

John Byrne at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery



Honor

Collection of KM Swinton, Nairn

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A stunning new exhibition of portraits by one of the UK's most versatile and accomplished artists has opened the summer season at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

Born in Paisley in 1940, John Byrne has had a remarkable career over the last five decades, enjoying huge success as an artist, theatre designer, playwright and screenwriter. As a painter, as in life, Byrne is difficult to pin down, skillfully switching between an extraordinary array of styles, in a manner which betrays his restless intelligence and his remarkable ability to absorb disparate influences from the art of the past and draw upon them at will.

John Byrne: Sitting Ducks will explore and celebrate Byrne's innovative and richly varied portraiture, with a selection of around 30 paintings and drawings, dating from the early 1970s to the present day. Focussing mainly upon sitters who are close to him – his children, partners, family members, friends and colleagues – it will also feature many witty and insightful self-portraits, such as *Self-portrait with Yellow Cigarette* (1986) and *Ceci n'est pas un Auto-Portrait* (c.2003), his homage to the Belgian surrealist Magritte.



Self Portrait on white, 2012

Oil on board

Size 91.44 x 81.28 cm

Private Collection, Courtesy of Patrick Bourne & Co.,
London

Among the highlights will be a number of striking portraits of the actress Tilda Swinton, the artist's former partner; iconic images of Billy Connolly, whom Byrne first met through their mutual friend, the singer-songwriter Gerry Rafferty (whose beautiful, hand-painted guitar will also be on show); and an unforgettable portrait of the actor Robbie Coltrane in the guise of Danny McGlone, one of the principal characters in the six-time BAFTA award-winning series *Tutti Frutti*, which Byrne wrote for the BBC in 1984.

Alongside these well-known images will be a fascinating selection of more intimate and revealing works, generously lent by a number of private collectors, which have rarely been seen in public. These include brilliant and touching images of Byrne's children: John and Celie from his first marriage (the latter featuring in an extraordinary pastel sketch from the early 1970s, *Celie Watching TV*); and Tilda Swinton's twins Honor and Xavier, who appear, singly and together, in a number of memorable portraits.

The exhibition's punning title underlines the significance of loved ones in Byrne's work. Falling so easily within his sights, they are a source of endless fascination for him, and are often, as a result, the subject of his most powerful works. Byrne is also an obsessive painter of his own likeness, having created hundreds of self-portraits in the course of his long career. For Byrne, identity is fluid, shifting and inconstant, and he appears in his paintings in a dizzying range of guises, somehow concealing as much as he reveals.

Indeed, Byrne's first success as an artist came in the late 1960s when he submitted a series of paintings to a London gallery, claiming they were the work of 'Patrick', a retired

labourer who painted as a hobby. The works were painted in a faux-naïve style which stemmed from Byrne's admiration for the work of 'primitive' painters like his great hero Henri 'Le Douanier' Rousseau (a self-taught French artist who was championed by Picasso and the surrealists). They were an instant hit, and though he quickly had to reveal his true identity, Byrne continued to produce work in a similar vein.

Sitting Ducks will feature some key works from this period, including *Self-Portrait in a Flowered Jacket* (1971-3) and the remarkable *The American Boy* (1971), a powerful and enigmatic image, painted on an epic scale.

Byrne's 'Patrick' paintings belied his training and sophistication as an artist (he had been described by the registrar at Glasgow School of Art as one of the most gifted young painter ever to have studied there), and demonstrate how easily he can shift gear in his work. Some portraits, such as *Xavier Asleep* (2001), are dashed off with breath-taking facility while others, *Sir Raymond Johnstone* (1993) for example, are executed with immense control and precision. Many are done partly or wholly from memory rather than from life, with their realism filtered through Byrne's imagination. Works such as *Red and Uread* (2002/04, a painting of Tilda Swinton), which are part-portrait and part-caricature, are described by Byrne as 'formal' portraits – images which capture and present the essence of the sitter unmistakably. Tellingly, Xavier Swinton-Byrne was once asked about the length of time he had to sit for his father and replied with a smile "My Dad *knows* what I look like."



Steven Campbell,

Oil on board

Size 182 x 153 cm

Paisley Art Gallery

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A profoundly individual artist, John Byrne has always admired

painters who broke the rules, or who, like Rousseau, didn't seem to realise that there were any. The prodigious range of work on show in *Sitting Ducks* illustrates how aptly the same claim can be made for Byrne himself, as well as the remarkable technical prowess, versatility, ingenuity, inventiveness, fun and gravity that he has brought to the genre of portraiture.

Speaking of the exhibition Christopher Baker, Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery said, "It is especially fitting that we should be celebrating the wonderfully diverse and accomplished portraiture of John Byrne – as he was the man who re-opened the doors of the Portrait Gallery following its successful re-development in 2011. I think visitors will find this a hugely enjoyable exhibition, as it combines iconic works with surprises, public figures and private moments. Underpinning them all is great warmth, wit and technical skill."



Self-portrait with Yellow Cigarette

Oil on board

Size 76.3 x 76.4 cm

Manchester City Art Gallery

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Organised in partnership with Inverness Museum and Art Gallery. Part of High Life Highland.

Part of the Edinburgh Art Festival, 31 July – 31 August 2014

Following its appearance in Edinburgh the exhibition will tour to Inverness, 1 – 29 November 2014.

JOHN BYRNE: SITTING DUCKS

14 June – 19 October 2014

SCOTTISH NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, 1 Queen Street, Edinburgh
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Admission free | 0131 624 6200

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#JohnByrne