

John Stevens

William Maggs

I have always been fascinated by the unique and varied shape of the human face. The varied expressions, skin types and facial features are endless and supplemented with personal statements that include fashion, colours and cultural identity. The inspiration for this painting developed from my experimentation and research where I painted a variety of portraits to portray diversity, uniqueness as well as imperfections. The alluring form of skin tones that come with such warmth and pattern inspired me to take on the challenge of painting darker skin tones. I think the beauty of this painting is that it started with an interaction with one of my peers. Initially I was going to use a reference image from a website but felt it had no meaningful connection. Despite obstacles with my Deafness, I was able to use an interpreter to create a conversation with John that enabled me to gain an in depth understanding of his personality and identity.

Curiosity and interest grew when I learned about his background and culture. In this work I wanted to express the importance of representation and shared cultural acceptance in the hope of a cultural reconciliation between people; a reminder that in the end we're all the same, we are all human. The symbolism in my painting was carefully selected. John's background derives from Sierra Leone and Ghana in West Africa. He described to me that in his culture many bright coloured clothes are worn to represent individual characters and personalities. He described that gold jewellery and accessories are used to show social class and John could be seen as a king and someone of importance. I wonder if everyone should be of equal importance regardless of their expression through fashion, symbolism and representation of themselves.

The symbolism used in my work was closely curated with the use of Adinkra symbols and each has specific meaning. My intention was to make John look like a leader, so the symbol of leadership was used along with a heart symbol representing love on the velvety depiction of the kente robe. The blended red paint and purple create a defining depth and value. John is a compassionate young man with strong leadership qualities amongst his peers, symbolically expressed through the use of the richly textured red robe. The painting of the dashiki was referenced from John describing his own traditional clothing. I mixed the flowers from the African Tulip tree together with the South Australian Kangaroo Paw flower to connect his life in Africa to his life here in Australia. The use of reds and yellows were centered in the composition to ensure that they contrast against the background as focal points. Elements of nature were incorporated into the portrait as they are an essential part of life and culture in Africa.

My personal aesthetic journey began as I was inspired by Ruby Chew's portraits where she contrasted realism with flat colours. This result was effective as the realistic areas gained greater three-dimensional qualities. The smooth and tight brushwork were closely refined to show texture of fabrics, accessories and a realistic texture of the subject's face. The execution of the skin tone and shades in the face was very accurate and represents him realistically.

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