

Pictures of You

Empowering and representing people with disabilities through art.

John Brookes

John is a Mensan living in the ACT. He challenges disability stereotypes in the media and public through the arts, moving people with disabilities from subjects to active agents in art.

In February 2020 I wrote a piece in *TableAus* called ‘The Wizard, the Professor and the Jellyfish’—about a collaboration on my portrait with artist Professor John Hyatt. It related when I was seriously ill due to a virus contracted volunteering in Fiji.

I am glad to say I am still around and intend to remain so! The kernel of the idea around the portrait process ended up blooming into an exhibition in my adopted hometown of Canberra. I wanted to share it as the individuals involved are truly remarkable people who have certainly inspired myself. The exhibition, ‘Pictures of You’, is a project I created at the Generator Gallery, Belconnen Arts Centre, ACT.

Have you ever tried to explain what it is to be YOU? To a friend, a partner, your family, a professional—even to yourself? Now, imagine having a disability: the prejudices that come with that, and the challenges of engaging people to look beyond the disability to the whole of your personality.

An image, a single depiction of mood, hopes, fears, strengths and personality, can say so much more than words. Imagine having an image that is YOU, that sums up who and what you are, a source of pride that you can keep and display and say ‘this is me’.

This is the focus of ‘Pictures of You’, exploring unique self-portrayals of people with experience of physical and mental health disabilities—collaborating as equals with a professional photographer to produce a portrait reflecting the whole person—a process that had surprising and inspirational results—both for the subjects and the artist.



Bruno Cirillo.



Melissa Hammond.

These are the people—

Bruno Cirillo

Bruno: I was born in Italy and moved to Geelong, Melbourne as a child. I come from a tight-knit loving family. My family has always been very supportive of me, especially my sister Maria and niece Rosetta. I attended the Koomarri School and then worked for them for 44 years, retiring this year. I love Elvis, ABBA as well as singing and playing the guitar. I love to do art and being around animals, playing games, watching old TV shows and cartoons. My favourite thing to wear is high-vis work wear. I had a fantastic time working with John. I would have been happy to pose and perform for him all day and was sad when he left. I love the photos and have covered my bedroom wall with them.

John: When Bruno and I first met he wanted to show me his love of Elvis Presley. He loves singing the songs and dressing up as Elvis. I thought about photographing him dressed up as Elvis with the wig, the glasses, cloak and the microphone. We did get some lovely portraits of him, but it became more about the character, not Bruno. One of the carers, Amanda, helped him put on his suit and as soon as he was dressed, I realised this was Bruno. Dressed, with dignity, with his guitar, singing Elvis and looking wonderful. It means so much to me to be able to portray Bruno with love, respect and dignity.

Melissa Hammond

Melissa: Do you see what I see? A person in pain? A person who struggled to get dressed and do their hair that day? A person calculating what they will have to give up in their week to recover from this? My battle is not only with my body, it's the part of me you can't see. In 2015 I was involved in a car accident. I was left with the invisible disability called chronic pain and became homeless, couch-surfing to get by. You could think for a moment that I'm lying but the truth is, being questioned whether I am is just another way having this invisible disability hurts me. I don't share my disability as an excuse or to get out of things, I share it to explain the barriers I am facing; hoping to be understood, supported and accepted as I am.

John: Melissa and I created this portrait after a long discussion about invisible disability and homelessness. Melissa lives



William (Glenn) Doig.



Eleanor Waight.

with chronic and debilitating pain. Her outward appearance looks 'normal', though that word should never be used! Because of her disability she has experienced homelessness, hence using the couch. Her pose reflects the two forms of human nature that intrigue me: irony and contradiction. She sits by the roadside, dressed to the nines with the sun on her face, resilient and calm. The mirror reflects a different point of view. One cannot assume that just because a person does not have an obvious problem that they are well and able. It is fluid. I

wanted to show Melissa's beauty and resilience against adversity. The backdrop is a home that has been vacant for a couple of decades, hence the irony.

