

# The Blush Upon Her Cheek

## AN ESSAY BY MILLEN BROWN-EWENS

When Charles II returned to England and ascended the throne in 1660, following nine years of Puritanical rule under Oliver Cromwell, a libertine age commenced. The new King introduced the pleasure-seeking proclivities, exuberance and licentiousness of the French Court within which he had spent considerable time, famously replicating public recognition of mistresses. In a marked departure from the previous government's approach to marriage, Charles II openly flaunted his affairs with many women and is thought to have acknowledged up to nineteen illegitimate children. This social paradigm shift evoked an intense preoccupation with the sexual 'nature' of women amongst the upper echelons of seventeenth century society; an indulgence masked as a quasi-intellectual engagement with the *querelle des femmes* (woman question). Over time, a new aesthetic economy emerged, within which a woman's beauty was eulogised, and became an asset that she could mobilise to accrue wealth, prestige and power.

Amongst this climate of aesthetic obsession, portraiture became a political vehicle harnessed by individuals to canonise themselves as paragons of courtly grace. This is perhaps best exemplified by Peter Lely's *Windsor Beauties* (1660s), a series of eleven portraits commissioned by Anne Hyde, Duchess of York in an attempt to consolidate her power. Currently on display at Hampton Court Palace, the series features depictions of mistresses to the King and his confidants, Anne and the women closest to her - each intended as an alluring vision of perfection. When Samuel Pepys first witnessed the *Windsor Beauties* in 1668, he described them as, "good, but not like" alluding to Anne Hyde's instruction for Lely to tend towards flattery. Indeed, across the series there is a remarkable resemblance between the sitters: each possesses a similar sleepy-eyed, seductive air that was likely modelled after Barbara Villiers, the fourth of the beauties and one of two confirmed mistresses to the King pictured. She was heralded at the time for her heavy-lidded almond eyes, swathes of chestnut hair and elongated *décolletage*.

During Charles II's reign, physical beauty became synonymous with inner-moral-virtue: perhaps a further motivation for Anna Hyde's commissioning of the series. In Italy, they adopted the phrase *belle e buono* (beautiful and virtuous) to reflect the belief that external beauty is associated with exemplary inner qualities subsequently manufacturing idols and packaging the concept of beauty as currency. The seventeenth century also saw the proliferation of the use of cosmetics to enhance one's appearance, yet the application of rouge or blush was fraught territory. A natural flush to a woman's face was prized as a sign of virginity and modesty, while blush used in imitation was regarded as deceitful and associated with the salacious women of the theatre and bordellos.

Within this context, Peter Lely's *Windsor Beauties* take on complex significances. Encased within Anne Hyde's commissioning of the series is the assumption that beauty is synonymous with power, a reality for women of the Restoration Court. Furthermore, to be prized as beautiful in the seventeenth century, was also to be considered pure of heart. As such, to falsify one's appearance through the use of cosmetics was to lie of one's character.

Much like today, the vision of perfection that the Windsor Beauties portray is deliberately manipulated; they are predicated on a societal beauty-standard that is intrinsically unattainable. As it was then, so it is now - beauty is presented as an impossible paradigm, to be upheld and pursued in vain.

It is upon this thematic underpinning that STUDIO WEST's group exhibition is built. Titled *The Blush Upon Her Cheek* after a line from the *Memoirs of Count Grammont* (1712) in which Windsor Beauty Mary Bagot, Countess of Falmouth and Dorset, is described as having, "an involuntary blush almost continually upon her cheek without having anything to blush for", the exhibition makes immediate reference to the complicated nature of beauty in the seventeenth century. Drawing together delicate, sumptuous, and subtle pieces, spanning sculpture and painting, *The Blush Upon Her Cheek* examines the tension inherent in the cultivation and appreciation of beauty both then and now. Works by Florence Reekie, Ki Yoong and Leo Costelloe unravel themes of identity, empowerment and adornment, filling a lacuna of artistic engagement with the Windsor Beauties that extends beyond their presupposed superficiality.

Florence Reekie foregrounds the lusciousness and formal qualities of drapery, through her masterful painterly portraits of velvet and silk. Lifting fabric from its primary role as adorer – as in Lely's portraits of the Windsor Beauties – Reekie's work can be understood as a metaphor for the very fabric of Restoration Court society, namely its infatuation with superfluous and abundant beauty. By titling her pieces with phrases borrowed from cosmetic products such as *Even Toned* and *Flawless*, Reekie situates her canvases within the contemporary beauty-industrial-complex, alluding to the manifold modes of self-fashioning that permeate image culture, while further underlining her work's relationship with the desire for aesthetic perfection at play in Lely's portraits. Yet, through her clever use of recycled fabrics as canvases, completed with seams, marks and stains, Reekie also coyly undercuts this narrative. Her paintings' inability to attain perfection mirrors the deliberate unattainability of societal beauty standards. Her adroit use of chiaroscuro, meanwhile, infuses her works with a unique sense of movement and light; creases and folds subtly reference the relationship between the body and the clothing that adorns us, drawing attention to fabrics as the soft armours that contain us as we go forth into the world.

Leo Costelloe navigates the liminal space between functional jewellery and sculpture, creating curiously coquettish pieces that explore the communication of identity. Speaking to gender-based assumptions and their relationship with beauty, Costelloe takes an animistic approach to objects, subverting traditionally feminine motifs such as silk bows through the use of solid materials. A bow made from glass, for example, speaks to the presumptive association between fragility and femininity; it is delicate yet rigid, reflective but sharp. The artist's glass comb embellished with upcycled fur, meanwhile, particularly recalls Lely's inclusion of allegorical accessories in the Windsor Beauties: Frances Stuart's archery bow for example, an expression of chastity or Jane Needham's overflowing cornucopia emblematic of abundance. In this way, Costelloe's work speaks of an individual's adornment or enhancement as a route to presenting or concealing their identity within an image-based economy of beauty.

Ki Yoong's tender, closely cropped portraits, meanwhile, exist in direct conversation with Lely's Windsor Beauties, almost as a revision for the contemporary moment. Focusing solely on the face of the individual pictured, Yoong creates intimate and delicately rendered pieces that immediately draw the viewer in. Like Yoong, Lely painted only the faces of his sitters (leaving his studio to do the rest), perhaps due to a consensus among the artists that the face is the primary conduit for emotion and identity. Like Lely's portraits, Yoong's figures are uniquely luminous. Bathed in an amber-hued glow, they appear alive, vital and welcoming, as if they are emitting their own soft internal light. Yet the two are unlike in their commitment to virtuosity; while Lely's figures are idealised and generic, Yoong passionately seeks to capture the unique beauty contained within every individual. Across Yoong's eleven portraits displayed at STUDIO WEST, mirroring the number of Windsor Beauties, we are therefore offered a new vision of beauty, one that feels representative, real, and yet equally present within all.

#### ABOUT MILLEN BROWN-EWENS

Millen Brown-Ewens (b.1998) is a freelance writer based in London. Her work focuses on visual art and culture as well as music and has been featured in award-winning publications including AnOther Magazine, Blind, DAZED, i-D, HUCK, Plinth, The Quietus and more.