

Salon-worthy hair

Sitting for artist James Powditch gave Catherine Keenan new insights into portraiture (and an enormous afro).

We are sitting at James Powditch's kitchen bench and, between sips of wine, he explains how his portrait of me for the Archibald Prize will proceed. It won't be anything like what I've seen in the movies. There will be no long sittings. No intimate relationship will develop. "There will be no seeing into your soul," he says. "None of that crap."

Instead, we sit facing each other and he asks lots of questions about the Sydney Story Factory, the not-for-profit creative writing centre for young people that I run. Why did I set it up? How did I get the money? What made me leave my job as a journalist? He draws me as we speak, though sheepishly. "I can't draw," he says repeatedly, his leg jiggling up and down on the bar stool. "See, look at that! I can't draw."

I have known James for five years, though not well. We met when he donated a work to a fundraising art auction we held in 2011. He's donated to the two auctions we've held since then, always coming along to opening night. He brings a frenetic energy into any room, and bids recklessly on works he likes.

He explains his concept for the portrait of me. "The Sydney Story Factory came out of your head, right?"

This is sort of true: it also came from the head of my co-founder, Tim Dick.

"And you have this wild curly hair."



Unfortunately, entirely true.

"So I want to do an image of you holding a giant afro, and the afro will be built out of cogs and wheels that are written and drawn on by kids at the Story Factory. It will be like the Story Factory coming out of your head... That sound ok?"

Having a giant afro is the hair-care nightmare I've spent a lifetime, and several hundred litres of hair product, trying to avoid, but still I take my seat on the stool James has positioned for me.

The first step, he explains, is for him to take my photograph, my eyes looking skyward, arms palm up beside my head as if I'm holding said giant afro. James will employ the same technique he used with Nick Cave, subject of his 2014 Archibald entry, and take the photograph in harsh light so afterwards he can digitally manipulate the high contrasts into a black and

white image. He darts back and forth between the camera and my hands, manoeuvring them into exactly the right position, his smudged glasses (they're his wife's) sliding off his head every time he looks down.

Half an hour after he started, my sitting is over. "That's it!" he says, throwing his hands in the air.

I receive a few texts from James over the next month, showing how the image is coming along, but I don't see him again until some of our long-term students arrive at the Sydney Story Factory for a special workshop to "build my hair".

James arrives with an old fashioned projector, the kind I haven't seen since high school, and a transparency printed with his worked-up black and white image of me. He projects it onto our white board, leaving plenty of space for the afro to go above it.

"Right," he says to the students, indicating some piles of photocopied wheels and cogs and pistons that he's downloaded from the internet. "Grab some of these – any ones you like – then write on them anything that comes to mind about the Story Factory. What it means to you, or what you like about it. Or anything, really. Or draw on it. Just whatever you think. Go for it!"

And they do.

The young people at the workshop are some of the students we know best: the ones who've

James Powditch *Catherine Keenan, Story Teller* 2016. Mixed media, 150 x 190 cm. Photo: Anthony Browell.

been coming to our writing workshops for a year or more. One girl, Jade, was in the very first Sydney Story Factory class I ever taught, back in 2011, and she's come back today for this, which feels special. They need very little encouragement and as James dashes between tables, handing out more sheets of cogs and pistons, they write quickly:

"The story bottled up inside, rushed out like a flowing river."

"The common human journey."

"The constantly spinning world recorded but by dry words on paper."

"The imagination written like 1000 silver strings in the morning sun."

Some just write single words. Martian. Creative. Imagination. Less flatteringly, one writes "Fat". Others colour the cogs in, and look thoughtfully into the distance. Then they cut their pieces out and bring them up to the board. With James's assistance, they blu-tak them above the projected image of me.

Within an hour, my afro has been built. It's bigger than any wig ever worn in the 18th Century. The kids seem to like it, or at least think it's funny.

As they file out, James photographs the giant afro then unsticks all the cogs and wheels from the board, to take back to his studio. There, he'll reassemble them and photograph the afro again,



before projecting it onto a board and painting over each cog and wheel, and all the kids' great lines, to make them evenly black. A final coat of oil-based varnish, and my portrait will be done.

When I asked James why he chose me as his subject he said partly he wanted to paint a woman. But mostly it was because he wanted a happy subject, something that would uplift him. Last year, he painted his father the artist Peter Powditch who, after a lifetime of smoking, has emphysema and was recently diagnosed as bipolar. The experience left him feeling hollowed by pre-emptive loss.

I wasn't sure, when James told me this, that I was up to the task of countering such looming grief, but when I saw the kids at the workshop

I realised I didn't have to be. They were the perfect counter to it. There are few things less like loss than young people discovering a new and appealing way to channel their creativity. Portraits, I have discovered, can see into things more essential than the subject's soul.

Dr Catherine Keenan is co-founder and executive director of The Sydney Story Factory and 2016 Australian of the Year Local Hero.

James Powditch's portrait was selected for the Salon des Refusés, SH Ervin Gallery until September 18.

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