



Diary of a Painting: Mrs Jordan Enters The Dining Room Stage Right

Strike a Pose: Stephen Farthing and the Swagger Portrait
29 June to 3 November 2024, Kenwood



Diary of a Painting: Mrs Jordan Enters The Dining Room Stage Right

Stephen Farthing was offered a residency at Kenwood during the course of his exhibition **Strike a Pose: Stephen Farthing and the Swagger Portrait** (29 June to 3 November 2024) and used the opportunity to create a new painting.

This new painting was made in response to John Hoppner's portrait of *Mrs Jordan as Viola in 'Twelfth Night'*, which was selected from Kenwood's collections by its volunteers and staff. The residency provided opportunities for the public to interact with the artist and learn more about his working processes, and the new painting was put on display at the end of the show.

Farthing kept a record of the painting's development in the form of a diary. What follows is an edited extract of that diary as the artist worked on the canvas in his temporary studio in London and his home studio in Tunis.



Stephen Farthing
(photograph: Ami Abou-bakr)

Tuesday 9 July

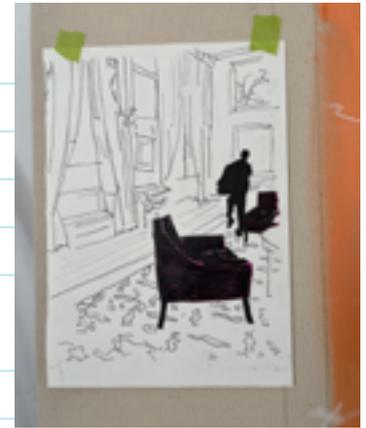
In London. Today I arrived at the size of what I think may become the final painting in my series of swagger portraits from Kenwood. The working title is *Mrs Jordan: A Swagger Hang*.



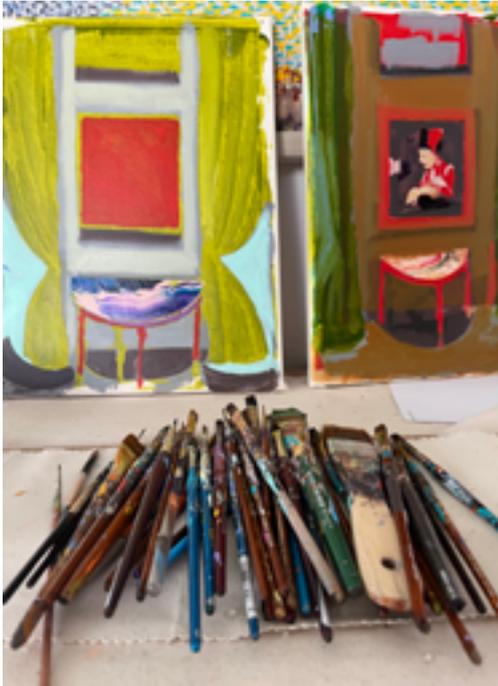
Primed and squared-up canvas,
170 × 128 cm

I stretched a canvas and primed it with a warm peach-coloured base layer, a mixture of Titanium White and Cadmium Orange acrylic paint. I'm a little worried that this might be too light for me to see the chalk drawing that I will make on top of it, but there we go. This chalk drawing will become the template for the overall composition. Then I marked out a grid on both the canvas and the sketch which I'd previously decided would be the painting's starting point.

Of course, today was not my first day of work on the project. That was back at the end of April when I looked carefully at John Hoppner's painting of *Mrs Jordan as Viola in 'Twelfth Night'* for the first time.



Carbon paper drawing on cartridge paper,
29.5 × 21 cm



Some brushes and two small painted studies,
each 40 × 30 cm

Since then, I've thought a lot about Hoppner's painting. I've made some small studies and drawings that tested strategies I might adopt during the process of repainting the portrait. Normally an image like this would not have given me pause; it certainly wasn't love at first sight when I added it to the shortlist of possible residency paintings. And when it was chosen by the team at Kenwood, I felt a pang of disappointment that all portrait painters must experience when their subject doesn't quite set their hearts on fire. But that disappointment was quickly followed by the challenge: how do I make this painting interesting not just for an audience, but also for me?

