

## Hieroglyphics of the Face: An Introduction

*Jack Southern*

**Jack:** If you were to draw me now, where would you begin?

**Clifton:** Eyes first, I'd start with the eyes. Then I'd draw the nose, facial hair, mouth and then your hair line. I used to always start with the shape of the whole head.

**Jack:** Is that because you were taught to start the drawing that way?

**Clifton:** Yeah, I was encouraged to start with the oval head shape first, but I never start that way anymore.

**Jack:** If you were working in oil pastel (as in the works on the table in front of us), what colour would you first pick up? What colour would my eyes be for example?

**Clifton:** I'm not sure; I'm not too sure about that. But I would work on the shape of your eyes in black first, then start to fill in the skin tones around your eyes. I could then see the colour of your eyes. Your face mask would be mainly grey, with some white.

**Jack:** What colour would my coat be?

**Clifton:** Your coat would be orangy, greeny, your scarf would be multi coloured, but mainly pinky. Your shoes would be light blue and grey.

**Jack:** How much would you include in the drawing? The background, the context around me? My immediate surroundings in your frame of view? The cabinet behind me, and the cup sitting just behind my head? And beyond that, would you draw the window, the view out towards

the trees?

**Clifton:** Maybe the cup. I might draw it, if I could fit it in. It would be yellow and orangey.

**Jack:** Beyond that, the window? The view?

**Clifton:** No, definitely not. The trees have too many parts.

**Jack:** Too complex?

**Clifton:** Yeah, too much going on, too complex.

**Jack:** I am guessing that drawing the trees from this distance, and trying to integrate the leaves and their tightly woven series of shapes, forms and structures, does not offer you the same possibilities of compositional play, as working from a framing of my portrait?

**Clifton:** Yeah, everything starts in the face for me.

**Jack:** Yes, I can see the importance of initially focusing on my facial features, and the immediate foreground. First establishing and isolating shapes, before then pushing the pictorial relationships. This seems to give you more potential for reinvention, constructing new and increasingly abstracted compositions?

**Clifton:** Yeah, the whole image depends on the (initial) placement of shapes.

**Jack:** I can see that, and that placement is about retaining a significant level of fluidity and flexibility in the making process? Everything has to remain relational. This allows you to unfold different layers of abstracted interpretation in response to what you are seeing and experiencing?

**Clifton:** Yeah, I think so.

Pause.....

Posing these questions to Clifton, about a speculative drawing he could make while we sat facing each other in the studio, was not some sort of test, analysis or even game (although it was fun). In many ways, it was just a very straightforward conversation about a distinctive process of observation, translation and response, in developing a portrait drawing from life. Portraiture from life distinguishes this remarkable body of work from the many which preceded it by this creatively abounding, and in many ways prolific artist. Having pursued portraiture for over a decade, much of Wright's previous work has been based on found imagery. Working from a variety of sources such as family albums, (art) books and internet searches, Wright has developed characters deriving from science fiction, film, and popular culture.

The occasion of this substantial and significant exhibition of works made between 2017 - 2020, illuminates and celebrates Wright's fascinating transition to working from life in such a focused and dedicated way. The works have been developed in response to a series of portrait encounters, filtered through an inimitable process of imaginative and expressive transformation. These twenty-two highly distinctive works adopt personalised and encrypted languages, ingeniously enmeshing diverse visual elements across shapes, forms, symbols and hieroglyphics. We read complex dialogues within each individual drawing, as well as collectively across the whole body of work, as pictorial connections and conversations extend beyond each frame. Cumulatively the works enact a visual and conceptual mapping of Wright's uniquely responsive and intuitive approach to making.

This important turn in attention to working from the *presence* of his subjects, as experienced within their own unique time, place and situation, is further underscored by the fact that all but two of the works on show, are made directly from life. All convey the same discerning sense of instinct to capture the seen, felt, and thought, in response to both portrait and immediate context. Wright's choice of subject acts as initial entry point, subsequently facilitating his creative navigation towards unique and inventive forms of abstraction. As such, it is perhaps important to note the principle focus of this body of work as being an image of Clifton's own face, his own portrait. However, we recognise subject variations, allowing us to appreciate Wright's extension into working with/from other artists in the studio around him, including Ntiense Eno-Amooquaye and Andre Williams.

Acknowledging Wright's process of working with/from others, also reveals the potential to understand his drawing process as imbued with the dynamics of both the subtleties and generousities of the encounter. A vital context being how frequently Wright expresses the importance of his subjects "feeling completely comfortable with being drawn". Additionally, he does not ask people to sit for him, but draws *with* people as they are "doing their own artwork". Works made in the studios of other artists are testimony to a fundamental and mutual understanding, sense of trust, respect and security, which the broader working environment clearly establishes. As such they offer us a rare insight into the inherent value of building up close (co-working) relationships with others over an extended period of time. Irradiating the intimate and implicit knowledge which is harnessed through this process. This clearly facilitates Wright's distinctive approach to the capturing of others in the studio through a multifaceted, and multisensory means. For example incorporating the "sound and feeling" of Ntense working on a table in parallel to him, as he "listens while sheworks, and to a conversation she might be having".

