

Finding Faces: An alternative approach to portraiture

by

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for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Art Department of the College of Visual and
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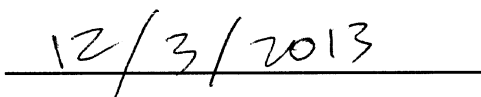
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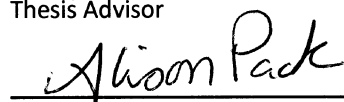


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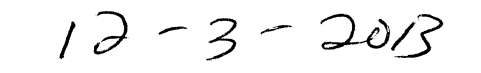


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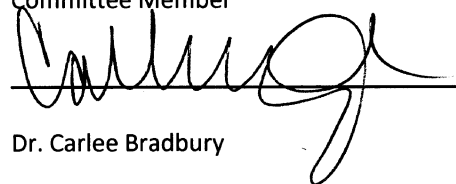


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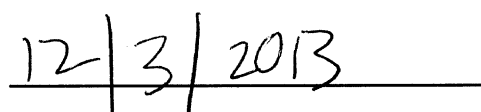


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Abstract

A face to me is like an apple to Cezanne. I am interested in the emotions the face conveys: the scars, wrinkles and unique characteristics on each. Yet, I am not interested in painting a “likeness” or a portrait, at least not in the sense of creating an accurate depiction of my subject, but what they are portraying and expressing. On its own, the face can express a lot about a person’s character without having to say a word. Regardless of whom they are or where they are from, each person I paint has a story written on his or her face that I wish to portray in my paintings.

In this thesis, I will share my journey from a rigid realistic painter of animals to a loose and expressive painter of human emotions. As with all journeys there were setbacks, challenges, changes, but ultimately a prize to be had. For me that prize was the discovery of my own artistic style that incorporates street art and one of the most famous contemporary artists: Chuck Close.

My results, thus far, have not brought me to the end of my studies but to an exciting new chapter. Each piece represents not only a new creation, but a new experiment that opens doors to new ideas. Even as this thesis is written, there are many more canvases in my studio with new experiments on them.

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Introduction: What is *Finding Faces*?

A face to me is like an apple to Cezanne. I am interested in the emotion it convey the scars, wrinkles and unique characteristics on each. Yet, I am not interested in painting a “likeness” or a portrait, at least not in the sense of creating an accurate depiction of my subject, but what they are portraying and expressing. On its own, the face can express a lot about a person’s character without having to say a word. Regardless of whom they are or where they are from, each person I paint has a story written on his or her face that I wish to portray in my paintings.

My work is a conglomerate of ideas and influences that revolve around concepts of the 20th century. Although I began as a classical realist painter, my work has slowly evolved into a mixture of pop and street art with a touch of influence by contemporary masters such as Chuck Close. When I arrived at Radford University to study under renowned artist Z.L. Feng, I had every intention of being a master realist painter. Yet, during the three years I have worked under him, I have realized that there are certain techniques and styles that would best suit what I wanted to say in my work. Part of this discovery came from observing Feng’s work and how it was changing as well. Feng was going from a strictly realistic portrayal of life to a more painterly style combining ancient Chinese brush painting techniques and traditional Western landscapes. As Feng was developing and changing his subjects and style, so was I. Originally, my subject matter was about animals, but through my three years of studying and practicing, I have gone from realistic animal portraiture to human experiences and from strict realism to more abstract and contemporary views of painting the human face.

When I started my journey into the art world I never considered 20th century art to be inspiring; yet, today, I find myself fascinated by 20th century works. As I explored portraiture, I noticed that the simplest shapes and two tones (black and white) could make a face stand out from the canvas. I observed this by studying street artists. I was intrigued and created portraiture in a similar way, even in academic drawings. It was not long until I realized that street and pop art had similar visual qualities, such as Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Monroe* portrait and Sheppard Fairey's Barack Obama of the *Hope* poster. The street artist known as VHILS creates portraits by painting white primer over raw brick then removes portions of the primed surface revealing only what is needed to create a portrait. This technique is not what pop artists did, but the actual "drawing" or image is similar to Warhol's: two-toned, black and white. I noticed that a lot of the street artists I admired used a similar technique, albeit a different medium. Artists like Max Zorn, Banksy, Sheppard Fairey, and VHILS all used the same approach. I studied their method, worked with street artists like Patch Whisky, and began to incorporate it into my own portraiture. Although I was pleased with the results, I wanted something that combined more of the elements of fine art.

My studies of the 20th Century introduced me to the works of Chuck Close. I was inspired by the way he created realistic paintings from a mosaic of smaller abstract pieces. Yet, I was not drawn to how photo-realistic the image appeared but rather to the concept that when one stood next to a Chuck Close they would see a series of small abstract paintings and together they created a whole image. I felt that this concept was something I wanted to employ in my own work but I wanted to take it in a different direction utilizing more abstract techniques.

In my recent work, I have been exploring the use of drips, texture and how they interact with one another. I combine these elements into my portraits of people who come from various backgrounds: Native Americans, military personnel, and even those in my neighborhood. Like Chuck Close, I strive to create a portrait that cannot be easily read up close, but unlike him, I am not striving for photo-realism. Instead my portraits are more like those of the street and pop artists: two-toned with strong contrast. With that in mind, I add texture to the initial surface, gesso it, paint it, add washes and utilize a watercolor technique called granulation. Next, I will drip paint vertically and horizontally creating imperfect “boxes”. Finally, I will paint within each box. Each box works toward the larger image - a portrait. I do not hide the lines of the drips, nor do I try to direct the drips; I am just reacting to the areas that I can paint and strive to find the face that lays within the canvas.

