

Gary Freemantle

b.1962

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Gary Freemantle's recent work has been in the centuries-old painting genres of portraiture and landscape. To create fresh images he blows away the cobwebs and moves the furniture round. *Smoke* is a portrait of Freemantle's friend, the artist John Baxter. Dressed in his father's tuxedo (New Zealand poet James K. Baxter), Baxter looks off into the distance. The shape of his face, the turn of his head, the nonchalant pose with cigarette and even something about the reflections from his highly polished shoe, bring to mind a contemporary vampire contemplating the dawn.

Smoke is from a larger series of paintings called *Velvet Nightmares* which Freemantle painted in 2006, using friends and acquaintances as models. Each person is posed in sombre clothing against an unlit background. This focuses your attention on their faces and their hands. It makes you wonder about expression and gesture. John Baxter's smoking pose is contemplative yet highly suggestive. His stark tuxedo accentuates his face which is sinister yet alluring in true vampire fashion, and the hand holding the cigarette seems to have a life of its own.

Ironically, Freemantle's approach in the *Nightmares* series is itself faintly 'vampiric'. The 'victims' of his metaphorical blood-lust are Baroque period painting conventions – the dynamic compositions, the stark contrasting of dark and light, the form-giving drape of clothing on a figure – exemplified by painters like Caravaggio (1571–1610) and Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664). Caravaggio's dramatically lit compositions lead your eyes to the faces and heavy clothes of his subjects. Zurbarán devoted himself to religious images, the most characteristic of which are single figures of monks and saints engrossed in meditation or prayer, bathed in other-worldly light.

Freemantle's skill with oil paint facilitates this seamless meeting of contemporary subject with art historical genre. The paintings have an old world ambience, but we also encounter the world

around us. His approach to image-making also has a wider context. It speaks of the "uprooted and interchangeable nature of images in contemporary culture".¹ To use the vampire analogy again, artists are free to feed from images wherever they find them – in popular culture, the everyday or from historical sources.

As a viewer, I love to ponder this image of a smoking man. It reminds me that what I love about paintings is their stillness – that they don't move, that they're not like television. *Smoke* embodies the contemplative stillness of a certain kind of painting.

Mary-Jane Duffy

¹ Gingeras, A. M. (2003). *Vitamin P*, Phaidon Press Ltd, p. 68.

Galleries and museums:

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Baroque art

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

Francisco de Zurbarán

