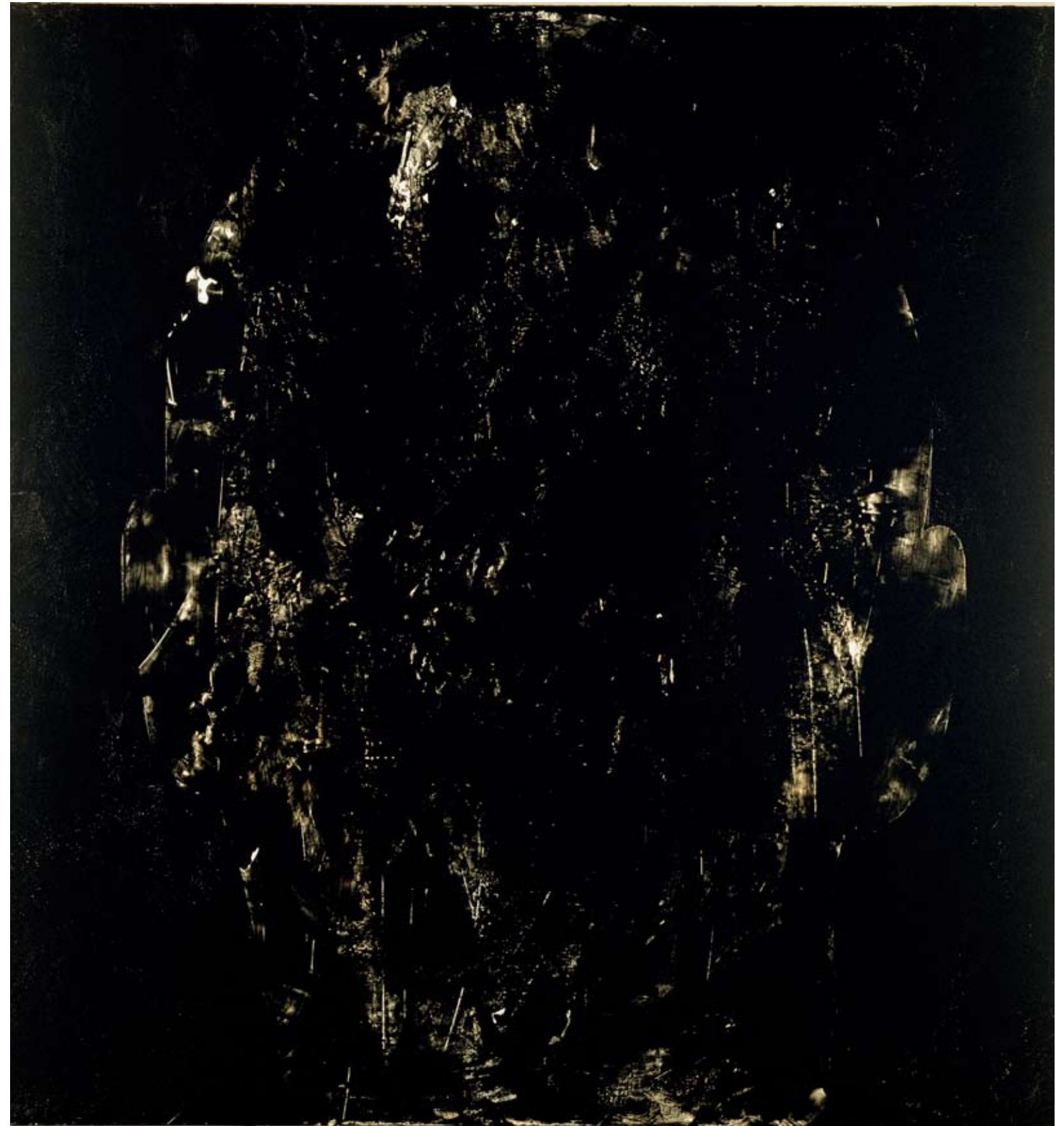


Headland

The paintings of John Beard (a tacit knowing)

William Wright





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John Beard, Head, self-portrait 9, 2000, oil and wax on linen, 180 x 180 cm, courtesy the artist.

opposite

John Beard, Head, self-portrait X, 1996, acrylic on arches paper, 109 x 109 cm, courtesy the artist.

