

**Features.**



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The Wallace Collection plays host to one of the more surprising TV hits of recent times: Portrait Artist of the Year. The Journal meets co-presenter Joan Bakewell and judge Kate Bryan to find out why a show about people painting pictures, largely in silence, resonates with its sizeable audience

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## Features.

### Portrait Artist of the Year

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## A BRUSH WITH SUCCESS

### 2017 SERIES WINNER GARETH REID DESCRIBES HIS JOURNEY TO THE PRIZE

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“Hello, we're at the Wallace Collection in London, where nine artists are going to paint three famous faces,” announces comedian and unlikely art buff Frank Skinner. “They're not always using paint either,” his co-presenter Joan Bakewell marvels. “One's using charcoal, one's using wax and one's thrown the canvas away entirely and is using a tile that he bought at the local DIY store.” Behind them, the luminous, airy and usually serene courtyard of the Wallace Collection hums with life, as camera crew and easels jostle with onlookers eagerly anticipating the excitement to come. “Joan,” says Frank suddenly, apropos of nothing and with endearing earnestness, “I love you.” The 83-year-old dame, broadcaster, Labour peer, journalist and university president looks at him sternly. “Get on with the programme!” But as the camera pulls away to pan round the assembled artists, an affectionate twinkle in her eyes says it all.

“It was a lovely moment,” she recalls when, to my considerable awe, I find myself speaking to her on the phone after the show has aired. “I am so glad the editors kept it in.” After three years of presenting Portrait Artist of the Year on Sky Arts, the pair have built a rapport that is by no means confined to when the camera light is on. “We've become friends with each other, and with the judges,” says Joan. “We send

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Facebook messages, meet up and have dinner together. I really look forward to filming.” With growing audience figures both at home and on set in the Wallace Collection, she is far from being the only one.

“It's like coming back to school after the summer holidays and seeing all your friends again,” agrees Kate Bryan, an art historian and one of the programme's three judges. I meet her outside Dean Street Townhouse, one of more than 18 properties around the world whose art she is responsible for buying and arranging. They've just had the viewing stats in for the latest series, and the number and range of people watching this public art competition has made her feel “less pessimistic about the state of the world”.

“It sounds like a pretty niche programme. It is literally watching paint dry,” she continues. “Usually an art programme lives off the strength of its name—Van Gogh, Damien Hirst—but there are no famous artists in this.” Yes, there are celebrities (the contestant's subjects are all prominent personalities) but as Kate points out, once they've sat still and quiet for four hours, you've almost forgotten that they're famous. “Even Richard E Grant didn't seem like Richard E Grant after a while.” After that, it's simply down to the painting: seeing what men and women from all walks of life, of any training or none at all can create in the four hours allotted

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It was my students who encouraged me to do it. At first I thought, no way. Art's my job—I teach at the Glasgow School of Art and I sell paintings. If I made a hash of it, it would be public humiliation. But then I needed to get my work out a bit more somehow, and I was trying to take my portraiture a bit more seriously. So a couple of years ago, the night before the deadline, I applied.

I appeared on a heat, but fell at the first hurdle. They featured me quite a bit though, and I felt like what I did was okay, so I applied again. For this series, I think the first portrait I did, of Adrian Chiles, was the best work I did. I felt there was a dip in the middle—but as the show went on, I tried to push myself a bit more, to show some kind of progression. My chances wouldn't have been as favourable if I'd stayed the same.

The timing didn't bother me too much. You have a time limit, so I'd practiced with two-hour slots. I practiced a lot. It's taken over my life for the past year and I've a huge backlog of clients now, but it's been very exciting. I'm used to working in isolation

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to them with nothing more than some pigment and a canvas—or a tile from Homebase. Nevertheless, “there are many viewers—a whole cross section of the UK,” Kate recalls, “and after Brexit and everything else feeling so depressing, I felt I had something in common with the rest of the country: we all love art.”

The volume of entries has risen so much that the number of heats this season has increased from six to eight to give more people a chance. Last week, Kate commissioned a piece of art for the Soho House collection from a former contestant. “I kept thinking about her work, and thinking I would be mad not to have her,” she enthuses. More often than not, the people who

Gareth Reid with Kate Bryan and (below) with Graham Norton



in a studio, and the camaraderie that comes with being on set is great.

It was a great day, the final. My whole family came along to support me. I've won a few things here and there, and been featured in the BP Portrait Award several times—but nothing this big. Graham Norton was so nice, natural

appear on the programme are fans who have been watching it for years. Where *The Voice* and *Strictly Come Dancing* have become as much about the contestants' character as their talents, *Portrait Artist of the Year* values the artwork—and as such, has become its very own ecosystem: inspiring new artists, encouraging lapsed ones to take up their brushes, and giving semi-established artists the boost they need to their career.

It's not *The X Factor*, as both Joan and Kate are at pains to point out. "We're not produced, and that's a great asset," says Kate. There is no casting—hopefuls apply by sending a self-portrait in for assessment—and no backstory, either: "No one's chosen

and engaging, and I was pleased with my portrait of him. I wouldn't have wanted to give it a showbiz quality, and he was happy with my showing something different to his TV presenter side.

The funny thing is that it turned out Graham and I are related: my great-grandmother was Christina Reynolds, from Ballymena, and Graham's great-grandfather was her older brother, James Reynolds, so we're third cousins. How amazing, out of all the people who entered the competition, out of all the celebrities they could have chosen to sit—although as Graham remarked, it's slightly embarrassing for Ireland. Sort of confirms what everyone thinks.

because they used to be a tambourine player and can do that while they paint. I can't really remember the painters' personal lives," she continues. "But I can remember every single painting. It's only a day, and you are putting them through to the next round on the basis of what they do then and there." Come the semi-final and final, they're looking for progression, as well as taking that round's submission at—quite literally—face value. "I expected it to be more like a competition. I thought I'd have to be ruthless. But actually, it is just about choosing the right artwork."

