

FACING THE FEELING

by Penelope Grist, 23 August 2022



Installation of 'Face to Face: The New Normal' at Wagga Wagga Regional Gallery, 2021 Vic McEwan. Courtesy of the artist

I can sing the singing. I can think the thinking. But you're not going to catch me feeling the feeling. No, sir. ”

Michael Gambon as Philip E. Marlow in *The Singing Detective* (1986)

I have always had a fear of hospitals. I remember causing a tremendous tearful fuss when my Year 1 class was scheduled for an educational tour of the local hospital. My parents were mystified. To both the six-year-old me at the time and the 40-year-old me today, the original source of this fear is inexplicable. Yet it lingers. I realised this when I found I was quietly steeling myself to visit the Wagga Wagga Regional Gallery recently to see *Face to Face: The New Normal*. I knew the exhibition addressed a critical aspect of portraiture, the

face, but I also knew that artist Vic McEwan made this work in a clinical setting, addressing the intersection of medical science and contemporary art.

I didn't need to worry.

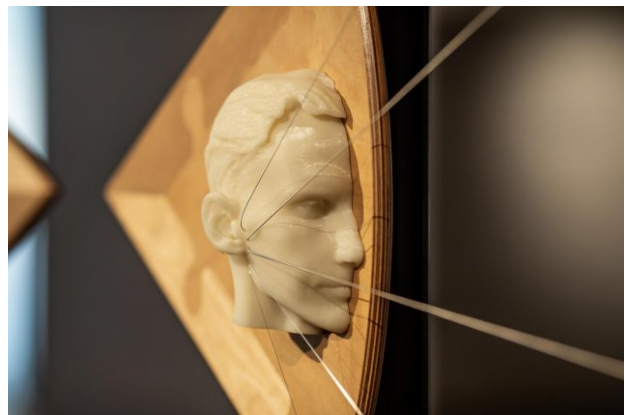
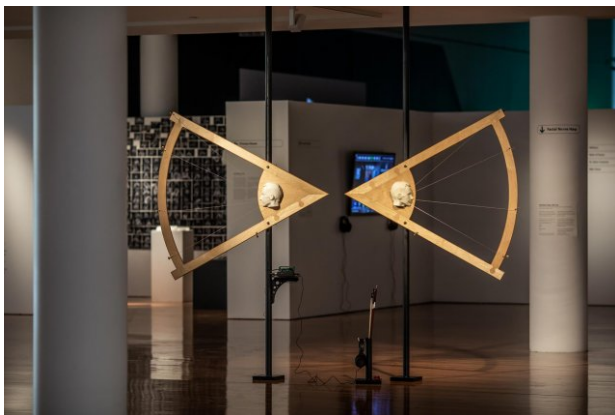
As soon as I stepped into the exhibition, it delivered an antidote to my fear. It was quiet with points of reassuring sound, so not spooky-silent or cacophonous. There was space, but it wasn't uncomfortably empty. It was brightly but warmly lit. The works of art, the curation, labelling and signage, and the design all contributed to an atmosphere of safety, calm and care. I was OK; and ready to understand what this exhibition had to say about the face, and consequently the portrait. I was to realise by the end of my visit that, in one sense, I'd already felt it.

McEwan has undertaken three years of creative practice research in residence at the Sydney Facial Nerve Service at the University of Sydney's Faculty of Medicine and Health. Embedded within this clinical practice that treats patients experiencing facial nerve paralysis, an inability to move parts of the face, McEwan developed the works in the exhibition. One of McEwan's supervisors, Dr Claire Hooker, wrote in her essay in the accompanying catalogue: 'Our face is our fortune. It is the portal between our confined embodiment, with its many social and emotional consequences, and our transcendence of it through the spiritual and relational aspects of existence.' This observation is also highly relevant to the centrality of the face in western conventions of portraiture.



The Face That Your Face Feels, 2021 Vic McEwan. Courtesy of the artist

A series of ten photographic portraits, *The Face That Your Face Feels* (2021), ran along the gallery's longest wall. On approach, the immediate visual parallels flashed into my mind: Albert Tucker's cubist series of *Cratered Heads* or Francis Bacon's blurred, distorted portraits. But this immediately dissipated. These portraits clearly didn't depict altered perception or psychological states, but instead told a story: a story of closeness. McEwan projected photographic portraits of patients' faces onto the hands of Dr Susan Coulson, one of their treating clinicians, and rephotographed them. At a distance the faces were more distinct. Up close, it was the creases, lines and shapes of the fingers that dominated. As one of the sitters, Susan Andrews, noted of the portraits: 'These images are how I feel, getting pulled in all these different directions.' To me, each work in this series offered three layers of meaning: a visual simile for medical care in the holding of expertise that holds someone's future; a narrative of the strange intimacy of this human relationship; and an evocation of the experience of being treated. In this way these portraits captured three dimensions of feeling.



1 2 *Facial Nerve Harp* 2019–22 Both Vic McEwan. Courtesy of the artist

In the centre of the gallery space floated two beautifully crafted wooden wings of an interactive musical instrument with 3D-printed heads in profile at their centre – the *Facial Nerve Harp* (2019–22). Having worked with portraiture for years, I was struck by how little I know about the face. Visitors could play the five branches of the facial nerve – Temporal, Zygomatic, Buccal, Marginal Mandibular and Cervical – represented by the strings stretched from the heads. *Facial Nerve Harp* amplifies visibility of the face's inner workings. McEwan foregrounded the invisible, unconsidered elements that control central aspects of our lives. In doing so, he gently emphasised how we take

the intricate dynamics of our bodies for granted – and perhaps many other things that you feel just under the surface of daily life.



