

Voice of the People

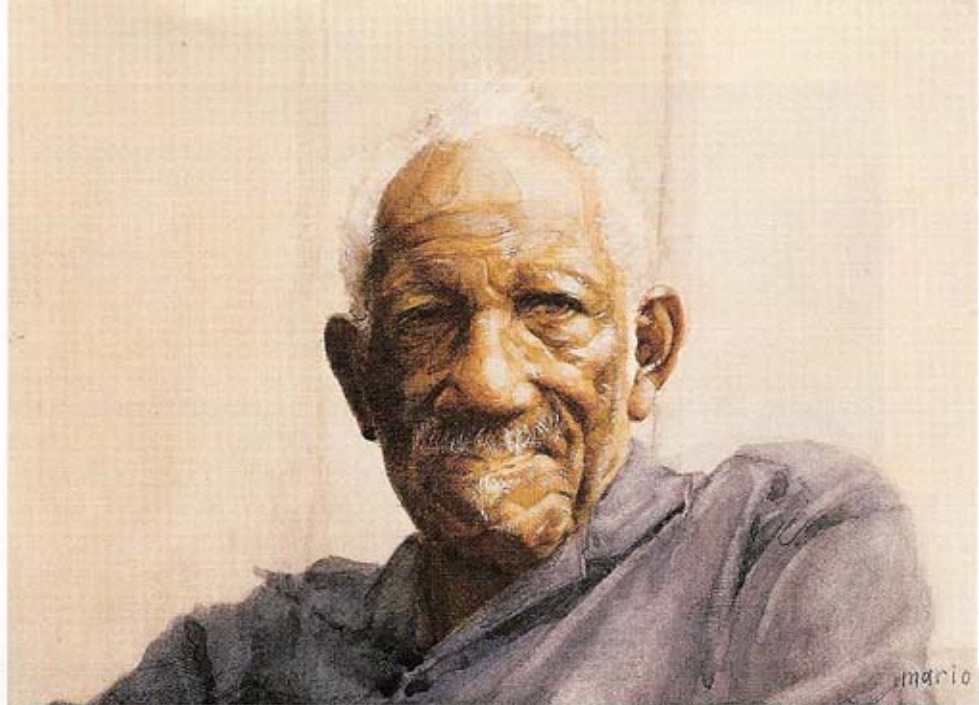
Mario Robinson's art speaks not only for the artist, but also for the subjects he paints—working-class African-Americans.

Interview by Loraine Crouch

Church Lady ■ "Mrs. Janie Simpson is the wife of the pastor at a church where I once had a studio," explains Robinson. "In *First Lady* (watercolor on paper, 12x9) I wanted to express the solemn atmosphere I experienced while painting in the loft above the sanctuary."



Revered Craftsman ■
"Philip (watercolor on paper, 14x20) captures the strong character of Philip Simmons, a master blacksmith whose ironwork adorns historic homes and buildings throughout Charleston, South Carolina."



Well-known for his realistic pastel portraits of African-Americans in the South, Mario Robinson has recently turned to watercolor. The results—like his compelling works in pastel—reveal an artist wise beyond his years. I had a chance to speak with Robinson about his craft, the differences in pastel and watercolor, and why he follows his heart when he paints.

LC: *Did you always want to be an artist?*

MR: No. I had an affinity for art early on and I would ask my friends or adults to draw for me, but I didn't think I had any talent until I was in fifth grade.

LC: *What happened in fifth grade?*

MR: I drew a bunch of presidents for an open house at school, and I was on the fast track after that. By sixth grade I was taking high-school art classes. My art teacher was really supportive, and her dream school was Pratt Institute, and that's where I went. Everything was like a whirlwind. Growing up I'd always admired other people who could do art. When I learned that I could do it, too, something was illuminated. Art gave me real direction.

LC: *You said your art teacher's dream school was Pratt. Where did you go to grade school?*

