Paul:

How did this project come about, and how did you start working with this figure of Christopher Wren?

Hamish:

I visited St. Paul's Cathedral as a child, which Wren designed, and I had some awareness of him being involved in the formation of the Royal Society, but I didn't know much until I started working at the Old Royal Naval College in 2019. That was also designed by him in the late 1600s, so I learned a little bit more about him at that point, but only really the official history of where I work.

For the 300th anniversary of his death, The Old Royal Navy College was planning some events, and my manager, who knew I was an artist, invited me to propose something.

I did a bit more research about him, and discovered that as well as all the famous buildings he designed, there was this significant, less intangible legacy to his work in many different fields. A whole culture of research that he was part of. I think because of my background in choreography, that felt quite interesting to me; I’m curious about traditions that are passed on that aren't objects.

Related to this, I had been working at the College for about three years as a visitor experience assistant, and had been wondering about the relationship between these massive buildings, and all the people who have invested their time to sustain, restore and animate it for hundreds of years

Around the same time, I had been working with flatbed scanners as part of my photography practice. A friend had suggested that I try scaling them up really big. I test-printed one at size A0, which was the first time I got to see it larger than a screen, and enjoyed seeing all the detail. It had this mysterious and painterly quality to it, which reminded me of the huge English baroque paintings at the College in the Painted Hall. So I thought there might be a fit with this invitation to propose something.

Paul:

The exhibition presents a number of portraits, of people who are involved in the legacies of Christopher Wren in one way or another. How did you decide who to approach?

Hamish:

I was originally interested in people who were involved in preserving his work on this particular site: for example, the cleaners, or a stonemason, or the guides. But I ended up focusing on people who were doing similar things to him now; researching different subjects and disciplines that Wren was involved in, and asking who might be a contemporary equivalent.

There are nine alcoves in the exhibition site, so that governed the number of portraits – eight, plus a picture of Wren. Because of the resources of the project, they had to be people in the UK, probably most of them in London. So for example, Wren was a surveyor who designed the Old Royal Naval College originally as a care home for naval veterans; I found a contemporary care home for naval veterans that had been built in 2022. I found this to be a more interesting connection than a grand contemporary cathedral or something.

When I started emailing people, many of them were already involved in events marking Wren's anniversary, so they already understood the context. Others were a bit more confused, and one thought it might be a scam; Why was this random person asking to take my photo?

Paul:

Were conversations with these people part of your process? Or were you content to simply turn up and take the photo?

Hamish:

We always started with some short emails back and forth to establish the project's relation to Wren's anniversary, and his connection to the field in which they worked. And then either I would go to their workplace, or they would come to me. If they came to where I work, I would give them a little tour to show the literal and historical context of the exhibition. Those encounters were the most satisfying: we could talk about their interests, and it felt like I could offer them something. For example I had a great chat with astronomer Katherne Blundell about the ways that astronomy has been depicted at the College.

And after spending a bit of time together getting to know each other, we would take the portrait. Usually we spend about an hour chatting, and then another hour taking the image. Where there was less time to talk beforehand or during the process it felt less satisfactory, less shared curiosity. But where there was that time people would say that they could appreciate the meaning and the value of the project.

Paul:

I find the images quite striking. They are not crisp portraits of individuals in their workplaces that I would expect from a photography legacy project, nor the kinds of images that people usually use to represent themselves in professional contexts. What was that process of taking the photos, and how did people react to seeing these images of themselves?

Hamish:

I would show people examples of these images while introducing the process. They're not exactly anti-portraits, but you can hardly see some of these individuals. I take them with a scanner, which has a strip of tiny lights and photoreceptors which give a very low, even light. It produces a very curious effect that I don't think you can reproduce with a normal camera. As soon as you are more than a millimeter away from the glass, the figure starts to fall away, losing focus and colour.

One person was worried about the possibility of eye damage from the scanner, even though I had done enough research to establish that it was safe. They also weren't sure about the effect. They are a scientist and in their work it is important that images are very crisp and accurate. They agreed to take one image, with their eyes closed, but kept well away from the scanner. So we talked a bit more, and they agreed to take another one, a centimetre closer. And then more and more, until we got the final image, which is a very nice picture – maybe a favorite, and many people's favorites – which they were very happy about.