The story of Mrs Jordan's life makes for spectacular reading (see www.artuk.org/discover/artworks/mrs-jordan-as-viola-in-twelfth-night-191728). By contrast her painted image seems rather ordinary. I found it impossible to imagine her life from Hoppner's portrait. Eventually I decided to turn his painting into a full-blown swagger portrait not by giving Mrs Jordan a pair of legs and standing her in fine clothes in a grand setting, but by painting her portrait in a new position at Kenwood, and by painting her into what I can best describe as a swagger space.



John Hoppner, *Mrs Jordan as Viola in 'Twelfth Night'*, 1785–92, 90 × 70 cm,
English Heritage, Kenwood (Iveagh Bequest)

Friday 19 July



Back in Tunis. This morning I transferred a drawing of the study onto the primed canvas.

From chalk under-drawing
to first colour

Saturday 20 July

I spent today establishing a sense of space and place on the canvas. I gave the large armchair and the smaller one in the background an undercoat of Medium Violet and then the area of the painting that represents the floor a thin wash of gesso to differentiate it more clearly from the wall, all the time consciously trying to slow myself down. Starting a painting is easy. The opportunities are endless. The difficult part comes next.

Monday 5 August

At the end of last month, I painted the first layer in Naphthol Red Light and the second layer of curtains at their tops in Quinacridone Red. After that I shaped the tables and began work on the window bench in Raw Sienna. And then I stopped work to allow myself time to reflect on what I'd done.

Essentially what I've done is place Hoppner's painting in a much bigger space, leaving me room to paint not simply a picture of the portrait, but also of a room in Kenwood where I imagined it as a much larger painting in a much grander location; a location where it might be hanging within reach of Vermeer's *The Guitar Player*.

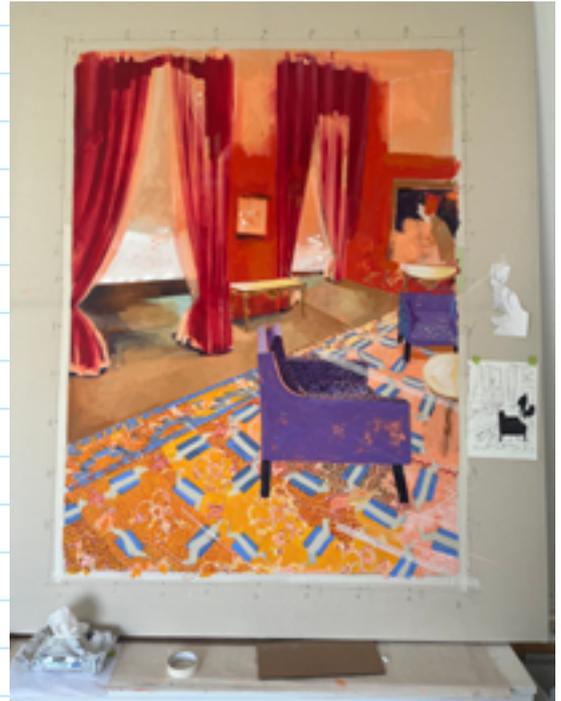


Detail of the painting showing the curtains

Tuesday 6 August

Today I gave the carpet a little more detail, more character and complexity. I based the detail on the carpet in the Dining Room at Kenwood, where the Vermeer is hung. I knew from the beginning that the carpet should provide an active but stable base for both the objects in the room and the painting itself. My goal was for the space of the painting to be governed by the relationship between the curtains, the carpet, the walls and the floor; some of the key ingredients of swagger portraits.

Getting lost in the subtle variations in colour and pattern that appear in handmade carpets is, for me, a very similar experience to getting lost in a Jackson Pollock drip painting. It's an adventure, a journey into the unknown.

