

entertainmentnow

Nudity...disability...culture

"Disability culture has never spoken as loud as women's culture or black culture", says artist Tanya Raabe. "It's going to disappear if we don't preserve it in some way or other." That's what she set out to address in her exhibition *Revealing Culture: HeadOn*. She talks to **Annie Makoff** and selects images from the show to look at in detail

I used portraits to portray well-known disability cultural figures, people who are known in the mainstream as well as in the disability circuit. I took hundreds of photographs of the sitter and painted their portraits.

Central to all this is the concept of the disabled nude: is there such a thing as a disabled nude? If you are defining yourself as a disabled person and you are posing nude, does your disability come into it? In my view, there is such a thing as a disabled nude.

There are only a few nudes in the collection and they are mixed with those who are clothed. I don't think that society can really cope with disability and nudity: it is still a contentious subject.

I don't see my work as political these days. The political is still there, especially with *Revealing Culture: HeadOn*, but I don't throw it in people's faces as much as I used to. I like my work to stand alone and to be valued from an artistic level, as well as a disability, political level.

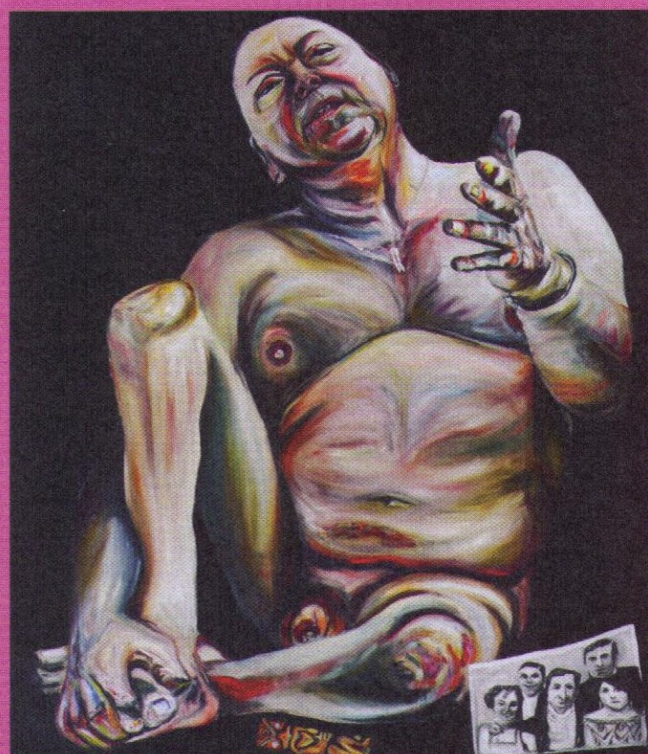


R:EVOLVE INSTALLATION

R:Evolve is a 7ft structure of three vertical cubes with full-length portraits of four nude disabled women (myself, visual artist Caroline Cardus, writer Penny Pepper and performance artist Julia Dean-Richards).

As Penny is a wheelchair-user, she was painted as if she were standing. Julia recently had breast reconstruction due to breast cancer which is just about visible in the piece and Caroline has a hidden disability but uses a stick.

The cubes – which can all be spun – mimics books you could get as children where new body shapes could be created by turning over different sections of the page to create matches or mismatches. It's the idea that nobody's body is perfect – what is a "perfect body" after all?



GARRY ROBSON PORTRAIT

(Actor and Artistic Director of DaDaFest 10 International and Artistic Director of Fittings Multimedia Arts)

Garry's bodily expression in the painting is just how he usually holds his body: his arm holds his foot to anchor that side of his body.

Garry is painted in a lot of high contrast tones: I always use a lot of white in my pieces because I want the image to be seen by as many people as possible. I make it as accessible as I can in terms of colour, light, shade and composition, so people with visual impairments can see the image too.

I asked each sitter to bring two objects with them: one personal and one with a disability context. Garry brought a family portrait with him and a Maori figure which his daughter brought him back from New Zealand. He saw it as a cultural identity of disability: he talked about the hinterland of disability where there is either worship or disgust.

Garry talked about the relationship he has with his legs: he refers to his legs as Belsen legs because they are thin and withered. Yet I saw his image as Buddha-like, iconic almost.

BARONESS JANE CAMPBELL DBE PORTRAIT

(Active crossbench peer in the House of Lords)

