



BETSY ASHTON: PORTRAYING IMMIGRANTS' STORIES

On public view this season in Long Island City, the artistic Queens neighborhood across the East River from Manhattan, is the groundbreaking exhibition *Portraits of Immigrants: Unknown Faces, Untold Stories*. This show features 10 life-size oil-on-canvas paintings, all created by Betsy Ashton (b. 1944), whose journey to this milestone has been totally unique.

In 1971 Ashton was an illustrator, artist, and art teacher just three credits away from earning an M.F.A. at American University in Washington, D.C. At that moment she abandoned fine art to pursue what became an award-winning career on television. She started, in fact, by teaching art on a local channel, but soon was reporting and anchoring the news. While working for Washington's WJLA, she became the only TV reporter ever to draw her own courtroom sketches while covering trials; they were shown on the news daily and exhibited in a prominent local gallery. Ultimately Ashton moved to New York City, where she became a well-recognized fixture at CBS News.

In 2006, Ashton resumed her career in painting at the urging of the renowned portraitist Everett Raymond Kinstler, whose workshops she attended. (She also studied with Mary Beth McKenzie and Sharon Sprung at the National Academy School of Fine Arts and the Art Students League of New York.) For the past 11 years, Ashton has made a name for herself painting commissioned oil portraits of the rich and accomplished.

Everything changed last year. Ashton explains:

The maligning of immigrants and refugees that took place during and following the 2016 presidential election, which continues to this day, has compelled me to seek out, paint, and tell the stories of the immigrants that I see, who are not a threat to America, but an asset. Immigrants from everywhere are all around me in New York City: the subway alone contains every gene pool on the planet. Using journalism skills honed in my prior career, plus my talents as a visual artist, I am interviewing and painting a variety of people who were not born here, but who chose to come to this country, or were brought here as children, seeking safety, freedom, opportunity, or all of the above. The ones I meet work hard — extremely hard — to support their families here and, in some cases, abroad as well.

Last year, Ashton approached the New York Immigration Coalition and several churches, asking them to help her find sitters willing to be painted and interviewed. There has been no shortage of candidates. The 18 sitters Ashton is painting are of different ages and from diverse cultures, but all have, in her words, “struggled in ways that typical Americans cannot even imagine.” Most have official immigration documents (indeed some are now citizens), but a few are hoping and praying to avoid deportation. Ashton has “agreed not to reveal the names of the undocumented; I don’t even want to know where they live.”

Few of these people would normally sit for a professional portrait because they are working too hard to slow down. Accordingly, Ashton has not taken up much of their time: she interviews, sketches, and photographs each person in one or two sittings, then returns to her Long Island City studio to paint the life-size oil portrait from her sketches and photos. Those who complete the process receive a high-quality print of their portrait and copies of Ashton’s reference photos, plus photos tracing the portrait’s daily progress in the studio.

Now that 10 portraits are completed, Ashton wants “the viewing public to better understand who these people are, what they have sacrificed to come here, what living here means to them, and what contributions they have made to their adopted country. I believe that the viewers of my portraits will discover ‘kindred spirits’ who are, in many ways, as ‘American’ as they are.” Accordingly, Ashton will exhibit the first 10 portraits in Long Island City this May and at Indianapolis’s Christ Church Cathedral from October 5 through November 6; details appear in the Information section below. She will complete eight more portraits by December 2018 and then exhibit all 18 (the entire series) at Saint Thomas Church on Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue (January 19–February 16, 2019).

This exhibition project has been designed so that the portraits can later be displayed together at other churches and other sympathetic venues, and also at galleries and museums. Ashton now encourages readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* to contact her with leads about venues that might be interested.

“The public,” Ashton says, “can look into my sitters’ eyes, examine their posture, read their stories, and sense who they are and what they are bringing to the country.” The summaries of their life stories that Ashton has written will appear beside their portraits, encompassing key points about their character, accomplishments, disappointments, fears, and dreams for the future. Running inside the exhibition will be a film tracing the evolution of the 18 portraits, all of which have been placed in handsome frames donated by Diego Salazar, whose portrait and life story appear here.

Ashton herself wrote all of the biographical captions here to accompany her portraits. Enjoy, and please do consider where else these paintings could be exhibited across America. ●

Information: ashtonportraits.com, licartsopen.org. The first 10 portraits will be exhibited May 17 – June 14 at Diego Salazar Antique Frames, 21–25 44th Avenue, Long Island City, NY 11101. This show opens with a reception on May 17 (6–9 pm) and will be available throughout the LIC Arts Open Festival (May 19–20, noon–6 pm). Thereafter it is open by appointment on weekdays (9 am–5 pm). The closing reception occurs June 14 (6–8 pm). Christ Church Cathedral, 125 Monument Circle, Indianapolis, IN 26204, 317.646.4577, ccindy.org.

PETER TRIPPI is editor-in-chief of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.



Mahyar Afshar: Composer from Iran, 2017, oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in.

Shortly after President Trump was inaugurated, Mahyar Afshar was shocked to learn that he would not be allowed back into the U.S. if he needed to visit his mother or father, who live in Tehran. Persian by birth, Mahyar was educated in Scotland, where he met and married his Scottish wife, Gemma Bell. Both graduated from the University of Edinburgh, where he studied music and she pursued business administration and accounting. Having composed music for Scottish and Iranian film directors, Mahyar answered the siren call of American cinema.