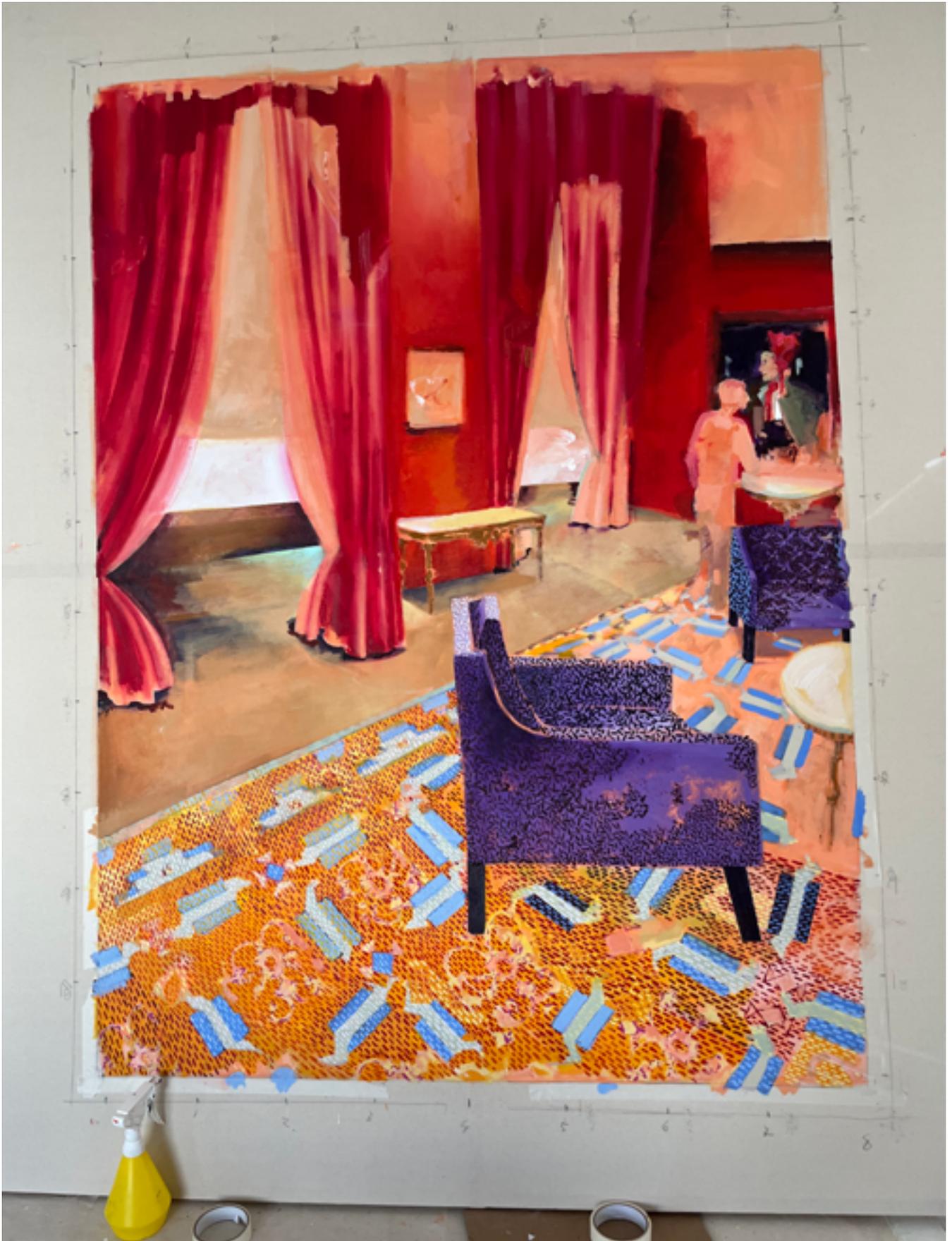


How the painting looked on 6 August

Wednesday 7 August

As I began to introduce more detail into the carpet, I began to see the importance of the dynamic angle I had given it as it dived towards the bottom of the painting, which in turn set the armchair above it afloat. Along with this came my questioning of the presence of the partially realised figure in front of Mrs Jordan's portrait. Questioning like this always happens when the pre-planning of a painting draws to a close and I step into unfamiliar territory with no map. I knew I was aiming to paint a picture in which the rather humble portrait of Mrs Jordan was reimagined as a swagger portrait. Beyond that there were plenty of unanswered questions and one in particular: did the floating armchair help the ghostly figure nearby remain part of the story?