My subject matter of Native Americans, military personnel, and people from my life are selected through an informal process. I select my models by their story and facial characteristics. I am an Iraq veteran, so painting other veterans and talking about our stories is a way for me to overcome some of my own issues when it comes to coping with the past. From these relationships I meet people with interesting facial features and stories that inspire me to portray them in my art. Likewise, although I am not a Native American, I find their history fascinating as theirs is similar to my own – I come from the Philippines. Like the veterans I meet, I am fond of their stories and facial characteristics, particularly the prominent cheek bones, steely eyes, and expressions which, alone, create so many interesting questions. For example: who are they, where have they been, and what are their stories? It is the same with the folks I meet in my everyday life; there are

so many interesting people I meet who have strong features and great stories. I try to tell their stories in my art. In all cases, regardless of background, they are people I know or get to know. Unlike pop art or street art I am not interested in celebrities, politicians or any popular image. I am interested in knowing who my subjects are, their stories, and taking my own photos of them. In the end, I hope to take everyday people and lift them up, much as pop artists lifted kitsch items up as art. I wish to do the same with the ordinary everyday person. My work is about “Finding Faces” and creating a portrait of my friends.

My thesis will include an analysis of my work in three stages: my process, my influences and my subject matter. I will discuss how my process evolved over my course of study. I will discuss how my studies of the 20th century influenced me. Finally, I will discuss my subject matter, why I choose to paint these subjects, and the direction of my work.

Chapter 1: My Background and the Decision to Change Artistic Styles

In this chapter, I will take you on an artistic ride from my early work at the undergraduate level to my current work. In doing this, you will see my early influences and why I chose, initially, to do representational realism and why I felt that I could not go on in that direction. Through six years of long nights studying and practicing art, I felt that my ability to express what I wanted to say was quite limited. As one looks at my vision for my art, one would agree that it had to change. Yet, change to what?

When I began my search for a graduate program I was determined to create work that was representational realism—photo-realism—and to study under a well-respected artist in that field. With this criterion in mind, I eventually found my way to Radford University as a student under Zheng L. Feng. Feng's portraiture was a feature in *Watercolor Magazine*—an art magazine I frequently read—and I highly admired his work. I knew from that point that I wanted to learn from him and become a strong realist artist; however, my idea of what I wanted then would evolve into a new direction inspired by the change I saw in Feng's work and in the watercolor classes I took with him.

As a child, I was always impressed with the Renaissance masters, such as Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. I wanted to emulate their works, I wanted to hide my brushstrokes like them, and I wanted to maintain smooth surfaces. So from my earliest days as an artist (somewhere around three years old) through age twenty-eight, I strove for Renaissance-styled work found in the family Bible.

My passion for art was on and off again throughout my youth but it was truly ignited during a tour with the U.S. Air Force to Iraq. During my six-and-a-half-month stay there I experienced things that I do not have the courage to write about here, but

through my paintings, I hope to express what I want to say. Not just about what happened there but in all walks of my life. My paintings tend to be portraits of other veterans, Native Americans, and the people in my life. Why I choose to paint them will be covered later in this thesis but for now I wish to lay a foundation for you to understand why I paint and why my style had to change.

When I paint, I paint in hope of creating an engaging experience for my viewers. I want them to ask more questions about who they are looking at, what is their story? What happened? Why are they sad, happy or discontent? The people I paint are selected by their unique characteristics and I love to paint that character. The face expresses so many emotions and tells so many stories that you do not need to add too much to make a story—it is there in the person's face and that is why I love to paint them. No two faces are alike.

After I came home from Iraq, I committed myself to going back to school and studying art. I took courses in figurative drawing, read industry magazines that focused on representational realism (like *American Artist*, *International Artist*, *Painting Magazine*, etc.) and I would study the works of contemporary masters like David Kassan, Jeremy Lipking, and Daniel Greene. I would spend hours copying their images hoping to just get a rough likeness of their work. I was certain that this was the path for me. The following images (Figure 1, Figure 2) were created in the style of many of these contemporary masters:



Figure 1: *It Was Beautiful Once Before*, Acrylic on Canvas



Figure 2: *Reminisce: Iraq and Me*, Watercolor on Paper

These two images, at the time, were like small landmarks for me, marking my increasing progress in my technical skills. There was an immense amount pride placed on each of these at the time of their creation. These paintings marked where I wanted to be

and were similar to the works of the contemporary realists I strove to be like. So one would think that this was the end of the road, right? Not quite.

As I grew in my work I became frustrated; I felt that a lot of my pieces were lacking essential elements and techniques for creating a statement. Often times I felt as though I were creating a still photograph and not a piece of “art”. In my later pieces, before changing directions, I illustrated images of Native Americans wearing traditional regalia. I found that I spent more time reading about and practicing painting about what they wore and less time about what I *felt*. It was as though my work was cold and lacked emotion.

In Figure 3 below, I recreated a historic scene regarding the treaty of 1611 between the Powhatan and Monacan Indians. I travelled over two hundred miles, round trip, to Amherst, Virginia to research the Monacan. I looked at their regalia and peace pipes, talked with their curator, and studied the DNA reconstructed face of a Monacan Indian based on forensic reconstruction of a skull. I did the same with the Powhatan Tribe and looked at all of their traditions, headdresses, and regalia before I put together the image. Once I felt good about the study, I began the painting and the result was nice, yet, to me, lacked emotion.



Figure 3: An Uneasy Peace: Treaty of 1611, Acrylic on Masonite

Several Native American friends and historians commented positively on it but there seemed to be a lack of movement or sense of urgency, and if not for the character in the middle there would be a lack of feeling too. I felt as if I spent too much time on getting facial features, physiology, and historical accuracy right but neglected my own personal feelings about the situation in the piece. So, I decided to revisit some of my older works and journals, and delve into more history books.

The spark that lit the flame for a change in my style began while I was tinkering with watercolor techniques in Zheng L. Feng's watercolor classes. I wanted real, but was drawn to looser brushstrokes, dripping of paint, wet on wet, and the granulation of color. So I began practicing techniques with no real statement involved, just cataloging how I felt regarding each exploit. One of the earliest exploits began with a portrait I did of Arvel Bird, a Native American musician. The painting is filled with a spectrum of colors that run together in what appears spontaneous but are very deliberate in execution. I wanted to play with colors, I wanted to have more depth in my paintings, I wanted more movement, and overall, I wanted my viewers to be drawn towards the work. In order to

achieve this, I put drips in to add movement, texture for visual interest, and a multitude of colors to create a more vibrant mood. I really wanted to express a more positive mood in this and the result is the image in Figure 4 below.

