

THE VANISHING POINT: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA HOTERE



Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *Las Meninas*, 1656–57, oil on canvas, 318 x 276 cm, Museo del Prado (photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Anthony Byrt
October 26 2023

'Hotere's novel is underpinned by the same understanding of the surprising power paintings can have over the trajectory of our lives.'

IN the mid-2000s, I had decided to take an indefinite break from writing about art. I was far more preoccupied with fiction: with reading it, writing it, and interviewing my literary heroes. At the time, I was particularly obsessed with the Spanish novelist Javier Marías, whose *Your Face Tomorrow* trilogy had begun to appear in English. Miraculously, my editor at the *Listener* at the time, Philip Matthews, agreed to spring for an EasyJet airfare from London (where I was living) to Madrid, so I could interview Marias in person.

The interview turned out to be one of the most defining encounters of my writing life: Marías shared things about his craft that I still think about, almost twenty years later, when working on my own books. But there was a second encounter that proved just as significant: with the work of Diego Velázquez. When I walked into the room in the Prado where Velázquez's most famous work *Las Meninas* hangs, everything changed. I was changed. I stepped out of time and into the work and stayed there for hours. It was an encounter that completely restored my belief in the pure magic of painting.

Since then, my work has been shaped by these different strands: close encounters with art works in an attempt to understand their transformative potential; the craft of fiction and how it might leak into the world of art; and an absolute belief that the answer to a work's magical intensity resides in the lived experiences of its maker. The past three years—a period in which I have, as a writer, largely hidden myself from public view—have only intensified this approach, and congealed in a cluster of new projects: a monograph about a painter; a collection of interviews with another; and a novel.

So I am very interested whenever I hear of a writer attempting to blur disciplines in an attempt to unlock the internal magic of paintings—and even more so when it deals with the same epiphanic work, *Las Meninas*. This is what Aotearoa novelist Andrea Hotere has done, placing Velazquez's confounding painting at the heart of her debut novel, *The Vanishing Point*.

Hotere's book is a literary, plot-driven thriller with twists and turns akin to Dan Brown or Stieg Larsson. It bounces between the declining and corrupt Spanish court of Philip IV, with the Infanta Margarita (the painting's ostensible central subject) and Velázquez at its heart, and early

1990s London, where a precocious but haphazard young researcher at the Courtauld is trying to unpack her family's dark connection to Velázquez's most famous work. Central to Hotere's narrative is the painting's internal mysteries: the fact that it is not really a portrait of the Infanta at all, but rather—in Hotere's telling—a work in which Velazquez hid, in plain sight, alarming truths about Philip IV, his family, and the dying Habsburg regime he stood at the head of.

In following a fictional path, Hotere joins a well-established genre: other examples of novels that explore the spells paintings cast over us include Tracey Chevalier's *Girl With a Pearl Earring*; Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*; and Iain Pears's Italian art history whodunnits from the 1990s. Reading *The Vanishing Point* brought my own experience of seeing *Las Meninas* back vividly. Hotere's novel is underpinned by the same understanding of the surprising power paintings can have over the trajectory of our lives.

The Prologue of *The Vanishing Point* follows the interview.

Anthony Byrt: Congratulations on *The Vanishing Point*—it's terrific fun! I guess the obvious starting point is, why Velázquez? And why *Las Meninas*?

Andrea Hotere: Thank you! I first saw *Las Meninas* when I visited the Prado with my parents, aged eight or nine. I spent several days sitting in the same room, reading, while Mum and Dad went around the galleries. I didn't think about it much again until I was in my 30s, with young kids. I tuned in halfway through a radio interview while I was folding washing. I didn't know what it was about, but by the end I had worked out that I was weirdly familiar with this painting that was being discussed. And I became interested in learning more about it. The painting was quite mysterious to me.

AB: It's famously regarded as the most-written about painting in art history—as well as the most confounding. Was the vast amount of literature on it an advantage for you, or a hindrance?