“America, for me, was a land of great opportunity,” he says. “There is no limit to what you can achieve here.” Like the multicultural software developers who flock to Silicon Valley, Mahyar represents the kind of well-educated, ambitious young men and women drawn to this country’s creative industries, and who have helped them conquer the world. Not even remotely hostile to the U.S., Mahyar is stunned to be lumped in, due to his homeland, with those who might pose a danger to Americans. He worries, like any other New York subway passenger, about how attractive a target the city is for terrorists. “I love my life and my wife and my friends and I don’t want any of us — or anybody — to sit next to the wrong person and get hurt.” He’s also worried about America “being so fragile. Things can break with just a flick. It has become so divided here that people are no longer building the country together — they are so against one another. I saw things break with Brexit. This can have a very bad effect on people.”

Escaping poverty was the motivation for Diego Salazar to leave Colombia for the U.S. He is the youngest of 15 children in a Bogotá family, and his mother sold chickens, eggs, and home-made meals to help feed and clothe them all. Having earned a high school degree but lacking job prospects, Diego was given a plane ticket to the U.S. by his mother. In New York City a Colombian friend from school days got him a job as an apprentice in a frame shop. Diego paid back the ticket price by sending home \$15 per month while he learned the business. Five years later, with handshake loans from some “very kind Jewish customers who liked how hard I worked,” Diego opened a shop in his home, then rented more space, and later ran a factory. He bought one antique frame, then another, and soon was making superb replicas that he sold to major galleries and art collectors. Diego sold the business 15 years ago and turned the factory into loft apartments. He now owns three buildings in Long Island City, two of which contain artists’ studios. But Diego’s passion is collecting antique frames, and he also helps sponsor local art festivals and exhibitions. Now a U.S. citizen with two children who have graduated from college, he says, “I am living the American dream.”



Diego Salazar: Business Owner from Colombia, 2017, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.



Maria Salomé: Housekeeper from Guatemala, 2017, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.

Maria Salomé was abandoned by her husband in Guatemala, leaving her with their five children aged 3 to 16. She became a laundress but couldn't begin to feed them properly. She faced two choices: prostitution or finding a "coyote" to sneak her into the U.S. Unwilling to do "indecent work," she asked relatives to look after the children and set off on the "very scary" journey through Mexico, across the Rio Grande, and walking through dry brush for two days until her group reached a road, where a bus picked them up at 2 a.m. She eventually got to New York City, where Guatemalan laborers got her work cleaning up a house after renovations. She quickly became the homeowners' beloved housekeeper. Four years later she had to return to Guatemala "because the children had become wild"—the oldest had sold the dining room furniture to buy clothing, and the twin boys' feet were full of fungus. She cleaned them up, but again had no way to feed them. Having left the children with a trusted aunt, she returned to New York with her 6-year-old son, who had begged to come with her but was difficult to keep quiet on the dangerous trek north. Naturally her employers were delighted to have her back. Having rented an apartment, Maria Salomé got her boy into public school and wired money to Guatemala to provide for her four older children. They now work in banks and other reliable businesses. Alas, she has missed their graduations, weddings, and many family christenings and funerals, yet she is grateful for "the generosity of America" that "enabled me to support my family," she says through an interpreter. Now a part-time lay preacher at an evangelical church, Maria Salomé is proud to have paid "a good lawyer" to get her the documentation she needs to remain in the U.S. Last October, she received her green card and flew back to Guatemala to visit the children she had not seen in 20 years and to meet her grandchildren. They want her to stay, of course, but she loves the U.S.: "I have a good life here. This is a good country. This is my home."

John Lam: Businessman from Hong Kong, 2017, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.



John Lam was a teenager when his parents brought him and six younger siblings here from Hong Kong. Seeing that he would have to miss high school in order to help support his family, John began washing dishes in a Chinese restaurant, but quickly realized that it had no future. He switched to laboring in a garment factory, handing all of his earnings to his mother. She gave him \$15 a week to spend. John studied every job and machine in the business, became indispensable, and was soon tapped to be the supervisor. He worked nights as a waiter to save money and eventually, with family help, bought the business. When garment factories left the U.S., he learned the hotel business and now, as CEO of the Lam Group, builds and staffs major hotels. He employs several thousand people.



Porez Luxama: Public School Teacher from Haiti, 2018, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.

Porez Luxama's family was "exiled" from Haiti after a military coup. He had just finished high school and spoke no English but won a soccer scholarship to St. John's University (New York City). There he majored in math and science, which he now teaches in a public junior high school. Porez also founded and runs the Life of Hope community center, which teaches English, reading, computer, leadership, and other skills to (mostly Haitian) immigrants, and which also offers family and legal counseling. His older brother, who taught engineering, quit his job after September 11 and joined the U.S. Marines to

*Beata Szpakowicz Kombel from Poland:
Nurse Practitioner, 2017, oil on canvas,
40 x 30 in.*

Beata Szpakowicz Kombel was a young nurse in crumbling post-Communist Poland when her father, desperate to escape the chaos and support his family, managed to flee to America. Accepted as a refugee, it was four years before he could get a U.S. visa for Beata, then 24, and two more years before he could arrange entry for his wife. Speaking only Polish and learning that her professional training was not recognized here, Beata had to study English from scratch, then start over and repeat every one of her science, math, and nursing courses in order to be certified to work as a nurse. But she did it, working first in home care, then in a nursing home, then for many years in a doctor's office, where she still works. She also studied part-time for the advanced nurse practitioner exam, passing it six months ago. Now she can see her own patients.