Often the judges disagree with each other, and with Joan and Frank,

the presenters—but, "they're very experienced in art, and we accept that judgment even if it's not one we share," Joan says. "We'll argue the entire way home sometimes," Kate laughs, "long after filming's finished. Of course, Frank loves art and Joan is incredibly cultured, having worked in the arts for so long—but we have quite specific criteria." Where Joan values a likeness "of the mood or spirit of the person" and Frank a good story, the judges want a good painting first: "Because the thing with likeness is, it doesn't always make for the most interesting portrait."

"By slaving endlessly on, making it look exactly like that person, you can lose something of the soul and character of the piece," Kate continues. She cites the example of Rembrandt's *Titus*, the artist's son, hanging mere metres away from where the heats are filmed in the Wallace Collection. "It's an incredible portrait despite the fact the person it's of and the person who has painted it have long since passed away. It has this energy about it. It's one of the finest portraits in the country," she explains. And the prize—the commissioning of a painting which will hang in a British national museum or art gallery—demands such timelessness. "People have to be able to look at it and appreciate it as a work of art hundreds of years later." If we're after likeness, she continues, we should turn to photography which "worked out how to capture faces perfectly years ago".

Does the public agree? "They hate us for it and we love their hating us," Kate grins. By and large they agree with Joan and Frank—"so, through them, we have the opportunity to clarify our decision." Public competitions court controversy: the finals of *Great British Bake Off* or *Britain's Got Talent* brought social media out in hives at the judge's decision. But with *Portrait Artist of the Year*, Kate feels their viewers do ultimately see the reasoning behind their choice. "My husband will say, 'I would have picked so and so, but I can see where you're coming from.' That makes me happy." After all, one of the

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### Portrait Artist of the Year



Frank Skinner, Kate Bryan,  
Gareth Reid and Joan Bakewell

main aims of both Kate and Joan's careers so far has been to open up the occasionally rarefied spheres of art to a wider audience. This is as close as Kate thinks you can get to space in which art, and the appreciation of art, can exist without all the trappings of the art world. "It's a prism though which to look at why visual images move us in the way they do, why they work and why they connect with us." The art world is an industry; art is a passion which Portrait Artist of the Year isolates in much the same way that Bake Off distinguished our national love of baking cakes from the patisserie kitchen at The Savoy.

"I don't think there is such a thing," says Joan, when I ask her where

she thinks the programme sits on the scale from high art to low or populist art. "Last year Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature. That pretty much sums it up." The show's applicants comprise both those who paint in their spare time, and professional artists. "No one is particularly rich or famous. They all love art." Visit the Tate gallery at half term and it's full of families, children's workshops—all sorts of people, she continues. From her perspective—and it's a long one, comprising more than 50 years of talking about culture on television and radio—programmes drawn from the man on the street are nothing new ("Ken Loach's films were groundbreaking in the 1970s," she points out) and no more or less 'highbrow' than artists drawing from life.

The diversity of the programme's appeal is reflected in its sitters, which range from the first female Asian high court judge Bobbie Cheema-Grubb DBE, to Graham Norton. Football presenter Adrian Chiles and Radio 4 Today staple John Humphreys have both featured, the latter bearing a newspaper because he "couldn't possibly sit still for four hours without". Lesley Manville sat cross legged; Sue Perkins was "a real fidget", Kate grins. "Joan knows most of them, of course, so she'll tell them if they're moving around too much." It's hilarious, she continues—but what gets her every time is the 'reveal'.

"The sitters can look during the day if they want, but I much prefer it when they don't. Then at the end, when the easels are turned round, they are absolutely gob-smacked. It is lovely to see." Of course, these are people with huge public profiles, well accustomed to seeing their faces on screens, magazines and billboards, but what the portrait artists do is



I don't think there is a gulf between high art and low art. Last year Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature. That pretty much sums it up.

catch them in repose. "They might have a resting bitch face. They might look anxious, or angry or meditative. You are so used to seeing them animated, you've no idea what they look like when they have to sit still for four hours—but the artists, and we as judges, have been watching that." The great artist, Kate explains, is the one who takes their sitter and communicates something about them that is "unexpected; that comes at them from the side, as it were, and reveals something about them and about what great art is."

When I look, at long last, upon the winning portrait of Graham Norton, painted by fellow Irishman Gareth Reid, I think I get it—though I can't quite spell it out. There he is, the man of sparkling shirts, cheeky one liners and Eurovision putdowns, recreated in a faded grey overcoat in a wicker chair in his home in West Cork, by the sea. He looks wistful, the bright smile replaced with a distant and inscrutable look, older than he appears on screen. "You look at Gareth's portraits and you think, that person could have come from centuries ago. There is something so classic about them," Kate enthuses, "and yet it is not old fashioned."

I once caught sight of Graham Norton, on his own in a street in Southwark. He was just leaving somewhere, and opening the door of his car. I caught his eye and, in the second it took me to recognise this surprisingly small, pensive man as Graham Norton, I saw a person lost in his own head, just as I was. Capturing those moments of authenticity—between people, as with Joan and Frank's exchange, or alone, as with Graham Norton, are as close a stab as I would venture to make at the 'essence' of art.