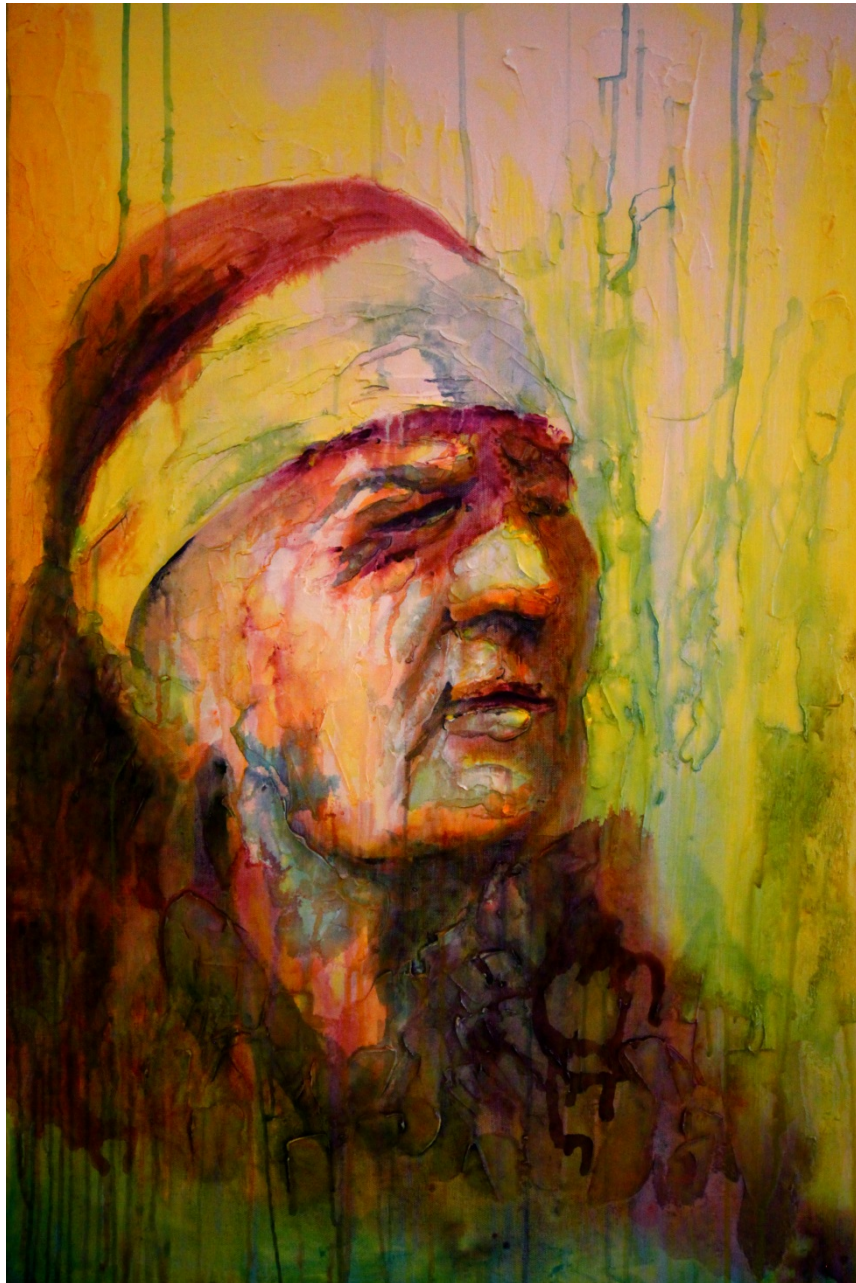


Figure 4

This particular image received a far greater response from viewers than my more rigid works, which was nice; but more importantly, people were discussing what the

image was about. Asking “who is this man,” “this is interesting, tell me more about him,” and “I feel that there is more to this person than what I see.” Statements like this made me realize that changing my style was imperative. Shortly after this image, I followed it up with *Listening* (Figure 5), a piece about a fancy-dancer I met at a pow-wow who believed he was dancing for his ancestors of the past. Before each dance he would “listen” for them.



Figure 5: Listening, Acrylic on Canvas

Listening garnered even better responses, not just positive remarks but often, exactly the ones I had hoped it would receive. I wanted viewers to connect with the past and present; to accomplish this, I painted a solid face of the Indian in the present while adding in primitive looking hand prints that resembled Mesolithic hand paintings. This

effect helped to emphasize the idea that this is not just about the present but the past as well, and that the main subject is connecting and listening. The overall response to this image left a mark on me. I decided at this point that there would be no going back. My viewers were responding and connecting with what my intended statements were about. My vision was to create artwork that made my viewers ask questions, search for answers, and learn more about that person.

I felt that viewer interactions and reactions were vitally important to my work, and as I looked into the past, at the museums, and the books I have read regarding art that impacts me, I asked myself “what pieces moved me?” This question guided me through my second year of study here and eventually laid the groundwork for my new body of work. In the next chapter I will share how my studies and influences affected me and my new body of art.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I started out copying images of Renaissance Masters, i.e. Michelangelo, Raphael, and Da Vinci. I grew up in a Catholic family and would spend hours just poring over pictures from the family Bible. I was enthralled by the brooding figures of Michelangelo’s and the compositional beauty of Raphael. Of course, being 3 or 4 years old, I had no idea what I liked about each of their works or what these terms meant, but I was really impacted by them. Part of it was their skill, but I was fascinated by the stories that I imagined were happening.

I spent many of my early years just trying to get to their level and I reached a peak with *An Uneasy Peace: Treaty of 1611*, as presented earlier. Once I was not happy, and thus began my soul searching—a search for a new style.

I spent hours looking at contemporary portraiture asking “why am I drawn to this?” If I could do this, then I could really work in earnest towards a body of work that I wanted. My first stop, the artist that really thrilled and inspired me, was Chuck Close.

