

BP Portrait Award 2018 Winner: Afternoon tea or Last Supper?

BP Portrait Award 2018 at the National Portrait Gallery, 14th June to 23rd September 2018

One of the great pleasures of the BP Portrait Award that has just opened at the National Portrait Gallery is that it sparks debate. Everyone has their favourite entries. Sometimes these personal favourites match the portraits judged to be prize winners and sometimes they don't. So I've decided to write two articles about this year's show. This one will take a detailed look at the painting awarded first prize, *An Angel at my Table* by Miriam Escofet, which I think is a worthy winner but also a painting with a hidden narrative that has so far gone unremarked (even by the painter herself). The second article will be about the other prize-winners and my pick of the remaining entries for the award.

An Angel at my Table is a painting of the artist's mother taking afternoon tea, mundane at first glance but so expertly rendered that the painting is a worthy winner of the £35,000 first prize and a future £7,000 commission. We the viewers appear to be seated opposite a silver-haired elderly lady wearing a white silk, pleat-fronted blouse with ruched sleeves. Between us, the table has been set for afternoon tea. The tea pot, milk jug, sugar bowl and plates are white china; this is the best tea service only used for special occasions. The elderly lady appears poised and elegant, but is looking away from us, momentarily distracted.



An Angel At My Table by Miriam Escofet © Miriam Escofet

The careful composition of the painting emphasises stillness and inner calm. Miriam Escofet has positioned her mother as the centre of the pictorial space and arranged the crockery so that the picture's vanishing point is contained in the sitter. The colour palette is constrained too, with Escofet manipulating 'the light and whites' in the painting so that the only note of colour is coming from her mother's skin. Rightly the judges have praised the painting's restraint and intimacy, and its successful expression of the idea of the Universal Mother.

But all is not what it seems. There are clues that something else is going on. The little statuette on the right-hand side of the painting is blurred and appears in motion. The plate beside this has a double image, and the spoon in the sugar bowl has a shadowy second presence. My hunch is that there is a narrative to this painting yet to be explored that might explain these dimensional slips. I'll work these clues through and see if you agree with me on what this something else might be.

Take the elderly lady seated opposite us. She could be looking away, her attention caught by a passing thought. Or, she could be looking at something off canvas to the right of the painting, her expression one of calm resignation, even expectation.

And her white silk blouse could be just that. Or, it could be an old-fashioned formal nightgown. We might be sitting down to afternoon tea but our hostess is dressed for the end of the day.



Detail from *An Angel At My Table* by Miriam Escofet © Miriam Escofet

The alignment of the crockery does indeed produce a vanishing point contained in the elderly lady. But much of the crockery also points to the statuette; the spout of the tea pot points that way as does the milk jug and the spoon lying on the table. Curiously, the shadowy second image of the spoon in the sugar bowl has shifted sides as if attracted by the statuette. Even our hostess appears to be acknowledging the statuette's presence, her right index finger pointing towards it across the table.



Detail from *An Angel At My Table* by Miriam Escofet © Miriam Escofet

What's more, the little statuette itself is blurred as if in motion, and its arrival on the table has disturbed the tea plate next to it, making the plate jump and develop a second indistinct image.

The statuette is significant then. Is this the 'angel' in the painting's title? Well, no, not really; the little statue is the Winged Victory of Samothrace, otherwise known as the goddess Nike. This masterpiece of 2nd century Hellenic art originally commemorated a great naval victory and was displayed in a dedicated sanctuary. Designed to be seen three quarters from the left – as she is in the painting – and sculpted as if alighting on the prow of a ship – as she is materialising on the table – Nike's right hand would originally have been raised to her mouth delivering news of the victory while her left hand would have been open in greeting. She is an angel in the sense that 'angelos' is the Greek for messenger but which victory is Nike announcing? And greetings from whom?

And in any case, if the statuette of Nike is the angel in the painting, the painting's title would be *An Angel on my Table*. As the title is *An Angel at my Table*, the angel has to be one of those taking tea. It's unlikely to refer to us the viewers and I suppose it's possible to think of the old lady metaphorically as an angel. But the final clue is the position of the only other cup on the table which set for a third guest off the canvas to the right.



Detail from *An Angel At My Table* by Miriam Escofet © Miriam Escofet

This painting is then as much about a Last Supper as about afternoon tea. The elderly lady - and apologies here to the artist's mother for such a gloomy reading of her portrait – is facing the end of her life. The Angel of Death is sitting at the table off canvas to the right, and he has sent Nike as his messenger to announce his presence and claim his victory in the battle that we all must lose; the victory of death over life. The old lady is ready for the Angel of Death though – she is dressed for the end of her days, has hosted a final afternoon tea, and looks at him with calm resignation and acceptance.

So yes, the painting is 'a sensitive depiction of an elderly sitter' as the judges have remarked, notable for its constraint, composition and planning. And yes too, it's about the idea of 'Universal Motherhood' as the artist has commented. But to my eye, there's an underlying narrative to this painting, so far unremarked but every bit as universal as Motherhood. It's about life and death and facing the mortality of our loved ones. And the presence of this parallel narrative quietly embedded into the apparently mundane act of taking afternoon tea is yet another reason why *An Angel at my Table* by Miriam Escofet is worthy of the first prize.

Published: BP Portrait Award 2018 at the National Portrait Gallery, London Student

Date published: 11th July 2018

URL: <http://londonstudent.coop/bp-portrait-award-2018-at-the-national-portrait-gallery/>