

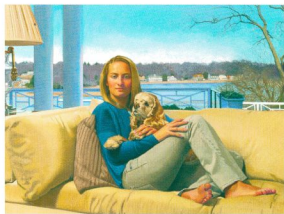
THE FLEETING EXPRESSION

Wende Caporale

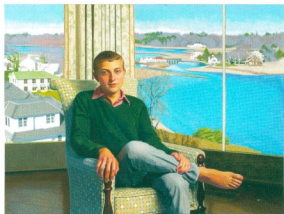
Since the advent of commercially produced photographs in the mid-nineteenth century, artists, most notably the Impressionists, began to explore photographic imagery as a source of reference for their work. There have also been scholarly studies speculating that an optical device such as a camera obscura was used as early as the seventeenth century by the artist Johannes Vermeer and others. With advances in the photographic medium, not only are many of today's artists using photography as a tool, some are pushing the medium and recording visual effects such as halation and microscopic detail. So the question is, "When should photography be used as a tool and how can photographs be utilized effectively?"

There are advantages to working from photographs, such as the ability to record fleeting movement, difficult to capture by mere observation. There is no better way to effectively acquire a great deal of visual information in a short period of time; for instance, documenting scenes from travel. But what steps does the artist take to avoid "copying" the photograph and instead inject the image with the intangible that transcends the two-dimensional image?

Dealing specifically with portraits or figurative work, photography enables the artist to record a fleeting expression or gesture that would be tedious at best for a subject to sustain for the extended period of time required for sittings. In fact, most commissioned portraiture done by artists today is accomplished with the use of photography, which is then sometimes combined with live sittings. As much as photography seems to be the ideal solution for convenience and providing substantial information, there are drawbacks that need to be recognized and dealt with. The most effective way of countering difficulties, including distortion and homogenized color, is to first develop the



Wende Caporale, *Emily*, Pastel on board, 34" x 44"



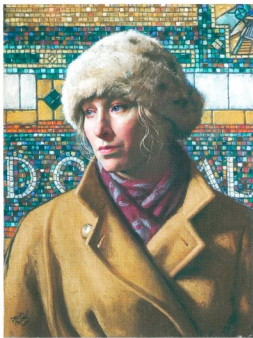
Wende Caporale, *Jonathan*, Pastel on board, 34" x 44"

necessary skills by working from live models and synthesizing this into the process.

With this in mind, I asked my husband, Daniel Greene, about his experience with photographic reference. It was more than 50 years ago that Dan first became associated with Portraits, Inc. in New York City. The work he was commissioned to do for the group was done in the studio from live sittings unless he was asked to paint a posthumous portrait from available photographs. I queried him about his method. "I asked clients to gather all the photos of the subject they could; the photos did not need to be in colour. I would then have a meeting during which I looked through all the photos to determine which ones had enough information and appeal to serve as the basis for the

portrait. The most important fact I learned was that the client must like the chosen photo. If they didn't, they would not like the finished portrait. I acquired information about the subject's coloring, physical characteristics, and biographical material so that I could emphasize the appropriate personality. Before starting the portrait, I would have a professional enlargement made of the head and hands so that details were more clearly seen. The portrait proceeded in the same manner as my approach to painting from life; drawing first, working from dark to middletone to light with colors that suggested the proper skintone." It is important to mention here that for the first two decades of Dan's career, his portraits were exclusively from live sittings. It was not until he moved out of New York City that he began to incorporate photography into his process for the convenience it provided.

My own experience took a different trajectory in that I was trained as an illustrator, which involved using photo reference. Nonetheless, I have spent many years working from life and have no doubt that this latter experience enables me to more faithfully represent my subject based on the accumulated knowledge of form and anatomy. Photographs tend to distort and manipulate reality. Values are often exaggerated and the color homogenized, factors that have to be taken into account to avoid making the result look like a direct "copy" of a photograph. Dan explains how he approaches this challenge; "I find it useful to put the photo reference in a copy machine and print several values of the photo. One will be very light, which will isolate the deepest dark areas, one extremely dark to expose deep middletones and highlights, and three additional interim settings to bring out the light/dark patterns and emphasize subtle values. Using plumb lines or a grid on the photo can also be very informative, as is view-

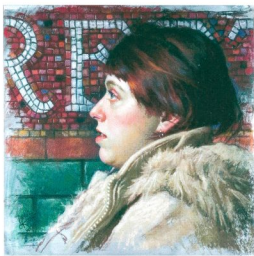


Daniel Greene, *Jean - Grand Central*, Pastel on granular paper, 24" x 18"

ing both the painting and photo simultaneously in a mirror."

The information regarding value that Dan describes is valid and informative, but it does not negate the necessity to develop an understanding of the affects of light on form and anatomy based on observation. When dealing with color, I find that even the best photographs fall short of the nuanced color observed when studying a sitter. During the initial sitting with my subject, in addition to taking hundreds of photos, I make notes regarding their skintones, eye, and hair colour. Many portrait artists make rapid color studies of the sitter in addition to the photography session. As much as photography has advanced, the naked eye still perceives more nuance than the single lens of a camera. Once I see the photographs, I am always a little disappointed in the color and tend to take some artistic license, usually pushing more saturated intrinsic color onto my subject than may actually exist. This I consider my personal and necessary role as an artist; it is the way I see the world and wish to represent it. Once I have taken the portrait as far as I can using photographic reference, I have a final sitting with my subject. Frequently, the hair and eyes can be lightened, and I often lighten the shadows.

Photography proves to be especially useful when creating a composition with multiple figures. When I have had occasion to do a portrait with more than one figure, I often begin the photo shoot by posing the group to create a strong interactive composition and photograph my subjects together. After reviewing the images, I photograph them individually to be certain that I have the best possible pose and expression for each of my subjects. As you can imagine when photographing a group of people, it's rare to have everyone individually looking their best in one image. So in this case, I create the composition with my camera first rather than create a composite of individual photos. On the other hand, I have also



Daniel Greene, *Fur Collar - Subway*, Pastel on wood, 16" x 16"

worked with individual photo references to create a composite composition, taking care to maintain the same eye level and consistent lighting when amalgamating the several images together. I, as the artist, must also envision how the figures relate to each other in space to determine their

Continued on page 20

THE FLEETING EXPRESSION

Continued from page 19

proper scale. Many artists are skillful at manipulating photos using Photoshop to create new composite compositions.

In our current world of technological innovations, it would be hard to ignore the possibilities that photographic devices and techniques provide to the artist. Using good judgment combined with unlimited imagination, the artist can create works of art that transcend the click of a camera.

The work of Wende Caporale, PSA-MP, has appeared in *American Artist*, *International Artist*, *Pastel Journal*, *Portrait Highlights*, and *Pastel Artist International*, as well as in several books. She is author of *Painting Children's Portraits in Pastel* and is included in *Who's Who in American Art*. She teaches at the Portrait Society of America, as well as conducting classes and workshops nationwide. Wende is president of the Artists' Fellowship and a member of the PSA board of governors.

Daniel E. Greene, PSA-MP, HFH, is author of *Pastel*, and *The Art of Pastel*. He has received the John Singer Sargent Award from the American Society of Portrait Artists and the Gold Medal of the American Portrait Society, as well as the Gold Medal of the Salmagundi Club. Dan's work appears in more than 700 public and private collections worldwide. His subjects have included leaders of government, banking, education, and industry.