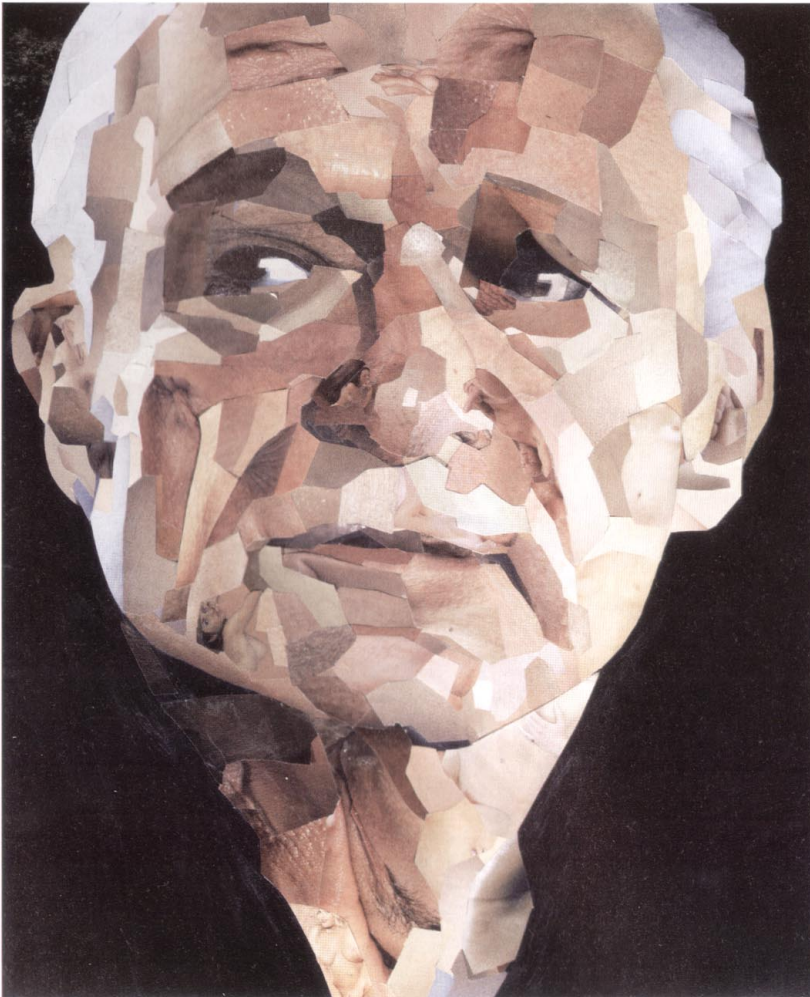


Jonathan Yeo

indistinct pornographer

HUGH HEFNER 2008
COURTESY JONATHAN YEO AND LAZARIDES GALLERY



Hello Jonathan, please introduce yourself.

Hi. I'm a painter and, arguably now, also a pornographer...

How did it all start... did you draw a lot when you were a kid?

I wasn't that great at art but I liked doing caricatures of the teachers in other classes to make my friends laugh, so I became good at doing faces.

Who was and is influencing you?

Picasso massively early on, then Freud for a long time. Now there's a wide variety of people but if I had to pick one, I'd say John Currin.

When did you discover your talent & preference for painting portraits?

I didn't go to art school but later on - in my early 20s - I started painting portraits as a distraction while I was being treated for cancer. I recovered but I kept doing the portraits.

How was it to work with Dennis Hopper?

I knew he was the coolest man alive before I met him. What I didn't expect was the depth of his interest in art. He really sees film making as a day job to subsidise his passion for both making and collecting it.

Which portrait was the most challenging one?

Rupert Murdoch, Nicole Kidman or Tony Blair?

Blair was hardest. The first time I painted him, I spent quite a lot of time with him but still had no idea who he was. The second time it was slightly easier as we had more history to go on but he's still a bit of an enigma. Murdoch was intimidating beforehand - I was expecting him to be like a James Bond villain! - But turned out to be charming and relaxed...and had a great face for painting. Kidman is ongoing...she seems great but you'd better ask me next year.

Is there a special icebreaker to get deeper into the personality of your clients, so they are less self-conscious and you get the right impression of who they are?

There's no single way in - everyone's different. But when they do start talking it's very important not to say anything but to just smile and nod. They'll eventually tell you everything...and while they're doing that you can get on with the painting.

How did the Bush portrait happen? Any reactions from the White House so far?

I was asked to do a painting of the pres by the people setting up the George W. Bush presidential library. I know it sounds like a contradiction in terms but they all get one! When they backed out I decided to do one anyway. I didn't actually speak to his people but a spokesman apparently told the journalists that they thought it was "very distasteful" and couldn't understand why anyone would want to do that.

The Blue Period. You use pornography as building blocks for skin tones. Is there a deeper philosophic meaning behind it or even themes behind the collages?

The original idea came because I wanted to make portrait collages and I suddenly realised that the best way to make skin tones might be to use pictures of skin. I didn't try it for a while because I couldn't think of a suitable subject. The Bush idea came about from reading about his opposition to pornography during the '04 election, pondering to the ultra conservatives. Images of kids dying in the wars he'd started overseas seemed far more pornographic to me than pictures of naked people having sex. Plus the fact that by then they had clearly changed their minds about the portrait idea!

The Blue Period developed really because of how well the technique worked and because people seemed less shocked by the approach and more amused and fascinated. There are themes developing within it already - portraits, classical nudes and homages to other artists - and there'll be more.

Did you purchase porn from flea markets to get your work on the Blue Period going? Any preferences for a certain period (like the 80's)?

Not flea markets. I can see the environmental/recycling benefits but do you really want to work with secondhand porn?? All the mags are contemporary although with the book we went for more of an 80s razzle look.

Is there a special arrangement of the images (the different skin tones) in your working space? Do you also use bleaching for some particular skin tones?

I have a great assistant who helps cut up the mags and create a palette using different coloured skin tones. I don't use bleaching...but I've noticed there's a lot of anal bleaching in porn these days.

What's coming up next?

I am working on some new collages for a Lazarides group show in New York. But the next big thing is a series of paintings based on people who've had cosmetic surgery, including some (I hope) interesting "before and after" diptychs. The show is provisionally titled "You Only Live Twice"...and frankly I can't wait to get back to painting after 6 months of solid porn...

THANKS TO ELISA RUFF AT SUTTON PR
INTERVIEW BY JK