How the painting looked on 7 August

Thursday 8 August

I started out this morning by refining the perspectival space within the painting, which amounted to adjusting the angles of the window blinds, picture frames and the legs on the furniture.

I then spent the rest of the day switching between working on the carpet and working on the distant and quite different image of Mrs Jordan. The painting of the carpet was slow and methodical and driven by a perspectival logic, while Mrs Jordan was a far more elusive subject, built up from flickering gestures. Every time I came up from the close focus and degree of certainty that the carpet offered, I took a deep breath and had another go at catching Mrs Jordan off-guard. As I was doing this, I began to realise that I was trying to paint Mrs Jordan and the ghostly figure looking at her as a single unit of information.

Saturday 10 August

With the sense of place on the left-hand side of the painting well established I decided to revisit the passage that runs bottom right to centre right through the two armchairs and the carpet. I finished by detailing the armchairs, which I now accepted were in the right place and could be given a more substantial presence.

Tuesday 13 August



Chalk line repositioning the image of the unpainted painting

An important part of painting is the thinking that drives the next move. This mostly happens at the start and end of the day when I am sitting in a chair in front of the painting and letting my eyes follow the colours and shapes on the picture surface.

While working on the painting I've retained the possibility that it might be interesting to do more than just relocate Mrs Jordan into a new swaggering place. With this in mind, I wondered if the painting between the two windows was hung too high – not as it appears at Kenwood, but in my initial mapping of the room – and decided to rehang the empty canvas a little lower, in a more intimate position.

Wednesday 14 August

Today I mapped in Vermeer's *The Guitar Player*.

Thursday 15 August



I spent most of the day working to establish a dialogue between the ghostly figure that stands in front of the portrait of Mrs Jordan and the painting as a whole.

How the painting looked on 15 August

Tuesday 20 August



After a pause of several days, I reworked the relationship between Mrs Jordan and the figure, which took on an even more ghostly presence. On the grounds that it had become a distraction, I decided to paint out the Vermeer and replace it with a much simpler abstraction, with a new image that simply said 'a painting'.

The Vermeer is removed

Friday 23 August

In very little time I completely repainted the section of carpet nearest the top of the painting. By simplifying the pattern and bleaching out the colour of the carpet I created a lighter passage through the painting that ran from the most distant window to the foreground chair. One of the problems with converging perspectival lines is that they take the viewer's eyes very quickly to the top of a painting. The passage of light I created brings the viewer's eye back to the bottom of the painting more slowly.



Pattern for distant carpet

Saturday 24 August

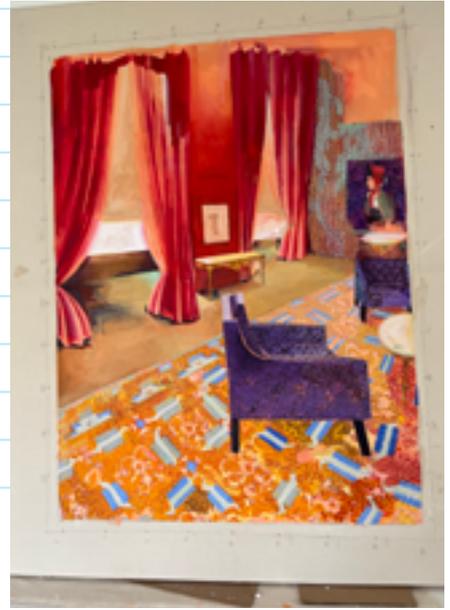
Today my thoughts about the painting returned to the overall goal of painting a swagger portrait of John Hoppner's painting of Mrs Jordan. Swagger portraits don't place their subjects in the background – the sitters are spotlighted and centre stage – and that isn't the case with my Mrs Jordan. I need to think all this through carefully.

