



“ Unless a few people at least say, ‘Why are you doing that? You’re mad!’ then what’s the point? **Sedate society portraits** ”
**to sexed-up shock tactics:
Jonathan Yeo’s walk on the wild side**

*By Rebecca Rose
Photographs by Charlie Bibby*

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HE FANTASTIC THING ABOUT GORDON

BROWN'S FACE IS THAT IT IS JUST SO VERY... craggy. That's what Jonathan Yeo tells me during a recent visit to his studio in Cadogan Gardens, off London's Sloane Square.

Laid out on a table in front of him is his recent portrait of the prime minister in all his splendid cragginess. Despite appearances, the portrait is nowhere near finished. In fact, the bold, expressive brushstrokes, typical of Yeo's painting style, are only the underlayer of what will undoubtedly be the first image of the premier of its kind. The 37-year-old artist is known predominantly for being one of most successful portrait painters in the UK today, and in particular for the illustriousness of his sitters, among them Prince Philip, Rupert Murdoch, Dennis Hopper, Tony Blair and, currently, David Cameron. Brown, however, would not agree to sit for him. "It was probably seen as too elitist for him to be sitting around having his portrait painted," muses Yeo, who resorted to composing the portrait from an amalgam of photographs.

Brown and his advisers may regret this decision when the finished work is unveiled later this month in New York. There, as part of a group show for Steve Lazarides, Yeo's dealer and an enfant terrible of the contemporary art scene, "Gay Gordon" (the piece's working title) may look like a painting from a distance but will in fact be made of scraps cut from pornographic magazines. Viewers' eyes are bound to water as they pick out certain salacious details.

When I ask Yeo if he ever thought twice about making such a flagrant piece of art, he says, "I did meet Sarah Brown the other day, and she was so lovely, I thought, 'Oh, can I do this?'" But he overcame any wobbles by the next day. "Anyway, I hope people will find it funny. I'm in the entertainment business after all!"

Pornographic collages of politicians and other dignitaries may seem a kamikaze detour from portrait painting, especially with Cameron sitting for Yeo in good faith. But for the past year, Yeo has been straddling two very different artistic spheres. On the one hand, he continues to paint oil portraits of the great and the good for £75,000-£100,000 a pop. But he is also dipping a toe in the frenzied waters of the contemporary art world with its love of controversy and headlines. His collages shock and titillate in equal measure; they whizz around the internet at the speed of light and are sold in a flash in Lazarides' Soho gallery. Is this a risky diversion from a lucrative business of classical portrait commissions? The fact that Yeo's porn-collage portrayals of Hugh Hefner and Lucian Freud fetched £30,000-plus this summer suggests not. The risk, then, might be of a different nature: that a portrait painter's bid for contemporary art-world stardom could fall flat.

The Gordon Brown portrait is under embargo until the New York show's opening night, September 25. But an exclusive look at the work-in-progress – and at Yeo at work – reveals Brown's large, square, boulder-like head filling out the canvas. At the piece's painted stage, Brown's face is rendered in sludgy, liverish tones, which make him look jowly and give him that unhealthy tinge of a man under the cruel light of news cameras. This is the tense, scrutinised Brown we recognise from the television, being taken to task once again. It is in marked contrast to Yeo's official portrait of Tony Blair unveiled earlier this year, in which the former leader has dropped his clenched smile and relaxed the worry lines of office.

On the table, a sea of top-shelf magazines surround the prime minister, some intact, but most ripped apart, with pages and scraps lying around.



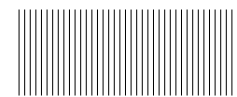
Jonathan Yeo's studio, just off Sloane Square in central London

While the juxtaposition is amusing, in a back-of-the-school-bus kind of way, I find the bombardment of genitalia of all shapes, sizes and tones initially stomach-churning.

"You soon get over the content, and start really only looking for very particular skintones," says Yeo. "You soon learn which magazines are good for certain areas of the face. Big Butt magazine is a good one," he says, pointing vaguely to two plastic crates full of porn, and then turning to test me with an impish smile.