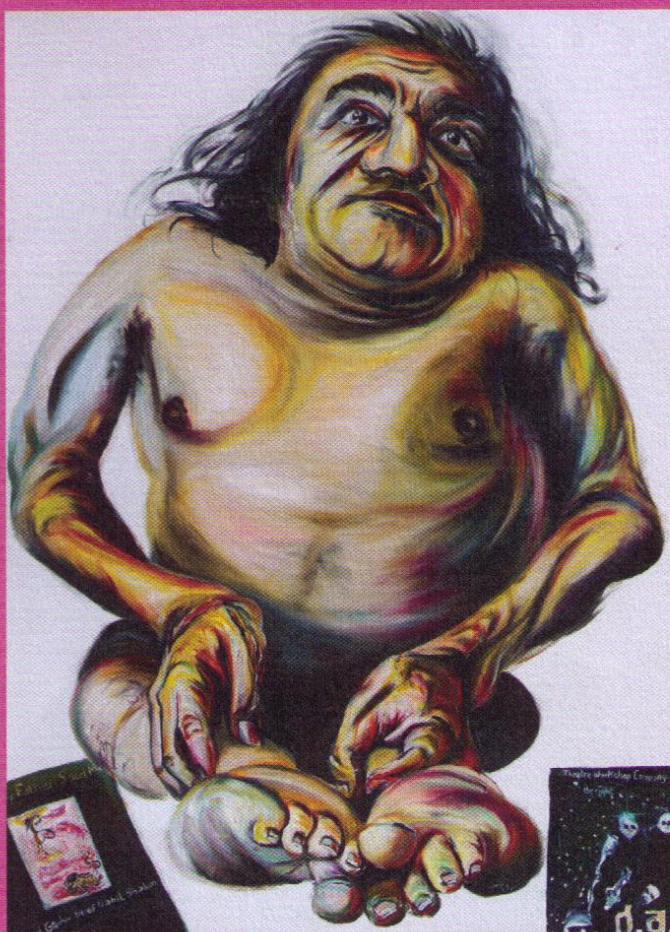
The tweed cape Jane was wearing at the sitting reminded me of a Miss Marple figure. She is such an archetype!

I don't think Jane was that impressed with the finished piece, she thought I was going to make her look like a supermodel rather than a Miss Marple figure, but the portrait was all about her animated character. Her disability restricts her movement, yet Jane did all these great gestures with her hands and her face: she was totally animated. Her face is very sculptural, she's got these really angular features and I wanted to translate that to the page.

She brought her royal seal with her in a red velvet box which was presented to her when she became a Baroness. The seal started a really interesting dialogue between her and this eighteen-year-old woman who was visiting the gallery. The woman didn't understand why you'd want to become a baroness. Why would you want to be a member of the House of Lords?

Jane's history is a fighting history: she talked about very strong contentious subjects like assisted suicide and the bill she fought to get through. She told me that people still say to her that they don't see her disability, as if that is a good thing. She always insists, "but I'm proud to be disabled, I am disabled, just get on with it! It's not the whole of my identity, but it is part of me."





NABIL SHABAN PORTRAIT

(Actor and founder of Graeae Theatre Company)

I really enjoyed painting Nabil, I'd wanted to paint him for ages, so this was quite an experience.

Nabil had dyed his hair black for the portrait. He's got such a great body shape, it's really compact. Interestingly, the finished painting is bigger than him! He's been on TV quite a lot exploring issues like body fascism and eugenics, typical Nabil stuff, and he has self-published an anthology of his artistic works which he brought with him. I used a lot of light colours for his painting, I wanted it to look cartoony, like a caricature.

He told me that he has a dialogue with his feet, which he says talk to one another. When he was posing, his hands and especially his feet were moving constantly, they reminded me of little ants.

SOPHIE MORGAN PORTRAIT

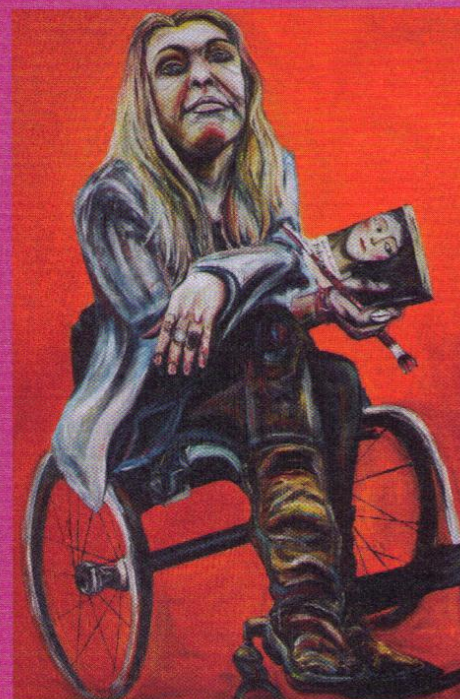
(Artist, campaigner and runner-up in the BBC reality TV show, *Britain's Missing Top Model*)

Sophie is a very self-assured young woman. She was training to be a lawyer but following a road accident which left her disabled, she became an artist instead. I think a lot of people who become paraplegic do go on a bit of a journey, you have got to adjust.

She doesn't feel that she herself wants to be identified totally as a disabled artist, she still feels that it can be a negative association. It's almost like she is saying: I don't want to be seen as a disabled woman.

I think that is another level of identity. It is a bit like the disabled nude: are you or aren't you? I often see myself as a disabled woman: I had burst ovarian cysts and I had to go to the hospital to have them drained and they said "you'll be infertile, but you won't be having any children, will you?" I was 35! That makes me a disabled woman because that attitude disables me as a woman.

So I think there are all these identities that we drift in and out of with a disability, whether we accept it or not.



Even Sophie describes herself as a disabled woman but not as a disabled artist.

Sophie is holding *Pride and Prejudice* not just because she is currently studying English literature but because she sees herself as a proud disabled woman who is fighting prejudice.

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