AH: It was both help and hindrance. It could seem like a daunting tidal wave of analysis; there were literally so many citations, I couldn't read them all. That could stop you in your tracks, but in one sense it was quite liberating, because I couldn't read everything. People had evaluated the painting from different perspectives, and I found those variations quite engrossing. Orthodoxies or 'received' views form and can ossify; people become afraid to challenge them. I went down quite a few rabbit holes. I needed to rely on the story and my own instincts to lead me through the labyrinth. I decided to treat *Las Meninas* as a historical source in itself. Historians tended to privilege written sources over visual ones—I wanted to flip that, and I think *Las Meninas* invites you to do so. The general history of the period was also important, as was the literature. But you can also lose yourself in there, so it helped to have my modern characters driving things along.

AB: Beyond the subject matter, I'm very interested in your genre choice. I know the press release refers to Tracey Chevalier and Maggie O'Farrell—but there's also a really big dose of Dan Brown in here. I'm interested to hear about the decision-making process that led you to write a thriller. Was it the obvious path from the start, or did it emerge in the writing?

AH: It actually emerged in the writing, but also from my research. I set out to write historical fiction, but I wanted to also have a modern timeline. When I started compressing and intensifying that modern timeline, it developed more pace and turned into something more thriller-esque. I knew it wasn't a romance, like *Possession*, which I loved. I admired Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*: I read that from back to front, as did AS Byatt, who wrote *Possession*. I tried to learn what I could from them. *Possession* has also been described as historiographic meta-fiction (as has Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, another I studied). It occurred to me that I was attempting to write art-historiographic metafiction, with elements of a mystery/thriller. Whether or not I've achieved that will be up to others to decide.

For me, the thriller aspect also began to emerge as I focused on the relationships between characters and I tried to tease out this sense of a 'curse'—wherein lay some mystery. Yes, I've read Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and I've considered his techniques. I wanted the reader to be able to follow the modern characters, but also have the added depth of the historical story—and a potential new interpretation of *Las Meninas*—and then be able to piece it all together. I

liked the idea that the reader would be traversing time in the same way that artworks traverse or transcend time.

AB: The story bounces between the period in the 1650s when *Las Meninas* was made, and 1991 in London. I was curious about this: why 1991? Why not the present day?

AH: I chose 1991 deliberately so that the main character's research could be done pre-internet. I also needed her to be a child of the 70s/80s—a time when parents would leave kids places without too much stress. I found the legwork required pre-internet makes it more active and therefore more exciting, hopefully.



Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), *Las Meninas*, 1957, oil on canvas, 194 x 260 cm, Museu Picasso, Barcelona

AB: It's almost impossible to deal with Velázquez without also dealing with Picasso. And you've placed his attempt to understand/conquer Velázquez's achievement right at the heart of the plot. Was that a tricky process, having to navigate not one Spanish master, but two?

AH: Picasso would love to hear you say that! It was such an interesting and fantastic process and looking at Picasso really helped unlock a few things in relation to Velázquez. I think you *can* look at Velázquez without looking at Picasso, but he provided a route which, for me, was more telling than some of the writing about *Las Meninas*. My impulse was to trust the art itself, and the artists. I suspect Picasso didn't have all the answers, although I felt he was intuiting them. His sense of a life force in art connected to my own understandings of mauri, of wairua, through my father's [Ralph Hotere] work. What Picasso reminded me of is the importance of bravery. Despite all the analysis, I felt Velázquez's motives may have been a little misunderstood.

AB: The decay of Philip IV's court—and of the King himself—sits underneath the plot, and the story of the painting. How faithful were you to the real events? Or is there enough ambiguity and mystery still in what we know that you felt comfortable fictionalising certain aspects?

AH: The past is often murkier, dirtier and more shocking than we expect, and fact is frequently stranger than fiction. That was the case with Philip IV's court. I used Hilary Mantel's dictum as my guide: 'don't alter history to suit your plot'. I tried to remain faithful to events, but there is some ambiguity in there, which I allude to in my notes at the end of the book. I sensed, too, that key historical evidence may have been suppressed, and that different parties had different motivations about what was and wasn't recorded. It's important to me to honour those people whom I'm trying to embody, almost to reanimate. In researching, writing, and inhabiting characters like this, as an artist or writer you have to leap into space—to borrow Picasso's phrase—and that can be quite a mystical experience. Having achieved what felt like the right degree of historical veracity, I allowed myself to do a few loop-the-loops. I hope readers are willing to come along for the ride.

