All of the great portraits exhibited in the BP Portrait Exhibition 2018 (showing at The Gallery, Winchester Discovery Centre, until 26 Jun 2019), shared a theme of individual connection with the model, or character representation of the model. Yet amongst those, there hid the self-portraits which appeared like the other; another stranger to the viewer. Some daring, some ambiguously gazing, some seemed in a setting of their own characteristic interest. With a self-portrait however, it is unlike representing someone else that you see and meet, you are required to represent yourself. It is almost impossible to do this objectively as you know who you are or who you want to be.

I spoke to Secil Guven, who produced a vast nude painting of herself amongst a heap of branches and leaves. She explains how the background reflects her upbringing and her ‘natural habitat’. Her reference to being in contact with such scenery from the moment she was born, is reinforced through her nudity which portrays the natural state of a human. Even with that in mind, her expression appeared confident and assertive, as if she knows who she is and who she is showing herself..

Overall it gave an impression of a fairy-like setting. The hyper realistic background slightly contrasted this stylised almost airbrushed fairness of her skin. I asked questions about how it felt to be exhibited as the youngest artist, I asked about where she is from and what her plans are next… and to be honest, (maybe it is my mildly competent attention span) but all I remember is how tiny she was. Shy and human. Her timid impression could be explained by the vital fact that her small persona was being towered and interrogated by three tall teenagers at her first public exhibition. But if not so, then possibly this self-representing portrait is how she wants to be seen, rather than who she is every day. I wished I asked more.

The sentimentality of the background and what it meant to her showcased an aspect of her upbringing not only her personal character. It reminded me of the beautiful self-portrait by Paula Wilson, where although it is a self-portrait, her meaning and sentimentality is more honoured to her female ancestors rather than her personal individualism. The self-portrait in these instances becomes a window to their life stories, upbringings, “backgrounds” rather than disconnecting oneself from their bodies and putting it down on paper.

The young persons portraiture exhibition running concurrently at the City Space, although abstract and focusing a lot about their mental health, there were elements where they too connected more with their heritage and upbringing rather than the portrayal of their body. One mentioned the wood panel which resembled the lake that they would often go to, to find peace. These self-portraits all are advocates for humanity with a story. Individuals beyond just a face and a name. With picture portraits and painting portraits even in everyday life, viewing a person is only ever seen by their exterior. We cannot enter their memories. Here though they built us a door to their past.