

## Captured on canvas: portraits at Frieze Masters

Marlborough Gallery's group exhibition explores the charged relationship between artist and sitter



'Ada Smiling' (1993) by Alex Katz

Chloë Ashby 2 HOURS AGO



It's only fitting that a gallery should focus on portraiture at Frieze Masters. After all, the characters who frequent this fair — and particularly its glitzier sister, a short walk through Regent's Park — are scrutinised as carefully as the art. But the group exhibition of portraits at Marlborough Gallery's first Frieze Masters presentation is about more than appearances. Instead, it's a celebration of the intimate and often complex relationship between artist and sitter.

At times, that relationship is romantic — as with Alex Katz and his wife Ada, whom the artist has depicted more than 200 times since they met in 1957. In "Ada Smiling" (1993) she flashes a toothy grin, her wide-set eyes fringed with thick lashes and her dark hair threaded with grey. In signature Katz style, the background is devoid of detail; the portrait too is pared back, leaving us with just enough to make the identification. Of course, the artist's ability to capture his sitter's likeness with so little makes perfect sense: this is the person he knows best.

Hanging opposite Ada is Larry Rivers' "Portrait of Frank O'Hara" (1953). The poet was a friend and a lover but also a long-term collaborator. Rivers, who is known for working at the crossroads of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, portrays O'Hara face on, hands on hips. It's a powerful stance, made more forceful by the fact that O'Hara takes up most of the canvas, and yet the muted tones of the figure blend into the background. The result: a merging of poet and painter.



'Portrait of Frank O'Hara' (1953) by Larry Rivers

The faces in Frank Auerbach's raw and highly textured portraits are all but obscured by his muddy palette and thick brush marks. One of the five people who regularly pose for the artist is the writer and art historian William Feaver. "I regard the weekly sessions as an enhanced form of psychotherapy," he says. "I sit and think and listen and talk in absolute privacy while the painter is engaged." He may barely recognise his face in the final product, but he often glimpses something else. "They catch a mood and remind me of what I felt like at the time."

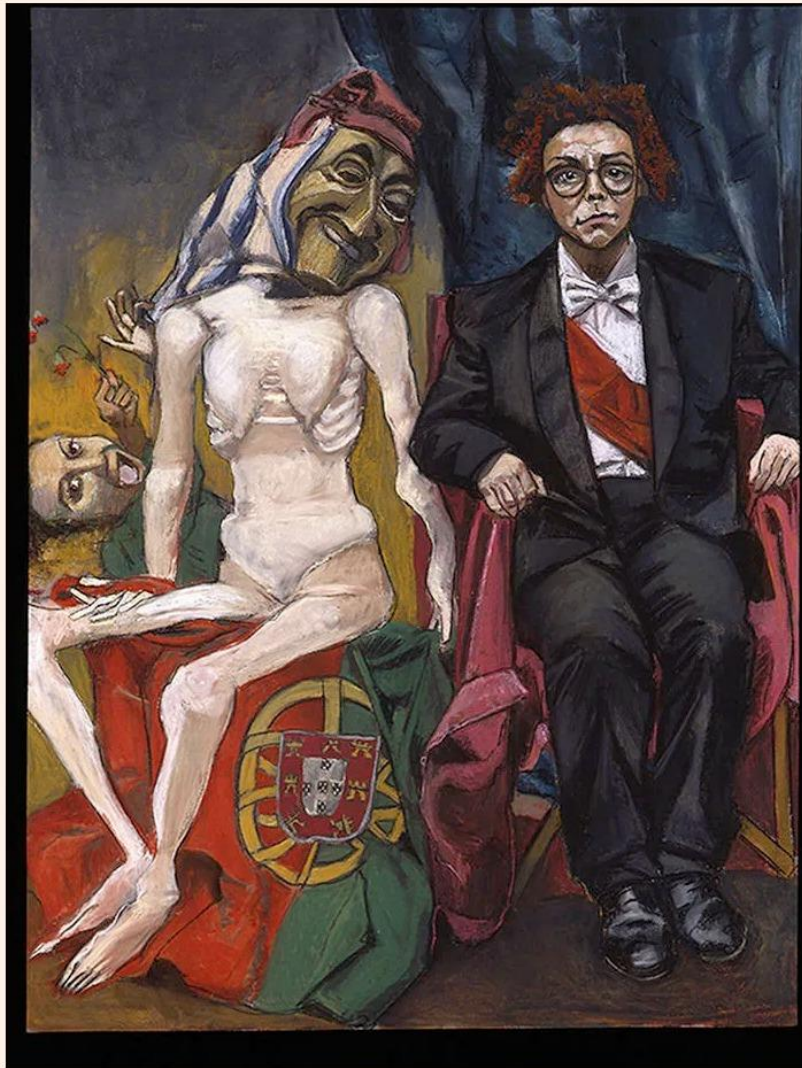
Mood is also ripe in the candid portraits by Alice Neel, who chronicles both close friends and complete strangers. "Steve Cornwell" (1976) shows her long-serving studio assistant sitting in an armchair, the picture of nonchalance with one leg crossed over the other and his fingertips gently supporting his head. His blue eyes stare at us — and at Neel — while beneath his bushy moustache his lips are curled into a wry smile. The carrot-coloured trousers add to the good humour.



'Steve Cornwell' (1976) by Alice Neel

Both playful and rich with history is one of the most powerful pieces on display: "The Old Republic" (2005) by Paula Rego. The artist was commissioned to paint a portrait of the president of Portugal, but first she made two preparatory works in her London studio using her assistant and friend Lila Nunes in his place. The one here shows the president alongside a skeletal figure perched on a Portuguese flag (an allegorical Old Republic) and an open-mouthed girl clutching carnations, a reference to the 1974 revolution that put an end to four decades of authoritarian government. As for Lila, originally hired by Rego to care for her late husband Victor Willing, she appears throughout the artist's works in endless guises, a constant source of inspiration.





'The Old Republic' (2005) by Paula Rego

Lucian Freud, whose etchings also feature in Marlborough Gallery's presentation, once said that the model "should only serve the very private function for the painter of providing the starting point for his excitement". For him, the picture was everything; for the other artists on show, the relationship with the sitter is clearly crucial. Speaking of which, do the subjects sneak a glance at the work before it's complete? Feaver describes the end of each two-hour session with Auerbach, when the artist places the canvas on the floor like a "big game hunter with his kill": "I look at it and say nothing, usually, because anything said would be intrusive," he says. "I do often grunt though."

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