

JUDGE'S COMMENT WINNER

Sisters, by Andre Brönnimann



Sometimes an artist can even convey a very special almost magic quality, which gives you the feeling that the portrait is addressing itself to you as a viewer, that it is not just mute and passive, but rather, so to say, has something on its mind.

Sisters, by Andre Brönnimann, is a wonderful group portrait of 3 women dressed in Maori clothing and with the traditional facial tattoos. They are seen in a frontal view, looking at us directly, catching our eye and seeming to follow us as we move.

The light source comes from the left creating distinct shadows on the chins and cheeks, subtle shadows on the necks. The background is black, and there are no hints or suggestions of any environment that might underpin their characters. The uniform dark background creates a strong contrast and draws attention to the faces. This work has strong references to earlier styles, first I would mention Gottfried Lindauer and his famous portraits of the Maori from the 19th century – accurately recording the facial tattoos, the ta moko, clothing, the ornaments – conveying the quiet dignity of the sitters in a smooth, concise manner, with a convincing sense of light falling and creating the 3 dimensional form.

Technically this work has roots in photorealism while also referencing the classic tradition. It is wonderfully painted, using the *chiaroscuro* technique's strong contrasts between light and dark, and bold contrasts affecting the whole composition. A classic technique known from Rembrandt, Caravaggio and other painters from the threshold between renaissance and early baroque era at the first part of the 17th century. In contrast to Lindauer's traditional portraits, however, this work is a much more ambiguous and multifaceted composition, which so directly, almost dramatically confronts the viewer. We are struck by the contrast between the traditional clothing, decorations, necklaces, the facial tattoos – the modern hairstyles, hair colour, and the countenances of the women and their modern appearance. We see them en face, directly, with no filters nor background to help us. We are forced to step backwards. They observe us as well as we observe them.

Their very strong presence raises intriguing questions about the role they play in society. What is their identity, and their relation to modernity and traditions? The title says that they are sisters, but what is their relationship? Their gazes are significant and lead us to wonder about them. Everything about their looks is ambiguous as well: they seem friendly, but reserved and watchful; mild but austere; feminine but strong; serious but smiling.

They are positioned closely together, but there is little interaction between them. Each is looking her separate way, they are both united and set apart – their monumentality and graveness almost makes allusions to the classical mythological Gods of destiny, the three fates, the sister goddesses from Greek and Roman mythology who were believed to have spun out the destiny of a person's life - one sister would spin the thread of life, the other would measure its length and the third would cut it – in a sense they controlled the metaphorical life of every mortal being.

It is indeed a very beautiful portrait, technically well done, embracing the classical baroque techniques, merging elements of traditional Maori culture with modern appearances and showing an interesting psychological relation between the three women. The way they are presented give them a strong presence and evoke many questions and issues both along themes of modernity and ethnicity, along the themes of the psychology between the three models and their roles in life and the universal questions of human existence.

Sisters is a strong portrait and relates to specific New Zealand contemporary life as well as combining it with the universal questions of identity, family and personal history. I find it a very innovative and profound portrait.

