

## From the collection



Determined to succeed as a figure painter in a period dominated by abstraction, Richard McWhannell is a contemporary artist whose painting has lived by its own rules during his 35-year career.

With a nod to the great European masters Goya and Manet, and early references to local light and shade expert Tony Fomison, McWhannell has become a painter of big technique. Landscape

preoccupied him for a year in 1994, but it is portraiture that has defined him ever since.

To make a portrait, he sets his sitter up in a situation and lets them decide the gestures and pose so that the body becomes a formal arrangement. Although he paints his wife, his friends and himself repetitively, it is what he sees of that person, working from the exterior or surface that he wants to portray. As a painter of light, it is the style of his work that he wants to be the content, not the apparent subject, yet he is a sucker for female beauty.

For McWhannell, the sum of paradigmatic beauty appears in the face and form of his wife, the actress Donogh Rees, who has been his most frequent model ever since they married in 1984. Recently he has used Claudia Watson, a rebellious young woman whom he first met aged 14 in 1998, as his model. She featured in several of the works in his

2009 exhibition, “Introducing Cowboys and Girls, Girls, Girls” and she continues to pose for him, despite recent motherhood. The artist comments that female sitters offer respite from self-regard.

“As a painter of women I have continued with some new and some returnee sitters. They are all in their way family, who have been wonderfully committed and excellent company. It continues to be a (difficult) pleasure to have people in front of

me, to thrill at what light does on flesh and cloth, and to be able to laugh, snarl and all with those who see value in what the painter does. They are the other side of the ‘Cowboy’ coin, and very welcome after stretches on the Range.”

The 1981 debut album of Los Angeles hard rock band, Mötley Crüe lends the name of its title track to this work. Being called *Too Fast For Love* positions the tattooed Claudia with her immodest Zambesi blouse open as a challenge to the viewer, making her seem both dominant and domestic. Like the girl in the song, she is big trouble, a “dream machine, so damn cool she can turn on the night/ She’ll use her time up/Have nothing to show”.

McWhannell’s portrait of Hugh Fletcher, previously Chancellor of the University and Chief Executive of Fletcher Challenge, recently featured in Erin Griffey’s exhibition *The Power of Portraiture* at Gus Fisher Gallery and the New Zealand Portrait Gallery in Wellington in 2009. He comments on the difference between portraying male and female sitters: “The women in my pictures are there because they’re likely to solicit my attention as much as I do theirs. It’s my opinion that women (and especially the young ones) have a strong awareness of mortality/sexuality and will happily participate in my locking them in an image of their youthful fecundity or their growing older. While blokes are more likely to come to me because they’re required to be ‘portrayed’ to mark their status and will invariably protest they’ve been made to accept this job as sitter.”

Linda Tyler

*Richard McWhannell (b.1952), Too Fast For Love, 2008, oil on canvas, 1010 x 830mm*