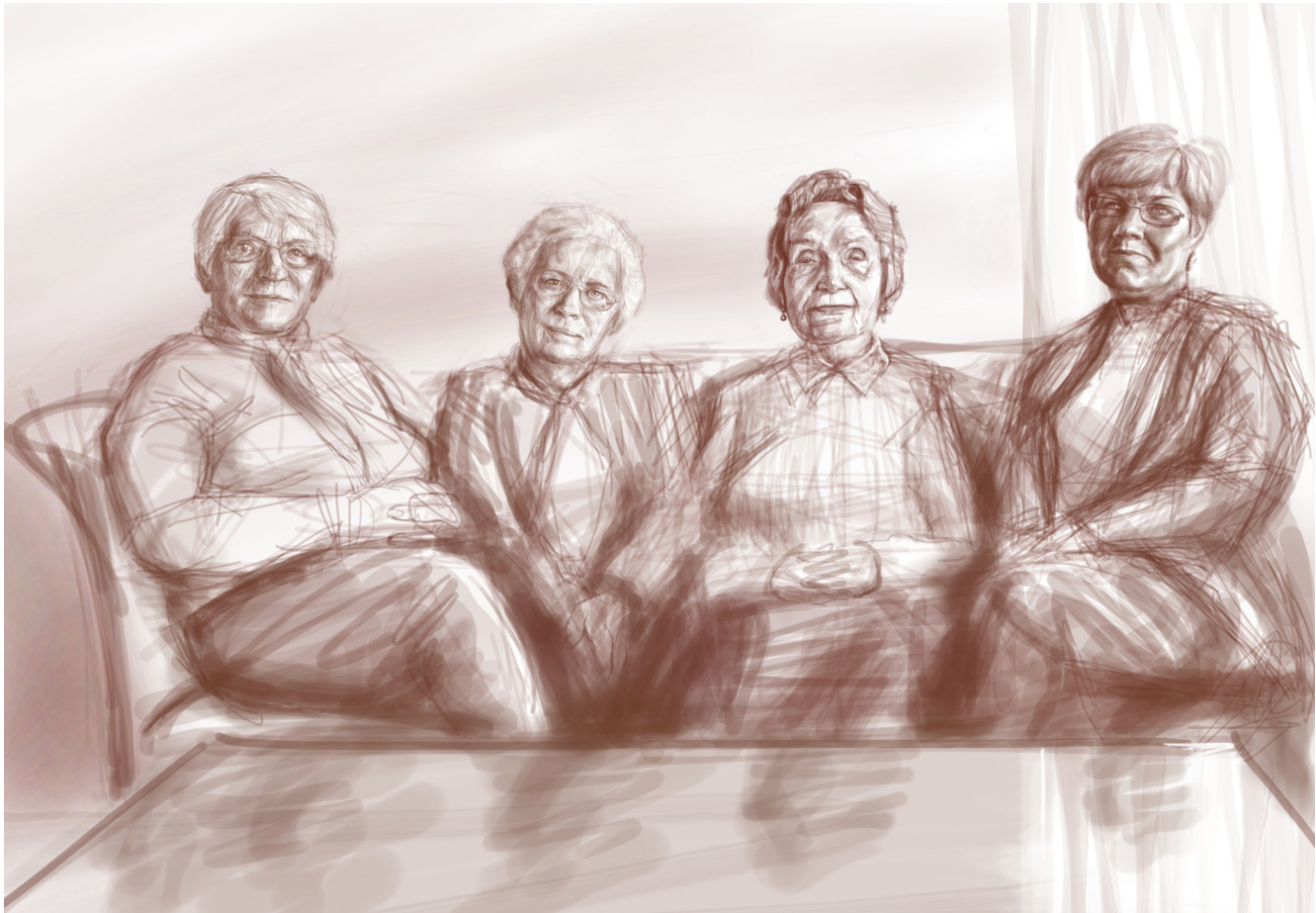


WINTER FIRES

Art and Agency in Old Age

Portraits by Mik Godley
From the book by François Matarasso













About “Winter Fires”

François Matarasso writer, researcher

Mik Godley, artist

The starting point of the book was a certain frustration that, while more attention is being paid to the value of art in old age, it is usually in the context of doing things for, or at best with, old people. I was interested in how people can act as artists through the whole of life, whether that action is that of a trained professional, an enthusiast or an occasional creator. During 2011 and 2012, I therefore set about meeting artists who are in their sixties, seventies and eighties to explore what their practice meant to them.

