

## Portraits

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Portraiture has always been a mainstay of Roderick Buchanan's art. Over the course of a fifteen-year career that has taken him far from his home turf of Glasgow to ever more distant and disparate locations, Buchanan's camera has alighted on countless faces: each equally memorable and distinctive; each acquiring further power and meaning through its proximity and affinity to others. Stressing the singular character of each of his subjects while, at the same time, insisting on treating them as simply one amongst many, Buchanan's portraits picture us not as isolated, atomised individuals but more as active, and interconnected, 'players' in a wider social/cultural arena. In this, his repeated focus on sport, and its relationship to everyday life and culture, has an obvious metaphorical significance. Many of his protagonists are often actual sportsmen or women (usually amateur rather than professional), whose personal biographies, whose attributes or achievements, or whose infectious enthusiasm or commitment make them exemplary in some way. But even when sport doesn't form the basis of one of his works, its guiding principle (an emphasis on individual excellence within a larger collective ethic) supplies a kind of philosophical and conceptual blueprint. And if they are not always sports people *per se*, the subjects of many of his other portraits are certainly 'players' in a parallel sense — willing, and increasingly knowing, participants in what often seems like the biggest game in town: carving out a place for themselves within the complex field of identity and allegiance that constitutes contemporary popular culture.

Buchanan's sure and skilful grasp of his material derives more from inside knowledge and experience than from any anthropological or documentary imperatives. His eye might be drawn, for instance, to a growing trend among

Glasgow youths to wear football shirts from faraway Milan, recording this phenomenon in a series of identikit poses that resemble the player photos in children's sticker albums or (before that) on cigarette cards. Along similar lines, when travelling abroad to various cities, he might stop people wearing New York Yankees baseball caps, and quickly snap their picture. His scattershot parade of random faces functions as a microcosm of the multicultural melting pot that is many people's shorthand image of New York. Brought together under the sign of this familiar and iconic NY logo, it is apparent that it is his subjects' diversity, as much as their choice of headgear, that unites them.

As people's primary point of identification is less tied to their place of birth and more to shared forms of cultural aspiration, factors other than the old bonds of history, family and class become the things that start to differentiate and define us. Buchanan's portrait works not only dramatise this shift, but also force us to ponder the limits, and potential drawbacks, of these new, and sometimes unsettling, transformations; noting, and often celebrating, the persistence of local influences and interests in the face of an increasingly pervasive 'global' culture. Buchanan's time-based portrait works press the point home. Short video clips of Glasgow schoolchildren spitting out their one-word, tribal loyalty to the 'old firm' football clubs of either Celtic or Rangers are counterpointed with engaging vox pop studies of people from British and other European cities struggling with the pronunciation of new and difficult foreign names (names like the ones that Glaswegians, to cite just one example, now encounter with ever-greater regularity in the increasingly cosmopolitan line-ups of their once entirely home-grown football teams).

Again, sport provides a highly accessible point of entry in to this new and emerging nexus of interdependent international relationships. Occasionally, though, Buchanan chooses to remind us how sport can often double as a form of conflict by other means. Freeze-framed from the television coverage of World Cup football matches, his photo-cameos of rival team members swapping their jerseys at the end of a game offer a striking contrast to the steely, almost martial mug-shots of many of the same footballers lined up for

the pre-match ritual of the national anthems. Elongated into an *Endless Column* of hundreds of footballers and rugby players, Buchanan's band of sporting brothers exudes a fierce team spirit that finds its echo in the enduring camaraderie of the massed ranks of Scottish and Indian soldiers (from historically-linked 'sister' regiments) assembled on the parade-ground in his recent film work, *History Painting*.

History confers the status of a portrait only on a chosen few — or used to, at any rate. Portrait painters, visual art's equivalents of the 'official' biographer or establishment historian, would have tended to gravitate instinctively towards the movers and shakers of their era, usually disdaining its bit-part players. After the advent of photography in the nineteenth century, the focus of portraiture expanded beyond the privileged orbit of the powerful and the famous (or the occasional study of 'picturesque' farmers or labourers), continuing to widen its compass to take in ever-greater sections of the population. This impulse to broaden its demographic horizons reached an apotheosis of sorts in August Sander's extraordinary photographic survey, 'People of the Twentieth Century' — an exhaustive typological classification of the various 'categories' of German worker that Sander added to obsessively from the 1920s onwards. It is a project that hovers in the background of many of Buchanan's portrait works — although more as a formal precursor than as a kindred spirit.

From their vantage points at either end of the century, these two artists present us with some of our most vivid insights into the cast of mind, and the cast of characters, of the industrial and the post-industrial age. In the intervening years, of course, Sander's roll call of workers, their identities bound up with their professional status, have been succeeded by a modern generation whose individuality is increasingly expressed through its leisure choices and by other forms of cultural allegiance. In contemporary consumer society, work may occupy as much (if not more) of our time, but our lives are less easily circumscribed by our occupations than they once were. In this, at least, work exerts less of a hold on us than it did. With this in mind, it is perhaps no coincidence that in the shadow of Sander's own great labour, his

*lebensarbeit*, Buchanan's portrait-making, as if reflecting something of the mood of the prevailing *zeitgeist*, draws back from any systematic claims or ambitions and is distinguished instead by a series of loose, often playful, conceptual gambits and stratagems.

That playfulness extends to the form of some of the portraits themselves — in 'Deadweight', for example, a top-ranking bill of legendary boxers is represented as a series of heavy-duty, but now slightly saggy-looking, punch-bags measuring each boxers' exact fighting weight (Esteban de Jesus: 135 lbs; Abe Simon: 225lbs etc). It is a one-liner that quietly floors you; a study of mass and meat whose crumpled, brooding presence conveys a sense of both latent menace and encroaching mortality. Buchanan branches out further in a number of recent genealogical works, going back through his own family tree to track generation after generation of his forebears; most of whom, he was interested to discover, had barely strayed from the small area of Glasgow where he himself lives. Rendered as a large-scale wall-based work, it is, of course, a type of self-portrait — a personal profile, brimful of anecdote and memory, that also records the inexorable, and unsentimental, passage of DNA over time.

The close-knit Buchanan clan would seem to have little in common with the maverick, itinerant figure of Thomas Muir, one of those regularly-invoked names in the pantheon of Scottish anti-establishment culture, whose biography, and whose claim to fame, nonetheless remains strangely elusive. Buchanan's portrait of Muir has an appropriately will o' the wisp quality, made up of overlapping fragments of information, and compiled under the banner of the *Thomas Muir Help Desk*. Once again finding the right style of portrait for the relevant individual, Buchanan's pick-and-mix approach to his subject is a perfect match for Muir's own facility for self-mythology and personal reinvention.

Echoing this new, historically oriented direction to his practice, this book of Buchanan's portraits pursues a similar 'genealogical' route through his evolving career as an artist, tracing a line from early photo pieces such as

*Guilt by Association* to recent film works like *Harriers* and *History Painting*. Throughout this loose visual anthology, various key themes reappear: a focus on the everyday, transformed, under Buchanan's adroit and observant eye, into something a little less ordinary; as well as a corresponding feeling for the commonplace, forged into something equally universal and exemplary. Above all, at the heart of his work, is a genuine and spontaneous empathy for individual lives, especially those that often go unnoticed (foot-soldiers rather than captains; club runners rather than elite athletes; characters rather than celebrities). Common to all of these portraits is a rare and singularly generous humanity that radiates across every photograph, video or film.