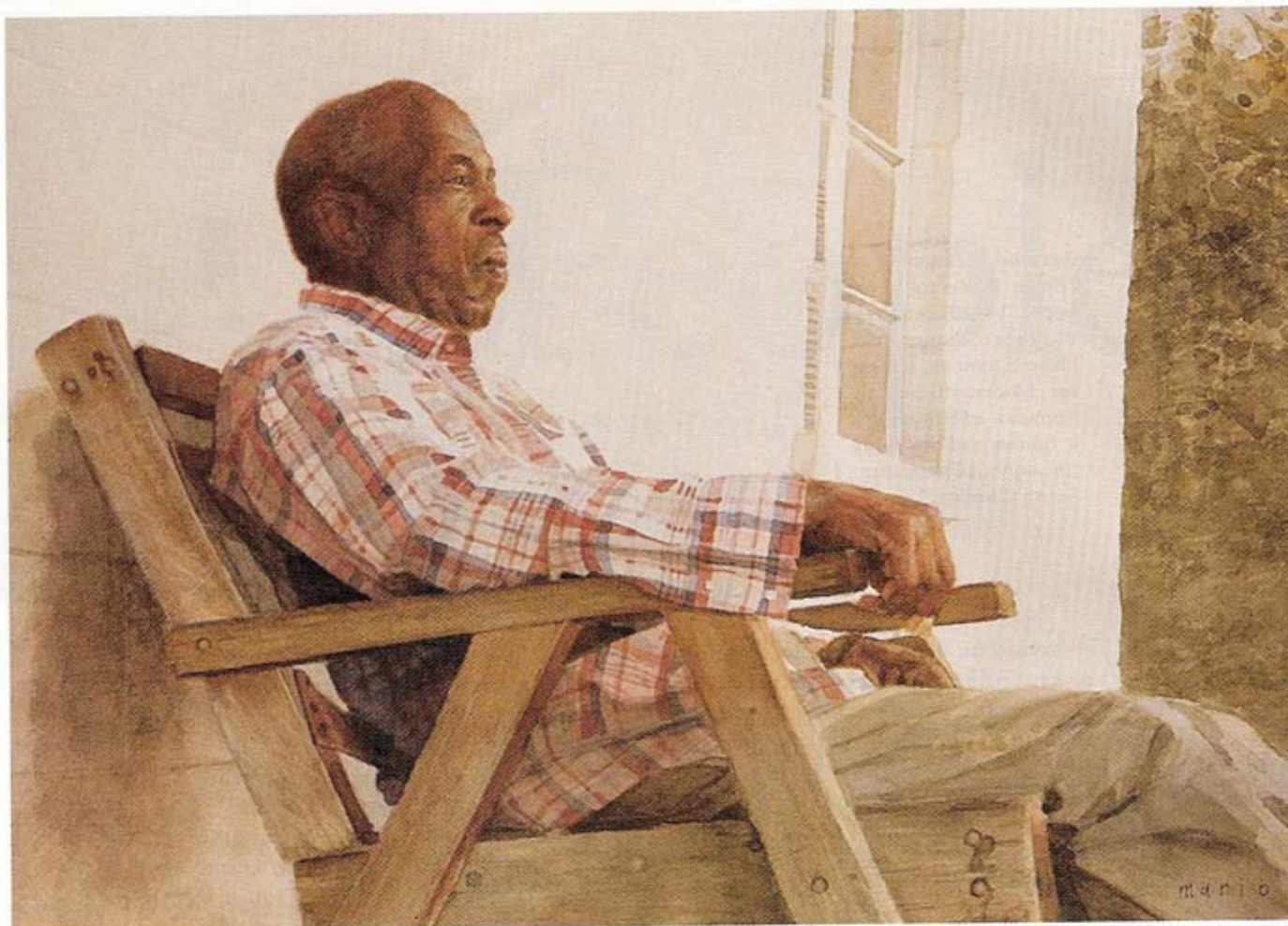
MR: I was born in Oklahoma, but we'd moved to a beachfront town called Keyport in New Jersey when I was 12 years old. That's where it all came together.

LC: *How was the transition from Oklahoma to New Jersey? I imagine the culture was much different.*

MR: When I think back on it, it's a miracle I survived! The kids were so much more advanced than I was. They all knew each other already, and I was the new kid, so they were playing practical jokes on me all the time. There I was, barely 100 pounds, wearing plaid shirts and boots to school. I think that's when I became closer to the teachers; they saw I was the odd man out. Those relationships worked to my advantage, though, because the teachers took more time with me. Once I got into art I was working hand in hand with the art teacher on her projects. Coming to New Jersey was good for me because I never would have been exposed to the museums and the types of situations that have given me a career.

LC: *So did you spend a lot of time in museums once your family moved to New Jersey?*

MR: Actually, I didn't see an original piece of art until I was in college. My parents didn't know anything about art; they would hang art prints on the wall to decorate, but that's it. Once I got into Pratt the teachers would take us to the museums. That's where I really started getting inspired. The first time I saw a Rembrandt at The Met, I didn't know what I was looking at. I'd seen it in books, but when I saw it in person, it really transformed everything I thought about art. Being able to see how he'd manipulated the medium was a life-changing experience. I'm so envious of young people who have opportunities that I didn't. You go into the museums and see families there with their 6-year-olds, and art is encoded. I talk to watercolor artist Dean Mitchell a lot about opportunity and exposure. The town he's from in Florida is a lot like where I grew up. There are factories and ghettos but no museums.



LC: *Art's not really a priority in those areas.*

MR: No. Not only doing art but also selling art or talking about art. You really have to get out. That's why, once I got to New Jersey, I almost felt like I had to make up for lost time. Everything was so impressive, so new.

