

Gabrielle Martin

Portraits

What do you paint when painting a portrait? This is a question that we can ask of each portrait painter, and it will lead to a decisive encounter with his or her works. Sometimes the answer will remain constant with one body of work; at other times it will vary considerably, and not only because here we see a child, there a man, and there a 'conversation piece' in a garden. Gabrielle Martin paints the same thing over and over, regardless of the people who sit for her. And yet she respects the particularity of each posture, each expression, and each demeanour. I am reminded of an old saying among poets: 'Good poets write two poems. Great poets write one poem'. It is true. My favourite artists do one thing but they constantly contest what they do. That probing of their subject is not done in order to call representation in question. It is pursued because they are called by something that evades being represented in their work. There is always more to say about the curtain's shadow on a breakfast table, for example. It is always possible to say it more simply. It is always possible to open oneself to a mystery that can be conducted only through the simplest words.

I think that Gabrielle Martin's true subject in her portraits is mystery. In saying that I am not suggesting that she paints a quality of blindness or withdrawal in men, women and children who sit for her. To be sure, she often paints something St Augustine says in *Of True Religion* - 'return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth' - and she does so in a world that St Augustine shares with Freud. Even the most open and curious eyes in her portraits are partly looking inwards. Also, she has an uncanny ability to paint a fissure in the being of each person: the difference between a man, say, and his image. To gaze for several minutes at any of these remarkable portraits is to draw close to someone whose being and image do not coincide. Gabrielle Martin is too subtle a painter to make the aporias of representation into a theme. Her art abides in suggesting the precise way in which a person is either venturing ahead or lagging behind his image.

Yet there is a third layer in Gabrielle Martin's portraits, and it is here that a sense of mystery is most surely registered. What she finally paints is a mystery that passes through the relations between mortal beings. Sometimes the relation is between sitter and artist. Sometimes it is between two or more people and the artist. Now and then a dog or cat is included. If we ask ourselves how far those depicted stand from the painter or from one another, the answer will come very quickly. We will say that the distance is infinite. This is not because she represents people as alienated. Far from it: she has a rare ability to paint the point to which people will go if left to themselves. (It may be a place of calm or resignation, a site where the self remains a project, or a deep place that can be visited only rarely.) The distance between people in these portraits cannot be measured because, at the work's most profound level, Gabrielle Martin paints the spiritual relations between individuals.

There is no program in these portraits, no attempt to reduce her men, women and children to a particular vision. Part of Gabrielle Martin's art is to let each

person arrive in his or her own way before her. Some of the figures, like Dur-e Dara, are fully here (yet strangely still to come) while others, like Kate, are shown a little before they arrive. So when I risk the word 'spiritual' I do not intend to suggest that Gabrielle Martin freezes her subjects in a unifying gaze that answers to a particular religious confession. On the contrary, she is attentive to differences: a clenching or a slight defensiveness, a longing, a wish to please, or even a look that feigns resignation while the shoulders assert impatience. What I want to suggest by the word 'spiritual' is that Gabrielle Martin paints what has occurred to her subjects – in their relations with others, death or God – but what has not been present to their consciousness. This is not spirit in the sense of *Geist*, and perhaps it would be better to call it 'counter-spirit'. Something has occurred to all these people; it has introduced itself as a new register in their being, but it has not happened in their direct experience. They cannot recount it as though it were just one event among others. Yet Gabrielle Martin points to it in each case and, far from trying to capture it, honours it by letting it pass unnamed.

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