



# Joy without division

**TO THE TETLEY:** Some artists like to work in miniature. Not Paul Digby. Sarah Freeman meets the portrait painter who has gone large with his latest project. Pictures by **Simon Hulme.**

**A** WEEK before his debut exhibition at The Tetley and artist Paul Digby has just one hurdle to overcome. He needs to work out how to get his giant paintings out of his top-floor studio in East Street Arts and safely to the gallery on the other side of Leeds city centre.

"I'm pretty sure we won't get them through that opening," he says, looking at the fairly narrow gap between his workspace and the next. "We'll have to go over the top of the partition. It'll be fine, I've got a friend who's good at these things to help and I've already done a dry run of the route down to the Tetley."

The exhibition is the culmination of almost two years work on a project

funded by the Arts Council, which Paul has called *Portraits of Emotions*. The aim was to capture on canvas a moment of pure joy and while all of the subjects live with a disability, for the purposes of this particular project it was the individuals' emotional rather than physical health he was interested in.

"There is a tendency to allow a disability to obscure everything else. Often it's the

first thing we see and for some it can be difficult to look past," says Paul, who grew up in Lincolnshire, but moved to Leeds 15 years ago. "I wanted people to look at these paintings and see pure joy, because regardless of who we are, that's an emotion we can all share in."

Supported by the Workers Education Association and Leeds Adult Social Care, Paul selected four subjects for his project,



**MIND AND BODY:** Artist Paul Digby pictured at the Tetley, Leeds and at work in his studio at East Street Arts. For his Portraits Of Emotions project he has concentrated on images of people with a range of disabilities expressing a moment of pure joy, an experience everyone can share in.

some whose disabilities were more obvious than others. Satwant is partially sighted, David has learning difficulties, while Gaynor was born with cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair.

"I did deliberate about whether to include her wheelchair or not. The first painting I did showed her from the waist up, but it just didn't feel right. I wanted people to look at these portraits and see the person, not the disability, but Gaynor's chair is a huge part of her life and it felt wrong not to include it.

"For people with a disability, acceptance is hugely important and I can't tell you how much trouble we had trying to get transport to bring Gaynor to see the finished portrait. Her wheelchair is quite large and every firm we rang said they wouldn't be able to help. That can't be right, but it shows just what a struggle everyday life can be for some people."

In the initial workshops, Paul worked with photographer Jonathan Turner to capture images of the four subjects at various community centres. Returning to his studio he then ran the chosen portraits through a Photoshop programme to accentuate the light and shade and used those images as a basis for his large-scale paintings which have a Pop Art-like quality.

The four paintings will be displayed in The Tetley until March and with the gallery also currently hosting the touring exhibition of the renowned Jerwood Drawing Prize it should mean a bigger audience for *Portraits of Emotions*.

"I'll take that," Paul says. "As an artist, I just want people to see my work and if that means they discover it by accident or on their way to see something else I don't mind."

While his brother is a photographer, Paul didn't come from a particularly artistic family. His father was a banker and his mother a nurse and it was a few years after leaving school before he decided to pursue his creative side.

"I was never particularly academic and when I left school I was a hairdresser for a few years, but I wasn't enjoying it so started to make art."

Deciding to return to education, Paul

graduated from Norwich University of the Arts in 1997 and after a couple of years living in London he headed back north and completed an MA at Bretton Hall, near Wakefield.

"Looking back that place was amazing," he says of the former arts and teacher training college which sits cheek by jowl with the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. "We had access to these amazing studio spaces, which were so big one of the students who had come over from America pretty much lived in his. We were just down the road from Leeds, but whenever you arrived, surrounded by woodland, it felt like you were in the middle of nowhere."

Throughout his career, Paul has often explored themes of the mind and body.

Asked why she wanted to take part in the project, Gaynor said: "If there are disabled people in soap operas, they are always portrayed negatively and they always have some kind of chip on their shoulder."

"I really don't like looking at myself, but it was nice Paul asked me to take part. We discussed it and I thought it was good that he wanted to promote a more positive image. I'm not just someone in a wheelchair. I have a sticker which I have not put on it yet. It says 'This is a wheelchair, not a hearing aid. Pat my head and I'll break your bloody legs'."

With her portrait now taking pride of place in The Tetley, Paul has not just given Gaynor a voice, but within the four walls of the gallery it's also made her impossible to ignore.

■ **Portraits of Emotions, The Tetley, to March 1. [www.thetetley.org](http://www.thetetley.org)**



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