By my third visit to the studio, he has begun building up the first layer of collage by finding bits of body that match skintone in the painting underneath. It takes time and, as Yeo points out, one of these collages can take a lot longer than a painted portrait.

He seizes on a scrap of darkish, toned flesh and holds it up to Brown's forehead. "Yes," he says, "that ought to do it." The match is exact. Yeo then traces around the blocky area of paint and transfers this shape to the magazine paper. He cuts it out carefully with a pair of nail scissors, uses his finger to apply a thin layer of glue from a puddle on a Blockbuster membership card, sticks the scrap to the canvas and smoothes it down. There are several bits of collage there already, and it is only under the glare of Yeo's giant spot lamp that you can see a difference in sheen. The edges of the paper, however, are now invisible. The result is like a cross between a



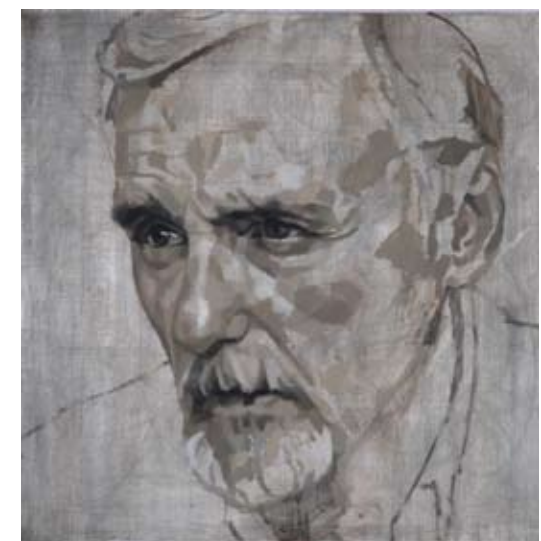
Portraits by Yeo

Before his move into collage, Jonathan Yeo built a reputation for unconventional oil portraits, often with bare canvas backgrounds. His image of the model Erin O'Connor, right, won a place in the 2005 BP portrait prize awards show



LEFT
Erin
2004, oil on canvas, of model Erin O'Connor

RIGHT
Dennis (study)
2005, oil on canvas, of actor Dennis Hopper





Yeo selects pages from a pile of pornographic magazines for tone and texture, then cuts and pastes them to build his collage portraits. The resulting pictures have sold for £30,000-plus



very complex jigsaw puzzle and an equally sophisticated mosaic. The process is mesmerising to watch.

While he flicks through a pile of pages selected for tone and texture, Yeo chats animatedly, telling me how he has consulted a paper conservationist to find out how to make these collages last. "This kind of paper," he says, feeling a thin, shiny sheet between two fingers, "is not meant to last." Yeo uses acid-free glue and frames the pieces with UV-filtering glass to give them a better chance of survival than, say, a Picasso collage. But those techniques are as far as he will go: a work of art should not be frozen in aspic. "It is, after all, a living thing."

YEO HAD LONG PONDERED USING PORNOGRAPHY IN HIS WORK BUT WAS ONLY GALVANISED INTO TRYING IT IN 2007, WITH AN IMAGE OF GEORGE W. BUSH – after an official portrait commission of the US president fell through despite a long, frustrating vetting process from 2002-2004.

The resulting piece, a large, framed collage that hangs in Yeo's studio (shown on the cover of this magazine), is a close-up of Bush, with the top of his head cropped. "I like that CinemaScope composition, it's much more direct," says Yeo as we stand and look at the picture.

"There was just a noise in my head telling me to go and paint"

Yeo studied literature and film (at Kent University), not art, but through his painting he's spent more time in the company of Hollywood stars than the average film graduate manages. The actor Dennis Hopper, for one, is a champion of Yeo's, and his portrait hangs on the wall of Yeo's studio opposite the collage of Bush.

Yeo grew up in London, attending Westminster School, where he did an art A-level. "The art department was very much there as a comedy, hobby department," Yeo says. He was discouraged by those around him from studying art at university, and it was only after doing the degree in film that he felt the urge to return to the easel: "There was just a noise in my head that was telling me to go and paint," he explains.