Sitting Time ■ "In the South, as opposed to the frantic running around that goes on in New York City, there's a lot of time to sit on your porch and watch the traffic as in *Summer in Guntersville* (watercolor on paper, 18x24). The sitting posture is something that's so natural and so indicative of the Southerners I paint. I feel like it almost makes me look better than I am. We sit around and talk; they talk about old times and how things have changed."

LC: *Were your parents supportive? Did they understand your decision to pursue art?*

MR: No ... When I mentioned that I was going to art school they almost laughed as if to say, "You're not serious." And I was as focused as I could be as a teen. I think my mother thought I'd see that art

wasn't for me, but I applied to different schools and got in. When I got the scholarship to Pratt she was relieved, but then she turned right around and said New York was dangerous. It was always something.

LC: *Has your mother come around now that you're making a living as an artist?*

MR: My mother has always worked for the government as a civilian. It's stable; she knows she'll have money coming in. She just couldn't understand the concept of being an artist. She never spoke harshly about it, but she was always suggesting a better way. "Why don't you take the test to work where I'm working?" It wasn't until recently, after 10 years, that she could see my art as a real career. I think that kind of pressure is the dream-killer for many artists. I know a lot of people who never stepped out on that dream and made something of it, so they could show people that it's real. They remained safe and worked in offices and tried to do art part time. I was adamant about not getting a day job because that's where a bulk of your energy goes. You have to be a risk-taker. You have to paint all the time.

Even though ends weren't really meeting back then, I was practical. I knew I couldn't have lavish taste if I wasn't making a lot of money. Now, through hard work, I think it's starting to pay off. One of my main goals was to show my mother that art changed my life. It wasn't like I joined the track team and it was a hobby. I have something to say here; it's me.

LC: *It's true; you manage to say so much with each portrait. You always capture something emotional about the subject, a certain expression that seems to help define the person. How do you make that emotional connection come across?*

MR: The first thing that happens is that I build a relationship with the people I paint. We talk, they complain, they ache. "It's too cold in here. How long is this going to take?" And I don't even have a pencil in my hand when I'm listening to that. If I were to spend time with you, I'd notice that you have certain body language, a turn of your head when you're in a certain mood or when you're talking about a certain thing. I take all that information and then I focus it and exaggerate it, almost like a director. If I notice that you frown when you're describing something, I'll overemphasize that. I only have the dimensions of the paper to capture the viewer's attention. I can't keep repeating a gesture and playing it in action, so what I like to do is pick up on the thing that you go to the most in your personality and that's where the sincerity comes through. It's getting to know the gesture.

LC: *Where do you find your subjects?*

MR: My mother lives in a small town in Alabama near Huntsville. That's where most of the people I paint are from. I've also found a new place in Charleston, South Carolina, that's been amazing for me to paint. I really don't find any inspiration up North. I have to go to the South, which I like doing anyway. The only person I painted from up North was a homeless guy I met in Philadelphia, but he looked like a transplant.

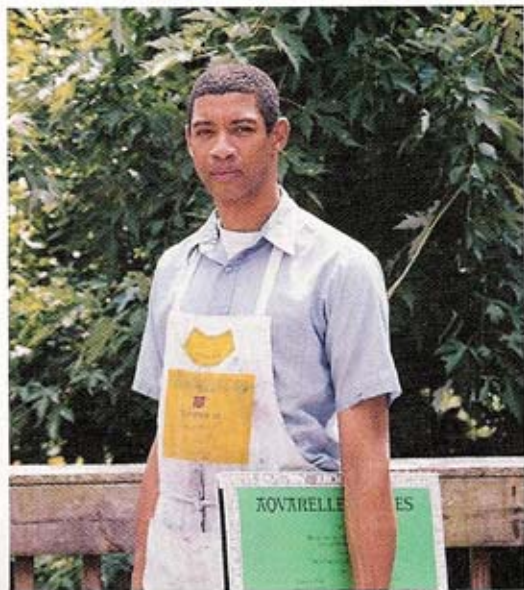
LC: *How often do you get back to the South?*

MR: Not as often as I'd like: a month here and there. I try to go every year to keep the relationships going. And I've fallen in love with Charleston, so I'm splitting my time away from home between Alabama and Charleston. And then I'll hibernate at home in the winter.

LC: *Do you look for new people to paint each visit?*

MR: I'll tell my favorite subjects when I'm coming into town. And even though I tell them not to, a lot of them try to sneak and get their hair done—thinking that I'm

All Attitude ■ "The subject of Mrs. Lockhart (watercolor on paper, 14x20) is a resident of Harvest, Alabama, and a lover of soap operas. I plan my visits with her in between her favorite shows, or she'll only allow me to talk during commercial breaks."



Meet the Artist

Mario Robinson was born in Altus, Oklahoma, and moved to New Jersey when he was 12. He went on to receive his formal art education at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. Today he lives in New Jersey, and is represented by Hearne Fine Art (Little Rock, Arkansas) and Ann Long Fine Art (Charleston, South Carolina). To see more of his work, visit www.annlongfineart.com.