'Artists and writers tend to critique the systems that they operate within. I'm familiar with that process, because I've witnessed it. And it can be heroic.'

AB: This is also a book about women. Just as the painting does, you've placed the Infanta Margarita at the heart of the story. How much did you know about her when you embarked on the project, beyond her place in the painting?

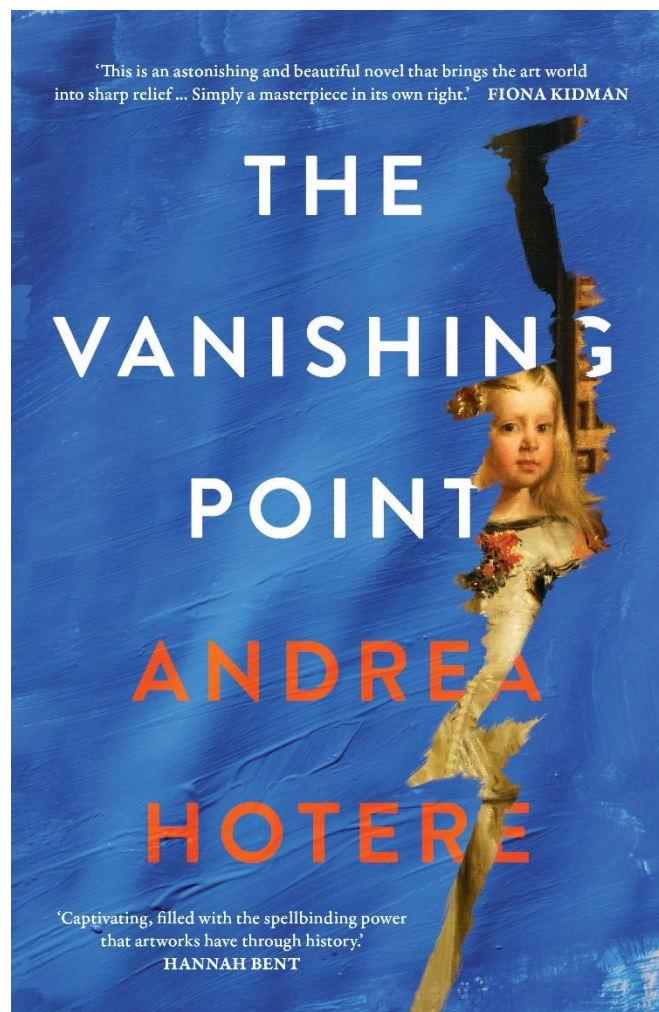
AH: Yes, it does foreground women; I take the lead on this from Velázquez, who, as you say, foregrounds the Infanta. I knew very little about her when I started. Quite early on I had a conversation with the biographer of her husband, the Emperor Leopold. He described her as not of much interest, pallid, even boring. That didn't fit with the earlier descriptions of her as the life of the Alcazar, and it bugged me. I wondered what had happened to her.

AB: Your central protagonist Alex is haunted both by the Infanta and her late mother's obsession with *Las Meninas*. Again, it seems like you wanted to put the intergenerational relationships between women at the heart of things. Why?

AH: Yes, that's true. I had a sense of women telling their own stories, and driving their own stories and rescuing each other. There is an old Spanish fable/folktale, about spinning women, who are trapped but free each other through their labour. That chimed with my efforts to say something about how women are shown in art, in history, as well as about their roles in society and their desire for self-determination. It also connected with Arachne, and her labours on behalf of other women.

AB: How much are your own parents a presence in the book? I've always felt that Ralph had strong connections with Spanish painting, both through Picasso and Tàpies. Poetry also permeates the book, which of course made me think of your mother, Cilla McQueen.

