

• TALL TALES •

# QUICK DRAW

Artist Isobel Williams paints a portrait of Portobello

**A**s part of the Notting Hill Visual Arts Festival in July, I sketched passers-by under the Westway. Bonkers, windswept, and officially just for a month, it's become an obsession. I'm still out there once a week.

On day one I arrived under the canopy where the A40 flies over Portobello Road with the daft notion that I'd represent people as if they were naked, but I soon learned that it had to be about hasty portraits. I practised on innocent bystanders and found a rhythm. People told me about their lives while I sketched; I snapped them holding their picture in a cheesy sort of way; then a squirt of fixative and I handed the portrait over. Lots of sitters said they'd give it to their mother.

An early subject, Egbert Knight Polycarp Glasgow, announced: 'I clean vehicles for a living and play reggae very loud. People say I should write my life story but too many people gonna get hurt. My grandmother says, "Speak the truth and shame of Beelzebub himself." You've captured the essence of me. My mother would have been proud.'

Ron, ex-Navy and dapper in a cravat, turned up with Mitz, his Jack Russell, draped over his shoulders. 'Good job I'm a pool or I'd chase yer round the market,' he said.

Eleanor's ninth grandchild had just been born and the stepbrother of one of her daughters had just been shot dead in Bristol (this story unfolded over the following days and 1,000 people followed his coffin along Ladbrooke Grove). But she still gave me a hug as she left.

Adam, a skateboarder, talked wistfully of hot California days on acid with bountiful girls during the Summer of Love. 'I was the premier wall painter in this neighbourhood until Banksy came along. I do stencils of surfers at the top of a wave and I've put four of them at the top of St John's Gardens.'

The intimate exchange involved in a portrait, however rapid, is an unbeatable way to get under the skin of a community. My journey to the Westway goes over the bump between the tectonic plates of just-surviving Notting Hill and sleek Notting Hill. Now, after the looting, more than ever it feels as if people are being ground between the plates. [lzybody.blogspot.com](http://lzybody.blogspot.com)



Cool sittings: Egbert Knight Polycarp Glasgow