

Katy Schneider: Two Decades of Portraiture

Artist's Statement

In these canvasses, I work small. I manipulate the scale of objects and colors until I feel that the canvas has grown. I want to create the whole world within 10 x 12 inches.

Here's how I work: I keep stuff laying around. I aim a spotlight at a group of people or objects. Working in a small cluttered space, I hope to uncover the geometry that is there, hidden amongst the seemingly unrelated collection of people and things. When I look at these portraits, it strikes me that even the people are "piled up," seemingly disorganized. But the apparent chaos is itself an order I've imposed.

I've been making portraits all my life. Growing up in a family of nine, in a cramped two-bedroom apartment in midtown Manhattan, I learned early to make the most of a small space, to organize the chaos. Without clutter, I might not know what I want to say. The process of organizing chaos results in discovery. Ideas emerge. Subtle stories unfold and reveal feelings I had at a particular moment in time. I'm in it for the surprise.

Nowhere is this truer than in my family and self-portraits. Raising three children brought new emotions and new shapes into my life. That's given me more to paint and more reason to paint. My children also brought more friends, and in turn, their stories, into my world. Many of these are represented here.

My main interests as a painter have long been about telling a complete story on a solitary canvas. In my recent work, illustrating children's books, I've had to learn to treat fifteen portraits, in sequence, as one single work of art. An interesting task: more detail than I had ever before let myself add, but also a need to persuade the reader, visually, to stop looking at the details, turn the page, and get on with the story. I've come to make portraits everywhere I go, in everything I do. As I ventured into musical performance in recent years, I realized I was making musical portraits. My songs, I found, were no diversion, but part of the same pursuit. My cabinet of art supplies now included a home recording studio, a pedal steel guitar, and a band with real live human beings.

The differences between painting and song writing seem minimal to me now. If all the instruments are set at the same volume, you can't appreciate their role in the song. If all the colors in a painting are the same intensity, they fight to be heard. Melody, like light, creates mood. Without dynamic shift, songs plod along. Without varying edges or contrast, a painting feels predictable as you move across the surface. In both songs and paintings, some areas require space, while others need compression. Both processes of portrait-making, this ordering of the elements of chaos, can ultimately produce something that makes an impact on your soul.

I worried that as I began to work in other media, children's books and music, I was straying from the love of my life, portraiture. Little did I know how faithful I remained. Little did I know how many ways there are to make a portrait.

Katy Schneider