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## ***The Black Portraits* -Making Geographical Connections through Political Communication**

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David Smith (2000) has taught us that there is a close and complicated interface between geography (as a discipline and a practice), ethics and morality (Lee and Smith, 2004), urging us to consider questions that have haunted the past, are subjects of controversy in the present, and affect the future. Just one of those questions is, does distance diminish responsibility? We are familiar now to thinking about public places (including museums) as sites of political communication (Hyden and Sheckels, 2016), about absence and presence, framing, positioning, and the creation of meaning.

Here we report on the interface between political geography and political communication through art, in particular one project and resource hub, *The Black Portraits*. This exhibition of over twenty portraits, with a web presence and an educational strategy, has two drivers: Aesthetics and Information. The aim is to reach and appeal to a wide audience, to inform and inspire; to improve awareness of governments' denial of human needs; to bear witness through research and story-telling and to be a common platform for human needs champions. Public awareness of the champions' plight and their country's governance will be raised through exhibitions, through print, broadcast, internet exposure and learning programmes. Paintings of the champions in black impasto oil paint is for aesthetic impact and to make their absences the more conspicuous.

*The Black Portraits* exhibition is a significant step in the relationship between art and geography, and how the two disciplines can co-operate to connect to wider global audiences and spread important messages. It lends itself to sparking geographical educational journeys of further enquiry to address key aspects of the new Geography A-level curriculum concerning Human Rights and Global Governance alike.

Paul Piercy was originally a portrait artist who was captivated by the face of imprisoned Nobel peace prize winner Liu Xiaobo after seeing footage of him on television in October 2010. The Nobel committee of Oslo, Norway, recognised 'his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China'<sup>1</sup>. Liu was, and still is, incarcerated in Jinzhou prison, thus unable to travel for the ceremony. Ultimately, the frustrations of not being able to paint Liu's face in the flesh inspired Paul to research into the story behind the man and to capture those details within a painting, paying close attention to political and geographical context to highlight the government's human rights / needs abuses. The official charge against Liu Xiaobo being 'spreading a message to subvert the country and authority'. This first remote and physically censored encounter developed the name of the project, 'The Black Portraits', as well as the style for all of the current paintings. Textured black paint is used to symbolise the



<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2010/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2010/)

absence and anonymity of imprisoned or deceased human rights champions, contrasted against bright and bold symbolic details that unite an emotional subject with the intellectual message behind each individual story. Art is the permanent stage to preserve the tragedy of these stories but this also journalism. The paintings are accessible to all, though might be read somewhat differently by different audiences and individuals. They reach out to us as individual people and as (active or at least in solidarity with those) defenders of human rights or fundamental needs (including freedom of expression and association, education, health, amongst others; as codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

The human needs champions in this project were or are either in prison or have died because each in their own way has been brave enough to question their government or has been denied freedom of speech. They have put their head above the parapet in their quest for a better quality of governance for their fellow citizens.

As circumstances change and some individuals may leave prison eventually, with domestic and international lobbying, campaigning and activism, Paul takes the opportunity to contact them and tries to meet them to draw their actual portrait from life, removing the symbolic anonymity that the black paint has represented. It is felt that this will bring both a sense of hope and with the released a moment of solidarity with those still incarcerated. There have been connections woven between some of the places and associates of the protagonists of the paintings through interactions with them. This highlights the project's personal touch beyond that of digital communication and internet research, towards its geographical context and connections with face to face meetings with different individuals – who may be in exile and may have asylum granted - in different cultural settings. The first life portrait was Doctor Binayek Sen from the state of Chhattisgarh in India; Paul flew to India to stay with Sen's family. Others include Lapiro de Mbanga of Cameroon (painted in the USA), and the Bahraini blogger Ali Abdulemam (sentenced to 15 years in prison before he escaped to the UK in 2013, where he was granted political asylum), and Guillermo Farinas of Cuba.



Connections are continuously being formed as the project has evolved. The paintings have gained global recognition across many digital platforms, highlighting the power of the internet. None more so than the close connection with Belarus based pro-human rights news site Charter 97. Activist and founder of the site Aieg Bebebin is the focus of one of the paintings in the project; he is considered a symbol of the Belarusian people's fight for freedom. Now deceased, his close friend and 2010 presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov, who was also imprisoned but eventually released and pardoned in 2012 (and has just released his book "My Story. Belarusian Amerikanka or Elections Under Dictatorship" in Warsaw), has had his portrait painted after receiving political asylum to the UK in 2012 (and is coming to Newcastle).

The latest edition to the exhibition characterises Bekele Gerba and the Oromo people of Ethiopia. The Oromo people are the largest ethnicity group in the country, some 40 million faces that are universally unknown by the consciousness of the planet. In England, where the



paintings are currently exhibited at Newcastle upon Tyne's Discovery Museum (a "social justice museum"), individuals and communities have been enthusiastic about the knowledge that those issues and their countries are gaining global exposure, with the plight of individuals battling injustice being acknowledged across the world. This has been achieved through a comprehensive events schedule with talks and films, guided tours /Q&As in front of the paintings, with local people (including MPs and MEPs, Lord Mayors and Councillors) and representatives from other countries.

The project has been influential in involving local schools through the education programme of workshops linking local history and social politics to The Black Portraits. Working alongside other active local and regional groups sharing an interest in human rights, such as Journey to Justice, A Living Tradition and Amnesty International, has boosted the awareness of the exhibition.

The impact that *The Black Portraits* has had already, and will continue to have, is testament to its ability to create geographical connections and educate people about the most important daily struggles for human needs worldwide which haven't had the exposure they not only deserve but need. The reality is that not all human rights issues or artistic potential have been covered or discovered, but there is no doubt that what it has achieved is to unite people of every culture and background through the events, education programmes and widespread media coverage that it has received. This awareness will only help inspire positive action and continue the global fight for human rights.



There are plans to show the exhibition in other cities across England, and in Europe, and the project is seeking venues and funding to facilitate this.

### References

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- Smith, D.M. (2000) *Moral Geographies: Ethics in a World of Difference*.Edinburgh University Press.

### Other resources

- <http://theblackportraits.org/the-project/4553307815>
- <https://discoverymuseum.org.uk/whats-on/the-black-portraits>
- <https://discoverymuseum.org.uk/whats-on/the-black-portraits-the-portrait-process>
- <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Black-Portraits/135889366512074>
- <http://www.alivingtradition.org/articles.html>
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