We could consider this process as a subconscious subversion of more conventional observational modes of the artist/sitter relationship. For example, the familiar of the portrait being captured through an intense and direct process of looking. Wright affording himself liberation from the bounds of such conventions allows for loose, provisional and highly subjective forms of looking and observing. Prioritising the fleeting glance, subconscious understandings, accumulated prior knowledge, as well as slippages of remembered visual information, in the development of the drawings core substance and structure. It may be difficult to assume such intricacies of the process are always explicit and visually understood by the objective viewer. However, these are such important aspects of the works made in response to others, that we could confidently state that these elements of the process are an identifiable and embedded quality, within the fabric of works we visually experience.

Across the three main bodies of work, *Alien Dialogue Shapes*, *Expression Dialogue Shapes* and *Hieroglyphics of the Face*, we see an extremely broad ranging application of mark, punctuated by a consistent return to a signature expressive and gestural autographic response. We see an expansive yet sensitive use of colour, at times very carefully applied to describe and delineate across fore and background contexts. Carving out and interacting with patterns defined through the salubrious use of negative space. As well as to isolated forms, structures and shapes of specific facial features, and their associated abstractions. Imaginative approaches to material reinvention; the cutting up, recycling,

remaking, layering, etc, allow a breadth of materials across oil pastel, graphite, charcoal, acrylic, ink, as well as pigment and linseed oil, to work together with a cohesive harmony. Wright discusses his process as being able to “move fluidly between materials, changing colour, texture and tone”. All explored at a variety of scales and differing paces of working, as discussed by Wright as sometimes “drawing into it really quick, and rushing at it”.

The work has an arresting impact and sense of visual agency. Conveyed through the highly personalised aesthetic languages, enabled through resolute material experimentation and application. However, it is the extraordinarily distinctive compositions which makes this work so endlessly fascinating, allowing the work to resonate so profoundly. This exploratory and searching approach to pictorial space and compositional value, anchored by the woven interplay of abstracted spaces and facial features, perhaps leads us back to the conversation in the studio which opened this text. To again appreciate the instinctive making process as catalyst for the development of such idiomatic pictorial (inter) relationships. A rare intensity of engagement in the relationship between subject and drawing, which I have only ever been able to somewhat adequately describe as being ‘*inside the drawing*’, during the making process.

The artists often discusses the work in terms of finding a balance between visual coherence, and pushing an image to its limits, “getting the balance right, but trying to push the envelope”. When an image becomes too complex, it is immediately and intuitively simplified in order to avoid over complication. An extend and retract, back and forth, identifying both opportunities and restrictions. Appreciating Wright’s ability to find an equilibrium, is to recognise his significant visual talent and abilities, as well as the work’s strength and sense of vibrant autonomy. The studio conversation reveals a creative process characterised by the harmonious and complimentary relationships of contrasting approaches. The absolute speed and clarity by which Wright knows what colour each visual element should be, coupled with the speculation of developing a relational colour pallet, through each element always being made up of more than one, often contrasting colours, “your coat would be orangy, greeny”. The absolutely decisive and instinctive certainty to know exactly what elements of a subject and context Wright is interested to include in the drawing, in contrast to the questioning, imaginative and playful approach to the placement of these elements on the page.

Again remembering Wright's words, "the whole image depends on the (initial) placement of shapes". Not knowing whether he would include the cup, as he wasn't sure whether he would fit it in, was an understated way of emphasising the importance of allowing the image to evolve with the greatest level of creative flexibility and instinctual decision making as possible, while *inside the drawing*. This requires a level of confidence and trust in one's own process which many artists aspire to reach, often resulting in some of the most subjectively captivating and honest work possible. In discussing one of the works in the exhibition entitled *Jigsaw Space (2019)*, Wright again referred to very particular visual elements in terms of initially not knowing "whether they would fit", and as a result said he would "draw them in last". In this instance he was referring to the seven bold black shapes hovering around the tilted oval head in the centre of the work. While acknowledging Wright's previous assertions about the importance of the initial placement of shapes, these comments reaffirmed something we both agreed on in our conversations, as being equally important. This was to conversely value *letting shapes float*, and the vital role suspended and transitory pictorial elements play in the developmental making process. Another example of contrasting tensions, resolved through Wright's ability to find compositional balance.

Within the context of the exhibition, we understand the sense of grounded presence, physical solidity, as well as the rationality of structure and gravity by which we experience the sequence of frames hanging on the walls. But this is equally offset and somewhat subverted by the space within the frames. We can enjoy the free and floating poise of this most remarkable series of compositions, as they test the limits of pictorial space. But crucially, the work is simultaneously conscious of the creative bounds which locate us within a constellation of cohesion. Affording us a degree of balance and equanimity, in order to directly observe and contemplate what the rich layers of meaning may be communicating to us.

**Conversational elements and quotations are all taken directly from discussions between Clifton Wright and Jack Southern, *Intoart* studio Feb 11, 2022.**

**JACK SOUTHERN, ARTIST/EDUCATOR, AND OCCASIONAL WRITER.**