

Michael Illingworth

1932–1988

Self-taught

The eyes of the woman draw you into Michael Illingworth's portrait. Her wide-eyed stare begs for help, validation or even a reason for being. This blank gaze characterises 'The Piss-Quicks', a quirky cast of characters invented by Illingworth to satirise middle class New Zealand.

Mrs Piss-Quick rarely appears without her well dressed husband in a double portrait. This single portrait still reveals a lot about the Piss-Quick condition. Piss-Quicks rarely stray far from their suburban homes where they define themselves through the objects they have acquired. Piss-Quicks lack mouths, marking an inability to communicate with each other and the world outside their window.

Illingworth uses portraiture as a satirical weapon against the Piss-Quicks by upsetting the expectation that portraits capture the personality of the sitter. His portrait reveals a glaring absence of personality or individuality in this woman trapped inside her suburban dream, interchangeable with her neighbour.

The blue hat perched on the head of the woman indicates that Illingworth has other agendas. It refers to the famous hat in Henri Matisse's portrait of his wife, *Woman With A Hat* (1905). Matisse and his fellow Fauvists liberated colour from the need to describe objects. Illingworth's use of heightened colour and flat surfaces owes a debt to Fauvist innovation. He uses this painting to acknowledge the influence of Matisse, while reworking the famous portrait for his own ends.

Besides the hat, Matisse's portrait is renowned for its flattened, multi-coloured background that surrounds and engulfs his sitter. Illingworth sits his woman in front of a red, abstract form that acts as a window to the bright world beyond suburbia. He inverts the way Matisse conveys the lively personality of his wife through this dramatic background. Illingworth's controlled, monochromatic window/background suggests the bland conformity of Piss-Quick existence.

Both artists play on an ambiguity of human form. Is Madame Matisse sitting straight on to the viewer, holding a fan across her chest? Or is she looking back over her right shoulder? Illingworth builds these ambiguities into his idiosyncratic depiction of the body. Like most Piss-Quicks, this woman has only one arm. This device is used to break the symmetry of his compositions. Here it also nods towards Madame Matisse's unusual left arm that juts out from the side of her body. The tapered, amputee right arm of Illingworth's sitter is also echoed in Madame Matisse's gloved right hand that becomes a single, snake-like form.

While there are these connections between the two artists' practices, Illingworth's deliberate, lustrous style is a world away from Matisse's jaunty expressionism. Illingworth has more in common stylistically with earlier artists like Vermeer who specialised in small, delicately painted scenes of women in domestic interiors. As with his makeover of Madame Matisse as a Piss-Quick, Illingworth uses clear art historical references to further his satirical vision. Vermeer painted the new Dutch middle class of the 17th century. Illingworth knowingly uses a similar approach to parody the bland middle class culture of his period.

Aaron Lister

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Books:

Skinner, D. & et al. (2001). *A Tourist In Paradise Lost: The Art Of Michael Illingworth*, City Gallery.

Web search:

Fauvism

Henri Matisse's *Women With A Hat*

Johannes Vermeer



Michael Illingworth | *Girl In The Blue Hat (After Matisse)* | 1968 | Oil on canvas | 258x308mm