THE POSER

38 Portraits Reimagined

MAYA STEIN

Foreword by Danielle Krysa

FOREWORD

It was March 2020; the entire world was told to stay inside, maybe for a few weeks, just to be safe. Sure, no problem! This would be a nice break from social engagements, a bit of time to ourselves to read or—let's be real—binge watch "Tiger King" while eating an insane amount of freshly baked sourdough bread. However, March came in like a naive lamb and went out like a caged lion as the realization of our "new normal" began to creep in.

As an artist, I decided to imagine this time at home as an Artist-In-Residence program. Granted, I was in my own residence, but still, I decided I would use this as an opportunity to focus on my personal art practice. It worked...for about two days.

So I asked myself, what if I didn't focus solely on my work? Maybe I'd feel better by distracting—I mean motivating—other artists. I started a "30-Day Art Quarantine" challenge on Instagram and watched as other creatives came up with lots of clever ways to help their fellow makers get through this weirdness as well. (How many fabulous coloring pages did you download? Yeah, me too.)

Unfortunately, even with all of these hilarious, creative distractions, the constant stream of news pouring in from, well, everywhere, was terribly overwhelming. As the weeks of isolation rolled by, finding inspiration—and toilet paper—became more and more difficult for so many people.

Unless, of course, you're Maya Stein.

I had been reading Maya's poetry and other writing for years, thanks to our connection on Facebook. It was also because of this online friendship that I saw her first "Poser" portrait pop up in my feed. I laughed out loud and, oh my goodness, that felt good! Every few days a new, ridiculous, unbelievably creative re-creation showed up, and I found myself excited to see what Maya—and her "reluctant art director" wife Amy Tingle—would come up with next. They did not disappoint.

I love every art genre—from ceramics and watercolors to sculpture and installation—but I've always had a special place in my art-loving heart for portraiture. I'm also a huge fan of making art accessible to anyone and everyone, which is exactly what this wonderful, totally homemade, joy-filled project was shaping up to be.

So when Maya messaged me with this little gem—"Hey, I have a unicorn mask. Any thoughts?"—suddenly my lockdown life had purpose. I sent her a few portraits with animal heads, but did I stop there? Absolutely not. In fact, I immediately emailed a very long list of contemporary portraits I just knew would be perfect material for these DIY masterpieces. (Don't tell the artists, but this list wasn't really about being helpful, rather purely for my quarantined amusement.)

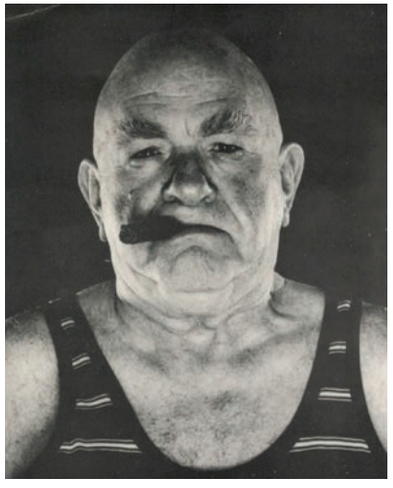
As the spring of 2020 turned into summer, the genius in each portrait was also heating up. Given the fact that none of us were supposed to be popping out to the store to purchase anything other than the essentials, Maya and Amy were forced to dig deep into their imaginations—and their kitchen cupboards and closets—to make these crazy compositions come to life. Converse low-top sneakers doubling as wolf puppets, blue masking tape masquerading as flowers in a woman's hair, and a watercolor cat-hat replaced with what looked to be a stuffed aardvark? No accessory was off-limits.

Art, humor, community—this was the recipe I'd been craving for months. Who needs a sourdough starter when Maya has a bra tied to her head?!

In these pages, you'll find a wonderful combination of contemporary art, humor, and ingenuity all tied together by interviews with the artist's themselves and Maya's beautifully written words. What began as a way to pass the time has become a collection of images and insights reflecting an awe-inspiring community who chose to laugh, create, and lift each other up during one of the strangest moments in modern history.

—Danielle Krysa

INTRODUCTION



When I was about five or six years old and visiting my grandparents in Los Angeles, I watched my grandfather—a big-bellied, balding man with extravagantly thick eyebrows—transform himself into a lookalike of his sister, Ethel. He donned one of my grandmother Beverly's wigs and what she called a "house dress" – part-muumuu, part-apron—flecked with small blue flowers, then dove into her makeup kit and spent a good amount of time camouflaging his stubble with foundation powder and rouge before dragging a tube of cherry-red lipstick around his mouth in concentric circles. When he was finished, he rose from the vanity and strode out of the apartment and into the elevator, where he descended one floor and knocked on #208, where Ethel lived. When she answered and saw herself on the other side of the threshold—to be sure, a highly caricatured, pancaked-and-lipsticked version—she burst into laughter. She knew immediately who it was behind the makeup. Grandpa Sam had been a mechanical engineer at NASA in a former life, an inventor of a fuel injector that was an integral part of the first space shuttle. But he'd always had this raucous, mischievous side, an outsized zaniness fueled by the desire to entertain those he loved. He was an engine that whirred into action at the most unpredictable times, for the sole purpose of slicing into the ordinariness of the day and creating a memory out of it.

