

**LUMINARY DRAWINGS:
PORTRAITS OF FILM DIRECTORS
BY NINA MAE FOWLER**

by Tanya Bentley
Assistant Curator

FOR THE GALLERY'S most recent commission, London-born artist Nina Mae Fowler (b.1981) travelled the country capturing on film, and then in charcoal, a number of leading film directors. The group of portraits fulfils a long-term ambition for the Gallery to help strengthen its representation of the film industry in the UK today. I interviewed Nina to find out more about the unique concept for the commission and her experience of meeting some of these cinematic luminaries.

TB: How familiar were you with the Gallery before you were commissioned for the Film Directors series?

NMF: I was a regular visitor to the Gallery from a young age – not only to the permanent and temporary exhibitions but also to see the *BP Portrait Award*. Allen Jones's portrait of Darcey Bussell had a resounding effect on me. I wondered how you could make a successful portrait of someone while also making a stand-alone work of art. In 2008, my painting of the ballet dancer Carlos Acosta was shortlisted for the *BP Portrait Award*. This was a particularly special year as Craig Wylie, now my husband, won First Prize and it was really the beginning of our relationship.

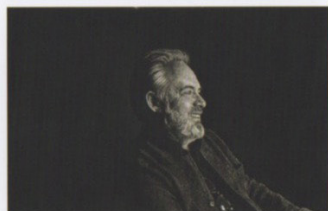
Tell me about the concept behind the commission. Why did you choose this approach?

Initially I planned a large-scale drawing that would incorporate all the sitters in one

BELOW TOP
(01:44:48) Sally Potter
by Nina Mae Fowler, 2019
(NPG 7067)
© National Portrait Gallery.
Photographed by Douglas Atfield



BELOW BOTTOM
(39:44:02) Sam Mendes
by Nina Mae Fowler, 2019
(NPG 7070)
© National Portrait Gallery.
Photographed by Douglas Atfield



composition. However, I soon realised the complexities of placing all these incredible talents together in a group composition. Instead, I decided on individual portraits where the sitter could exist in their own space, but the series would also work together. I realised I might have only thirty minutes with some of them because of their busy schedules. Having never met them before, how could I get some idea of their personality in such a brief time? This led me to think about the cinema experience: perhaps I

**Luminary Drawings:
Portraits of Film Directors by Nina Mae Fowler**
From 12 April 2019
Room 32
Admission free

BELOW
(01:40:25) Amma Asante
by Nina Mae Fowler, 2019
(NPG 7069)
© National Portrait Gallery.
Photographed by Douglas Atfield

could capture them all in that moment of suspended consciousness. I designed a small, self-contained portable cinema, which I could take to them. My only requirements would be a film of their choice (something of real significance to them), two or three square metres of floor space and a darkened room. I envisaged the final series appearing as if they were all seated in an auditorium.

Did the directors take to the idea?

Once they entered the room they were intrigued by the scenario: a director's chair, a short-throw projector, a screen and a table with popcorn, chocolate, coffee liqueur and other treats! I explained that I would be filming them watching their film choice and

all they had to do was enjoy. The beauty of these sittings was twofold – first, they lost any sense of being watched or portrayed, as they were too engrossed in the film, and secondly, we experienced the film together, which created conversation, laughter and an immediate bond between strangers.

Did any of the sittings in particular stand out for you?

Every sitting was truly a pleasure and a privilege. I kept thinking how amazing it was that one person had this opportunity to sit and watch nine films in the company of the world's leading film directors. Meeting Sir Ridley Scott for the first time was daunting, but he immediately put me at ease by talking



about his favourite painters and his own painting practice. Travelling to the studios of Aardman Animations in Bristol to meet Nick Park was also a particularly special moment. When Wallace and Gromit's *A Grand Day Out* came out in 1989, I was eight years old and it inspired me to make similar plasticine models. My parents bought me a video camera and this led to multiple endeavours in stop-frame animation! Both Ridley and Nick chose films that would be in my top ten, too.

Could you tell me about your process of working up the drawings?

I spent days watching the films of the directors and going through the photographs and sketches. I watched them frame by frame, extracting every possible still for a potential portrait. This is how I usually go about making my work, so it was great to be able to tie in my practice with the commission. The hardest part of this project was choosing which frame to use for the final drawing.

Each of the drawings conveys such different emotions. Were you surprised by the directors' reactions to their film choices?

I hadn't expected them to approach the sittings in such different ways. Sally Potter based her choice of film on how she would react. It felt more like a collaborative process, as she had considered the concept behind the sitting. Other directors such as Amma Asante

chose films laced with nostalgia, recounting the first time they saw the film and what it had meant to them. Sam Mendes chose a film that made him laugh out loud. He also knew the script word for word and I enjoyed listening to him recite the lines before the actors did! Nick Park hadn't seen his choice for many years but was fascinated by its structure. As the movie played, he taught me about film theory and the basic rhythm of a successful script. Ridley Scott cited the scene in his film choice that was a turning point for him and his relationship to cinema, so I aimed to capture a moment of revelation in his portrait.

Why have you chosen not to reveal the directors' film choices?

My favourite portraits are those in which there is an element of mystery between the sitter and the artist. When you stand in front of Manet's paintings of Victorine Meurent, for example, her gaze is such that you put yourself in his position, wondering what their relationship entailed, what they talked about and how long they spent in each other's company. There is something very intimate about a portrait sitting and I wanted to keep some element of this shared moment private. I also want the viewer to wonder what film the directors are watching and to seek the answers in their faces. The only clues the viewer has are their reactions, the exact frame (documented in the titles) and the light thrown on them by the films themselves.