Chapter 2: My Studies and Influences: How the Past and Present Formed My Art

In this chapter I am going to share how my studies in art history and of contemporary masters influenced my evolving style. During my second year of graduate school I had decided to get away from the rigid style of realism to a looser, more expressive style of work. I spent many months tinkering with new techniques, concepts, and designs. During this time, I do not believe that I was ever really set on one form or another, and Feng and I were okay with that. I knew that I wanted something loose, spontaneous, and powerful. I knew from my studies of the masters that I admired most—Chuck Close, VHILS, and Banksy—that those were the things I wanted my viewers to feel, because these artists' work had the same effect on me. I didn't want to mimic their style, but rather the way they impacted others.

The first time I saw Chuck Close's work, I was fascinated by the way Close used color and made the viewer look at the face differently. I had spent many years trying to create photo-realistic images—no brushstrokes, no abstract interpretations, and nothing loose or expressive—yet with Close I saw an opportunity to be realistic but without all of the rigid rules of realism. I was fascinated and hooked on his work. I never wanted to copy his style, but rather, I was inspired to try to do something different that would combine my favorite abstract techniques that I had experimented with and the representational realism that I wanted.

Close's earliest works are textbook examples of photo-realism: well-rendered, hidden brushstrokes, great use of depth, volume, and mass—as if you were staring directly at the person (see Figure 6). Even more, what makes his work really stand out is the era that he created these images in. Abstract expressionism and pop art were all the rage, yet

here is an artist doing something conventional during a time when the unconventional was popular. I found this to be an admirable quality, and to some degree I felt the same way about my own artistic journey.



Figure 6: Mark, 1979. Acrylic on canvas, 9 x 7m.

I was pushed throughout my undergraduate studies to be loose, but I wanted tight realism. I liked abstract paintings, abstract techniques, but I wanted to exhibit a sense of strong technical abilities that realism gave. Close's work was so technically sound that I could not get over how he did it. But in the end the same questions I had about my own work regarding expression, I began to ask about Close's. Why did I like his work? Was it

purely due to the realistic rendering? If so, what did it say? How would that help me with what I have to say to others? In the end I could not answer these questions.

What fascinated me about Close's work? I looked at his early work, photo-realism; I looked at the contemporary photo-realists; and then I looked at my own work and process. I was enthused by the way artists like David Kassan and Jeremy Lipking captured such realistic textures, skin tones, and expressions. Kassan made everyday people look interesting and pushed me to ask more questions about the person. Lipking had a way of creating a very present feeling in his paintings, as if you were a part of the scene as opposed to viewing—just like a Rembrandt. Close's characters were much the same way. I liked the stories and interesting expressions found on each of their models' faces. Yet, in the end I did not like painting that way. I started to look at Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, and street artists. I began practicing their techniques—drip painting, splatter painting, mono-chromatic two tone painting—and the more I practiced abstract techniques on my own, the more I wanted to get away from the rules of realism.

As I began gravitating towards a looser style, I delved deeper into the life of Chuck Close. Close had a life altering accident that forced him to work from a wheel chair for the rest of his life. Despite this obstacle, he still continued to do what he did best: paint. He painted images that were abstract but also photo-realistic.

When one gazes upon a Chuck Close painting up close, one is treated to a mosaic of small abstract images that harken to the time of Kandinsky, but standing farther away; one sees the photo-realist in Chuck Close come out (see Figure 7). It is like staring at both an abstract painting but also a realism piece. For me, it was as though the world of art was born again: abstract and realism could co-exist in painting.

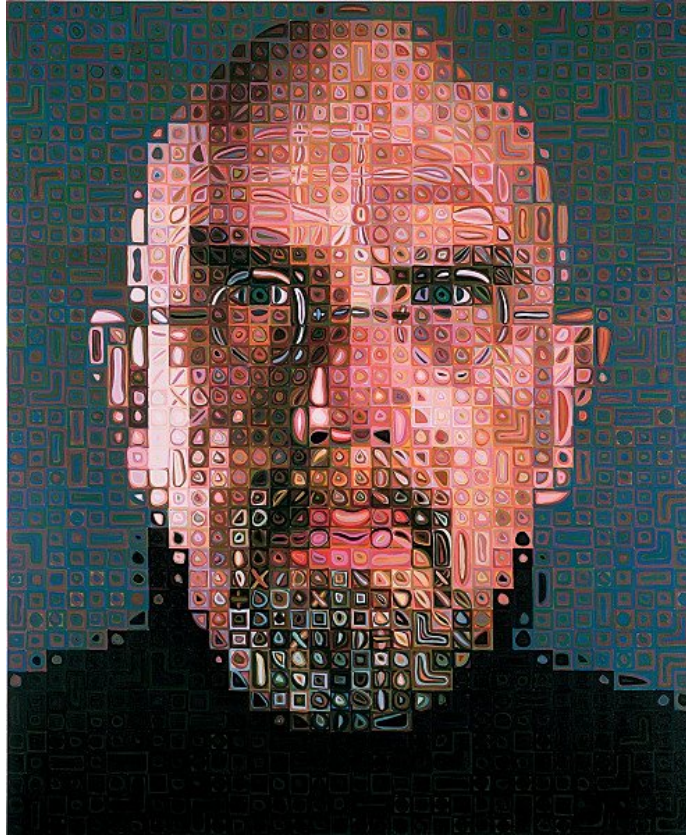


Figure 7: Self-Portrait, 2004-2005, Oil on Canvas, 102" x 86", Private Collection, New York

While exploring the works of Close on a Google image search, I stumbled upon images by VHILS and Banksy, two world renowned street artists. I was immediately drawn to what they were doing; they were creating the illusion of realism but with very basic concepts and techniques. Neither artist employed a large number of colors nor did they use an eight point gray scale (often used for indicating middle tones). Instead, they used limited colors—often just two—and the only real draftsmanship they worked were on the shadows and contrasts. In short, they did more with less. Their images appeared three dimensional, well rendered, and detailed, yet were very simple.

