

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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### Bob Dylan's portraits capture the poet's unique vision

*The pastel drawings in Face Value, an exhibition at London's National Portrait Gallery, are as tough and characterful as Dylan's songs – and yet another testimony to his creative power*

Jonathan Jones



*Facing the music ... a detail from Bob Dylan's Face Off: Scott Wagner, exhibited for the first time at the National Portrait Gallery, London. Photograph: Neil Hall/Reuters*

Recently I was walking around Rome with the words of Bob Dylan rattling around in my memory. "Oh, the streets of Rome are filled with rubble ..." sings the folk musician, rock star or poet (as you like it) in *When I Paint My Masterpiece*. Dylan, in Rome on tour, has "Botticelli's niece" waiting in his hotel room – she promised to be with him when he paints his masterpiece. But little did we know that Dylan really was trying to paint a masterpiece all along. I always took the words in this song as a figure of speech, yet in recent years he has started to exhibit the works of art he has been making since the 60s – pictures that clearly take up a good deal of time and effort.

At present, he is showing his pastels in London at the National Portrait Gallery. Much like his songs, they are tough and characterful and impressive. Dylan has drawn 12 heads, partly from memories of real people, partly from imagination, and given them evocative names. Each is linked to a phrase about faces. There's *In Your Face: Nina Felix*, who looks back at you with a sharp aggressive presence that's actually quite daunting, even though she's just a sketch on paper. Nina may or may not be a real person – these portraits are said to draw on various recollections and encounters – but Dylan gives her huge personality. More to the point, this and the other portraits make sense of why a man so steeped in language should choose to exhibit visual art. For these are words enfolded: Nina Felix physically embodies the clichéd expression "in your face". Similarly, the broken look of gangsterish Leon Leonard gives form to the expression "losing

face". Red Flanagan, his eyes dark and narrow in his fleshy mask, must "face the consequences". The words – these phrases about faces, and the names attached to them – seem to inspire the people created by Dylan's hand.

What makes this more than some stale conceptual exercise, however, is the ardour and integrity with which he carries it out. His drawings are firm and passionate, done with honesty and determination. The energy with which Dylan makes his faces tangible and carnal is oddly moving. It reveals a poet's vision: this is an artist for whom words must mean something, suggest something, and here he gives weight and substance to words we say all the time. It comes down to the human face and our endless harping on it in everyday speech.

Dylan draws well, with feeling and hard-won accuracy. He has a powerful imagination. He is much more of an artist than plenty of people who do it full-time will ever be. Botticelli's niece can back me up on that.