

Exhibition of the week **Cornelius Johnson**

National Portrait Gallery, London WC2 (020-7306 0055, [www.npg.org.uk](http://www.npg.org.uk)). Until 13 September

“Some artists have all the luck – and in Cornelius Johnson’s case, all bad,” said Alastair Smart in *The Daily Telegraph*. Johnson was probably the first British artist to consistently sign and date his work. Born in London in 1593 to Flemish/German parents, he made his name painting the emerging middle classes. In 1632, he was appointed to the court of Charles I as “Official Picture Drawer” – but within months of taking up this prestigious post, he had been “eclipsed” by Anthony van Dyck, who arrived in London the same year and became the king’s favourite artist. If Johnson had hopes of regaining his position when van Dyck died a decade later, these were soon dashed. In 1642 the English Civil War began, and demand for grand portraits collapsed. Johnson was forced to flee to Holland, and has remained an “all-but-forgotten figure” ever since. Now, though, this one-room exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery – Johnson’s first ever UK retrospective – seeks to re-establish his reputation as a significant British portrait painter.



Johnson’s portrait of King Charles II (1639)

The show, entitled *Charles I’s Forgotten Painter*, makes it clear that Johnson was at his best when painting “single figures from the chest up”, said Waldemar Januszczak in *The Sunday Times*. Works like his “marvellous” likeness of Susanna Temple, later

Lady Lister, have a “tangible psychological presence” that confirm him as a “British artist of note”. This is even more evident in the “excellent” portraits he painted after moving to the Netherlands. Best of the lot is his “stern” painting of Apollonius Veth, which has a “note of human seriousness” that even van Dyck never matched. Unfortunately, he was inconsistent and “even in this petite selection the weak Johnsons outnumber the strong”. His “most ambitious” painting is a “near life-size” portrait of the Capel family, prominent royalists, which “falls apart” when it comes to the figures of the children. His royal portraiture, meanwhile, is largely “unconvincing”.

There is indeed “some variation in the quality of Johnson’s work”, said Florence Hallett on *The Arts Desk*. Yet he painted both flesh and fabric with “beautiful, tactile detail”. His portraits of Charles I’s children, for example, contain “exquisite” touches that emphasise the “virtuoso” intricacy of his work. While he was no van Dyck, nor was he a “sorry failure”. In future, a bigger exhibition might allow

interesting comparisons between Johnson and his contemporaries. For now, though, this “tiny” exhibition is a “tantalising dip into art history’s footnotes”.

## Where to buy...

The Week reviews an exhibition in a private gallery

**Emma Talbot**

at *Domobaal*

Emma Talbot’s art is certainly not for the faint-hearted. By turns sexually explicit and treacle-sweet, her works dwell on some disturbing themes. But while they might not be to all tastes, Talbot’s paintings, drawings and sculptures are nothing if not memorable, referencing everything from Japanese animé cartoons to modernist novels to the work of American feminist artist Judy Chicago. There is a home-made, decorative quality to much of these new works which makes their emotionally wrought subject matter all the more eye-catching. Small watercolours such as *What Used to Be (Vintage)* show an intriguing use of colour. Meanwhile, Talbot’s larger paintings seem to explode with ideas. The best piece in the show is *Before I*



*Before I Loved You Love, Nothing Was My Own* (2015): £9,500 excl. VAT

*Loved You, Love, Nothing Was My Own*, which superimposes a Pablo Neruda poem onto the intricate pattern of a Persian carpet. Prices range from £650 to £9,500.

3 John Street, London WC1 (020-7242 9604). Until 6 June.

## Tehran’s outdoor gallery

Tehran’s billboards usually advertise the latest gadgets and household items, says Saeed Kamali Dehghan in *The Guardian*; occasionally they commemorate martyrs of the war with Iran, or,



less frequently these days, simply state “Death to America”. But as of last week, the ads on 700 billboards were replaced for ten days by posters of works by local and foreign artists. Images by Picasso, Magritte and Matisse have “turned the capital into a giant urban art gallery”, in an attempt to encourage people to visit the city’s museums. The “tree-lined Modares highway now displays *The Scream* by Edvard Munch”; another street shows *The Son of Man* by Magritte next to a painting by the Iranian artist Sohrab Sepehri; nearby is a David Hockney landscape. Tehran’s Museum of Contemporary Art has the finest collection of modern art outside Europe and the US. Until recently, the paintings were classed as “un-Islamic” and never exhibited.

• In last week’s issue, we printed the incorrect contact number for the Francis Bacon exhibition in Norwich. The correct number is: 01603-593199.