

Speech For The Launch of "Close To The Bone"

Shane Simpson (Nov. 1991)

We know Davida as a painter. She has had her share of honours.

We now meet her as a writer and a painter.

Although this evening we are celebrating the publication of Images of Vicki Myers: What is a Portrait? by the valiant New Endeavour Press, it is impossible to separate it from its companion volume, the novel: The Autobiography of Vicki Myers: Close to the Bone", published by Simon & Schuster.

After all, the text of "Portrait" is drawn from "Close To The Bone" and the thirty-odd "Images of Vicki Myers" are based on Vicki's autobiography.

So "What Is A Portrait?"

Being a lawyer, to answer the question I went not to the pages of art history, but to the Law Reports.

"What Is A Portrait?" is a question that has been asked of the Courts on various occasions: one case that we all know of, is the William Dobell - Archibald Prize saga (Attorney-General v Trustees of the National Gallery of NSW).

You will remember that the question was whether his painting of Joshua Smith was a portrait or a mere caricature; and if it was the latter, were the terms mutually exclusive anyway?

In that case, the judge held that the word

"portrait" means a pictorial representation of a person, painted by an artist. This definition connotes that some degree of likeness is essential and for the purpose of achieving it, the inclusion of the face of the subject is desirable and perhaps also essential.

The picture in question is characterised by some startling exaggeration and distortion clearly intended by the artist, his technique being too brilliant to admit of any other conclusion. It has, nevertheless a strong degree of likeness to the subject and is I think, undoubtedly a pictorial representation of him".

For a moment, I felt secure in the view, that what we have in these books is indeed a Portrait.

But then I thought: If Vicki isn't Davida the work it hasn't been drawn "from life". If this is so, can we call it a portrait?

Carefully avoiding all the recent Archibald Prize debate on the issue, I came across a case called Leah v Two Worlds Publishing, a 1951 English copyright case.

It involved a painter who created his portraits by means of extra-sensory perception.

He specialised in painting dead or missing people. He said that he could actually see the dead person standing near his easel. It was only after having finished, signed and sealed the work that he would allow himself to see a photograph of the deceased. If the commissioner thought that it was a good likeness, he would sell the work for 3 pounds.

The central question of this bizarre case was:

"Does the fact that the work is made from imaginative or mental material rather than from any material of physical attributes, prevent it from being a portrait?"

Both Vicki and Davida can rest assured; the court held that the work was none the less a portrait even though the materials that the artist had used were entirely subjective.

So, these books are indeed a portrait.

- At the very least, they are a portrait of Vicki Myers.
- A portrait of the Artist
 - as a young girl
 - as a woman
 - as a mother
 - as a wife
 - as a lover
 - as a fantasist
 - as a talent
 - as a hard working, self doubting, professional...

the whole being a crude assemblage of the parts - torn and even overwhelmed by the conflict of experience and memory that is inherent in all those roles.

This portrait is an insight into that fractured world that we all carry within - a world that few of us explore alone, let alone invite the public to share that exploration. It is a rare privilege.

I am sure that there are people who will read these books and say, "How dare she!

Being Australian, they will probably turn to Michael and say, "How could you have let her!"

The answer, if there needs to be an answer, perhaps was alluded to by Saul Bellow in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: He said, "Art attempts to find in the universe, in matter as well as in the facts of life, what is fundamental, enduring, essential".

In this portrait, Vicki Myers is exposed.

Nobody could accuse Davida of flattering her portrait subjects. They are victims of candour; victims of textual harassment.

There is a famous Australian story that Davida might pin to her studio wall:

After seeing a portrait of William Morris Hughes, a friend said to Hughes,

"It's a very good likeness. It does you justice!"

"It's not justice I want", said Hughes, "Its mercy!"

That famous humorist Franz Kafka said, "Art is that which registers the deformities which have not yet penetrated our consciousness".

I would prefer to say, that it is that which registers the experiences of ourself, which have not yet penetrated our consciousness.

That is the importance of this portrait of Vicki.

I would misquote Picasso and suggest that her portrait is "a sum of destructions; a series of lies that makes us realise the truth".

For this portrait may well be a series of lies!

Is the story of Vicky Myers, fiction or thinly disguised autobiography?

Is Vicki Myers really Davida Allen in another dimension?

Perhaps it simply doesn't matter:

Autobiography is merely the least reprehensible form of lying and its inherently flawed by the conflict between the expectation of truthfulness and the desire to be interesting to others.

Whether this is the story of Vicki or of Davida, I don't know.

But through these books, I have grown close to that:

daring

compassionate,

exasperating,

yearning,

startling painter,

called Vicki Myers.

So thank you, New Endeavour for publishing, "What Is A Portrait?"

and thank you Davida Allen for revealing to us, these "Images of Vicki Myers".