Willem Jan Otten, *The Portrait*, translated from the Dutch by David Colmer (Scribe Publications, 2009)

Willem Jan Otten’s novel was published in Dutch as *Specht en Zoon* (G.A. van Oorschot, 2005) and won the Netherlands’ highest literary honour, the Libris Prize. The original title translates easily as Specht and son. However, unless one is a Dutch speaker the combination of the letters *cht* is challenging to pronounce and that is probably the reason why this title was dropped for the English version. A pity, as a trinity of sons (Singer, Tijn and Stijn) are central to the text.

The narrator of Otten’s novel is an ‘Extra Fine Quadriple Universal Primed’ canvas (3), known in the artist supply trade as a ‘support’. The novel opens with the line: ‘I’m coming to a tragic end,’ and recounts events from the first moments of unconscious darkness, within the middle of a roll of canvas, to the moment when the canvas is about to be thrown on a pyre. From the first the canvas is aware of its Extra Fine qualities and declares it can only be painted on by a prestigious artist. The artist who acquires the huge, two metre canvas is Felix Vincent. Canvas reflects that for its whole life it has hung opposite ‘a poster of furiously painted sunflowers’ (6) and remarks that ‘a serious painter wouldn’t call himself Vincent’. Readers will understand the reference to Vincent Van Gogh, but may not be aware that while that artist is usually referred to as Van ‘Go’ outside the Netherlands even the Dutch find the pronunciation of ‘Gogh’ resistible and usually refer to him as ‘Vincent’.

Canvas calls the painter, Vincent, ‘Creator’. Creator is a prolific artist who paints portraits for ever increasing sums of money. He wants to buy the house he and his wife are living in thereby attaining the ultimate Dutch dream of owning a free standing home as opposed to one joined to the next by a party wall. A word portrait of Creator has recently appeared in an art magazine. In the interview Creator suggests he might use his recently acquired large, Extra Fine canvas to paint a Pieta in that sublime moment when the dead Christ is held by his mother and only the onlookers know that there is to be a resurrection.

A wealthy businessman, Valery Specht, reading the word portrait about Felix Vincent, commissions him to paint a portrait of his dead son. The son’s name is Singer and he is a young black boy from Sierra Leone. ‘You will be saving a life’ (48), Specht tells Vincent. The canvas observes that Creator works from very small supports (polaroids) and a particular video recording, a captured moment where the recording stops, ‘just when eye contact with the camera is about to be established’ (55). At this point of the text Otten stretches the willingness of the reader to accompany him on his anthropomorphic journey. One reads on, not only to see how Creator manages to bring a dead boy to life on the flat, white background of a canvas, but also to judge for oneself whether or not Otten manages to sustain the novel’s unusual point of view and deliver a successful climax.

Three boys lie at the heart of the novel. Singer, the black boy from Sierra Leone, was chosen by Valery Specht to be a ‘son’ because of his beauty and sexual allure. Specht, we learn, is a man who prefers boys and discards them when he ceases to find them attractive. Creator/Felix Vincent had a childhood friend called Tijn who in a confiding moment asks Felix to look at his genitals. Stijn is the son created by Felix and...
his wife during the process of painting the portrait of Specht’s ‘son’. The painting must be
finished by Easter.

In the Southern hemisphere Easter heralds the crimson nostalgia of autumn. To the
Dutch there is a whole panoply of days devoted to Easter. Black Thursday, Mourning
Friday, Holy Saturday and then the purple and gold of resurrection Sunday. The novel
utilises the liturgical calendar. The reader anticipates some sort of climax, some act of
redemption will occur at Easter, but Specht doesn’t come for the painting until six months
later when he is close to death and after the painting has been destroyed.

Some of the most famous portraits ever painted were by Dutch artists such as
Rembrandt Van Rijn, Frans Hals, Vincent Van Gogh and Charley Toorop. Creator defines
painting as: ‘just a skin applied to skin’ (57). The Extra Fine Quadruple Universal Primed
canvas notes: ’As far as I know, no-one is ever going to look in me. Just at’ (22). The
Dutch artists mentioned above engaged their audiences in a dialogue asking onlookers
firstly to look ‘at me’ and secondly to reflect on the very nature of portraiture. Van Rijn
painted his ordinary neighbours and called them portraits of biblical figures, Van Hals
painted Burghers and thereby depicted the hypocrisy at the heart of Calvinist
philanthropy, Van Gogh used lurid tones to depict his friend Gauguin and illustrated his
own mental decay in searing self portraits. Charley Toorop, the only woman in the group,
painted her self-portrait obsessively during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands,
resorting to cardboard and packing cases when she could not acquire canvases.1 As she
lost her sight she painted ever diminishing tableaux. Looking at, and into Toorop’s
paintings, one shares her experience of approaching blindness, followed closely by death.

It is tempting, easy perhaps, to suggest that Willem Jan Otten is in discourse with
Oscar Wilde in The Portrait. I would suggest that another reading, reflecting on this
Dutch dialogue to do with the essence of portraiture, is ultimately more rewarding.
Throughout Otten’s novel we, the viewing audience, are asked to look at the goings on
within the text, the canvas wherein the author works out his difficult point of view. The
anthropomorphic point of view, being of necessity static, concentrates our gaze to a part
of one room. We sense that there are deeper plot lines, but they escape us because our
sight is filtered through Canvas.

Canvas cannot know what has been painted on its Extra Fine surface until one day
a newcomer enters Creator’s studio. ‘I wanted ... the other to look at me, and at the same
time I feared his gaze’ (108). Gradually, during a scene where Creator has sex with the
journalist who wrote a portrait about him for an art magazine, Canvas realises that ‘the
other’ is a mirror. Canvas confuses what has been painted on its surface – ‘Creator had
wanted to capture me like this, so not yet knowing what I was seeing’ (128) – with the
essence of its existence as a canvas – a support – a device for representing the likeness of
a person and hopefully capturing something of the personality of the one immortalised by
the artist.

Canvas cannot become Singer. He can only ever be a captured likeness. Creator
destroys Canvas even as his own son is brought into the world. Consciousness for the
previously Extra Fine canvas continues however, in a redemptive, yet reduced existence
as a torn photograph of Singer.

Elisabeth Holdsworth

1 Charley Toorop is an artist of legendary status to the Dutch. Her story, particularly the travails during the
war, is well known. She was a friend of Vincent Van Gogh’s.

Transnational Literature Volume 2 No 1 November 2009.