

FROM TOP Gideon in his north London studio, next to a pair of large-scale landscapes in oil on canvas. His portraits of people with featureless faces in gouache on cardboard



Gideon Rubin

Continuing her series, Emily Tobin meets the Israeli artist whose faceless portraits speak volumes of a missing family history

PHOTOGRAPHS JOSHUA MONAGHAN

Gideon Rubin's north London studio is populated by faceless men and women; eyes, noses and mouths have vanished. Perhaps they were painted over. Perhaps they were never there. And yet, Gideon's talent is such that a kink in a lock of hair or a cocked head can somehow be heavy with emotion; the flesh-coloured facets of a face seem to harbour a multitude of unspoken words and untold stories. Some may find these works eerie; I find them beautiful, though they are steeped in melancholy.

Gideon is the grandson of Israeli painter Reuven Rubin. But despite his artistic lineage, he studiously avoided art through school and it was not until he travelled to South America, following a stint in the Israeli army, that he picked up a paintbrush. 'I was doing it for the first time in my life and something felt right,' he says. He studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York and later at the Slade, and has lived in London ever since. 'I wanted to be a painter, ▷





not an artist,' says Gideon of that time. He was preoccupied by figuration, often turning the focus in on himself to produce self-portraits. But he had, by his own admission, painted himself 'into a corner'.

Gideon was in New York when the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed in 2001. He watched the tragedy unfold from a friend's rooftop. 'It was like a screen had come down. I couldn't paint how I'd painted before,' he says. 'I needed to unload this great psychological residue.' And so he began to paint abandoned toys – old dolls with missing limbs and eyes, and toy cars that, he explains, 'showed a life lived'. Slowly he shifted back to portraiture, using historical photographs as his starting point. 'I'm Israeli-Jewish from Europe and my family was destroyed in the war. We have no memories, no objects, no photographs left,' he says. 'These photographs became a vehicle for memories. I was reclaiming and recreating a past that was missing.'

Despite these featureless faces, his studio is filled with recognisable people. The maid from Manet's 1863 painting *Olympia* proffers a bunch of flowers; a red-headed prince adjusts his tie; figurative artist Alice Neel touches her hair. Gideon's works are marked by absence and yet they are entirely knowable. gideonrubin.com ▷

ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT A poster advertising one of Gideon's exhibitions in Shenzhen, China. *Black Bra*, oil on canvas, 2019. *Untitled*, oil on linen, 2020. Gideon relaxing in his studio. *Untitled*, oil on linen, 2019. Detail from *Black Pen*, oil on linen, 2019