The late American critic Harold Rosenberg took issue with the notion that the painted surface is merely a site where artists record the contents of their minds. Instead he proposed the more resilient, if contentious, idea that the work is itself the 'mind' through which the painter thinks.¹ Does intent precede the act of painting or is it itself a product made manifest through its means? Through lengthy experience Rosenberg's contemporary, the painter Mark Rothko, knew that 'ideas and plans that existed in the mind at the start were simply the doorway through which one left the world in which they occur'.²

To describe the predisposition of John Beard's work requires devoted persistence as well as an ear patient for creative nuance. The artist, who adopted Australia as his homeland in 1983, talks reservedly of a Dionysian–Apollonian division, of the schism between dark and light zones of being, of poetic slippages in a surfacing consciousness. There is a tenor in much of Beard's work of the past two decades that affirms this aspect of painting's existence – as a sounding zone of creative impulse.

Beard's art is consistently subject to the transforming rigour of a perceptually intensive, intuitive working regimen:

It's like you're in some other state of mind that you're able to make these marks without being in any way constrained by some kind of rational inhibition. There comes a point when you've been doing something long enough – and of course instant intuition comes into this – where there's a tacit sense of knowing. And that's something that sits almost behind or below: those levels below consciousness. And even though I might make a work entirely from myself or from a series of still images, the work evolves through an infused sense, a collective sense of memory, and real experience.³

The painting's surface both enables and embodies feeling. It is the place and source of contemplation; its site of existence. Beard's work often exists on the imaginary cusp between what is and isn't manifest, a fugitive zone.

John Beard was born and nurtured in Wales – ancient, often ravaged, perennially colonised, a land of mines and chapels. The visual imprint is of an interminably grey place where silver skies illusively merge and mingle with leaden seas. It is a place where time past and present is inextricably intertwined, where the young Beard began to experience the world, his cultural endowment full of the old and the new.

The Welsh language has a word indicative of life spirit, the *hoyle*, and those within its inspirational orbit are often said to be blessed

with the music of the soul. In a country like Australia where cultural consumption becomes daily more normalised in its craving for the 'new', the presence of an artist of immemorial Brythonic temperament such as John Beard could seem anomalous. Though, clearly, there must be some axiology more embracing than novelty in the artist's favour, for how else would Beard's brooding images of sundry heads, outcrops and headlands continue to attract such consistent peer acclaim?

It was while living in Sintra just outside Lisbon between 1991 and 1995 that Beard's approach to painting underwent a fundamental change of focus. This came from an epiphany brought about by the natural circumstances of light and objectivity, where the observed external world began to command attention equal to his all-absorbing painterly introspection. Beard spoke of his first encounter with the subject of 'Adraga', an isolated rock off the Portuguese coast:

I was on the cliff and I saw this incredible rock in the sea: this pyramid in the sea, an equilateral triangle. All these things link – the pyramid in the sea, the sphinx – but I saw this rock in the sea and I found something: a kind of motif that I knew was going to be something I could return to, and it would always be there. Because of the rock and the sea it would always be seen and experienced in so many different conditions. Sometimes you would hardly see it at all in the mist. Sometimes it would be absolutely still; the water like a mirror reflecting the inert absolute from above. Other times the sea would envelop the rock – it was so alarming, so physical, so violent. Standing up there, totally protected from these elements but nonetheless going as close as you could to the edge of the cliff with its precipitous face, you were vulnerable also. Before your eyes there was this orchestration of nature – the power, the force – and I didn't really make any paintings on canvases then for several months. When I did, they happened very quickly. It was as if I knew my subject so well it was the most natural thing. It was the most natural response. It almost seemed that what I did was inevitable.

Like the ancient quoits and rocking stones of his indigenous landscape, Beard's paintings are sites of energy. There is an absorbing synergy in this now extensive body of works. With its contraposition of elemental images of surging sea ruptured by the eternal presence of the black rock and its mutely shadowed heads, the forms depicted are no longer so much object as apparition:





opposite
John Beard, After Vermeer, 2007, oil and wax on linen, 76 x 76 cm, courtesy the artist.

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John Beard, After Adraga, 2006, oil and wax on linen, 250 x 250 cm, courtesy the artist.

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John Beard, Head, self-portrait 10, 2000, oil and wax on linen, 180 x 180 cm, courtesy the artist.