Banksy is a street artist whose real identity is not known and who is referred to only by his street art name. His work is popular in the United Kingdom and he is well

known for his political statements. His statements did fascinate me, but I was more interested in his work. Oftentimes he'll paint on a bright urban surface, such as a white or light colored wall, then he will hold up his stencil and spray (or roll) black paint onto the surface. The black-stenciled image creates a very strong contrast so that, from a distance, you immediately know what you are looking at. Usually it is a three dimensional figure, and it was all done in a few minutes (to avoid arrest). What interested me in his work was the simplicity of using only a few colors with no middle-tones (something I fought with a lot in realism), yet creating the illusion of something real. There is no detail but the illusion of realism is present; that is what drew me to his work. Same with the work by VHILS (Alexandre Farto): realistic, with a simple palette of colors, but with an added dimension: texture.

VHILS' work fascinates me. His subjects are typically portraits, the faces are filled with emotion, his color usage is limited, and what really draws me to his work is how he creates it. Unlike traditional street artists, he does not work with a brush or a can of paint to draft his portraits. From time to time he'll do outlines with the paint but it is not the focal point. Instead, he creates his images by reducing the façade of the surface. For example, a cinder block is gray in color but in many cases when used as an exterior on a building the cinder block is covered by a coat of paint, which makes any wall like this a prime target for VHILS to work on. First, if needed, he will prime the wall (often with white primer), and then he will draft an outline of the portrait with black paint. Just as Banksy would create a black and white "stencil" image of a person using two tones, VHILS does the same but with a face. All of the shadows on the portrait are painted black, and initially you see a black and white portrait in paint, but VHILS takes it further.

This is where he adds in that extra dimension: he removes the black painted surface with a chisel and hammer thereby making the shadows on the portrait gray from the natural color of the cinder block. The effect is surreal. When I first saw a VHILS in a book, I was not sure what I was staring at, but I knew right away that I liked it! It took me a few minutes of wondering “what is it,” but once I saw the big picture I was really fascinated. I stopped reading my book at the time and did a Google image search for VHILS. I needed to see more works of his! I spent nearly four hours looking at all of his works online. The cinder blocks I mentioned above were only an example of the many materials he’s worked with. He has cut into brick walls, poster kiosks (often found in Europe); plaster walls with brick underneath, and many other surfaces. What VHILS exposed me to was the power of texture!

I knew how interesting texture was before, but VHILS, like Chuck Close, showed me a new way of looking at it. As mentioned before, I spent most of my youth and academic years in art trying to achieve a hidden-brushstroke appearance in my paintings, as this was the style of the Renaissance artists that I so admired, so upon viewing VHILS’ work I saw great potential. I liked how the images changed with the lighting. The textural surfaces created small shadows of their own, adding an extra layer of interest. The image as seen from one point differed when looking at it from another and that is what I liked—the multiple ways to interact with it made it move.

When I began my studies I had an idea of what I wanted to do—Renaissance-style art—but in the end Chuck Close, Banksy and VHILS would be the most influential on me. My work was slowly developing from a rigid style of realism to a more fluid and expressive style but at the same time, I wanted to maintain a level of real or natural

representation. During the summer of 2012 I realized that I really enjoy painting faces. I liked alternate viewpoints of creating realism and I was no longer interested in doing things in a realism style. During the following academic year (2012-13) my work would combine elements of Chuck Close, Banksy, and VHILS. I wanted to paint portraits like Close, I wanted a limited palette like Banksy, and I wanted texture—not exactly like VHILS, but used in a way that would add dimension. With these ideas in mind, I felt that I had the foundations for my new direction laid down, but moving it to canvas would prove challenging. In the next chapter I will discuss these challenges. However, at the time, just getting to the point where I knew what I wanted to do was a big step.

Chapter 3: My New Direction: *Finding Faces*

My Subjects and Process

I felt a new level of confidence and energy as I entered into the fall of 2013, as I had established a foundation for what I wanted to create. The hard part was putting ideas to canvas and hoping they went as expected. Over the summer I spent a lot of time looking at the techniques I liked, particularly the ones that suggested emotion. Techniques like paint drips, glazing and layering, and textures all spoke to me and when applied can suggest a range of emotion. One afternoon I started running some watery paint across the top of a canvas and I observed the random lines being created by the paint dripping down the front. The way the paint interacted with the textures spoke to me. Also, I was intrigued by the spaces between the lines and I thought, “What can I create between these lines?” This was the start of my new direction and in this chapter I will discuss how this small question started me on a new journey.

Subject Matter

A face to me is like an apple to Cezanne. I am not interested in painting a likeness or a portrait, at least not in the sense of creating an accurate depiction of who it is, but rather what the face is portraying. I am interested in portraying the emotion it conveys. On its own, the face can express many emotions, tell many stories, and can tell us a little bit about a person’s character without any narration. Regardless of whom they are or where they are from, each person I paint has a story written on his or her face that I wish to portray in my paintings.

The people I portray come from many different walks of life, but I choose people based on their facial characteristics (e.g., wrinkles, expressions) and stories. The stories

and faces that tend to intrigue me the most belong to Native Americans and veterans. Although I do paint non-Native Americans and non-veterans from time to time, I find that I focus most of my energy on these two categories.

I have made friends with many Native Americans in the region and I am drawn to their unique facial structure. Their high cheek bones, piercing eyes, and strong expressions written across their brows attract me. I am particularly drawn to the way light hits their faces at certain times of the day. The contrast and shadows created by their unique characteristics and facial textures create many interesting stories. Native Americans and their history already suggest a lot about their pain and suffering. From the Trail of Tears to Pine Ridge and the Massacre at Wounded Knee, there are many stories that come to mind. This past is something that I take into account when painting Native Americans, yet I offer a contemporary view on the topic.

Contemporary Native Americans are aware of their past, and despite the fact that stories like Wounded Knee happened over a hundred years ago, they still feel it today. They wear their heritage and are very protective of it. So in a lot of my paintings I tended to paint sorrowful images using paint drips as a way to evoke tears as seen in the piece below, *Can't Hide the Past* (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Can't Hide the Past

When creating this piece I wanted to create a sense of sorrow, and I felt that it was important in telling their story.

