

LINDA TALBOT

# Making a beeline for a Nettle...

**W**HEN businesswoman Annette Fraser commissioned Sophie Levi to paint her portrait, the artist was struck by the uncanny resemblance she bore to Portrait of a Lady in Yellow painted by Renaissance artist Alesso Baldovinetti.

"I was intrigued too by Dutch 17th century flower painting and decided to paint Annette in profile with symbolic plants," says Levi.

Now the oil painting, entitled Nettle? (Annette's nickname), is hanging in the BP Portrait Award Exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, Trafalgar Square, until October 5.

The composition includes a thistle because Annette was born in Scotland; a pink rose, because she lives in England, and a red tulip, common in Dutch flower painting.

Levi, who comes from Hampstead and is searching for a London studio, explains: "There's another tulip representing those that in the 17th century were sold for very high prices - twice the annual salary of a carpenter. It's a reference to Annette's busy life in a bank."

"And as there are always

insects in Dutch paintings, I've included a bee, which represents industry and reflects the fact that Annette is very active." Now she is painting Annette's sister, Jacque Fraser-Fielding.

"I always wanted to paint people, no other kind of art has that magic. It's a joint enterprise and I meet people from all walks of life, while so many painters are isolated," she says.

In September she will portray Dr Tess Adkins, a geology professor at King's College, Cambridge. Fellow tutors and students raised the money - "they wanted to see a female face on the college walls", says Levi.

She would love to paint the Nigerian author Ben Okri, who wrote *The Famished Road*. "I feel there must be something in him

## Levi always wanted to paint people: 'No other subject has that magic'

of the boy he writes about and I'd like to express this." Another hoped-for subject is Glenda Jackson: "She's such a formidable character."

There is clearly a family talent



● Past meets present in Nettle? - Sophie Levi's portrait of Annette Fraser.

for painting: Levi is currently showing her portrait of her uncle Ronald Bernstein QC alongside works by her father, Dr Jonathan Levi, and her aunt, Judy, at the Royal College of Physicians, St Andrew's Place, Regent's Park, until July 18.

Levi's work has a quietly intriguing quality that dispenses with the predictable portrait, prompting psychological speculation.

Elsewhere in the show at the National Portrait Gallery, many people are proficiently presented, but the most memorable appear in positions that are perturbing or bizarrely off-beam.

There is a degree of narrative, bearing subjects beyond the disclosure of character into situations that are enigmatic or may dramatically deteriorate. One ponders motives and meanings.

What, for instance, has occurred

in Ian Palmer's painting of a naked man sprawled with a bored girl by a scattered picnic? Has she done him in? Are they about to be discovered?

Who are the strange twins painted by Saied Dai, wearing quirky uniforms in a shadowed interior? And from what planet or in-bred enclave do the family of Jago Williams come? In this commended work, they seem not entirely human; something subtly disconcerting has happened to their bodies as they pose.

John Notter contributes another commended work; Enrica at Blackpatch; a solitary woman clutching a small black book in an industrial wasteland. What is she doing there? Checking pollution or preparing to read a sensitive passage in her diary? Other commended artists are Paul Benney, Paul Brewster and Sharon Brindle.

And curiosity is aroused by Orlando Mostyn-Owen's work, *The Couple*, summarising perhaps the sullen disregard of youth for well-meant words of advice,

## The most memorable portraits are posed in off-beam positions

with a girl impatient in the presence of an older man.

Techniques are accomplished and sometimes stylistic experiment is paramount. Abigail McLellan elongates figures in Rebecca and Matthew, so they extend as an inextricable part of the room, enhanced by a vase of flowers as wispy as themselves.

First prize of £10,000 went to London artist James Lloyd for his desolate oil, Penelope watching TV. Seated in a bare room, soli-

tary and subdued, she could be the epitome of youth bereft of opportunity. Lloyd also won a commission worth £2,000 to paint a portrait for the gallery's collection.

Second prize of £5,000 went to Kevin Cunningham, another London-based artist, for his work Phillip Knightley (spy writer with Indian wife). The fact his clock says Bombay

Police instead of displaying figures and there is a white bird perched on his head, clinches the picture's wry humour.

Nicola Clark won third prize of £2,000 for her portrait of the immutably middle-class Mr and Mrs Panchal at home?

Akash Bhatt won the BP Travel Award for Friday Night; another Asian couple at home and a casual contrast to the Panchals. Bhatt will go to western Fiji to research the life of the Indians.

## SUMMER SHOW '97