The sea was like pigment, I realised when I started painting. To me the paint was like the sea. There's this pliable material that could be thick and lumpy, solid like a trough of water, or it could be vaporous, frothy like the crash of a wave. It could be opaque or it could be transparent; all of these different qualities. It could be still, just shimmering. It could be moving so quickly that you felt there was an incredible vibrancy about it. The totality of this experience of rock and water had this evanescence which you felt; it came right up to you, to the top of the cliff. The 'Adraga' project gave me clues as to how to deal with the head and the face as subject matter. I found myself literally washing in and washing away the most familiar features of reference, arresting the anticipated need for confirmation of certain aspects of subject existing behind, and perhaps beyond, the complex layering of what we know.⁴

The image is not the outward projection of its process so much as the image of the process itself. Rudolf Arnheim's theoretical paradox that 'complete disorder or chaos provides a maximum of information, whereas a completely organised pattern yields no information at all'⁵ provides a partial conceptual model when contemplating Beard's fragmentary surfaces. As first noted by curator Anthony Bond, the artist's methodology often simulates the matrix appearance of digital reproductions, fragmenting the picture plane. In this respect some of Beard's works of the past decade pursue a similar approach (if not appearance) to that of the American painter Chuck Close. Where Beard differs, however, is in his awareness that delimiting the range of visual information enables the artist to concentrate the focus of attention and thereby, paradoxically, to open the field of response in the viewer to a deeper complexity.

The art historian Stephen Bann has observed that Beard endows his heads 'with an empathic presence seemingly divorced from any trace of psychological introspection'.⁶ If this work is not about the psychological nature of being, it nonetheless invokes feelings of emotional compression, particularly so in the artist's self-portraits. Indeed the sense of reflective disquietude that one often experiences when confronted with the human imagery in these paintings does not emanate from any specific individual character of the subject. Instead it comes from a sense of entering into a composure of secrecy. If painting is a mirror on life then for Beard it is one containing many undeclared internal counter-reflections which combine to play an intriguing game within the perceptual sphere. Many of Beard's later works are consistently located

in a tonal range of night, in the realm of scotopia where our hard-wired capacity to identify is stretched for want of visual definition. It is the zone, like Dante's *via smarrita*, where apparition finds accommodation in the human imagination.

For the exhibition 'Painting the Century: 101 Portrait Masterpieces 1900–2000', held at London's National Portrait Gallery in 2000–01, Beard's work *Wanganui Heads* was chosen to represent the year 1998. In an accompanying statement, Anthony Bond referred to the difficulty he encountered 'reading' a Beard image, extolling this as the distinguishing quality of his work. Of the work in question he wrote:

From a distance in certain lights it appears to be a slightly modulated black monochrome but as you approach it the form of a face appears. It is not that it is a vague or sketchy image, on the contrary it seems almost hyper real but on the verge of disappearance. I feel as if it captures that thing where something seen peripherally at twilight seems to be so powerful because it takes the form of memories, dreams strongly affective while fugitive. It reminds me of Berger's 'our faces my heart as brief as photos' or words to that effect. The paint texture is barely visible although it is very dense – in some ways this seems to be delivering perception with invisible means – the image and the material (while so subtle as to be imperceptible) are totally synchronised.⁷

In qualification – the final word – John Beard added:

There is a common sense of stillness and silence, intelligence and ignorance, strength and weakness. Whilst simultaneously creating an ambiguous reading, an emblematic constancy forms the nature of their appearance – a tacit knowing.⁸

Beard's works are hovering presences carrying within them the quality of ineffable recognition. Head, head-land, headland: they contain metaphysical affinities, as if seeing into the communal self.

¹ Harold Rosenberg, 'The American action painters', *Art News*, vol. 5, no. 8, December 1952, p. 22.

² Mark Rothko, 'The romantics were prompted', 1947, in Herschel B. Chipp (ed), *Theories of Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968, p. 548.

³ Beard in conversation with the author, November 2008.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Rudolph Arnheim, 'Information theory and the arts', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 17, 1958–59, p. 501.

⁶ Stephen Bann, 'Saving the plane', in *John Beard: Other Faces*, exhibition catalogue, The Fine Art Society, London, 2007, p. 2.

⁷ Statement from Anthony Bond, sent in a letter to exhibition curator Sandy Nairne, National Portrait Gallery, London.

⁸ Beard, *op. cit.*