Another group of stories that intrigue me are those of veterans. Part of the reason for my interest is due to my family's military heritage. As a child I was enthralled by the military stories and history that my family endured, from the Civil War to my grandfather's exploit in World War II as a Combat Engineer in France. I had even walked the battlefields of my grandfather's service in France and my great-grandfather's in the Civil War. My father, under no pressure from his dad, entered the Navy purely out of curiosity and enjoyed it. I would later follow their footsteps but after a tour in Iraq I had had enough. Yet, I learned a lot about life and about people. I enjoyed the camaraderie I had with my fellow veterans, particularly those whom I served with in Iraq. There is a special bond we carry with those who were "boots on the ground" there. Even if I do not know them, if they have a bumper sticker, a license plate, or even a tattoo indicating service in war (Iraq, Afghanistan, even Vietnam or older), there is a special bond. There is a certain feeling and respect you have for your fellow service man or woman who went overseas into a warzone.

In a few cases, I have been able to meet Native American veterans to paint. One of the models I enjoy talking with and painting is a man named Crow. Crow is a former US Recon Marine and US Army Airborne Ranger who shared his story with me and later agreed to allow me to use his likeness in my paintings. I have found his story to be one of the most interesting and have used his likeness in many paintings. He revealed to me that many Native Americans are veterans, and opt to serve in order to be recognized as warriors in their tribes. Although the history between the United States and native tribes has been tumultuous, I found this revelation to be refreshing and felt that it was a story

not told enough. So this new perspective offered me another opportunity: a chance to bring both worlds together.

Although I like to paint my models live, I do not always find it necessary to capture a true likeness. An accurate portrayal of the individual is not the goal for each piece, as I am not creating a portrait but an interpretation of their experience. The scars, wrinkles, and unique aspects of each person create on their own an interesting story so that as an artist I do not need to add much, but rather try to emphasize their presence and not get in the way of it. I am fascinated by people and the distinct characteristics written on their faces, as there are many questions that I see, stories to be told, and emotions to be felt that do not need embellishment, as they are already beautiful.

My Process

My work is an exploration of colors, drips, textures, and various people that I meet in life. This exploration has been a series of trial and error yielding a body of work that combines all of these elements. Initially, I wanted to be a realist, yet my work kept breaking down to simple forms. I liked portraiture that looked real, but without much detail or exhaustive amounts of layering.

During my breaks from painting, I always look at past works that are not completed, asking, “What can be done?” It was during one of these breaks that I started to ask, “what about the drips?” They created boundaries and lines, yet not perfect lines. I looked at an earlier painting that was not finished and noticed drips in the background. I liked the way they moved and wanted to see more of it so I experimented. Dripping paint from the left to right and letting it flow freely without any interference, I saw gaps between the lines emerge. These gaps would be the area where I would work my paint

and create my image. The results of this experiment led to the creation of *Rain* as pictured below (Figure 9):



Figure 9: Rain

Upon realizing this exciting effect, I began to create a whole series of paintings.

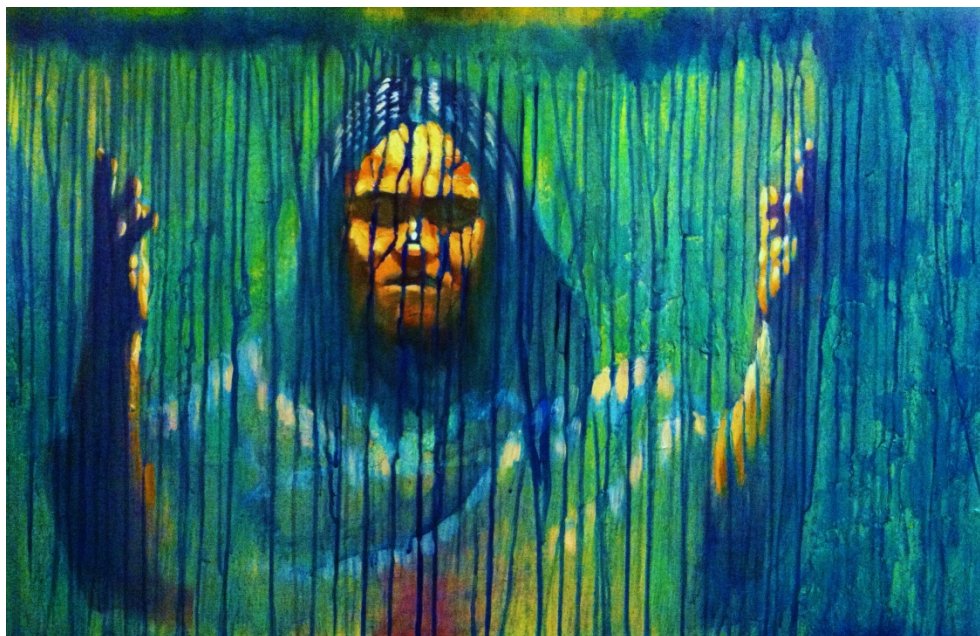


Figure 10: Prayer, Acrylic on Canvas, 24" x 36", Private Collection

The painting above, *Prayer* (Figure 10), was done in similar fashion. In this painting I re-worked an older painting of a man in prayer. I simply added more washes

