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After my father's death, I came face to face with grief in a painter's studio

Parental loss became a shared experience for artist Chantal Joffe and writer Charlie Porter — and the focus for a series of raw, liberating portraits

Charlie Porter MAY 10 2025



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Chantal Joffe does not want you to look at her. I first sat for the artist in March 2023, at her studio by the Regent's Canal in Islington, London. Joffe is not interested in portraiture as eyeballed interrogation, the artist staring down the subject, and vice versa. My gaze could be off to the side, so that she could get on with making the painting.

I was grateful for the chance to sit. My father, Tony Porter, had died six days before, unexpectedly, aged 77. It had been nine months since the death of my mother, Pat Porter, also aged 77. Both were artists, and they met at London's Slade School of Fine Art in the early 1960s. I sat for portraits all the time for them as a kid. It was so normal to me that I didn't question it, however much it was a test of endurance. Today, I am thankful for that early practice in being still.

Joffe and I had already rescheduled the date for my sitting. I knew I could cancel. But, a couple of days before, I emailed her. "Are you still free Tuesday?" I wrote. "I think I will value it, and sitting brings me to them somehow."



Chantal Joffe (left) with Charlie Porter at her studio in front of one of her series of nudes © Photographed for the FT by Toby Glanville

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Grief was a shared experience between us. Joffe had also recently lost both her parents. I wanted to be with my grief, rather than hide from it or deny it. I had seen friends be pulled under by parental grief, unable to face it. I wanted to find another way through. So began a series of seven portraits that spring and summer, about to be displayed for the first time at Joffe's new solo show at The Exchange in Penzance, Cornwall. The exhibition is called *The Prince*, Joffe's first to focus on masculinity.

At the end of the session, Joffe said something like "we're finished for today". I had not yet learnt that this really meant "the painting is finished". We arranged that I would sit again the following week, and I turned up wearing the same clothes. But the easel was set up in a new position, the chair was different, and she was ready to start a new work.

Sessions followed a similar rhythm. For the first hour or so, we would chat while she painted. Then, after a tea break, the next hour would become more focused, for both Joffe in her work and me in my thoughts. Talk fell away.

But the conversations we did have helped me. At the time, I was finishing my book *Bring No Clothes: Bloomsbury and the Philosophy of Fashion* (2023), within which my



grief had become a narrative. During the second sitting, Joffe and I spoke about the inevitable shifts in dynamics among siblings after parental death, and the realisation that grief can also be understood as a period of unavoidable change. Once the painting was over, I walked to the National Gallery, sat in front of a Monet, and was able to write the postscript to my book, about the death of my father. That first painting, "Charlie 1" (2023), is of raw emotion barely contained. My right eye is on alert, but my left eye is like it's only looking inwards. My skin is both reddened and sallow, betraying the jolts of grief I was feeling. I can see something else too: my curiosity at what's happening on the canvas. I look like I want to sneak and take a peek at what Joffe was doing.

At the time, I had started to

SKARSTEDT

handmake my own clothes. Most of what I wore for these portraits I made myself. For my father's funeral, I hand-stitched a jacket, based on the Japanese hanten style. I wore the jacket for my next sitting with Joffe. In the work "Charlie — Funeral Suit (Hamlet)" (2023), I seem the most self-contained, coiled up with legs crossed, arms crossed over each other. It was an end and a beginning.

For me, it is all about the painting. I am not interested in portraiture to flatter an idea of myself, but to be involved with the act of art-making. I find it nourishing and energising to sit for Joffe. Her studio is an accumulation of stuff: books, paintings, magazines, cups, packaging, art materials, papers, all piled everywhere. To me this is not mess, it is a creative mind unleashed. Within it, there is always order. Before I arrive, the setting for the next portrait will be arranged, everything ready to begin.

Joffe works fast. Her palette is a table, glass-topped and intended for computers. Around its edge are great globs of oil paint. Its front, approximately where a computer keyboard would be, is where Joffe mixes the colours, perpetually wiped clean in a semi-circle, like a windscreen wiper. Joffe only uses linseed oil, no turpentine.



Her energy changes with each work. Sometimes Joffe is exclamatory, vivacious, physical. Other times her pace is more reflective, and she can be so quiet behind the easel that I almost forget she is in the room. She is responding to how I am at that sitting, as well as what is happening in her own life. The resulting work captures all that is present in the room. The image of me is incidental to the painting itself.

The first time I sat for Joffe, I remember her saying as I left: "I'd also like to paint you naked." At the time I didn't respond, maybe I smiled, but the thought stayed with me. Recently, I have started to sit for her again, after a break of nearly two years. In these

SKARSTEDT

new paintings, I am naked. So far, I have sat for four — one a week — two lying on a bed, one sitting poised on its edge, one standing. The challenge is bracing, the removal of the garment layer, the giving in to vulnerability.

Joffe's invitation to pose naked has opened possibilities for both of us. For Joffe, it is the paintings that can be made from my strange, tall and gangly flesh. For me, it is how I think and feel about myself. I am 51 years old — it is time to be pushing into territories that are new.

Artwork Images:

'Charlie 5 — Funeral Suit (Hamlet)' (2023) by Chantal Joffe

Chantal Joffe's 'Charlie 1' (2023)

'Charlie 3' (2023) by Chantal Joffe

© Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro gallery