

RAY TURNER: GoodManBadMan

By Peter Frank

We are hard-wired, apparently, to heed one another's faces. We count on countenance to tell us what the emotional weather is like, to provide us the gestural underpinning to language, to cue us to proper – and the proper degree of – sexual response. What we know of one another begins in the visage, and depends on details often so small that, were they situated in other parts of the body, would go entirely unnoticed. The fronts of our heads are our beacons; we broadcast our lives from and with them. No wonder Ray Turner has zeroed in on the human face; formulaic as it is, it is an endless source of pictorial fascination.

But in looking with such undistracted intensity at our faces, a bemused Turner becomes all that much more aware of the formula – and more aware of how much we pay attention to the secondary and even peripheral factors of the face, driven to those details by its symmetry. If we pretty much all have two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, a centralized nose and mouth and chin, a degree of hair, we have to evaluate one another by subtler circumstances: eye size, hair color, structure of cheek, shape of nose, the expression of lips at rest, the set of the ears on the head. We take one another's measure thus, gaining first impressions that serve as the bases for our judgments about people. Those judgments may turn out to be wildly inaccurate; but, alas, too infrequently do later-learned facts revise our first impressions, much less our inner codes for reading those impressions.

Our prejudices, Turner deduces, derive from our facial preoccupation, our need to compare one face with another in order to determine everything from superficial beauty to the nature of the soul. What happens when we are faced with façades of faces, with veritable seas of visages? What judgments do we make about crowds? Certain "types"? Ethnicities? Humanity itself? In contemplating our habitual rush to judgment, Turner pursues an inquiry of sorts even more sociological than psychological: how do we typify groups of people from the neck up?

In his "Population" series Turner appoints himself documentarian, looking at what a populace looks like. On one level, the realization of "Population," entailing the rendering of myriad faces comprising a cross-section, is a performance, the carrying-out of a set of procedures; on another, it is an overarching conceptual artwork, subjecting acquired data to an interpretive grid. Turner slyly reveals the potential in this apparently standard methodology for false assumption and faulty analysis, by imposing such a pseudo-scientific deductive structure on the essentially inductive, idiosyncratic act of painting. We are all painters when we look at faces, Turner implies, casting a jaundiced eye on our physiognomic conclusions, and even on our tendency to make such conclusions in the first place.

Turner's skepticism carries over into his "Bad Man Good Man" series. Here his painterly approach to the face has become inductive to the point of inventive: he is no longer painting from models, but from imagination – from the sense of the face that working with so many different models has left him. Turner abandons the pretense of conceptual rigor (except to maintain the grid's fearsome inference of standardization) and lets the performative aspect of painting take over. Turner is here concerned with measuring his own human tendency to interpretation against ours, presenting the lineaments of

men's faces as triggers first to his response, then to ours. By restricting this far more avowedly subjective sequence to a single gender (his own, not accidentally), Turner profoundly diminishes the potential for complications in our response. He has to: having complicated our process of apprehension with his own fabrications in this startlingly expressive, even expressionistic series, Turner needs to bring us back to focus – to focus, that is, on our own biases and presuppositions.

Who, asks Turner, is a "bad man" and who is "good" – and how can we tell who is who, simply from the signals their faces send us? We need, after all, to have a good idea about who might harm us and who might help us as early as possible in our relationships with them, and before actions speak and words are spoken, what do we truly know? Indeed, how hard-wired are we to read faces? How immediately? How deeply and intricately? What do we – each of us – really know about one another, or about the human visage in general? The more Ray Turner paints faces, the less he knows he knows and the more curious he gets – about faces, and about how we face them.

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