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Movements of the Soul

Thursday evening, 1 November it was down to Chelsea's Andipa Gallery to attend Movements of the Soul, the title of the first major solo exhibition of Belgian artist Johan van Mullem, a rising star in the modern art world.

As the title suggests, this collection of striking portraits represents windows into men's souls, an exploration of the psyche, an attempt to depict abstract emotions through tangible pieces of art. The paintings, none of which have titles, are not traditional portraits but surreal interpretations of the subjects' innate feelings. As in any abstract painting, we the viewer can interpret them in any way we choose. He uses expressive brushstrokes and vivid colours.

I found them quite haunting and powerful, sometimes vulnerable, all mysterious. The sorrowful eyes and sad mouths make each one recognisably portraits, some offering several faces in the one picture. Some remind me of those children's books in which you have to find the face hidden in a morass of detail. They are meticulously painted in ink. As a result, they are drawn quickly, some within an hour, all within a day. I met the man himself, very affable and eager to talk about his work. "Using ink I can remove unwanted brushstrokes completely in a way you can't do with say watercolours. Once it's dry that's no longer possible and ink dries quickly."

There is another reason for speed. His paintings are expressions of deep emotions drawn from daily experiences, nostalgia and dreams. "Once I arrive at the time when I step back and start analysing what I have painted, I know the work is finished." Yellows, browns and reds dominate.

Van Mullem, 53, began by drawing in black and white, then moved to painting only in sepia. Russets were a natural development. Embedded in van Mullem's psyche is an unhappy and lonely peripatetic childhood in which he followed his Belgian diplomat father from country to country. He was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and spent seven formative years in Tunisia. His parents refused to send him to art classes since they regarded an artist as an unsuitable profession for their son.

Young Johan had started drawing portraits from the age of five and found art as the only way he could express his true inner feelings. He turned inward, at one time contemplating suicide. He lived what he calls a "Jekyll and Hyde" life. He studied architecture and became a city planner in Brussels, "playing a role that was not me." It was only when he decided to become an artist full time that he feels he achieved what he calls true contentment. "It's not that I wanted to paint, I needed to paint, to express my real self."

The introspection he practised for decades is at the heart of his work and has remained despite his "rebirth" as a person. It is difficult to reference other artists' influence in these portraits though some have likened the themes to those employed by William Blake and Francisco Goya. His life, he says, has been a difficult journey and, in the same way, each painting is the manifestation of a particular emotional story. Check it out and make your own journey. Johan van Mullem's *Movements of the Soul* exhibition is at the Andipa Gallery, 162 Walton Street, London SW3 2JL and runs until 25 November.