

The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman by Gráinne Rice

'She has followed the same course as myself in the adoption of portrait painting, and is earning success merited by fine colouring, by great sincerity, and, particularly, by perfect resemblance. Still young, she can but add to a reputation which in her diffidence and modesty she has scarcely ventured to foresee.' (Memoirs of Madame Vigée Lebrun, 1835)¹

Sharon Thomas's *Herstory* paintings are a visual account of strands of influences and experiences that have brought her to where she is today. These heroic portraits are a departure from the previous subjects and genres of Thomas's work. The artist curates herself in this project; the following essays and interviews are a stitching-together of the themes that occupy her: personal narratives; art history; gender politics and radicalism. Choosing her words carefully, the title of this exhibition serves as homage to feminist neologist strategies of the 1970s and 80s that sought to redress casual gender inequities in everyday parlance.

Though she is not visually present in these works, Thomas's personal story is invisibly inscribed in the series of illustrious figures from her past: the writers, educators, gallerists and political role models that she has encountered en route. She is present in the material of the art works; the egg tempera mixed by hand and the wooden panels generously donated by Bullwood Project from the ancient woodlands near to her home in Glasgow.

From early on Glasgow School of Art, where Thomas began her artistic education, had a progressive attitude to female students, "Newbery [Director of the art school from 1885 to 1917] saw no distinction between woman and men as potential artists. One of the chief barriers to progress was the general lack of availability of nude life classes for women... women were working from the nude from at least 1887"² By choosing to work within the formal constraints of academic portraiture, Thomas is both celebrating and critiquing the traditions and heritage of the discipline of painting so strongly identified with the gendered term 'master'.

Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker's 1981 parodically titled book, *Old Mistresses* illustrates how simply turning the gender of a phrase on its head does not always have the desired impact. The text provides context for the changing conditions of production of art by women and the apparent exclusion of women from art history; it attempts to fill in the gaps in that history. A lot has changed for women since 1981, a point made all the more evident in the personal narratives, or *herstories*, of the seven sitters for these portraits in Frances Robertson's interviews.

Conceptually driven by her commitment to feminism, the *Herstory* portraits are also a love-letter to painting. They beautifully celebrate Thomas's love of the material qualities of the paint, gesso and wood panels they are made from. In common with John Lavery's 1888 'Royal Visit' series of 250 oil sketches of Glasgow notables and

¹ <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/lebrun/memoirs/memoirs.html> (accessed 1 March 2011)

² pp.23, 'The Renfrew Street Panopticon' Ray McKenzie, *The Flower and the Green Leaf*, Luath Press (2009)

Alasdair Gray's 1977 'People's Palace' series of portraits of Glasgow folk,³ Thomas's *Herstory* portraits are representative of Glasgow life at this particular moment in time. As such they are a remarkable legacy for future generations of women and civic history.

"I tell you, someone will remember us, even in another time" (Sappho, 7th century BCE)

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³ both series owned by Glasgow Museums