The actual process is really enjoyable. You have to stay still for each scan, like the old daguerreotypes. It's also a bit like a Polaroid; we would wait together for a little while for

the image to appear on the laptop. We could then see it, before trying another one. We were figuring it out together, making small adjustments to how they were sitting or tilting their heads. We would be having conversations about what we liked about each image; they were very involved in producing the final product.

Paul:

You have extensive experience of working as a choreographer with performers, and in developing participatory games for audiences. Does portraiture feel like an extension of those practices?

Hamish:

Yes, definitely. For example I'm curious about what happens in a photo shoot for the people involved; the subjects, the photographer, assistants... Often the discussion within photography is from the point of view of an outsider looking at a photograph that they weren't involved in; for example, about how it gives them access to a different world or experience. But what does a photograph – and the process of taking it – do for the people involved? What's going on with that care or control? There can also be a moment of time travel, in which you might anticipate this future of yourself looking back at this time.

I've also been developing some playful instructions, game-like choreographies, as part of a series of photo shoots I've been doing with pairs of friends. I give them a deck of cards, each of which proposes a different score or suggestion: for example, 'pick the other person up', or 'hide'. It becomes a game: who is going to pick up whom? *How* are we going to pick each other up? I'll quickly snap a photo, and then we move on to the next score.

Most 'normal' portraits come with various instructions: can you stand, sit down, sit still, or look relaxed? But maybe we don't have to be sitting down or relaxed or whatever. Maybe there are other things we can be doing. I'm very interested in images of people being occupied by something else, particularly if it's a very sudden thing like a jump, or someone falling over. But these games can also help people stop worrying about what they look like. And as the photographer, I can get surprised. I have some control over how I frame the image, but what the subject decides to do is often not what I would go for, or what I would expect. It keeps it alive, for all of us.

Paul:

The images in this exhibition have a ghostly quality to them. It's like these people have died, and their spirit is fading into nothingness. They might be looking at us from beyond the veil; or perhaps they are looking into the afterlife from the present. You suggested

that this is part of the process of any portrait: people imagining themselves looking at this image in the future, and perhaps imagining a future in which this portrait persists, but they have died. Were notions of death and the afterlife part of your thinking about this project?

Hamish:

As you say, all photographs can have that relationship to death, particularly when it's an old photograph and the subject might not be young or even alive anymore. In this exhibition I wanted the sense that these people will be as dead as Wren too one day and they will have their own legacies and successors.

But I wonder what it is about my images that give that sense of ghosts, and time, or things appearing or disappearing. Is it down to cinematic representations of death or ghostliness: candlelight in a spooky house? Sometimes the scans can get very bright and washed out, and look like the Shroud of Turin. When the people being photographed have their eyes closed, it can look like a death mask – particularly when you only see a part of their face, or if you don't see their hair.

I think there’s also a sort of eroticism or intimacy to the scanner portraits I take sometimes. Maybe not these Wren ones specifically, but depending on how the person tilts their face, their lips can end up being very close and in focus. It can feel like when you are with a lover in a dim room, and you're close to them, or at an angle, and can only focus on a very particular part of their body.

Paul:

The exhibition presents some of the people connected to these intangible intellectual and disciplinary legacies of Christopher Wren. I wonder how your project sits within a broader movement that seeks to democratize our institutions, and think critically about who is represented or allowed to take on significant roles of office within them.

Hamish:

At one point in the project, I started to imagine a huge dark room, or a warehouse, that went on for miles, that was filled with generations of people throughout time, all whispering or passing on things to each other; or whispering to me, or to the viewer or the camera. I was imagining these photographs somehow documenting this huge space.

