

## Once Again

*Jane Harris*

There is a painting in Tate Britain called the Cholmondeley Ladies c.1600-10. An inscription

*Two Ladies of the Cholmondeley Family*

*Who were born on the same day*

*Married the same day*

*And brought to Bed the same day*

Painted on the bottom left of the image reads:

On seeing the painting for the first time one is immediately struck by the identical quality of the right and left sides. On further inspection however we see that there are many differences between one lady and the other: the colour of their eyes; the details of their clothes and ruffs; the subtle variation of outline of the pillows they rest on. The robes of the babies too are not of quite the same red and the patterning on their clothes echoes that of their mothers' rather than being identical to each other. Looking even deeper we discern that the right hand lady and baby are painted in deeper shadow than the left.

To our early 21st century eyes, with our aesthetic roots in modernism and our quickly acquired comfort with 'copy and paste', this is a deeply satisfying painting formally, with its basic similarities but subtle differences of shape, tone, colour and texture. Also, its enigmatic quality provides psychological intrigue as questions have not been fully answered as to the actual relationship between the two women. Are they twins, or even sisters? Its format echoes tomb sculpture of the period. Could this therefore not be a celebration of the birth of two babies but a memorial to the death in childbirth of each mother and child? Although 400 years old it fits well to our modern sensibility in its ability to invoke simultaneously the possibility of pain and pleasure.

There is a human fascination with seeing the same, or nearly the same, thing twice. Twins, couples, doubles and pairs can both compel and repel. The artistic representation of these can be discomfiting, mesmerising and often absurd, not only to the viewer in the resulting image but to the artist in the process involved to achieve this result. Thoughts of double-vision, double-trouble, double-take, déjà-vu, double-entendre occur in this act of duplication. Whether obtained by splitting, mirroring or repeating, whether back-to-back, side by side, one on top of the other, upsidedown/right way up, the second form qualifies the first creating either an implicitly or explicitly self-contained dialogue, of which we are excluded onlookers, or an agreed alliance (united front) which confronts us and seeks to compromise us both physically and emotionally in a somewhat uneven three-way relationship.

In addition to this the notion of mimicry arises. Questioning the authority of the 'original' and exquisite in its mockery of authenticity, good impersonation is both skillful and artful. By drawing attention to this the effects achieved by artists can be sinister (thoughts of collusion, false identity), troublesome (repeating oneself, compulsive behaviour) or playful (spot-the-difference, snap, Pelmanism) or cunningly pragmatic. Why invent a second new form, figure or object when you can make the same thing once again and create a whole that is greater than the sum of its two parts.