He began to paint regularly again at the age of 19 in a studio in Greenwich owned by his grandmother. Three or so years later, in 1993, he found a new reason to paint: he was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, a form of lymphatic cancer, and during his treatment art became solace. "The problem when you're going through a serious illness like that, it's partly having all this time to sit around feeling shit. Having something to do is a huge advantage." He made a full recovery.

Yeo's first portrait commission was Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, the anti-apartheid activist, who sat for him in 1993. Huddleston came to Yeo through the artist's father, Tim Yeo, who is a Conservative MP. The younger Yeo spent his childhood in the company of politicians and dignitaries, a

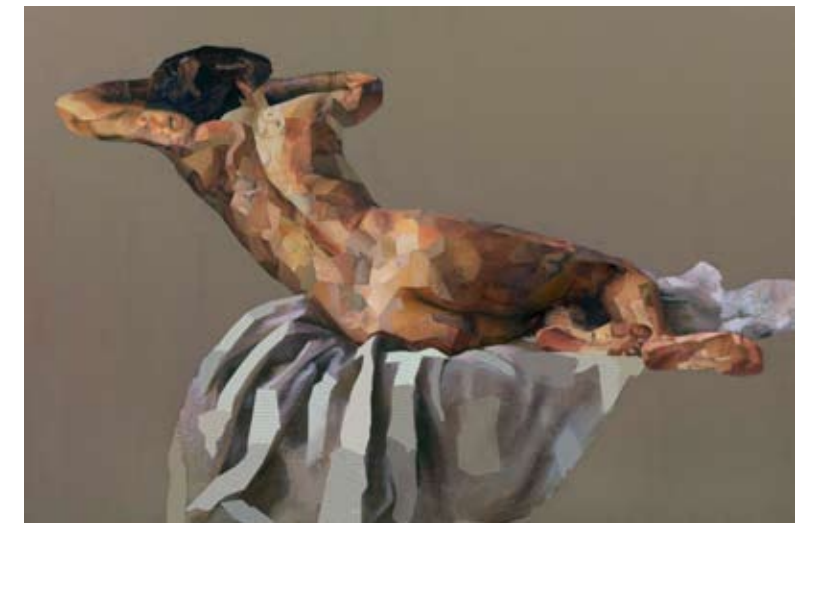


FROM LEFT
Tony Blair
2007, oil on canvas

(Keith) Rupert Murdoch
2005-2006,
oil on canvas

Reflection
(homage to Freud)
2008, mixed media
collage

Cassiopeia
2008, mixed media
collage



background that may have helped him feel at ease with Blair and his band when shadowing the prime minister on his election campaign in 2001. Yeo had been commissioned by the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art to paint a triptych portrait of the three main party leaders – Blair, Charles Kennedy and William Hague. He called the work "Proportional Representation" and tailored the size of each portrait to reflect the percentage of votes each politician received in the 2001 general election. This kind of playful wit is typical of Yeo's approach. He deployed it again in his 2007 portrait of Blair, in which Yeo encouraged the former PM to keep his remembrance poppy pinned to his lapel as a delicate reference to war.

When Yeo started down the portrait route 15 years ago, he was happy for it to be a lonesome path. Hardly anyone else in the art world was painting, let alone painting portraits. "When I used to tell people I was in portraiture, they were a bit baffled. I was seen as an interesting curiosity," says Yeo. He relished being an oddity in an art world fixated on minimalism and conceptualism and dominated by the first wave of Young British Artists (YBAs), led by Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, as well as collectors such as Charles Saatchi and art dealers such as Jay Jopling. Despite Yeo's incongruity with the main thrust of the art set, he socialised with them. "I bumped into a lot of the same people and was seen as their mad old artist friend doing portraits in the attic." Gallerists would hear about Yeo and occasionally ask him to contribute a portrait as a sort of wild card.

