

ART & MUSEUM



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Inspiring People – aiming high at the National Portrait Gallery, London

by Pippa Nissen of Nissen Richards Studio

Dream jobs only happen a few times in anyone's lifetime, but one did truly happen when the commission landed in 2020 for Nissen Richards Studio to work as interpretation and permanent exhibition designers for London's National Portrait Gallery, one of the world's most beloved galleries, which re-opened this year after a three-year closure, boasting a complete architectural remodel, interior redesign and over 1000 artworks from its incredible Collection re-hung and interpreted.

I have loved this Gallery for as long as I remember, going back to family visits with my mother, where we would go and find our favourite paintings – to those with my own children. Portraits feel very democratic. Whether or not you know the historical context, you can feel a connection, whether to an author, painter, musician or statesman or woman.

From the moment the invitation to tender landed in our inbox, I knew this was a very important opportunity. We were almost stopped in our tracks by the gravitas of the pitch and, when we won it, the whole office cheered! Then the real work began. The project lasted 3 years and was incredibly complex. Lots of people were involved, both client and consultant-side, and lots of differing ideas as well as aims, attitudes and ambitions needed to be made harmonious and then incorporated.

It was delightful to collaborate with so many interesting and clever people. In particular, the team led by architect Jamie Fobert, with a very clear vision for the overall look and feel which was a fantastic starting point. Jamie Fobert was also generously clear about allowing us to also have room to tease out a true vision for the interior gallery spaces, so the works could sit seamlessly within the overall setting.

We also loved working with our long-term lighting designer collaborator Zerlina Hughes and her team at Studio ZNA. Zerlina and I met working on a theatre production over 20 years ago, and we talk

in shorthand when we work together. She always delivers with an artistic expertise that feels special and magical.

The scope of the works included newly- created gallery spaces to create a more contemporary wing on the East side of the building, as well as stripped back, re-opened windows, and all the existing galleries. The new colours for the walls, chosen with the curatorial team, felt radical to us all. We had decided to be bold: using bespoke coloured wool fabric linings on the walls on the oldest chronology of the second floor, and a more neutral but still intense set of painted colours on the first floor. We wanted the colours to make visitors feel like they were in another time, as they looked at the characters from the past, as well as shifting through the spaces gently, taking you through the chronology using blues to reds to greens. The colours reached a climactic parade of bright, jumping colours through the enfilade in the Gallery's Duveen Wing, ending in the newly hung grand room, with paintings as high as you could see and right down to the floor in a salon hang.

We tested the colours at great length, painting up boards of colour, or stretched fabric panels, with printed out portraits in the actual spaces and lighting set up on scaffolding towers, debating the nuances of changing a tone slightly, or picking up on a colour from a painting, or deliberately stepping away from a painting's tonality. I remember a particularly intense meeting where we

looked at tens of whites on a board. Success lay in making slow and incremental decisions.

We also created networks for the display of the Collection, information panels and digital screens, plus a new family of showcases and plinths, working closely with Jamie Fobert's team on the furniture aspects. Then came the pure joy of opening day, where I slipped in through the front door and pretended to be a visitor for the first time. Seeing the array of busts in the entrance hall, with faces from across history meeting yours, was amazing, as was seeing the galleries bustling with people. Visitors were sketching the paintings, scrutinising the contextual material, enjoying the beauty of the now beautifully lit spaces – and seeing more people who looked like them, with the display showing many more traditionally under-represented people, often via carefully-curated light-sensitive works on paper, including photography, and with a notably improved gender balance of artists on show too.

The drama created through lighting and colour quickly became familiar on Instagram and the scope of the hang made new connections between people – as well as between the artworks themselves. The whole process, although complex and slow at times, really was a joy. From the first image we made to the opening night party, I am so grateful to have been part of the team that made it happen.



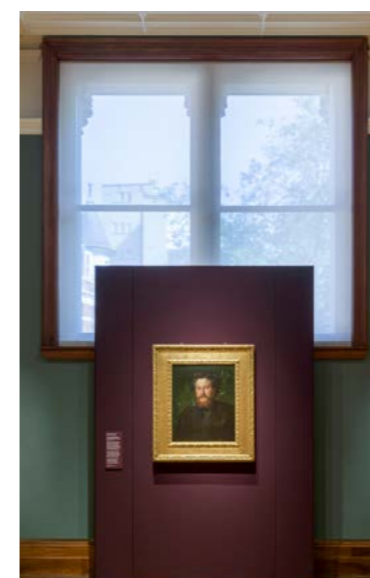
Bold wall colours in the Ondaatje Wing enfilade



The entrance area sculptures are displayed at head height to greet visitors



Second floor central gallery with view towards perimeter window with light-mitigating screen



Fabric screen display in front of newly-opened windows feat. portrait of William Morris



All images by Gareth Gardner