



View Through a Window I (Double portrait with self-portrait)

Isabel Rawsthorne

Not on display

Title/Description: View Through a Window I (Double portrait with self-portrait)

Artist/Maker: Isabel Rawsthorne

Object Type: Painting

Measurements: h 940 mm x w 1750 mm

Accession Number: 50695

Copyright: © Courtesy of the Warwick Nicholas Estate

Credit Line: Donated in memory of Warwick Llewellyn Nicholas, 2016

Isabel Rawsthorne (1912-92) painted two works entitled *View through a Window* and both are now in public collections (*View through a Window II* is held at the Tate). *View through a Window I* depicts Rawsthorne and her husband, the composer Alan Rawsthorne, sat at a table with two glasses between them. In the background, a flurry of paint suggests some indistinct movement and vertical planes in the foreground subtly indicate the titular window, probably from the glass room at her

home, Sudbury Cottage, in rural Essex. [1]

Rawsthorne captures the two figures in motion. The figure on the left, Alan, is painted twice, as if in two different frames of an animation. This double image may have been inspired by the photographs of human and animal movement taken by Eadweard Muybridge which influenced many artists, including Rawsthorne's close friend Francis Bacon. [2] The figures are executed in what, by this point in her career, we may recognise as her signature style. The figures are articulated with only the eye sockets, nose, collar bones and ears, which are carved out of thick knots of paint, physically standing out from the otherwise flat canvas. The blurred, indistinct rendition of the face contrasts to the glasses which appear frozen in time with their neat clarity of execution.

The painting, at first glance, appears to be an engagement with phenomenological problem of painting another person as they appear. Rawsthorne's style of building up paint to show the body in positive terms, initially seems to echo the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. [3] Merleau-Ponty championed artists such as Cezanne and Giacometti (Rawsthorne's lifelong friend) who rejected traditional techniques, such as linear perspective, in favour of approaches which were closer to human perception. [4] He particularly approved of artists who found alternative approaches to drawing outlines and then filling these with colour. Rawsthorne's figures, carved out of thick paint, appear to fit with this theory.

Attempting to replicate human perception also fitted neatly with Rawsthorne's other artistic interest: capturing the living quality of her subjects. Not only are her figures caught in the middle of movement, but they are also caught in the act of breathing, as cigarette smoke plumes from their mouths. The smoke alludes to ephemerality, acting as a *momento mori* and suggesting that this moment, as well as human existence is fleeting. This co-existence of life and death in the work echoes the writing of her friend Georges Bataille who wrote that "a corpse is seen as the most complete affirmation of the spirit", [5] emphasising the role of death in drawing our attention to life. The presence of both life and death, and the animate and inanimate, in the same work serve each other to emphasise their opposition. Rawsthorne paints her subjects as they appear to her but also captures something of what it is to be human. Juxtaposed to the lifeless objects on the table, and separated from the viewer by glass, her figures are characterised as dynamic, inaccessible and alive.

Georgia Kelly, April 2023

[1] Carol Jacobi, *Out of the Cage: The Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021), p. 337.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 346.

[3] For further detail on Merleau-Ponty and Rawsthorne, see Carol Jacobi, "Cat's Cradle" in *Out of the Cage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021), pp. 211-219.

[4] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt" in *Sense and Non-Sense*, ed. Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992), pp. 9-25.

[5] Georges Bataille, "The Theory of Religion" (1948), quoted in Carol Jacobi, "Cat's Cradle", *Visual Culture in Britain* 10, no. 3 (2009), 293-314, (302).

Further Reading

Suzanne Doyle and Karen Southworth, Isabel Rawsthorne 1912-1992: Paintings, Drawings and Designs (Harrogate: The Mercer Art Gallery, 1997). Exhibition Catalogue.

Carol Jacobi, Out of the Cage: the Art of Isabel Rawsthorne (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021).

Calvin Winner, 'Alberto Giacometti in Britain' in Alberto Giacometti: A Line through Time ed. by Claudia Milburn and Calvin Winner (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp.54-81.