"Doing portraits was seen as absolutely, irredeemably uncool. And I was so determined not to follow the art world crowd that I probably spent longer doing it than I would have done otherwise."

LOOK CLOSER AT THE BUSH COLLAGE AND YOU CAN'T HELP BUT NOTICE THE PRESIDENT'S EAR IS COMPOSED OF A GRAPHIC IMAGE OF AN ACT BANNED IN CERTAIN US STATES. And the crease of his downturned smile is fashioned from a photo of a woman whose bland, open-mouthed expression suggests she appeared in pages more risqué than Vogue's.

"I did it really to amuse myself," says Yeo. "I didn't mean it to be an insult. It was more an ironic tribute intended to unsettle ultra-conservative, right-wing Americans." At the time Yeo began the Bush portrait, he was exhibiting oil portraits of figures such as transvestite potter Grayson Perry, actor Ross Kemp and model Erin O'Connor in museums including the Scottish National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery. Rendered in delicate paintwork so that their smoothly modulated faces burst out of the rough canvas, these portraits were far from conventional. One image of O'Connor, in which the model strikes a contorted yet elegant pose, caught the eye of the judges at the BP portrait prize, and was exhibited in the 2005 award show. The appearance helped push Yeo's fees higher, and brought in more famous sitters and media attention.

As a portrait painter, Yeo says, you get to dip into other people's worlds. "You don't think you are doing the same thing over and over when one day you're with the Russian mafia, the next you're with Prince Philip and then you're on Venice Beach hanging out with Dennis Hopper."

Andrew Lloyd Webber
2008, oil on canvas



IN MAY 2007, STEVE LAZARIDES ATTENDED A PARTY AT YEO'S CADOGAN GARDENS STUDIO AND SPOTTED THE HALF-FINISHED BUSH COLLAGE. Lazarides, whose stable of artists includes that will-o'-the-wisp of graffiti, Banksy, and other street and graphic artists, was quick on the uptake. "I thought it was very funny, but with dark undertones. It hit the nail on the head in terms of what a lot of people think about Bush. I said – 'I really want to do a show with it'."

Lazarides got excited about the porn collages at a time when Yeo was ready for something new anyway. Since the heyday of the YBAs, narrative art has come round again. "You no longer shock the diehard art world by saying you're a portrait painter now," says Yeo. The artist's new dealer, however, had a plan to shock the public anew.

Lazarides – in an excellent example of the way that art and artists are marketed today – posted the Bush portrait on his website, sent it to various blogs and art sites and pushed out a flurry of emails to friends, journalists and others. Within five days, Yeo's website (www.jonathanyeo.com) had received 5.5 million clicks.

"The internet is the best medium to get artists' images across the world," Lazarides says. "What kind of gallery can offer that kind of viewing potential?"

The story was then seized upon by the press, and one or two British newspapers even printed the Bush image in all its graphic and unsettling detail. "I did lose a couple of commissions," Yeo says. "Unless a few people at least say, 'Why are you doing that? You're mad!' then what's the point?"

Major art institutions, meanwhile, remain interested in Yeo, but for his classical, painted work, not his foray into YBA shock-tactic territory.

The National Portrait Gallery has been exhibiting Yeo's portrait of Andrew Lloyd Webber this summer; it was a private commission, but the NPG decided that it would be nice to show it to the public before it disappears into the Lloyd Webber estate. A small oil of Rupert Murdoch by Yeo also hangs in the gallery; the NPG acquired it about a year ago.

Sandy Nairne, the gallery's director, says that Yeo's collages are not relevant to the NPG at the moment, but he isn't horrified by them. He points out that collage with an element of visual trickery has a historical precedent in Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the 16th-century Italian painter known for his faces made of fruit. Yeo's work, however much it embodies today's need to shock, is still following some form of tradition. Little is truly new in the art world.

I asked Nairne whether Yeo's street cred will have increased since he is no longer pigeonholed as an artist working on commission. "There is a premium in the art world for art that is produced freely. The very idea of a commission tends to put it at a different or lower status for some art critics," Nairne admits. "But I think there is fantastic skill and ability in the best commissioned work, and I would argue it has a very important place in contemporary art."

