

How Bratby Painted My Portrait

Early in May 1980 I received a telephone call from John Bratby RA. To my embarrassment he said he was doing a series of paintings of British heroes and would like to include me. This was in reference to my initiative in bringing a private prosecution against Peter Hain for disrupting South African sporting tours in England, which impressed him greatly. I agreed to a sitting. This took place on 24 May 1980 at Bratby's house in Hastings, called 'Cupola and Tower of the Winds'. The sitting started at noon and went on for about four hours. Bratby engaged me in conversation throughout. He said he admired individualists and those who took personal risks for a good cause. I think this must have been the same series of portraits done by Bratby as that referred to by David Nobbs (*The Guardian* G2, 11 April 2006, p. 16) when he wrote in an accompaniment to an illustrated portrait very like the one Bratby did of me: 'John Bratby did this portrait of me in 1980 as part of a series about the individuality of people'.

In a 1983 travel book¹ Paul Theroux describes how Bratby painted his portrait at about the same time as he painted mine. What Theroux writes is uncannily apt in my own case, so I reproduce some of it.

[John Bratby] did the paintings for the movie *The Horse's Mouth* and his own life somewhat resembled that of Gully Jimson, the painter-hero of the Joyce Cary novel on which the movie was based. Mr Bratby was speaking in a room full of paintings, some of them still wet. He said-

"I could never buy a house this large in London or anywhere else. I'd have a poky flat if I didn't live in Hastings."

His house was called The Cupola and Tower of the Winds, and it matched its name. It was tall and crumbling, and it creaked when the wind blew, and there were stacks of paintings leaning against every wall. Mr Bratby was thick-set and had the listening expression of a forgetful man. He said he painted quickly. He sometimes referred to his famous riotous past – so riotous it had nearly killed him. He had been a so-called kitchen sink painter with a taste for drawing rooms.² Now he lived in a quiet way. He said he believed that western society was doomed, but he said this as he looked out of his Cupola window at the rooftops and the sea of Hastings, a pleasant view.

"Our society is changing from one based on the concept of the individual and freedom," Mr Bratby said, "to one where the individual is non-existent – lost in a collectivist state." . . . "There is no commercial consideration to this at all," he had said of my painting, "This is for posterity to see, when our society has completely changed." . . . He scratched his head and went on dreading a police state where everyone wore baggy blue suits and called each other "Comrade" – the Orwell nightmare, which was a warning rather than a reasonable prediction. Anyway, it was almost 1984 and here was J. Bratby with a delightful wreck of a house, painting his heart out in Hastings, the bargain paradise of the south coast! It seemed to me that his fear of the future was actually a hatred of the present, and yet he was an otherwise cheery soul and full of projects . . . Bratby was doing portraits of the living in anticipation of Armageddon . . .

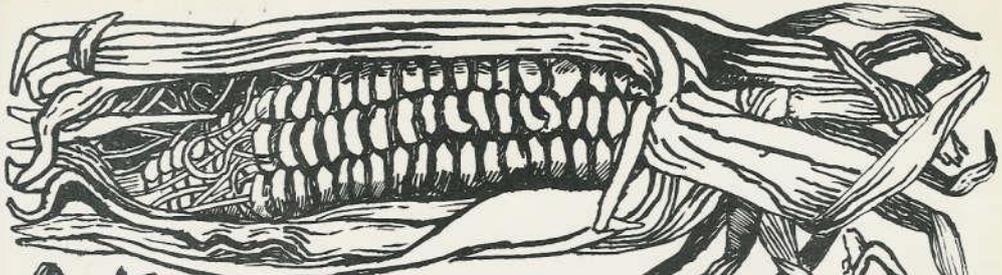
The illustrations to this piece show a photograph of me taken in 1975, Bratby's portrait of me and an undated letter he later wrote me when there was a suggestion he might paint my wife Mary for a fee. This did not come to anything, but afterwards I bought my own portrait from Bratby for £350.

Bratby's career is described in *The Great Bratby* by Maurice Yacowar (Middlesex University Press, 2008). On page 231 there is a reference to this note, to which Yacowar adds the comment: 'Bratby's individualism trumped opposing apartheid'.

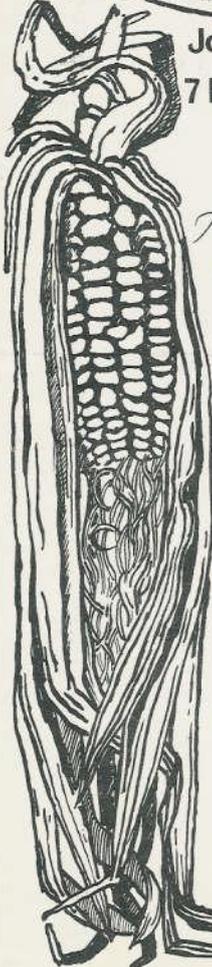
¹ Paul Theroux, *The Kingdom by the Sea: A Journey around the Coast of Great Britain* (Hamish Hamilton, 1983), pp. 37–39

² A nice ambiguity!





John Bratby. ara. arca. rba. fial.
7 Hardy Road. Blackheath. London. S.E.3.



Dear Fanus. Am sorry about
Mary, and understand. A portrait
can be a reassurance to a
lady of her virtues & with
regard to her charms.

I'll give you a
ring in the Spring.

Glad that you
read my letter and I read
yours in The Times of course
The Observer clawed
up & excised my letter

Look forward to seeing
you again Yours John.

