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METHOD & MEANING IN PASTEL PORTRAITS

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COVER: *THE BAPTIST* (DETAIL), BY MARIO ROBINSON

Mario Robinson concerns himself foremost with the ideas in his images. He makes a point of getting to know his subjects on a personal level, believing that the connection between artist and subject informs the artwork in undeniable ways. "Emotion propagates my creative process," he says. "A lot of the time, my subjects and I go to the same church, have dinner together. None of what comes across in the paintings is made up; it's the undercurrent of what I feel toward the person."

Robinson, who lives in Lakewood, New Jersey, but spends four or five months a year in Huntsville, Alabama, strives to communicate a story in each painting. To this end, he seeks subjects with an "esoteric, earthy look," as he puts it, encountering some of his best models in the South. One series of a girl has yielded several of Robinson's most powerful works. Intrigued by the contradictions in the girl's life—her mother relied on her to look after her brothers, giving her adult responsibilities at a young age—the artist has created some 100 paintings, drawings, and sketches of her over almost a decade. In them, Robinson explains, he uses "the natural expressions of the girl and the composition to tell the story of her wanting to be a teenager, and aging before her time."

In beginning a new work, Robinson thinks of an idea first, then gathers the appropriate wardrobe and props. "The posing is simple," he notes. "She is either seated or standing, frontal or in profile, and so on." He determines the setting and lighting next. After taking four or five rolls of film, he evaluates

the prints and selects a few that best represent his original idea. Robinson asserts, however, "the energy is so intense when I am working with the model that photos are never enough." So to supplement photos, he makes about a dozen graphite drawings, roughly 8" x 10", which he uses along with the photos and his imagination to develop his concept further. "I draw incessantly to get the overall feel of what I want," Robinson adds. "I keep the drawings small because if they're too large, the energy is lost."

Once he is satisfied, Robinson tapes off a clean margin around a sheet of Arches 140- or 300-lb cold-pressed watercolor paper. Then he starts with the head, making a tightly detailed drawing in graphite. After spraying Grumbacher fixative over it to secure the drawing, he begins applying pastel in crosshatched horizontal and vertical strokes, working from dark to light. "I might start with Prussian blue or dark umber, with thin lines and no smudging," the artist notes, adding that the crosshatched lines form a grid pattern over the surface. "I might gradually work in Indian red and sienna, and as the tooth is filled and begins to get muddy, I spray fixative and apply more pastel." He works toward progressively lighter tones until he can add the highlights. Then, using a medium tortillon, he fills in any remaining spots in the resulting plaidlike surface.

After completing the head, he moves to other areas. "For the fabric of a dress," he remarks, "I might start with umber and blend in the colors on the face. I always start with natural colors, the colors in life, and work toward



Method and Meaning

BY LYNNE MOSS PERRICELLI

Miss Chuckii, 1999, pastel, 40 x 30.

All artwork this article private collection. Robinson says older models need less instruction than younger ones, because they've seen so much in their time that it doesn't take as much to find an evocative pose or gesture that is natural to them.





whatever is truest to the fabric color. For the dress in *Blue Daze*, I worked in blues over browns and reds, and dropped in highlights later. Working slowly to the highlights makes the work look realistic." For the background, he applies darks in the same way, keeping it very simple so that the viewer's attention is on the subject. Throughout the process Robinson is careful to use fixative to his advantage, often spraying over areas to adjust the values. When the work is complete, he applies a final coat of fixative in a thin layer to avoid further darkening.

Generally, the artist spends about three months on a single pastel. As a piece nears completion, he evaluates his progress and asks himself whether he has told the story he envisioned. With such a labor-intensive method, an artist could easily become too absorbed in technique, but Robinson continually reminds himself to avoid that pitfall. "I want the work to be just finished enough that it is satisfying," he explains. "Once I'm at that point, I just start peeling off the tape and let it go." He stresses, "Technique is not the most important thing. The story is more important, the moment. I just use technique to get the viewer's attention."

Robinson's crosshatching method does pique viewer interest. More important to the artist, however, is the tendency of his method to impede easy or quick review of his work, bringing a sense of mystery and drama to the viewing experience. "The grid pattern makes the work less accessible," he says. "Instead of looking at a painting that is flat and smooth, the viewer looks through a kind of screen, which adds a certain dimension. When you look at my work, there's something in front of it, a sense of intrigue. Something blocks the viewer from working out the imagery. It's miniscule, but it's there."

The artist breaks up and shaves down his pastels (predominately

***Blue Daze*, 1999, pastel, 40 x 22.** The artist considers this painting a self-portrait. The model was rushed and unfocused, so Robinson portrayed her expression as his own. This work and the others on this spread are from the series on the Alabama girl.

Below: *Independence Day*, 2002, pastel, 30 x 30. Robinson says this piece captures the subject's transition into adulthood. "Because of her nickname, Plum, I traditionally paint her in purple or blue," he notes. "Here, however, she wears white to symbolize a new beginning."



Right: *The Graduate*, 2001, pastel, 20 x 18. The haughty expression of the model here suggests the inconsequence of her graduation in her induction to adult responsibilities.



Ruffles, 2002, pastel, 22 x 30. The girl's dress and hairstyle belie the mature look in her eyes.



Rembrandt with a few Sennelier sticks) into small bits, the size of a Tic Tac. Akin to working on his paintings one section at a time, the broken-up pastels make the process “easier to control,” Robinson says, adding, “I use my pastels as washes or glazes on top of each other, and I work more like a watercolorist in that way, creating movement with horizontal and vertical strokes. Smudging pastels always looked too flat to me.” Working in small increments, with both the medium and the composition, seemed natural to Robinson from the time he first began experimenting with pastel, soon after graduating from art school. “I had not seen a lot of pastel works when I first started,” he remarks, “so I didn’t know what they were supposed to look like.

