

Internationell Konst Film Utställning, IKFU, is a biennial exhibition of art of the moving image in the Jönköping region of central southern Sweden. The exhibition this year runs from 8 to 31 March and focuses on portrait in the moving image. It features the work of Gillian Wearing, Ferhat Özgür, Isabell Heimerdinger, Avi Mograbi, Felix Gmelin, Fried vom Gröller, Jonathan Lewald, Mattias Härenstam, Ceven Knowles, HyunJoo Min, Joacélio Batista and Juan Francisco Adaro, alongside an open exhibition of new work shown in non-stop screenings in Jönköpings Läns Museum and Vandalorum, Värnamo the new gallery designed by Renzo Piano for the exhibiting of design and contemporary art.

Adelina Popodeleva's four-channel film portrait *Fresh*, will be shown at Vandalorum, Värnamo on four LCD screens.

Fresh is the nickname of a Bulgarian man in his early twenties, first seen in a bright blue and white leather jacket against a wall of lively pastel-shaded graffiti. He is a good-looking guy with plenty to say. He speaks to camera in a stream of personal information occasionally prompted by questions from the artist who is behind the camera. His eyes rarely make contact with the lens. His body language is demurely evasive but, at the same time, he seems is eager and communicative. This is the portrait of a bright, ambitious, acquisitive young man of the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. He describes every detail of what is shown on screen.

*"I have come here to flash my jacket: a BMW original, real cool, so hot, pockets in the back an' all."*

He has a matching New York Yankees baseball cap, Pepe Jeans sweatshirt, Diesel jeans, Sergio Tacchini trainers, Tissot watch, a classic '94 beanie necklace and sunglasses. He says,

*"My natural beauty is complemented by the things that stand out."*



The narrative reveals his ambition to be respected in his milieu: he makes it clear that he must gain that respect with a show of fashionable accoutrements.

*“I never had a job. Never want to. Don’t want to work, in fact. I wanna be a wheeler-dealer”.*

He drives an Opel Calibra car.

*“.....a very good car but it ain’t around right now ‘cos it real dirty and my fittings got nipped yesterday.”*

He cannot be seen in a car that is not cool and is uncomfortable driving it if, *“the music ain’t blazin’ ”*

The four episodes trace his journey from being a wannabe big shot to a thriving successful pimp. The second screen portrays him five months later. He has been to the USA, he has returned with \$3000 worth of new clothes and has new highlights in his hair.

*“Can’t wait to show off my new clothes. I change two times every day. Two times every day. What I got on now, I’m gonna throw in three hours.”*

In the third screen, three years later, he is driving a Porsche and wears Cavalli sunglasses.



The fourth, four years later, he is wearing a wolfskin jacket.

*“... not to be laughed at when goin’ out, wearin’ the same clothes, had to get some other skins. Next year, no, in fall, I’ll get a python jacket... ’ can’t figure what other animal to get.”*

His mobile phone is changed every two months to keep up with the latest models:

*“Nokia 8800 Sapphire, black leather, limited edition, pat on my jacket too. The watch - black leather again, Zenith. See, all in style.”*

*“Very important about how people treat you. No beads any more. Now I wear the Versace weave.”*

He is consistently vivacious and engaging, his skin is lustrous, his hair is bright against the dark, luxurious background of the interior of his car. The impression is reminiscent of a finely detailed and varnished oil portrait in the way that he engages and fascinates the viewer.

This is an account of early 21<sup>st</sup> century street culture that sets out the philosophy and expectations of young men the world over and shows the mechanism by which those expectations are achieved. The temporal dimension of video portrait and the addition of a biographical commentary create a representation that is not simply rich in detail but which has enhanced meaning. Whereas, looking at, say, a 16<sup>th</sup> century

portrait the viewer is obliged to make their own interpretation of the iconographic narrative of the image, in this video the iconography is clearly and thoroughly explained,

*“Ivana...yeah, that’s the stuff. That’s my favorite song. That’s gotta be put on record. It reflects my new appreciation of the world. “*

Guided though many layers of understanding the viewer easily reaches through the narrative to the philosophical enquiry of the work. Fresh is a typical young man of the newly democratised culture of Bulgaria. Young Bulgarians have been addressing a newly found freedom of choice that has opened up for them. In this case, the conclusion seems to be that they see freedom, not so much as the right to free thought and political choice, but as the freedom to be consumers.

Fresh positions himself not through a sense of achievement in an industrial or creative context but in the refinement of his appearance. He grooms himself and works to acquire the clothing, jewellery and car that will express his position precisely, that he is successful and eligible for sex.

*“I really like America. ....Everybody dug me, American women an’ all. No work until 5 in the afternoon, the gym, the beach...I’ll show ya my tan, later...”*

He is ambitious for street credibility. Not until the final episode do we get a hint that he might think of embracing a bourgeois lifestyle but it seems like a whimsical suggestion that looks at a world afar off.