Installation featuring 'William' (2019) and 'Wall of Faces' (2020–22) Vic McEwan. Courtesy of the artist

Reassured and braver, I moved into the darker back rooms of the exhibition towards *William* (2019). As I walked in, William's voice rang clear from a large projected audiovisual work in which he narrated his experience of facial nerve paralysis: 'One half of my face works, the other half doesn't work. People only see the half that doesn't work.' He speaks of people looking away and avoiding eye contact. He speaks of that perception reversing when people get to know him, now seeing only the half of his face that works. He speaks of accepting his face: 'To me a person isn't their physical appearance.' As a curator of portraiture, the implications of this felt true and deep – yet somehow contradicted by the emphasis on physical appearance that is regarded as one of the cornerstones of the genre: achieving a likeness.



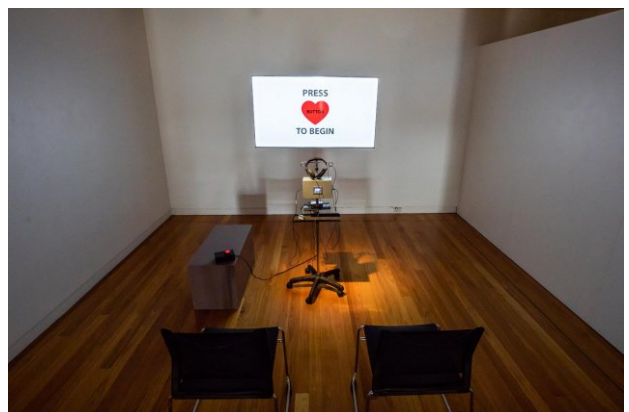
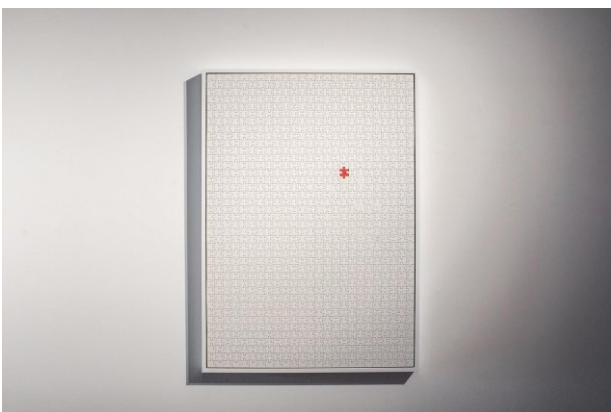
Wall of Faces (detail), 2020–22 Vic McEwan. Courtesy of the artist

McEwan's exhibition not only made hidden physical structures visible, but also subconscious patterns. It is a strange aspect of our perceptions of each other that people's faces lose their individuality in crowd – we have to concentrate to re-see each face's uniqueness. In *Wall of Faces* (2020–22), a crowd of 3D scanned faces forms a beautiful array. The images were collected, if that is the right word, from diverse participants during McEwan's time at the Tate Exchange gallery in Liverpool, UK. The method of scanning produces a flat, blank side to the 3D form of the head. This work made me acutely aware of what Dr Coulson describes in her catalogue essay: 'The human face is an instantly recognisable source of information about another person. It conveys a complex array of signals and emotions, triggering judgements within less than half a second of our seeing another person ... we are ... constantly reading and responding to one another.' These factors are at play just as actively with representations of faces as they are in person. It feels important to portraiture to be aware that this is what our brains do with faces.



1 2 *The Unravelling* 2021–22 Both Vic McEwan. Courtesy of the artist

In McEwan's non-representational portraiture, he demonstrates the potential of storytelling through objects. For *The Unravelling* (2021–22) McEwan has crafted a French Horn, the pipes of which have distended and pulled loose. It tells the story of Liz Clarkson, who lost the ability to play this instrument that was integral to her sense of self, unravelling her identity. She took up the cello, which she now loves playing, the sound of which emanates from the horn. Liz described how the work of art encapsulates this new dual identity and how 'the facial palsy has been the catalyst for this new state I find myself in'. This non-representational portrait vividly captures her journey, character and sense of self. Some of the similes McEwan created are more direct, but no less eloquent: his own self portrait symbolises the crucial interconnectedness of socially engaged arts practice in a white jigsaw puzzle with one piece missing to reveal a red background. In *Bio-Medical Composing Machine* (2020–21) McEwan offered the visitor the chance to create their own self portrait, measuring their vital signs and turning the data into a piece of music only they could hear. Consistent across all the works is the inextricability of feeling, identity and representation.



1 *Self-Portrait*, 2019. **2** *Bio-Medical Composing Machine*, 2020–21. Both Vic McEwan. Courtesy of the artist

The empathy and ethos of care underpinning McEwan's approach was profoundly realised in *Face to Face: The New Normal*. McEwan's research supervisors, Hooker and Coulson, both emphasise the collaboration, trust and respect he built with patients and clinicians during his residency. He disrupts the pandemic-era cliché referenced in the exhibition title by making it feel like a hopeful challenge – there is no normal, just unique individual humans with skin and flesh within which our nerves nestle. While the exhibition at Wagga Wagga is over, keep a lookout for more of McEwan's groundbreaking work. I found in this exhibition a reason to seek a fundamental shift in the values and definitions of portraiture away from representing what we look like and closer to representing how we relate to each other and simply how life feels.

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