William (Glenn) Doig

Glenn: I was born on a 1,100-acre farm in Lockhart, NSW, with my Mum, Dad and four siblings. It was a mud brick house over 118 years old. I loved growing up on the farm and was very rarely clean! It was a great teacher to me in adapting and overcoming struggles, especially with my cerebral palsy. I



Arto Levonpera.

achieved a Diploma in Computing at Charles Sturt University, and then moved to Canberra to work at the Bureau of Statistics. I have been part of a church group for a long time and through this group I met my beautiful wife Sharon.

I love to talk about my childhood and family. I am pictured holding photos—I love to share them and tell the stories behind them. I am interested in science and natural wonders, and enjoy the comic *Footrot Flats*, and *The Muppets*, created by Jim Henson. I love sharing these with people through YouTube. I found John very interesting and really enjoyed talking with him. I was very impressed that he made me look so good in the photos!

John: Glenn and I met a few weeks before we did the portrait. We talked about his wife, his condition, his photos, and what I did. His wife has also been doing a photography course. He spoke about his faith and how important it is to him; it is how he met his wife. Glenn's smile is infectious as is his wonderful positivity. The day I photographed him it looked like it was going to rain, and he told me that he loved the sound of the rain on the tin roof. I watched him sitting very happily and contentedly outside and felt it was only appropriate that I photograph him in the front yard of his home.

Eleanor Waight

Eleanor: I am an emerging artist with low vision, dabbling in a variety of media. I have always had a creative leaning—music, writing or art. I wanted to capture me as I am now, particularly following a period of personal hardship, including COVID-19. John and I had a good rapport and I felt comfortable. I even came up with my own pose, indicative of how comfortable I became. The poses where my cane leaned against the sculpture were particularly powerful. I didn't want to be portrayed as a sad figure. I wanted people to see me as I am, and I really liked the end result. There is a tendency for people to see the white cane before they really see the person, which is a shame. I like the way it shows me looking forward with a certain sense of anticipation. I think what surprised me was my own presence as the focus of the portrait.

John: Eleanor and I met at the NGA Sculpture Gardens, as she is a creative individual. I wanted to make a strong, positive portrait of Eleanor as she was previously a runner and had lost weight. It was important to me to use her cane in the image, to make the viewer question what it was. As an able-bodied person I have learned much about disability when photographing for the exhibition. Eleanor and I had a lovely chat about life, family, relationships and work. I felt that even though there are many differences in our lives there are far more similarities. I really enjoyed the

time together making her portrait. Choosing the portrait was interesting as photographically at first, I preferred a different image, but in the end we agreed on the chosen image easily.

Arto Levonpera

Arto: I was born in Finland and came to Melbourne with my mum, dad, sister and brother when I was seven. I studied computing at school and went on to become a programmer which I enjoyed immensely. Despite suffering a stroke due to a brain tumour, I still have a love of computing along with science, engineering and space. I enjoy watching shows and documentaries on these subjects—particularly anything involving Professor Brian Cox. I love to talk about my Finnish heritage—which is where my love of beetroot comes from! I really enjoyed that John sat with me before the photo shoot and that we were able to have a chat and get to know each other. I loved having my photo taken and was smiling more than I have in a long time.

John: I sat down and enjoyed a cup of tea with Arto before photographing him. I learned of his love of the planets and stars, Brian Cox, robotics and that he was currently reading a book called *Autonomy*. The book discusses self-driving cars, but it is poignant that the word autonomy is part of his portrait, as his life requires much help and care. I loved that he had a twinkle in his eye and I enjoyed his quips. I photographed him in his chair at home.