This exhibition presents only eight people connected to Wren, but it could be eight different people, or twenty people, or more. Two questions that frequently came up with Wren’s anniversary were, “Who is the current day Christian Wren?” and, “Why aren't there any polymaths anymore?” Some of these individuals I’ve photographed are more

obvious successors – Katherine Blundell holds the same honorary astronomy position at Gresham College that Wren did. But we could easily connect his legacy to other people; other astronomers, or people in different fields altogether. Many of these intellectual legacies don't have a particularly strong connection to his core work at all. Wren dabbled in many things early on in his career, without them going anywhere for him. He developed an early sign language, with finger spelling, but it has no connection to BSL, which has its own history that he doesn't appear to be involved in.

These portraits allude to the fact that there were strands of thought that he was on the edges of, or that he didn't master. Rather than suggesting that it takes eight people to do the work of a polymath like Christopher Wren, I hope this exhibition leads people to question the whole nature of how knowledge is organized. It's not that we don't have geniuses like Wren anymore, it's simply impossible to work across different disciplines like that: to be at the forefront of brain surgery and also at the forefront of meteorology. You would have to be involved in brain surgery for decades to get to that point.

The other thing I've been thinking about with this project is the importance or value or power of big stone objects. Having a huge stone edifice like the Old Royal Naval College or St Paul's Cathedral, helps people to remember you. We aren't just in an open room with people sharing different kinds of knowledge through time. There are objects and spaces that these legacies become invested in. And we normally remember people like Wren, rather than the stonemasons. We remember the people whose money paid for it, rather than the people who were exploited. We can often feel a sense of injustice about that, but it's partly due to our human reliance on simple narratives. How possible is it to conceive of and acknowledge the efforts of the thousands of people who have been involved in different ways in developing and sustaining a building like the Old Royal Naval College?

Paul:

As a photographer, you share a lot of your images online, and I know you're particularly interested in social media as a space where images are circulated. What is made possible by presenting these images in a physical space?

Hamish:

The tunnel where the work was installed means that people often came across them by accident, which is nice. They're also printed large enough to enable people to look at them from different distances, which is particularly interesting for this style of photography. As you come closer the images blur into pixels and textures, and as you pull away they fall into focus. Because they are physically exhibited, you can have several people looking at the same image, or you can look at someone else looking at it. And that felt like quite a significant change for my work; mostly people look at my

images privately. Exhibiting them also encourages people to linger with the images for a longer time. I’d been interested in presenting images in the future that have more information in them, that aren't just a face, so that people's attention can dance around in different ways.

The other thing about exhibiting them in this context is that, for better and worse, there's a lot of framing going on. The institution frames it; the 300-year anniversary frames it. So that leads the work in a very kind of particular direction, compared to say one of the photos being presented as part of a portrait exhibition in a gallery, which would obviously direct people’s attention in a different way.

Paul:

One of the things I appreciated about this exhibition was how the quality of these images so strongly went against the conventions of this kind of anniversary event. As a viewer, that shook things up for me, and demanded I think more about who these figures are, or what these images might be doing in this space.

What was it like to be commissioned in this context? As an organisation, they're not commissioning contemporary art very often. You were also in the unusual position of already working in that organisation, in a non-artistic role.

Hamish:

There were some advantages to this. I knew how the organisation worked, and had the trust of my colleagues, so I could get things done quite quickly. And also, unlike most exhibitions, I've been able to spend a lot of time with the work after it's been installed. However, I could imagine someone with no prior connection to the organisation finding it easier to be a bit more 'off the wall', or to present Christopher Wren's story in a really different or critical or radical way. I think I worked with the traditional narrative, and tweaked it a bit in small but important ways. You mention the quality of the images for example, and I think the sort of anti portraits or deathly portraits introduce something different to the kinds of legacy portraits you see outside of universities or hospitals.

In terms of being an artist working with an organisation, I do feel like it gives me an advantage to have been working there for such a long time. I feel like it's an interesting relationship, and personally a lot more interesting than proposing something for another museum that I had no engagement with. I feel pleased that I have a relationship with the people, and the history and the buildings. Being able to apply my artistic practice, in small ways, to this kind of an organisation feels like that's quite a valuable thing for an artist, or art, to be doing.