Because I see art itself as, among other things, an irreplaceable way of knowing, I invited Mik Godley to

work on some portraits that would sit alongside my text. They would not be illustrations but artworks as capable of communicating understanding of the people I was writing about as the words. Together, images and text, might create a deeper knowledge than either could achieve alone.

Mik seemed the right artist for this task for several reasons. First, I had the greatest admiration for his artistic ability and integrity: he is, above all, a great painter. Secondly, we had worked together on an earlier project in a kidney dialysis unit that had left us both feeling there was more to discover about this process. Finally,

one aspect of Mik's own practice is about exploring representation through deconstructing and reworking photographs published online. Because of travel, time and cost constraints, it was going to be necessary for Mik to work from photographs.

A simple process quickly established itself. At the end of my conversations with artists, we discussed the possibility of doing a portrait and how they might wish to present themselves. Everyone I asked was happy to do this, and they approved the final photographs before they were given to Mik. He then used an iPad with an application called 'Brushes' to turn the photographs into drawings:

'One of the things I knew I could do, to try it out, was to trace off from the photograph as a starting point. And those were the very tight drawings that were abandoned – because it made the drawings very stilted and awkward. So we had to start again.'

After this, Mik's approach was exploratory, even experimental, as he tried different ways of capturing something of the sitter without the usual opportunity to meet them.

'Because it was done over quite a long period of weeks, and I was testing new ideas with it, they all ended up being completely different. If I'd done each one all the way through, I think they'd have been more similar. But working on them together and taking quite a lot of time, I'd naturally get to a point where I'd think I don't know quite what to do with that so I'd go on to another one and then return to it.'

Mik showed me work in progress and we discussed what we liked or didn't like, what seemed to be working in different images. As he worked he found a way of remaking the images into something new, something that existed in its own right as a work of art.

'There were certain things that I thought fitted the personalities. So with the lady in the red shirt that you'd photographed against a red wall, what I did was start with a solid mass of that red as a background, and then painting it, if you like, so that that red came through in certain parts of what would be flesh.'

Each sitter was shown their portrait and sometimes it was a bit of a jolt. However, as they got used to them, almost everyone approved the images. One person didn't like the way her half-finished work on the easel had been represented. That was solved by dropping in the actual photograph of her work. One other person, after some hesitation, decided that she didn't want her portrait included in the book, for reasons of vanity as

she said. It was a disappointment, as both Mik and I had liked that image, but that was the agreement I'd made with all the sitters.

The portrait of Lena West, the woman in the red shirt, felt very risky when I first saw it. But it captured so well the spirit of the book, that I chose it as the cover image. We knew it was right when Lena came to the book launch having specially chosen to wear her red top again.

Winter Fires is an experiment, like the whole series of Regular Marvels, to which it belongs. It tries to find other ways of making sense of what art is and what it does for people that bypass or even undermine some of the assumptions and power relations that dog both community art and research. It's in the nature of such exploratory work that its results are more likely to be interesting than wholly successful, but that is enough. I'm hugely grateful to Mik Godley for his work, and for being so generous with his own exploration of representation.

Winter Fires: Art and Agency in Old Age
is published by the Baring Foundation
available free of charge

The Baring Foundation
60 London Wall, London EC2M 5TQ

Tel: +44 20 7767 1348
baring.foundation@uk.ing.com

The book can also be downloaded as a PDF

<http://regularmarvels.com>