Monday 26 August

At times I've felt I should have started the painting by painting my version of Hoppner's painting and then built the entire room around that image rather than what I've done, which is to paint an interior and then hang the painting in it.

Tuesday 27 August

I wasn't happy with the previous day's work so I've attempted to alter the image of Mrs Jordan to fit. The result is dreadful. Pausing.



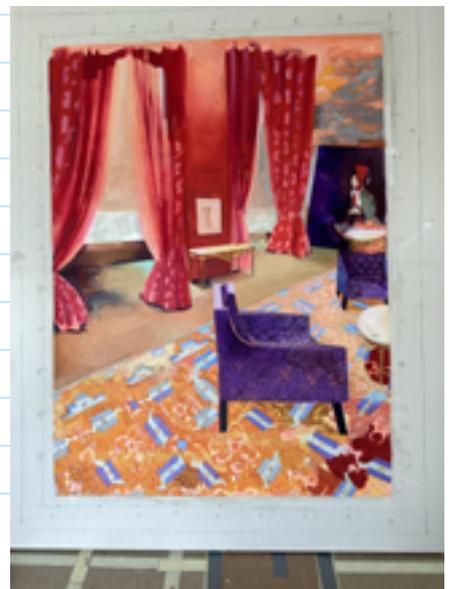
Reworking Mrs Jordan and her surroundings (stage 1)

Wednesday 28 August

Today I returned to the idea that Mrs Jordan might be more of a ghostly figure within the painting; a presence rather than an image hung on a wall.

Thursday 29 August

It looks to me as if Mrs Jordan has been painted on a much larger canvas which is leaning against the wall.



Reworking Mrs Jordan and her surroundings (stage 2)



Friday 30 August

As interesting as the writing of this diary has been I'm aware that it has influenced the development of the painting. On the positive side it has forced me to question why I've chosen to head off in the way I have. On the negative side I worry that I've dismissed some painterly options on the grounds that I couldn't fully explain them in words. I've therefore decided to spend an hour each day not working on the painting, just looking at it.

Monday 2 September



The problem with the painting rests with how I've depicted Mrs Jordan. I want her to have a presence that is midway between ghostly and recognisably a painting on a wall, an ambiguous presence. I've tried several ways of achieving this and failed. The problem will have to come with me to London later in the week.

Reworking Mrs Jordan and her surroundings (stage 3)

Monday 9 September

Back at Kenwood. I arrived at what would be my studio for the next week with the canvas. The studio is in a building that was once the Dairy, which is located in the wilderness to the west of the main house, close yet remote.

I start the day by stretching the canvas onto its new stretcher and then sit back and look at it in its new surroundings. My eyes immediately settle on the same area of the painting as they did a week earlier, on Mrs Jordan and her immediate surroundings, which still trouble me.



The Dairy at Kenwood

Rather than confront the problem head on, I decide to finalise some other aspects of the painting, looking firstly at the thin border of raw canvas. I decide to let some of the curtain and carpet flow into it, hoping that this will soften the edges of the painting.



Tuesday 10 September



I began today by rehearsing a move that I want to get right first time in the actual painting. The goal is to marble a table top using masking tape to define its edges and a pallet knife loaded with white paint and two small spots of colour, which I flick onto the canvas and then spread using the edge of the knife.

Marble table top

After the rehearsal, which worked, I immediately started on the table itself, which sits between the two windows. Thereafter I moved to the half-round table below the portrait of Mrs Jordan.

The rest of the day I spent talking to studio visitors and completing the round-topped table in the foreground. The discussion was useful because visitors bring fresh eyes and push me to explain my decisions, even if I resist this initially by falling back on descriptors such as 'intuition' and 'emotional response'.