AH: The short answer is they're not. The characters are independent creations or based on historical figures. But yes, I am influenced by my parents. Mum and Dad connected through art and through poetry and, perhaps not surprisingly, my heroes are artists and writers. Dad had a great affection for Spain—for Velázquez, El Greco, Goya, Picasso and, more recently, Tàpies. He also loved, as does Mum, the poetry of Federico García Lorca. The writers of the period such as Quevedo, and Calderon, who was like the Spanish Shakespeare, had this wonderful skewering wit. Artists and writers tend to critique the systems that they operate within. I'm familiar with that process, because I've witnessed it. And it can be heroic.



Andrea Hotere, *The Vanishing Point*, Ultimo Press, 2023 (cover)

An extract from *The Vanishing Point*

PROLOGUE

The Royal Alcázar, Madrid, 1656

DIEGO Velázquez stood alone in the studio. He glanced up at the painting above the mirror. A fair copy – of one of Rubens’ finest, even down to the background detail – of the tapestry version of Titian’s *The Rape of Europa*. Velázquez knew Rubens’ work well, almost as well as he knew Titian’s original. Ignoring the goddess and the cowering mortal, Arachne, his eyes rested on the image of the bull, Zeus, bearing away the fair maiden, Europa, on his back, while her friends lament on the shore in the distance. The king of the gods. The resisting maiden. Titian’s bold title.

The face of his own king swam before him, pale and sallow. It was a miracle that he was still here, painting King Philip and his new family. He sighed and closed his eyes as his mind travelled back to the night, years past, still haunting him.

—

A pounding at the front door. The dog barked. Beside him, Juana stirred. ‘Go back to sleep,’ Velázquez said, patting her linen-clad shoulder. ‘I’ll go.’ He slipped a robe over his nightgown and climbed out of bed, padding over the Turkish rugs on the wooden floor and down the stairs to the entranceway, where the housekeeper was already opening the door. Olivares, his patron – a great beast of a man – entered without ceremony and proceeded into the living room. Trailing him was a younger fellow, dressed as if for a journey.

Velázquez was in his early twenties when the chamberlain had brought him to Madrid and helped to establish him in the royal court. This was back in the 1620s, when the King, an uncertain young man of sixteen, had not long ascended the throne. His Highness still deferred too much to those around him, which, Velázquez knew, was just how Olivares liked it.

At a look from Olivares, Velázquez dismissed the housekeeper.

‘He leaves in the morning for Italy,’ Olivares told him, gesturing at his companion. ‘I need a likeness. Can you do it?’

Velázquez knew better than to question his patron, but he wondered at the strangeness of this urgent request. Why not a daytime commission, with more time, if a portrait was required?

Before he could respond, Olivares inclined his head to the right, as was his habit when he appeared to be making a suggestion but was, in fact, subtly directing their sovereign in his game of puppetry. ‘From this we will be able to complete a portrait, to celebrate him on his return,’ said Olivares, straight-faced.

Velázquez nodded, steepled his fingers in front of him and pressed them to his lips, studying the younger man who seemed oblivious to his fate. What that fate might be, Velázquez was not sure, but the circumstances of his arrival – covert, late at night, with the patron himself – did not bode well.

Olivares added, ‘He goes on an important mission for the King – to the Pope.’

Ah, so that was it. This was the messenger tasked with transporting the evidence to the Pope: a heavy load he would carry in a very small trunk. He would not know its contents. The churchmen of the Inquisition had worked hard to provoke this concession. Evidence had been gathered; perhaps justice would be done. Yet it was to be entrusted to one man? How secure would he be? The enterprise seemed ill-judged . . . or was that intentional?

‘Please, sit.’ Velázquez could not believe this was all going ahead – and now Olivares had brought him here; was implicating Velázquez in his plan. He cursed internally, felt his innards clenching, recoiling, but fought to keep his outward expression tranquil. ‘May I offer some wine, perhaps?’

Olivares sank into a chair with a grunt and, at his nod, the other man, the messenger, took a smaller seat by the window. He sat with his back straight, hands on his knees, the soles of his boots pressing into the floor.