Breaking everything down just seemed comfortable.”

Robinson has also followed his instincts in terms of selecting subject matter. When he visits the South, he feels equally inspired by the people he meets and the sights and sounds all around him. “I see different textures and hear different nuances,” he says. “The quiet there makes me so sensitive to things.” Despite the proximity of his home in New Jersey to New York City, Robinson has no desire to find subjects in an urban environment. “The city doesn’t attract me as an artist. I have to be in a quiet place and in a subdued mood.” With this sensibility, not surprisingly, the South is the source of Robinson’s best work, and sensitivity is its defining element.

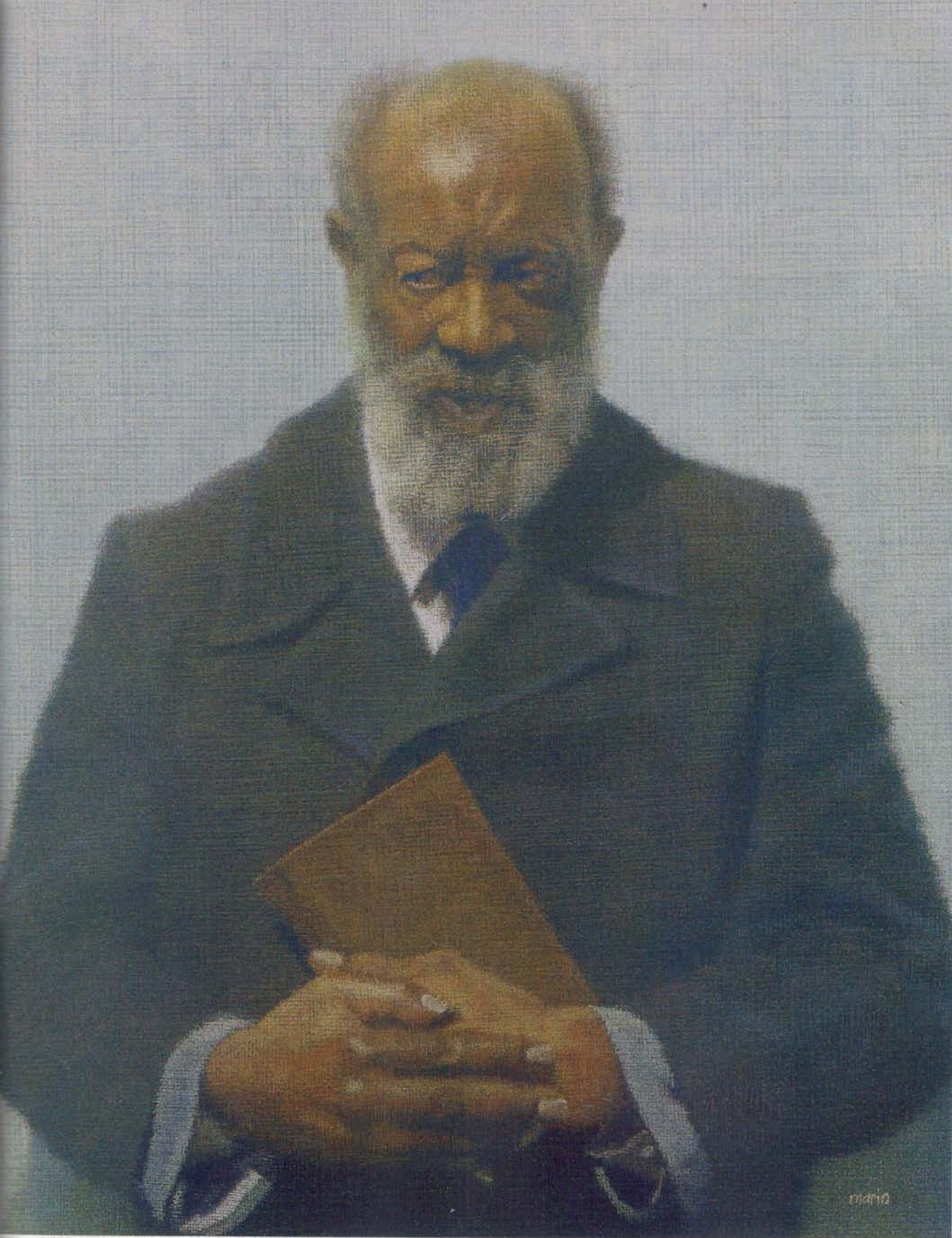
As Robinson describes his work,

“The interaction with my subject starts the whole process, and the work just happens. I always try to be open to the moment, to what the model is feeling, and I think viewers can see that. If an artist is attached to the subject, a conscious effort is not required to create a meaningful painting.” He concludes, “There is something in the way I work that won’t let me do anything that is not respectful of the subject, that does not come from a sincere place.” ■

Lynne Moss Perricelli is the senior editor of American Artist.



To learn how Robinson’s relationship with his mentor, Dean Mitchell, has impacted his artistic development, go to www.myamericanartist.com.



Above: *The Baptist*, 2003, pastel, 22 x 20. Robinson hoped to convey something of his experience with this subject. "I met Frederick Price on the streets of Philadelphia after he had been asked to vacate the steps of a local church. He was wandering aimlessly while clutching his Bible. His goal was to find a serene place to sit and read it."

Opposite page: *The Medicine Man*, 2003, pastel, 20 x 22. "This gentleman is a firm believer in a parallel universe," says the artist in explaining the mysterious quality of the work. "His whispery tone gave his stories of ghosts and herbal healing a certain legitimacy."