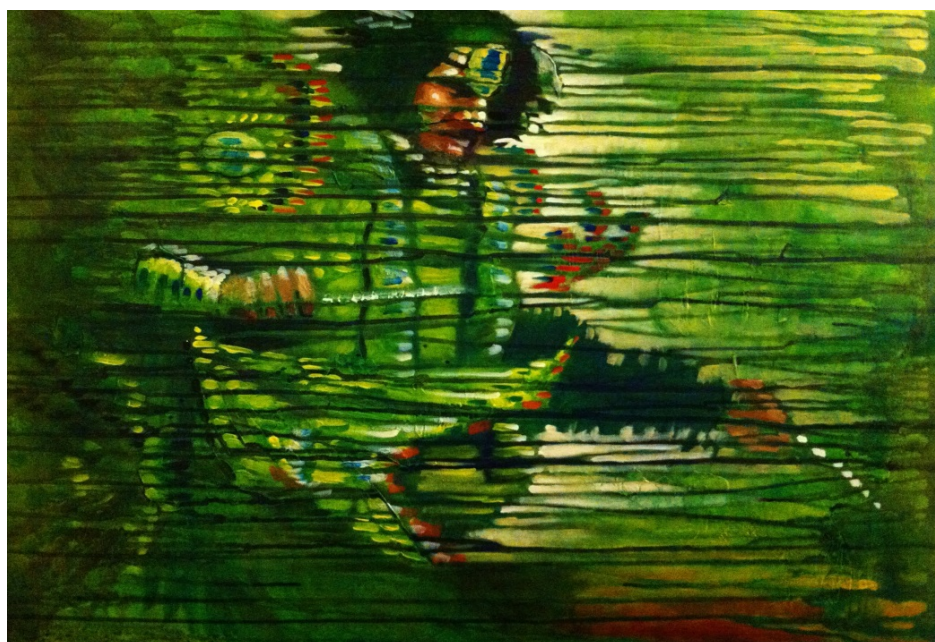


Figure 11: Ramon: Fancy Dancer

(layers of thin paint), then drips, and using the original image (still visible through the

washes) as an outline, I then painted in my colors. I was fascinated by this effect; I decided to take it a step further and began dripping paint from left to right as seen in *Ramon: Fancy Dancer* (Figure 11, above).

I enjoyed the left to right movement of the drips, and from there I continued to experiment with drips. In the painting *Aio* (Figure 12, below), I dripped the paint from corner to corner.



Figure 12: Aio

I liked the overall idea and the fresh perspective, but opted to go in a different direction. In my next piece, *Conrad* (Figure 13 below), I decided to go more conventionally, with an up and down and left to right approach. In doing this, I essentially created a grid that offered small boxes where I can add colors and, in a sense, create a mosaic-like effect.



Figure 13: Conrad, Mixed Media on Canvas, 30" x 48", Private Collection

With *Conrad* I added simple colors straight from the tube—no mixing—and the result was pleasant. It accomplished what I wanted: a simple portrait without much detail, yet it speaks volumes.

Over the course of my experimentations I realized there were two processes to go by when creating these pieces. The first is with an outline (under painting). With an outline, I paint my washes, drips and colors over an under painting that I create first. In the following images you will see a step by step process of how I created this series.

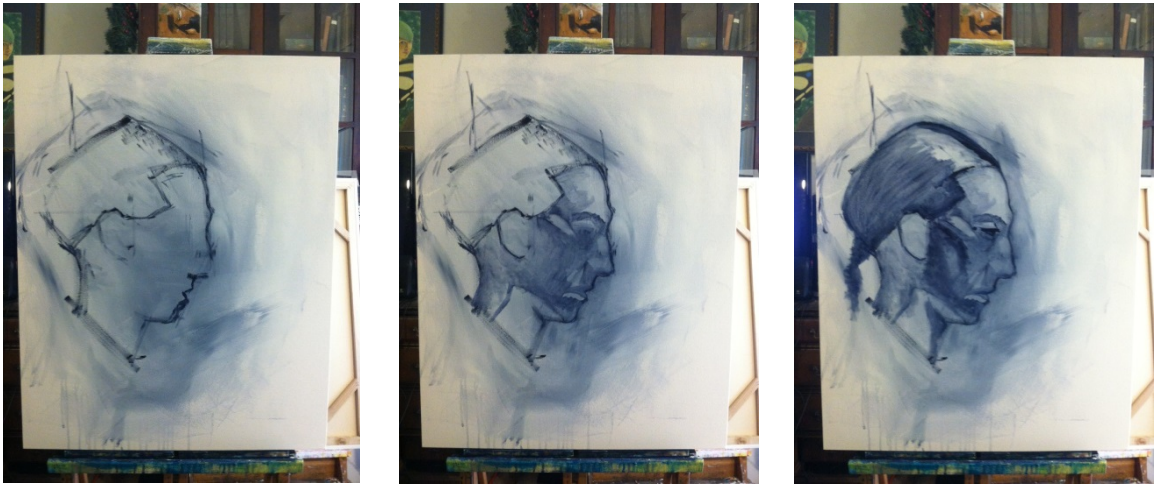


Figure 14: Initial Stages

During the initial stages, I start out painting this piece like I would with any realistic image: a well-structured under painting (Figure 14). This is partly to create the outline for my color placement, but also it helps with just getting started; it breaks the white canvas fear. Also, during these early stages I like to add Golden Acrylic's Flexible Modeling Paste to the surface for texture. This is applied liberally and without any particular pattern in mind.

The under painting is done monochromatically and serves not only as a guide for where to paint my colors in but also helps to identify values and edges. Once the washes are laid down, the figure will still be visible, and even after I lay the grid down over it, I will know where to add my colors in. In this piece titled *Contemplation*, I go with a

yellow wash first then follow it up with a pthalo blue (greenish-blue) which results in a nice aqua-like tone.

In the first image in Figure 15, the under painting is complete. Next, I add the yellow wash and then the first set of lines.



Figure 15: Second Stages



Figure 16: Last Stage before Colors, with Lines and Washes

Once I have the first set of lines down, I will turn the canvas on its side and add the left to right lines. Once dry, the fun begins—I add colors to each individual box.



Figure 17: Contemplation, Mixed Media on Canvas, 18" x 24"

The second process is without an outline. I create a portrait after the washes and drips are laid out. This process was born out of sheer frustration. I felt that in the first process I was sticking too closely with the under painting, and the ability to be free and create was lost. This frustration resulted in *My View* (Figure 18).