Nairne is more concerned about Yeo pushing the porn collage theme too far. "The Bush collage was a riposte. And there was a certain logic in that riposte. What is more puzzling is what happens after that."

THE NEW YORK GROUP SHOW, WHICH OPENS IN TWO WEEKS' TIME AT A "SPACE" IN LOWER MANHATTAN, HAS A DISTINCT WHIFF OF LAZARIDES about it. To start, in typical Lazarides style, the location is the up-and-coming Bowery district. The exhibition will showcase artists who are not necessarily art-school trained and who have come at the contemporary art world from different angles – street art, for example, or even taxidermy. The organisers are even erecting a museum shop – a dig at the New Museum of Contemporary Art nearby, perhaps – and aiming for a hottest-ticket-in-town opening-night party. (Keep in mind that Lazarides masterminded Banksy's 2006 secret-location Los Angeles show "Barely Legal", which attracted "Brangelina" – Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie – among others).

"We're hoping for some more hip-hop stars to drop by this time," Lazarides says. "We have a good client base in New York, but you never can tell who will show up until the day."

The pieces in "Blue Period", Yeo's ironically titled one-man show of collages at Lazarides Soho this summer, sold out the afternoon before opening night. And there is still a waiting list of people wanting to buy the next one he makes – no matter who or what it portrays. "People will now buy things off the basis of a 'jpeg' image on an e-mail," Lazarides says. "But, it is new territory in NYC, so it would be nice to give people over there a chance to try and buy something."

During several visits to Yeo's studio, I get to observe a frenzied production period as he scrambles to finish enough collages for the show and meet demands for various charity donations – he receives three to four a week. All this is in addition to a constant flow of requests for portrait commissions – there have been about 100 so far this year. He is lined up to do Nicole Kidman and Baz Luhrmann at the end of the year in Australia.

The Yeo portion of the New York show will open with several different coloured canvases decorated with collages of swirling autumn leaves. Porn lends itself surprisingly well to falling leaves, I discover, as I watch Yeo arrange the delicate cut-outs on a black, shiny, painted canvas.

The leaf display will be called "Fall in Love", and will doubtless please visitors at first glance: "It's very New York, and the timing is perfect." The pleasure will last, Yeo hopes, until they step a little closer, see what they're really looking at, step back again, maybe step forward once more – until they find a distance from the painting where they feel comfortable. "It's a little like performance art," he says, clearly looking forward to witnessing this merry dance.

New York has yet to react to Yeo's work. The cognoscenti there may well hate it. And New York is the most important art market in the world. You don't become a superstar without winning its blessing.

In fact, Yeo says, he doesn't expect the king-makers of the NYC art scene to be the first to warm to his work. "What tends to happen with Lazarides shows is that they bypass the art world and generate a groundswell of popular, and usually also celebrity, interest so that the art world then has to take notice." Indeed, this is what happened with Banksy in LA. This show's title, "The Outsiders", may suggest naïve art or Art Brut (often known as Outsider Art) to the New York crowd. But while many of Lazarides' artists didn't go to art school, there is nothing naïve about what they are doing or how it is marketed.

Perhaps most important of all, this will be the first time that the American public will see the Bush portrait, and for many, the first they will have heard of it. Yeo seems a little nervous. "They may all hate him but he's still their president."

"The art world is so cautious," he continues, as he glues down a leaf that crowns the swirling arrangement. Maybe, but not on Yeo's and Lazarides' side of the street. Yeo points to two graphic photographs pinned to the wall: they are images of breasts before and after cosmetic surgery. "I'm doing a series of diptychs on plastic surgery next year," he says. "It's called 'You Only Live Twice.'" ■

Rebecca Rose is the FT's deputy books editor. "The Outsiders", Lazarides Gallery, 282 Bowery, New York (www.lazinc.com), from September 26 to October 12. Video: visit Jonathan Yeo's studio at ft.com/jonathanyeo

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