

SPINAL COLUMN

MELANIE REID

I'm having my portrait painted. Can the artist make me look fit, with glamorous hair? Please



If a professional artist asks to paint your portrait, unless you're a member of the royal family or a huge celebrity getting five requests a week, it's fairly impossible to say no. I mean, even the tiniest ego goes a bit Dame Edna Everage at the suggestion. Me? A proper picture of *moi*? And in the next split second, because we're all capable of being truly shallow, ooooo, I'll have to get my hair done.

Naturally I was so flattered I said yes. It was a serious commission: Fionna Carlisle, a well-known Scottish artist, had won an award from Creative Scotland for her idea to paint "Women with Form" – various professionals at an older age, still on top of their game. Along with me, glowing faintly and trying not to ask questions like, "Why me?" and, "Are you really sure?"

We began late autumn last year. Fionna came to my house and we set up in the sunroom – my chair quite close to the easel, my gaze at the tops of the trees over her left shoulder. What I wore was left entirely up to me; I have no badges of office or uniform, so I chose a favourite mocha brown jumper with a funnel collar, in a kind of felted cable knit. A rug on my knee, and we were off.

I made a silent prayer she wouldn't emphasise the wheelchair too much. Which in a guilty way feels like a betrayal, but it's the sad truth. I didn't want to be badged disabled.

We didn't discuss the issue, funnily enough, but she obviously understood. She sketched me front on, head at the top of the paper, knees at the bottom, body dominating the middle of the frame.

I did what all novice sitters do, I guess. You start with your favourite mirror face, the best you, with soft eyes and a hint of warmth and wisdom in the expression. This is the you you want to be reproduced. And then, as the minutes become hours, and you realise it's a long haul, your face slips into the default that other people see, not you. The real you, not the best you. The artist's gold.

Once I realised I'd ceded control of my face to her pencil and her conversation, once my defences were stripped away, I began to ponder how I would really like to look on her easel. I want to look like the me who lives inside my head, of course. The me I've lost. The me who may actually never have existed. I want the fantasy of who I might have been if I wasn't trapped in a chair – long legs draped across a sofa, with big hair, a bright top and an amused face, an action woman caught by the painter in fleeting repose.

Forget about honesty, I begged Fionna silently. See me how I ought to look: restless, fit, attractive, blonde. Give me the contained energy of someone a teeny bit glamorous who's paused between practical chores, ready to dash off and do stuff. Make me look powerful and interesting. Heal my

twisted hands, my shapeless slumped body. Paint me a spine. Solve the puzzle of my smashed identity.

But it's all cobblers. Whimsy. Serious art is not about my denial. I am not posing for a vanity portrait, a duchess seeking beauty in posterity. I'm being painted precisely because of my tough realities. In fact, mid-portrait, as if fulfilling the brief, I became even more shapeless. Fionna works always from life with a very fine brush in an impressionistic style, and this takes lots of sittings. My mastectomy interrupted the process, so when she returned this year she found my jumper bigger and baggier, my face more lined.

We've now had several sittings. When she first showed me the work in its sketch form, I saw someone with a small head and a big body, someone I didn't want to recognise. "You could make the hair a bit bigger," I ventured, hating myself for being so shallow. I kept faith. I dyed my hair blonder. Now, with the paint going on, the portrait is coming together. I recognise myself emerging. She's caught me in the eyes, vividly fixed on the skyline, full of wistful yearning and stoicism. Wish I'd worn a lime green jumper now. Just to acknowledge the fantasy. ■

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Melanie Reid is tetraplegic after breaking her neck and back in a riding accident in April 2010