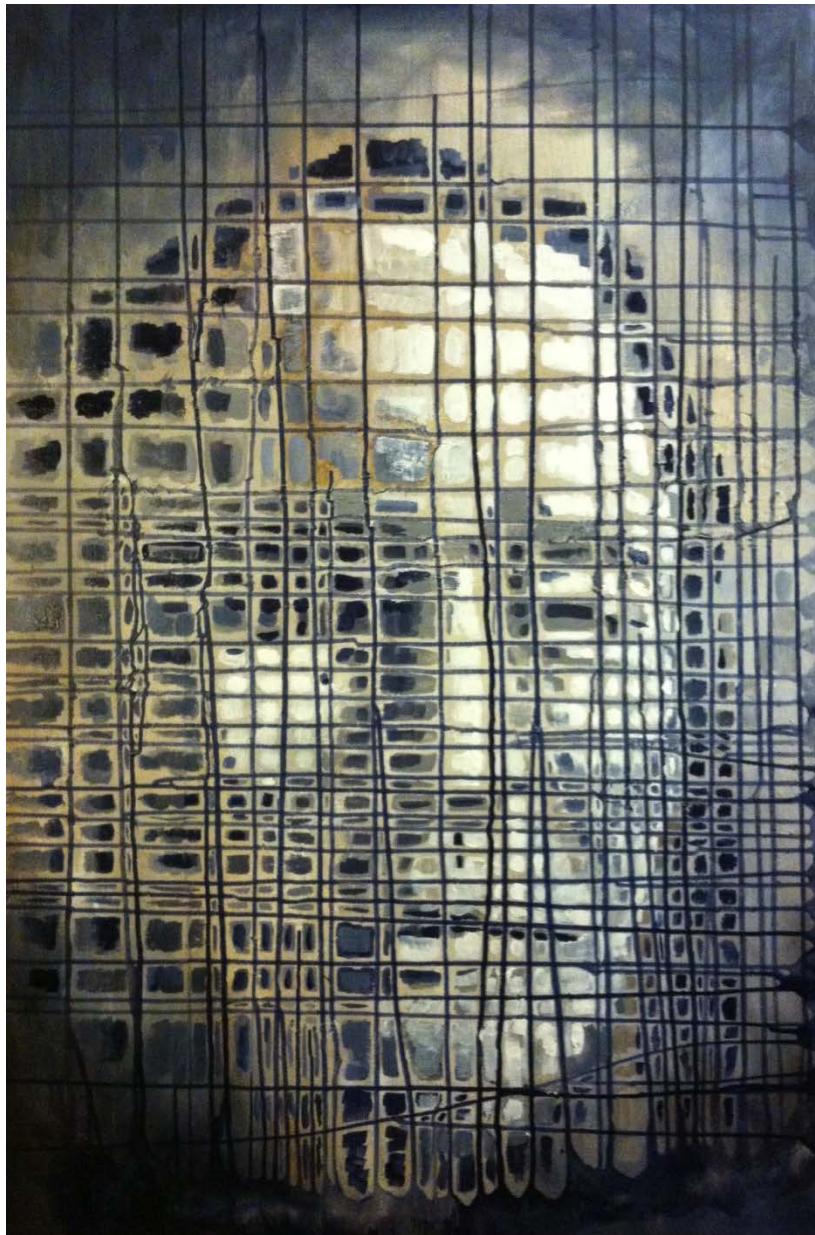


Figure 18: My View

My View was the first image I did without an under painting to go by, and I felt that this piece was more powerful, as it appeared more creative and unrestricted. Up close, it appears to be a series of blocks with no purpose or direction in mind (Figure 19), but from a distance it comes together like a tapestry.



Figure 19: My View Detail

The process for this painting is similar to the stages described for *Contemplation*, but without the aid of an under painting. I simply start by painting in my background colors; in this case, it was burnt umber mixed with Payne's grey and white.



Figure 20: My View Process

The colors are simple, and by adding more burnt umber or more Payne's grey I can get varying tones of gray. When I began the portrait I worked from the interior outward—I began with the eyes then measured my proportions off of them. In the end I felt that I had finally found what I was looking for: portraiture—simple, fine art with a touch of street art influence. But more important, it is a portrait that appears as if it is coming together, or fracturing, depending on your point of view. It is not a simple picture. Like a true life face, there are many questions and stories. In one position you see a face but up close it is hard to decipher. My work is not about presenting another face but about the viewer finding the face, in this series called "*Finding Faces.*"

Conclusion

Over the six and a half years since I began this journey, from an aspiring artist sitting on post in Iraq to who I am now, I thought I knew who I was and what I wanted to create, but in the end I have learned a lot about myself and what kind of artist I am. Although I am finished with my Master's program, I am not finished with my artistic journey; this is something that I know will take years and years. In six years I have gone from a realist to a unique abstract artist fused with faces from nature. In six more years, I see my work going even further.

Further into what? I do not know for sure, but if the past six years are any indication, then I know that it will be entirely different from what I'm doing now. In fact, I am already thinking of new things to try in my recent body of work.

Some of these things include more washes to add depth and several thin layers of opaque paint to help hide the lines. Washes add more visual interest, as the item appears to have a more three dimensional quality. It is much like looking into a clear river in summer; the water is there but the rocks and sediment go further down, creating a pleasant natural scene. This same thinking applies to washes, and I would like to add more of that to my works. Finally, I would like to get the thick lines toned down - particularly when I am painting with brighter colors. One of the ways I have thought of getting around this would be to create the face within the grid and glaze either white or any other light color over the whole of the painting. Once this first coat is applied, I might let it dry then add another coat, then repeat until the image is almost gone. Once the image is faded, perhaps I would repaint the shadows on the face, still staying within the boxes. This, I hope, would create the same visual effect but without the lines being so

prominent. These are things that I have considered but have not been able to perfect as of yet. Over the coming years, I hope to try these things and perhaps discover more techniques to try.

In the end, I have tried to make the most of my time at Radford and I feel that I have. I feel that my work has grown and is moving in the right direction. In six years I expect that my work will be different, but that is natural in art. Nothing stays the same, and that is good. Although my style may change, I feel that I will be spending many years *Finding Faces* to paint.