Perhaps more shocking than the revelation of Fresh’s contemporary philosophy are the implications that this portrait has in informing our view of male portraits back through history. We look, for instance, at the men depicted by Renaissance miniaturist painter Nicholas Hilliard as though they exist only through their emblematic presentation. We accept a generalised interpretation of the intention of the sitter through his accoutrements but we never stop to question the relationship between the sitter and his iconographic surroundings: a man surrounded by luxurious and colourful fabrics, finely crafted garments, exquisite jewels, erotically aggressive weapons and deeply complex messages of amorous intent. We read the trappings of Courtly love as though they were only plainly noble and selfless: the honourable pursuit of love on a higher plain. Yet if Fresh is an example of an ordinary man we must surely question the portraits of men back through history and wonder how noble their intentions might

have been? Or were they simply flamboyant, vain, fickle, deceitful, ambitious and extravagant?



In Renaissance portraits jewellery is not simply for aesthetic adornment or amorous attraction but is a statement of status. It was understood that jewels could have meaning and create a narrative within the image. The

number of jewels displayed in a Renaissance portrait was not relative to the sex of the sitter but to their status: male subjects often appear more heavily adorned than female ones do.



Fresh adopts this system of symbolism by using necklaces, watches and mobile phones as a direct statement of his achievement and status on the street, even to the extent that his woman is an accessory.

*“I like to be seen with a pretty woman.”*

On different levels Fresh seeks both to individualise himself and to be one of a group. It is the need for both recognition and inclusion that drives his ambition. The fear of his generation is that they may be socially isolated and invisible. The communist culture of Eastern Europe had provided a structure in which the individual could exist and be fulfilled. Without that programme of order and duty the individual is left in a social “free market” where they are cut adrift and must find their own position in their own way. Fresh must earn the right to be respected by the group by acquiring certain fashionable emblems of status. However, the individuality that is defined by fashion is ambivalent. Choice gives the sensation of individuality but allegiance to a brand ties the individual back into a group.

This trait seems to have become characteristic of contemporary urban life in all cultures in the Western world. It is conspicuous in contemporary gang culture but also incipient in many strains of urban culture. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century hippy ideal, influenced by Zen and Eastern philosophies which proposed that every individual might simply exist and be valued merely for their presence has been supplanted in 21<sup>st</sup> century culture by consumerism and a driven need to earn a place in the community with marks of status. The riots and looting in Britain through the Summer of 2011 illustrated the passionate need of disaffected individuals to connect with society through consumerism and brand acquisition.

Popnedeleva's portrait, in four episodes, spans seven years, from Fresh's beginnings on the street to what seems to be the apogee of his achievement. We are then left to wonder what happens next: can he stay within the law and continue to prosper? The English painter Hogarth's "*The Rake's Progress* ", documents the life of London in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the transient morality of that time from highly structured and religiously dominated puritanical ideal to a enlightened libertarian culture that could accept the transience of life and the urgency of engaging with the experience of worldly existence. *The Rake's Progress* , whilst being a comprehensive account of the aspirational life of a young man moving from the country to the city, illustrates the notion that the alternative to a life of modest industrious diligence is madness and ruin.



The similarity between this and Fresh's progress brings us quickly to wonder what the story of the next tableau could be. Can he marry a rich girl? How will he find more stimulation to hold his interest in his current activities and further the survival and development of his livelihood? Can he make a sidestep to a safer means of maintaining his standard of living or is it, as in Western morality, doomed? *Fresh* challenges our

preconceptions of Christian ideals in society: the Puritan work ethic, the value of ambition and the expected outcome of a life lived, or not lived, according to those expectations. It is a statement of the expectations of the contemporary urban man and the means by which he is expected to achieve them: without work, “*Doin’ nothin’*”

Although the image of Fresh is photographic and makes him instantly recognisable, another effect of this film is to make him an icon: a symbol of everything that is desirable in 21<sup>st</sup> century fashion and a paradigm of the philosophy that drives its acquisition.

But what if human nature has not changed greatly in the past 500 years? What if Fresh’s outlook is little different to that of the average man through many generations back? How does Popnedeleva’s documentation of his image affect our appraisal of the way that we see men through portraits in the past?

His strategies to establish his position in society: as one who is recognised, respected and admired as successful and available for love, would be no different to the outward signs that we see exhibited in the pursuit of courtly love.

What if the intention of the sitter never rises above the level of vanity and self-aggrandisement and all the trappings of dignity, office and achievement are a flimsy attempt to divert the viewer’s attention from the core need of the sitter: the need to be admired and recognised?

Adelina Popodeleva’s *Fresh* begs us to look beneath the trappings of iconography to the reality of the men who sat for painters of the past. Each generation of artists has used developments of technique to make likenesses that are more accurate and more communicative, less and less like effigies and more individual. We see iconography dropped in favour of more and more real and earthy surroundings in portrait that tell the story of the sitter more naturalistically but it is only with the addition of biographical content of film that we begin to see portrait as a strong philosophical medium which can present a precise argument.

Adelina Popnedeleva’s *Fresh* is showing at Vandalorum, Värnamo, Sweden 8 - 31 March 2013  
[www.ikfu.se](http://www.ikfu.se)

Tim Reed  
Curator

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Stills from *Fresh* courtesy of the artist.

*The Rake's Progress* by William Hogarth

Courtesy of Sir John Sloane's Museum, London (new publication rights needed)

George Clifford, 3rd Earl of Cumberland, 1558 - 1605. William Hilliard,  
Courtesy of National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London (new  
publication rights needed)