

Photographs of myself, whether I'm caught unawares or trying to arrange my pose, are almost always a horrible surprise – not just because I'm vain, but because I don't recognise myself at all in them. Even though I know that they are, to a certain extent, a record, they hardly ever reflect my memories or feelings. A painted portrait is an altogether different proposition – a slow deliberate act, a culmination of thoughts and observations of changing and constant form, of colour and light and plane, on the part of the artist, but also requiring cooperation and participation-of-a-sort from the sitter.

I have sat for portraits before – it can be romantic – or at least the idea can be romantic – being a 'muse'. It is also intense, the frisson of being stared at, being seen. And it is very boring, and maybe also depressing, being so mute, being objectified. I have even gone through an art school phase of self-portraits – convinced at the time that I was only interested in the human head as an object in space, like Giacometti, and my own was the most convenient – but of course there was always an element of existential introspection, and, less flatteringly, self-regard. I painted myself cast in extreme shade in front of a bright white wall, in Cyprus, to look like a saint. That was over 20 years ago.

I jumped at the chance to sit for Susanne – and carved out some time to do so, in my ever-so-busy life. The family was turfed out for the day, and the house was quiet. I didn't have any props or objects of symbolism, or any particular visions for the outcome – I chose what to wear, of course, and wanted to include my red kelim rug and green blanket, because I like the colours and geometric patterns – not so much to represent Van Gogh's 'terrible passions of humanity', although Susanne's vertiginous floors do recall his. The Ikea chair is a design classic of sorts, but I don't really like it, I don't generally sit on it – I don't feel it says anything about 'me'. I used to sit on it to breastfeed my babies to sleep, that's why we got it, from a friend, so it has memories attached, now I think about it, but doesn't everything around one's home? My gold rings are emphasised – interlocked fingers to hold me together – and they are precious objects to me, inheritance from my grandmothers.

Susanne wasn't grandiose or demanding – she didn't insist on recreating the same pose even, or marking my position with masking tape. (I told her an anecdote/myth about Euan Uglow nicking a model with a knife to mark a hand position.) We talked to each other constantly about painting and writing, and people and places we know. She seemed to be finding it difficult, drawing me, on that first day – I wanted to help – I tried to keep still and poised, but I could feel myself collapsing inward. We worked in silence. Afterwards we walked around the harbour together.