Rebus Theatre cast: Edward Menzies, Leanne Shutt, Josh Rose, Carol Jayne McManus, Stephen Perkins, Sam Floyd, Zoe Trevorrow, Megumi Kawada

Rebus Theatre's bold new work *Utopiate* was performed at Belco Arts Theatre in November 2022. The cast-devised show explored the experiences, challenges and voices of the mixed-ability cast through a fictional intergalactic sci-fi odyssey.

"This is the first time I have been part of writing a play, there is a bit of all of us in it. It is an empowering, fascinating journey. We support and encourage our diversity and quirkiness. It is a safe space allowing us to explore ourselves, our feelings and how we engage in life on this planet. It has helped me find myself, my voice, communicate, and explore my



The Rebus Theatre *Utopia* cast.

creativity. It opened my mind to new ways and possibilities. Theatre is therapeutic.’—**Leanne Shutt, cast member.**

‘It’s been an honour to direct this incredible, insightful bunch of humans. They shared openly and honestly, supporting each other in the creation of the story. They are a theatre ensemble in the truest sense of the phrase.’—**Ben Drysdale, Rebus Theatre Creative Producer and Co-director of *Utopiate* with Co-director Sammy Moynihan.**

John: When I attended the Rebus Theatre rehearsals I was warmly welcomed. Ben Drysdale told me that many people see theatre performed by people with disability as just a hobby and ‘activity’. We felt it necessary to show that these actors are very talented at their craft, and that not all emotion is happy. We photographed the group going through an exercise where they were expressing an increasing amount of pain. The expression was visual and verbal. It was a powerful thing to observe and photograph. ■

John Brookes has over 25 years in arts marketing in the public, government, commercial and disability charity sectors across the UK, Fiji and Australia. As a photographer he has worked for the London Police, Royal National Institute of the Blind, Fiji Paralympic Team and Fair Canberra, as well as exhibiting locally since emigrating 10 years ago. He previously won the Mensa British Photographer of the Year award and worked with the Spinal Injuries Association of Fiji following Hurricane Winston, documenting relief efforts.



In 2017 John created Canberry Communications, a Canberra-based voluntary organisation supporting and advocating for disenfranchised communities including those with lived experience of mental and/or physical disability, refugees and asylum seekers, those with addiction issues and those experiencing homelessness. He has provided voluntary marketing support to Fair Canberra, ACT Mental Health Network, and Perinatal Wellness Centre among others.

He has tutored individuals experiencing disability or challenges to their social and emotional wellbeing, in basic photography.

He does this through developing arts projects and promotional plans for free for small charities who may not otherwise be able to implement them. John believes in giving a voice to individuals, to people telling their stories in unique and thought-provoking ways - looking beyond the ‘issue’ to the whole person.

Reminder: @mensa.org.au emails will be discontinued on 30 June 2023

Australian Mensa is upgrading its email services to Microsoft 365. As part of this work, we are discontinuing the @mensa.org.au emails on 30 June 2023. We are offering from 1 January 2023, on request, @member.mensa.org.au emails.

One of the benefits of being a current member of Australian Mensa is the free access to a ‘Mensa vanity email’. This is not an actual email account; it is an email redirection service: any email sent to the ‘your.name@member.mensa.org.au’ address will be forwarded to your private email address as registered in the database.

Members who had previously registered a ‘your.name@mensa.org.au’ email forward will need to apply to a new ‘your.name@member.mensa.org.au’ email before 30 June 2023. The old vanity emails will be discontinued on that date.

Please go to our website <https://www.mensa.org.au/member-centre/mensa-email-application> to apply for the new email.

Jean-Marc Genesi
Chairman ■

Mensa International Competitions, 2023

Mensa holds two international competitions each year and all members in good standing from anywhere in the world are welcome to enter with no entry fee.

The first of these is the search for the Mensa International Photographer of the Year 2023, and the second is the Mensa International Poetry Competition, 2023.

Check the mensa.org website for rules and dates, or (if concerning the Poetry Competition), write to the poetry coordinator Kate Nacard at katenacard1@gmail.com. ■