

Celia Paul

Over the past twenty-five years Celia Paul has painted three generations: her sisters and herself, her son Frank, her mother. Besides them, the others she works from are close to her, all the closer for sitting for her, watchfully or dreaming.

These paintings have a particular lucidity, neither clear-cut nor easy on the eye. Their surfaces are often hazed, the sitters lit mistily from above and from one side; colours are subdued, scumbled, uningratiating. A sense of affinity looms through the necessary detachment.

From the rooms which serve as a studio, high up, north-facing, Sir Robert Smirke's stupendously blackened British Museum blocks the view. In *The British Museum*, 1996 [no.6], a small figure heads across the glistening wet forecourt into the portico of this Jungian archetype, this shadowed mystery: the mother temple.

"I've lived in this flat longer than I have lived anywhere (21 years) and the British Museum and Post Office Tower have taken on a significance for me. I'm directly opposite the main gates of the British Museum and I'm in a constant relationship to it – the visitors walking into it in the day and the lovely creaking of its gates at night when one of the night workers leaves. The Post Office Tower is to the left behind it and looks very lonely and remote."

The Post Office Tower is too distant to obtrude, though it has featured a few times, a sort of lighthouse on the Bloomsbury skyline. The outdoor world in these paintings and etchings is background only. The sand and grasses at Walberswick, and the sea behind, are measureless; a mountain range – Austrian Alps – is set down on paper like a realm's edge, sublimely abrupt.

In the studio Celia Paul takes distances in hand and subjects her sitters to the effort of getting them right, each becoming an arrangement (as Whistler used to put it), each made definite in a revealing light. Two recent self portraits in particular demonstrate her impulse to purge distractions and do away with irksome minutiae.

Juan Velázquez
Las Meniñas
1656



Lucian Freud
Painter and Model
1986-7



For both paintings she stood herself at the easel, eyes narrowed, palette a babyish shape lodged between her hip and the crook of her left arm. In *Self Portrait, 2003* [no.14], she is seen full length, sandwiched between the mirror image of the canvas she's working on and another, behind her, facing the wall.

This image has conspicuous precedents: two Van Goghs, a Cézanne, a Goya, Velázquez in *Las Meniñas* in 1656 and Rembrandt in 1629, examining himself across the floorboards of his Leyden studio. But the painting that most intimately relates to it is Lucian Freud's *Painter and Model* of 1986-7, in which a younger Celia Paul appears to one side, a brush in her hands, posed between a man sprawled on a sofa and (out of vision) Freud himself. To her, that picture is "about power and desire": the naked man and the woman in her daubed smock, not painting of course, Freud was doing that – but being the image of the painter.

Freud influenced Celia Paul powerfully during her student years and for a while after. His arrangement of her in *Painter and Model* was both formal and admiring; and she appeared in other paintings, most notably *Girl in a Striped Nightshirt* of 1985 in which her concentration borders on the ecstatic. In all Freud's paintings of her she looks more or less docile; but even then there was the gleam of independence, and this warmed into "something unsettling and wondrous" in her work, as Angus Cook (the man in *Painter and Model*) wrote in his catalogue introduction to her first show at the Marlborough, in 1991. He talked about "the inference of something extraordinary."

Self Portrait has a commanding air. The painter stands tall, eyes unwavering as the arm holds firm and somewhere on the canvas, some highlight probably, the brush connects.

"I think if I'd grown up in one place I would have a very intense feeling about it and paint it to the exclusion of everything else."

Lucian Freud
Iri in Striped Nightshirt
1985



Born in Trivandrum, southern India in 1959, where her father was a missionary, Celia Paul came to England with her sisters when she was five, was sent to boarding school at eleven and went to the Slade at seventeen. A prodigy initially, she surpassed that by going deeper and becoming, as Lawrence Gowing the Slade Professor said, “one of the best painters of her generation.”

Even the best painters tend to have difficulty finding good sitters. That reassuring phrase “I’m always there for you”, usually a quick parting remark, takes on a special meaning when it comes to spending hours and days for weeks on end simply being present, watching the sky outside.

Over the past twenty five years Celia Paul’s most frequent and most reliable model, eminently matriarchal, has been her mother.

“When I was a child I always felt she wasn’t giving me attention properly and that she was often tired, anxious and abstracted – not surprising as she had five daughters and I was the fourth.”

The availability now so freely afforded her by her mother has become more than compensation: it’s a subject in itself.

“The paintings of my mother are always about her and me, and also about her and her faith.”

The faith resounds in the titles (My Mother and God [no.1], Study: My Mother and the Cross [no.13]) and is reflected in the handling – light from on high – while being confirmed by the sitter herself. “Six hours silence – well this is a gift for a Christian”, Pamela Paul once said. “A time to give myself to God, I thought.”

Hers is the face of faith, set with the patient composure that is the sitter’s virtue. In My Mother and God she sits under a great weight of darkness, illuminated by – and implicitly trusting in – the crack of light above. (“That vast amount of dark and only a ray of hope, a promise in the offing. I don’t feel that. But you don’t argue with painters!”) In My Mother Looking Away, 1996 [no.4], she is relieved of the black. Hands clasped, a resolute air, and an

immeasurable space around the seated figure give the painting a serenity suggesting that here too is a kind of "power and desire".

