

Fifteen

Using traditional materials and methods that link her to earlier portrait artists, Emma Stroude has become this year's Ireland-U.S. Council/*Irish Arts Review* Portraiture Award winner, writes **Angela Griffith**

Some of the most compelling and enduring examples of Western art are portraits of young women. We attempt to understand those represented, knowing that, in the main, they faced a future that was predetermined by others. Within patriarchal societies, the role of women is primarily one of service. They act as nurturers, carers, spouses, lovers, political pawns, objects of desire and muses. The faces rendered in masterworks such as Petrus Christus' *Portrait of a Young Girl* (c. 1470), Leonardo da Vinci's *Ginevra de' Benci* (1470s) and Vermeer's *Study of a Young Woman* (c. 1665), painted some 200 hundred years after the aforementioned Renaissance masters, are remarkable in a manner that transcends time. We are drawn to their stoical veneers, their poise and maturing beauty. Yet a childlike vulnerability remains, which reminds us of their humanity.

Emma Stroude's portrait, titled *Fifteen*, hangs as part of the Royal Hibernian Academy's 191st Annual Exhibition. The image is of Stroude's youngest daughter, Caoimhe Davidson.

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It is one of a series of works that has traced the sitter's development from a child to a young adult. As an artist, Stroude uses traditional materials and methods that link her to earlier portrait artists. She is also aware that her image may be viewed within the wider historical and social contexts of female portraiture. Stroude is not daunted by this, but rather sees her work as part of an artistic conversation that spans generations but remains germane to how we present and see ourselves today.

The painting is small – it is less than 30 cm high. It is in keeping with a tradition of domestic-scaled portraits, firstly created for middle-class homes. These early works were projections of personal achievement, of the family's position in society or of how they wanted society to see them. While some portraits retain this function today, either in a civic or domestic context, Stroude's work, given its subject matter,

is much more personal. Working on a small scale demands an intense level of concentration, almost to the point that size is no longer a concern. The power of small work was brought home to the artist when she saw Rembrandt's *The Laughing Man* (c. 1630) in The Hague's Mauritshuis. Belying its mere 15 cm height, its painterly vivacity created its own monumentality, as echoed in *Fifteen*.

While Stroude does not describe herself as a portrait painter, she first began painting her daughter's portrait when the latter was eleven years old. Other paintings were made when her daughter was twelve and thirteen, and each is titled according to the sitter's age. The numbers mark a progression in terms of stages of development, but they also dictate the viewer's response, determined by the viewer's own life experience and their expectations. The first paintings in the series were based on a collection of play fashion photographs taken by the sitter's elder sister, Evelyn Davidson. Stroude was drawn to Caoimhe acting as a fashion model, her youthful, carefree abandon. The resulting painted images are to some extent more distant from the sitter, as they are viewed through the lens of roleplay.

However, *Fifteen*, the next in the series, marks a new departure. Here Stroude has taken the photographs herself. Her daughter is not pretending or acting. She is herself.

The fact that the painter is the sitter's mother is significant in the sense that she feels a responsibility to her daughter. This is a work of loving carefulness and respectfulness. The sitter is of a generation that proliferates digital platforms with 'selfie' portraits. These are knowing constructs; they are controlled and manipulated by the subject, who is the maker. Few of us would be comfortable with unfiltered scrutiny. Nonfamilial sitters must find a way to trust the artist, to become familiar with their gaze, directly or through a lens. Here this is not a concern. The artist, in turn, while informed by her close personal knowledge of the subject, has particular personal challenges. Apart from the aspiration to meet her own and her daughter's expectations, she must confront the transitioning of her offspring from a dependent child to an increasingly independent adult, and the nature of their evolving relationship.



Stroude describes her process as allowing the subject to find its painted form. From taking and selecting the initial photographs to working up a series of drawings from her photographic sources and then transferring the drawings to canvas, each stage is a journey of discovery. The act of translation from the machine-made photographic image to the hand-painted is one composed of choices. She allows the image to reveal itself, responding to any vagaries embedded within the process. She does not paint lines directly. Instead, Stroude applies oil paint in a series of layers, each one manipulated with turpentine; forms are defined by pushing paint to the edges. She uses the process of tonking, named after British artist and Slade painting master Henry Tonks (1862–1937), where absorbent paper

or cloth is placed on wet paint and pulled away. She takes her time, leaving the work for extended periods, then revisiting it. Stroude is in search of a presence. As an artist, she has to decide whether to work with or against the painted surface. She has to find a balance, an agreement that serves her creative ambitions and the painting's final appearance. Stroude's painting methods are an apt and beguiling metaphor for the painting's subject matter. *Fifteen* represents an artist and her daughter who are learning more about themselves and their relationship, and asks how they will both navigate the future that lies before them. ■

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1 EMMA STROUDE, *FIFTEEN* 2021 oil on canvas 29 x 24cm