

## ArtSeen

### Graham Nickson: Eye Level

Is a physical likeness the manifestation of identity or is there something more?

By [Aimée Brown Price](#)

Graham Nickson, *The Empathist*, 2019.

Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches.

Courtesy Betty Cuningham, New York.

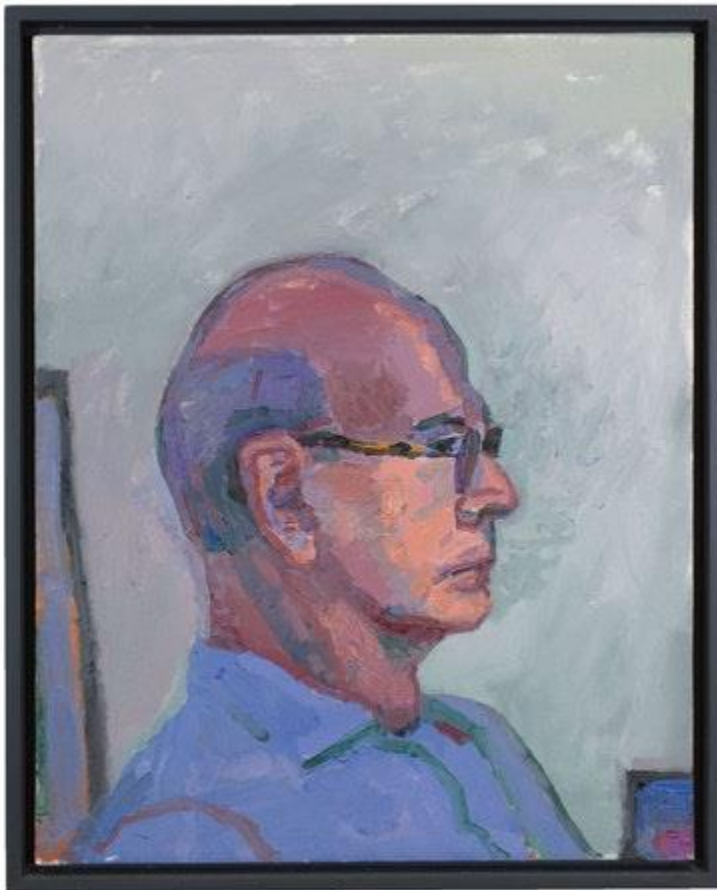


Graham Nickson's most recent exhibition displays a revelatory new subject matter. Until now, Nickson has been generally associated with two kinds of work. His most expansive paintings like *Pelican Bay Bathers* (2006) are often on large conjoined panels and comprise figures in carefully calibrated, iconic poses in beachside settings, rendered in intense blasts of clear color. The brilliant conceit of these “Bathers” allows for all manner of starkly constructed poses: sunning, emerging from the water, drying off, doing a headstand, or balancing at the water's edge. Another body of work has consisted of landscapes—or better, lightscapes—of

skies with land below that provides a bordering locus of radiant, searing, fully saturated colors and wafting or backlit clouds, many in watercolor. Whatever his medium, Nickson is a supremely adept colorist, using pigment to further the sense of subject and place, whether the heat of summer or the metamorphosing light at the end of day, before the swift onset of dusk.

Now Nickson, the much admired Dean and Atelier Head of Painting at the New York Studio School, has some 24 portrait heads from over two decades on view at Betty Cuningham Gallery. These are modestly-scaled paintings with the heads themselves slightly smaller than life size, all posing the basic question of what a portrait is. What actually is to be depicted? Is a physical likeness the manifestation of identity or is there something more? Observation is central to the exercise. The physical individual is very much here, but as one examines the show as a whole, it is apparent how Nickson further penetrates and alludes to the sitter's temperament and character.

A distinctive mood marks many of the heads. In Nickson's portraits an interchange of understanding between artist and sitter is evident. Crucial to the mix is a complex, intense examination of what may be revealed or is better veiled and kept private—as expressed by many of these sitters. A certain wariness and unease is not only recognized, recorded, and honored, but also made into a topos. Nickson, with great invention, manages to indicate that this is a philosophical and ideological decision, and ultimately an empathetic understanding of the subject who is penetratingly portrayed and probed. Not unparadoxically, this is done with enormous tact: a face with lowered lids, downcast or staring eyes, a troubled glance, inwardness, the shielding of one's emotional life, and a stalwart refusal to be too open. There is no need here to prove oneself, ingratiate, or charm. These works, then, are the complex result of a superbly sagacious artist with an understanding of abiding by a need for privacy and emotional containment. This stance, evident and intriguing in these portraits, I venture, may be the manifestation of Nickson's English background and its requisite manners: No, don't go there. No, don't let it all hang out. No, we don't want to know and will leave you to your private thoughts as you don't want us to know either. We are discreet. There are no smiling figures seeking approbation here. Rather, the subjects of these portraits are almost all restrained, visibly and purposefully emotionally opaque, and as such, all the more absorbing and interesting.



Graham  
Nickson, *Scholar's Gaze*,  
2019. Oil on canvas, 20 x  
16 inches. Courtesy Betty  
Cunningham, New York.

Titles like *Glancing*, *The Engineer*, *The Lawyer*, and *The Painter of Myths* indicate that momentary expressions, the sitters' professions or their engagements are more important in identifying these images than the names of the sitters. The given titles, such as *AB*, also protect privacy while acknowledging that these are not necessarily famous people whose names would be recognizable. Many of what I have termed "portraits"—the

gallery calls them “faces”—are pensive renditions of colleagues and fellow artists. Except for *Scholar's Gaze* (2019), a single profile portrait of the art historian and critic Jack Flam, the portraits are frontal busts.

Nickson again shows what he can do with color. But these are not the vibrantly fired up and blatantly bright hues of the beach scenes. Facial angles and features and the dimpling of flesh and tresses of hair are rendered in myriad patches, flecks, and strip of mottled hues. Overlays of more restrained color tonalities are orchestrated in skin tones with lavenders, grays, and blues. One can discern experiments with abstracted color (often black), backgrounds that frame, offset and anchor the portrait within the given format. It is fascinating and immensely satisfying in these cultural and political times to see and study portraits that are so somber, thoughtful and reflective. It is a welcome antidote to current loud and flagrant shouting, hyped-up posing, and pretenses.

## **Contributor**

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Aimée Brown Price is an art historian, teacher (Caltech among others); lecturer, author (*Pierre Puvis de Chavannes* [Yale University Press, 2010], contributor to periodicals including the *Art Bulletin*, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, *Art in America*; sometime guest curator (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; Bunkamura and Shimane Museums, Japan), and critic.