

# Meg Porteous:

## Germinal centre

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### Can't see my ears

Mum told me I can never see my ears without a mirror and it's caused me some distress. It's not so much that I want or need to see my ears: I know that they exist and I know that, for all intents and purposes, seeing them in the mirror is as good as seeing them for real. I can look at them in the mirror and I do so regularly. The reason for my anxiety is this: I'm now hyper-aware of how mediated my vision of myself is—I'll only ever see an exact mirror reverse of my own face and body. Does this make a difference? It might. We read books left to right. Maybe we read people that way, too. Maybe that's why I look odd in photos, because I'm used to reading my face from right to left, rather than left to right like everyone else.

The 'not seeing' thing isn't limited to ears, anyway. The same applies to my entire head, except my nose and eye sockets, which frame my vision like the chyron on a news broadcast. I can see my hair too but strictly speaking, that isn't a part of my body, though it is attached. Hair is more of an adornment, really. I'll never see my back either, or neck, or anus. Also never seen directly: heart, lungs, throat, stomach. In any case, 'seeing directly' is a misnomer. 'To see' is to receive the light that an object reflects—something to do with texture, physics.

I'm not sure whether everyone can see their eye sockets like me. I'm lucky in that respect. I got my eye sockets from Dad. His are like postholes. Grandpa's, too. It's a family trait. People do say that I have deep-set eyes, but they don't freak out over them like they do with Dad's. Mine are shallower, smoothed out by Mum's genes. I got his big noggin, though.

When I used to draw my parents I always represented Dad with a long oblong head. Mum's head was a circle. Like Bert and Ernie. Sort of a phallic/ynic thing. Dad's head was so big his hair would brush the roof of the car while he was driving. On car trips I'd watch it lightly teasing the roof from the back seat. I always aspired to that, wanted a big head like him.

When I was five Mum went through a brief phase of making papier-mâché heads. Her most famous construction was Wilbur. The other heads disappeared, but Wilbur remains. He forms a part of the eternal clutter that gathers in little drifts around the house, impossible to throw away. Every few years someone brings him out to scare the shit out of someone else. Wilbur is pumpkin-shaped with rosy cheeks and shiny pink skin. He clenches a cigar in his thick lips. His nose is wide and flat with cavernous nostrils. His sparse hair is made from brown twine. Mum punched holes through the skull, tied off the twine with little knots inside. The scary thing about his face are the eye holes. Despite the care with which Mum had fashioned his rotund cheekbones and gorgeous,

outward-turned lips, his eye holes were roughly cut with a Stanley knife. Over time they have become flayed and tatty. The world outside the head is visible through these two rough-hewn apertures. And inside the head many strips of newspaper are visible, unpainted. It smells of paper and glue, and mothballs, like a wardrobe. The neck hole is only just big enough to fit over my head, folding my ears over as it passes. Once inside, the sound of the world becomes muffled and you hear your own breathing magnified.

Mum came to school and showed my class how to draw faces. She showed us how to draw an oval, then bisect it with scaffolding lines on which to hang the eyes and nose and mouth. She explained how the eyes are actually about halfway down the head, but people untrained in drawing faces tend to put them near the top, as our brains have a tendency to subtract the forehead and hair, so concerned we are about the face itself that we do not see the head for its constituent parts. We draw the nose and lips and eyes with hard lined edges, rather than perceiving the unbroken topography that forms a triangle of subtle shade between the corner of the eye, down the side of the nose, up to the cheekbone and out to the ear.

I spend an inordinate amount of time in front of the mirror touching my ears, twisting and folding them up into little parcels, releasing them, watching them spring back into shape. Sometimes I pretend my tongue is a small, fearful animal. I dissociate, and make it sneak out through my lips in little creeping motions, retracting suddenly if it senses danger. I turn my eyelids inside out, exposing the pink insides of my face, stick my fingers up my nose, pull bits of hair out, stretch my mouth, turn my cheeks outward, press my fingers hard against my skin and watch the blood rush back and colour return. If I press my face against the mirror and stare myself in the eye for long enough, I get the terrifying sensation that I'm being watched, or worse still, that there isn't anybody there. These manipulations provide only momentary distraction from my distress, however. I pace in the garden, stooped, hands clasped behind my back, deep in thought. My ears remain unseen.

Fergus Porteous



Meg Porteous, *World outside head* (cc Mary Porteous), 2020, courtesy of the artist.

Germinal centre can be viewed on billboards at the corner of Devon and Liardet Streets, New Plymouth Central and at 600 Devon Street East, Fitzroy; and on posters on St Aubyn Street, King Street, Brougham Street and Liardet Street.

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