Marble table top with masking tape before the application of paint

Wednesday 11 September



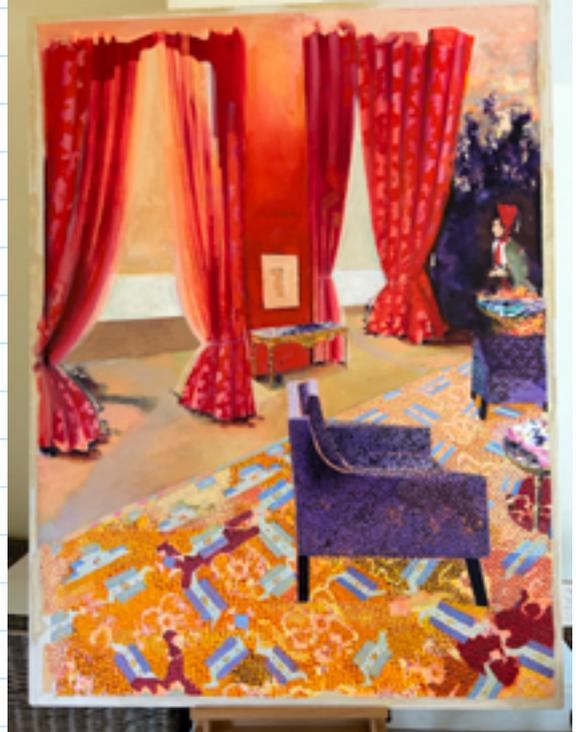
I added more detail to the carpet and worked on some subtle colour changes on the floor beyond. The goal was to get the viewer's eye moving across the whole painting.

Carpet and floor

Thursday 12 September

This morning I worked on animating the curtains with light-touch brushstrokes and addressing the space around the portrait of Mrs Jordan.

After lunch I had a studio visit from Kenwood's volunteers who immediately focused on the status of Mrs Jordan. Was she an oil painting hanging on the wall? Was she pictured as an actress on stage? I explained that she had an ambiguous presence, but after an hour of questioning and discussion I realised that her presence remained unconvincing. More positively we all agreed that she was on stage and that I had turned her surroundings into a stage set and that the title of the painting might reflect that. Also, I think we were all fairly happy that I had given her a certain swagger and released her from the tight frame into which Hoppner had painted her.



The unsatisfactory space around Mrs Jordan

On the way home I had an idea as to how I might solve the problem and complete the painting. I popped into Greene & Stone, an art supply shop on the Fulham Road, and bought some fine linen canvas. I knew I needed a fresh start on the painting: not the whole painting, just the top right-hand corner.

Friday 13 September

I arrived early at the studio and started by collaging the linen over the unsatisfactory area of the painting, carefully cutting it to fit around the red curtain which I wanted to retain. The fresh linen wiped clean the history of mistakes and became a blank canvas hung on the wall – or possibly an untouched part of the painting – which left Mrs Jordan to enter my stage set from the wings. I suddenly realise that I've finished the painting.



Monday 23 September

Back in Tunis. I'm sitting in my studio wondering about a title. A title can be a starting point for a new piece of work, but on this occasion it's the ending. Titles aren't simply a means of naming paintings. They're often a handle that opens the door just enough for the viewer to catch a glimpse of what the artist is trying to achieve. The swagger setting that I've created for Mrs Jordan is a stage set, at least in part, and the title I've finally chosen for the painting is a piece of stage direction, which tells the actor where she should go: *Mrs Jordan Enters The Dining Room Stage Right*.



Mrs Jordan Enters The Dining Room Stage Right, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 170 × 128 cm

Strike a Pose: Stephen Farthing and the Swagger Portrait was developed in collaboration with independent curator Paul Bonaventura and is part of the Creative Programme at English Heritage. The Creative Programme commissions artists to produce creative works that draw inspiration from our iconic sites and collections and encourage engagement with heritage and history in new and thought-provoking ways.

English Heritage would like to thank Towner Eastbourne, National Museums Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery and Michael Farthing for their generous loans to the exhibition.