Velázquez unstopped a carafe and poured some *vino tinto* for his guests.

Olivares flung off his gloves and let them fall, then took the proffered goblet.

The messenger declined the wine.

Velázquez studied his subject. The man wore a short cape and a white shirt open at the neck.

There was something of the soldier in his attentive posture.

Olivares was almost smiling, as he twirled the tip of his moustache with one hand and swirled the wine in his cup with the other. 'Make it an exact likeness. His mother loves him, and the King will too.' He laughed, showing his stained teeth.

Velázquez took up some paper on a board and selected a pencil from a pouch inside the sideboard. With his back to his guests, he took a few moments to steady himself. These were the tools he kept at the house, with which he'd drawn his beloved wife, Juana, and even Ignatia. At the thought of her, his little departed angel, he took up another pencil, a new one; those that had sketched her form were sacred. There was nothing sacred about Olivares, and nothing was sacred to him. All was tradeable, even honour. And yet, he, as royal artist, had given his own loyalty to this man, and to the King.

Sighing, he returned, sat on a wooden stool, and considered his subject. He let his hand translate the man's stubby nose and alert eyes onto the paper. Could he see in the dark with eyes like those? He seemed to open them unnaturally wide, as if trying to let more light inside. And he had the eyelashes of a woman, bristly and black. Unluckily for him, his face was a distinctive one; there was even a mole on the side of his nose.

Velázquez made a point in the corner of the lower eyelid, for where the tears would come out. For he suspected, as he drew, that there would be tears; that his drawing might even become a death warrant.

When it was done, Olivares took the drawing and held it in front of him, between him and the messenger. He smiled slyly, pursed his lips and nodded. Then he frowned. 'You've forgotten the . . .' He touched the side of his nose.

'Ah, of course.' Velázquez had left it off on purpose, wanted to give the man a chance.

He brought his pencil to the likeness once more and sketched the raised mole on the side of the fellow's nose into position.

'That will do very well,' said Olivares. 'Instantly recognisable.' It was true. Poor bugger.

Velázquez released the paper into his patron's eager hands.

Velázquez shivered slightly. A cool breeze drifted across his shoulders. He had been staring at his own reflection in the mirror, lost in the memory of where this had all begun. He took a step back and considered the distance to the door on his right. He then looked up to the two empty hooks in the ceiling, awaiting new lights. Like the Inquisitor's tools, or the meat hooks in the market, he thought. One of them was tantalisingly close to the pictured bull. It was not too great a mental leap.

He checked himself.

Could he do it? Did he dare?

About the Authors

Andrea Hotere, daughter of renowned Aotearoa artist Ralph Hotere and acclaimed poet Cilla McQueen, grew up in Ōtepoti Dunedin. After studying history at the University of Otago (BA Hons) and journalism at the University of Canterbury, she travelled to London where she worked on newspapers and magazines. Returning to Aotearoa, she worked on television documentaries and programmes as a researcher, investigative journalist and as a producer. Andrea Hotere is the co-author (with Priscilla Pitts) of *Undreamed Of... 50 years of the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship*, which was longlisted in the 2018 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards. Andrea connects to Te Aupouri, Te Rarawa, and Aotearoa, England and Scotland. She lives in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland with husband Richard Naish and their three children.

Anthony Byrt is a writer based in Te Tai Tokerau/Northland. He is the author of two books, *This Model World: Travels to the Edge of Contemporary Art* (AUP, 2016) and *The Mirror Steamed Over: Love and Pop in London, 1962* (AUP, 2020). Throughout 2023, he has been the Kaipukahu Writer in Residence at the University of Waikato, working on three book projects.

This text was commissioned and edited by Christina Barton.

About ArtNow Essays

Commissioned by the Aotearoa Public Gallery Directors' Network (APGDN) and published on ArtNow.NZ with support from Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa New Zealand and member galleries of the network. Learn more about ArtNow Essays [here](#).

Copyright 2022 ArtNow.NZ, the author and the artists.

All rights reserved. Except for reasonable purposes of fair review, no part may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by any means without prior written consent of the publisher.