"I think that the central thing for her is her faith, so that to do a full deep portrait of her, I want that to be included. But I think she would probably appear very different – she's very sociable and loves a laugh. Perhaps that's the side I find disturbing."

In her way, Pamela Paul has become as formidably unforgettable as Lucie Freud, the subject of dozens of paintings by her son Lucian done over more than fifteen years after his father's death in 1970; her daughter took to working from her with similar persistence and comparable intensity after Bishop Paul died. Observation becomes observance. "By sitting for me she's there still and concentrated for me." The faith itself finds expression, illuminating (*Study: My Mother and the Cross*) and, mysteriously not to say mystically, rendering the sitter translucent. *My Mother in the Centre of the Canvas* [no.8], a sublimation of figure into aura against the cruciform stretcher, is half way to representing the immanent.

Faith enhances family ties. "That fiercely protective maternal stare", as Kate Paul, one of the sitter-sisters, wrote, passes from mother to daughter. In *Mother and Frank 3* [no.35] the most reliable of women watches over Celia's sleeping son; in *Little Walberswick I* [no.3] she dozes off (it's five years later); in *The Story, Little Girl and Her Grandmother* [no.10] a relationship settles into affectionate vignette.

For Celia Paul the spirit of a painting is as much as an envelopment as any true faith. The working of what she sees and feels into uncluttered certainties is a process of containing the images while the sitters hold still.

"I can't talk when I paint and it's very quiet (only inside, outside in the street it's very noisy). So I have to feel that people can sit without feeling sleepy, restless or constrained."

Etchings count as glimpses, particularly soft ground etchings, their burred lines diffused into tone. "I love the way that each medium dictates the way you should use it; what I love about soft ground etching is that I do them quite quickly and yet the acid works on them like time." Drawn on paper direct onto the soft ground plate, *Kate Pregnant*, 1996 [no.36], and its natural sequel, *Kate and Molly*, 2002 [no.43], have the look of glimpses caught in a piercing interval before committal to memory.

"Intimacy gives her freedom to express a wider vision, whilst remaining firmly rooted in her knowledge of the people she paints", Kate Paul wrote in 1995. The stints, she found, were not a matter of just sitting there. "She wanted active participation... A subject, not an object... She watches to see what we do, how we look, what we are feeling: that will be the story." Kate often sat on the sandy-coloured old sofa, the one on which Celia used to sit for Freud and which had been passed to her for a few more years of studio use before the stuffing and springs finally gave out.

"I get more reclusive as I get older, so that it makes it more difficult to find new sitters."

Canvas Back, 2000 [no.9] could be a demonstration of how to do without a sitter. The idea looks simple: reverse observed, as it were, several degrees looser than *trompe-l'oeil*. Then the way it is painted, the nice lack of differentiation between marks depicted and marks made, the whole exquisite business of drips and stains catching the light, gives it content; and the cruciform stretcher bars, bold as a banner, are off-square slightly, just enough to show that this is a close-up not a painterly diagram. As to what's on the other side? Another painting, we may assume, though logic suggests that this is a painted representation of the mirror image of the back of this selfsame canvas.

Dptych (Presence and Absence), 1996 [no.5] is more straightforward though no less subtle in its sleight of mind. First the sitter in classic meditative pose, then to her left, the same space again, same rucked-up carpet, same time of day, but the skirting board larger, sharply delineated now and the woman gone, leaving not a trace of herself except the sense of someone missing.

Steve and the Sublime, 1997 [no.7], has an even stronger quality: one of apparition, wonder, an incandescence of unknowing. Steve, drenched in glorious Rembrandt downlight, his head tilted, patience wearing thin, could be a student of the Sublime, that sensational late 18th-century mix of ecstasy and terror, the essence of romanticism and spiritual uplift. He appears sceptical, however, an impression strengthened by further appearances, six years later, in four beautiful small studies of his head and neck, front, back and sides, austere paintings founded on character alone.

“I think that stillness in a picture can only happen if it takes a long time (and probably many scraped-off layers and changes). It’s like a newly-painted room still jangles with the presence of the decorators, whereas an old room has acquired its stillness, however turbulent the lives of its tenants. This is what I always want to get with a painting, but I don’t know if it’s what I’m best at.”

Celia Paul has the ability – rare in itself – to create a sense of inner mood. In this respect, her paintings may seem to invite comparison with those of an earlier Slade graduate, Gwen John. But they are fundamentally different: more uneven, more testing perhaps, certainly more exploratory. Their nuances can be remarkably robust.

Two recent watercolours, astonishingly large and expansive, are a spectacular violation of normal watercolour practice. The translucency of watercolour pleases her, but it is the heavy paper that particularly suits her, the degree to which she can work on it, rubbing it, rinsing, digging into the layers, gradually enriching the colour and strengthening the definition.

Celia Paul is a rarity, a spiritual painter in that she concerns herself with the redeeming features of life, a painter bent on seeing the universal in the personal and in making the personal truthful. (John Donne's "one little room an everywhere.")

When I asked her what effect she would like her exhibition to have – a tricky question for some, almost inviting ambitious pleasantries – her reply was characteristically vivid:

"I would like it to be like the mysterious, complex communication of a hand-written letter – with all the character that the handwriting reveals adding to the message, rather than a story (however powerful) printed by a computer. I would love people to feel that they loved 'Painting'."

Painting is loved for the ways it has of keeping immediacy immediate.