



Magical Moments

Haynes Galleries presents a new exhibition of **Seth Haverkamp's** intricately designed portraits.

BY JOHN O'HERN

1 *Essie and the Crows*, oil on panel, 60 x 42" 2 *Fable* (detail), oil on panel, 24 x 18"

Seth Haverkamp's portraits are attractive. They draw you in. The models are not props for the artist to demonstrate his skills—beautifully rendered but devoid of life. They are alive in their moment, inviting us to join them. The models, themselves, are attractive—often, one of his four children or his painter wife, Catherine. Comfortable in their own skin, they are collaborators with the artist when they talk about a pose for a painting.

After our conversation, Haverkamp followed up with a message: "In almost all of my paintings the subject is looking at us. I want there to be a connection (an immediate one) between the viewer and the person in the painting. Whether they are talking to you or you are talking to them is up for interpretation. Maybe they are viewing you the same way you are viewing them."

He eschews "meaning" in his work. "My students think my paintings mean something. Subconsciously they may mean something," he says. "Consciously, they don't. People think there's more in them than I put in. Truthfully, they're solely visual. They're an interesting looking child doing an interesting thing."

Often, the "interesting thing" involves the model using his or her hands, usually the most difficult thing to paint. In *Essie's Cranes*, his daughter dangles a string of origami cranes from her elegant hand. "My kids have long fingers," he says. "The cranes remind me of sitting at the kitchen table when I was 5 making origami with my brother." The viewer searching for meaning can think of the significance of cranes in Japanese culture and mothers praying for the protection of their child: "O flock of heavenly cranes cover my child with your wings." Or they can think of the story that if you make 1,000 origami cranes and string them together you will be granted your wish, but in the meantime, she invites you into silent conversation.

Haverkamp's portrait *Mars Rising* features his son Caspian holding a longer string of cranes. The painting earned Haverkamp the Draper Grand Prize at Portrait Society of America's 2019 *International Portrait Competition* this past April.

He received his BFA from Carson-Newman University in Jefferson City, Tennessee. He later studied with the late Nelson Shanks at his Studio Incamminati in Philadelphia as well as with Robert Liberace. I had visited Shanks several times at his home and studio on the banks of the Delaware River. His glowing, vibrant portraits emerged ethereally from the dark of his studio.

I asked Haverkamp what Nelson's influence was on him. "Huge" was the immediate reply. He says, "I got to know him and went to his New York studio. Basically, to this day, he has the best paintings out there. His handling of paint from thick to thin was phenomenal. I don't try to emulate him but from time to time I'll think, 'That cheek or that forehead has a Nelson feel.'"





3



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"I don't look at modern artists," he continues. "I don't want to be swayed. I admire Velázquez, Wyeth, Nelson—and Robert Liberace who is alive and so freaking good!"

He adopted working from photographs because he realized that working from life he tried to emulate "real life on canvas. The paintings were sterile and I never finished them. Working from photos, since they're not real, I can have liberties and change the colors and the lighting. I can have the same pose in the same lighting but adjust it with the camera settings and have three different images. Using photos allows me to capture the moment. I can then get into the painting and be present."

He admires landscape paintings but seldom paints

them. He could create landscape backgrounds for his portraits as the masters before him did, but he creates an abstract layer of splattered paint from which the subject emerges. With slight layering he can suggest a drapery or a floor from the abstract setting as in *Reflections of Self*, a portrait of his daughter, Penelope. It contains a tiny self-portrait in a fish-shaped mirror from the kids' rooms. A shaft of light runs across the floor and over the skirt of Penelope's dress. She holds a paintbrush in her elegant Haverkamp fingers. "Sometimes I lie awake thinking about what I'm going to do," he says. "I don't do self-portraits, but I thought 'Maybe it's time to paint myself.' I was thinking of the lyrics from Neil Young's song *Old Man*."

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Fireflies #3, oil on linen
on panel, 35 x 24½"

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Walking the Tight Rope,
oil on linen on panel,
36 x 24"

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Reflections of Self, oil on
linen, 42 x 30"



*Old man look at my life,
I'm a lot like you were.
Old man look at my life,
I'm a lot like you were.*

Driving down a road near his home he often admired some gnarled old trees in a field. "I knew I had to paint them sometime," Haverkamp explains. "In *Essie and the Crows* the background is the only landscape I ever painted. The crows weren't there when Essie and I went out for the photoshoot. They were later compositional elements. The painting became a composi-



5

tion of things I love—my daughter, those trees and the crows. Together they may create a feeling that will make a person think and mean something else to them."

The rare landscape joins the rare nude he painted in *Walking the Tightrope*. "The model is the niece of one of my students," he says. "She has a great face and the hand gesture and light falling on her were beautiful. I think a nude staring out at you is playful. I had to have a reason for her pulling her hair and painted a June bug walking up it."

He observes, "I feel like my paintings have a depth that creates a feeling in the

viewer. That's pretty freaking cool!"

The exhibition *Seth Haverkamp's Magical Portraits* will be at Haynes Galleries in Franklin, Tennessee, August 22 through September 28. ●

SETH HAVERKAMP'S MAGICAL PORTRAITS

When: August 22-September 28
Where: Haynes Galleries, Franklin, TN
Information: (615) 312-7000, www.haynesgalleries.com