It's my grandfather I must thank, then, for imprinting my early years with his Ethel transformations because this is, undoubtedly, at the source of my lifelong fascination with alter egos, shadow selves, evil twins, and secret identities. What struck me always, even at a young age, was my grandfather's utter commitment and the unabashed lengths he would go to achieve his vision. As I watched him slather on makeup and straighten his wig, I noticed the way he completely immersed himself into character. It was a kind of claiming, an ownership, a full-bodied devotion to purpose. The outcome was always hilarious, but I could see it was also incredibly serious business. Transformation as art. Art as transformation.

When the pandemic hit and lockdowns began, my wife Amy and I bunked down with my in-laws. We were on the verge of moving to our new home in Maine, but because the house wasn't yet winterized, we had to wait until the spring thaw for the water to be turned back on. The early days of life under lockdown were strange and stressful—there was so much we didn't know yet about how this virus was moving, and everything suddenly felt dangerous and off-limits. We were all frantic to stay up to date with the news while trying not to overwhelm and frighten ourselves. And because our movements were limited and the safest place to be was inside, away from other people, Amy and I spent more hours than usual online, losing ourselves to social media. It was then when I learned of the "museum at home" Instagram challenge, first initiated by the Dutch account @tussenkunstenquarantaine and then made popular by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The challenge was to re-create a work of art using only a handful of props, and then share it online.

It was a perfect distraction for me—I began combing through the archives of museums all over the world, looking for artwork to re-create. At first, I stuck to the classics—Vermeer's *The Milkmaid*, Caravaggio's *Boy with a Basket of Fruit,* to name a few—and then Amy suggested I try a contemporary work, one by a still-living artist. Suddenly, a new set of choices emerged. I even got my in-laws to agree to join me in the first re-creation, Keith Mayerson's *My Family*. An hour after posting the image (along with Keith's painting) on my Instagram account, I was totally gleeful to discover a comment by Keith himself! The following day, he reposted my reenactment on his Instagram account. And thus, my contemporary portrait series began.

It was an entirely different experience re-creating work from living artists. The variety of options was astonishing—a Pandora's box of subjects and styles and settings to pick from. With the guidance of Danielle Krysa, I was able to connect with the artists personally, to reach out across the wires and time zones and countries to let them know their work was being appreciated in this new context. The re-creations began to feel like conversation openers, introductions that led to connections that transcended the boundaries of isolation the pandemic restrictions were forcing on all of us. It felt like going to the heart of things, minus the lead-up of small talk. What's more, I found myself investigating visual art in an entirely new way; out of the restraints of a museum or gallery visit, where I could only stand back and observe, I was embodying the work, becoming the canvas. I was slipping through the frame into a narrative not of my making, but also of my making.

It was so much more than a creative exercise. These transformations became portals of change, vehicles of transcendence out of a pandemic uncertainty and the limbo of our living arrangement and the real and existential worry that was growing daily, into a space of surprising groundedness. Yes, we would sometimes laugh until our ribs hurt. But the hilarity returned us to that part of ourselves that still held a capacity, an agency, a command of our circumstances. Hilarious as it was, it was also a serious kind of business. There was so much we couldn't control, but the daily re-creations brought us front and center with what we could.

As I prepared myself for each portrait reenactment, I couldn't help but think about Grandpa Sam all those summers ago on the third floor of The Kensington, festooned with a wig and makeup, and the gleam in his eyes as he trotted down the carpeted hallway to the elevator. I pictured his sense of triumph as he pressed the buzzer on great-aunt Ethel's door and listened for her footsteps. I can hear the click of the doorknob as she reached down to open it, that first instant she saw the figure before her, and the exquisite moment of recognition when she knew it was her baby brother and felt the delight and love rise up inside of her. They are long gone now, both my grandfather and Ethel, but this ribbon of joy and connection has stretched for more than 40 years inside of me, and it's here now in these pages you are holding in your hand, and who knows? Perhaps you will take a few of its threads and stretch them even further.

—Maya Stein

ALI CAVANAUGH

A Brilliant Overlay, 2008

One day, my daughter put socks on her arms and I was instantly inspired. I had been thinking of other ways to incorporate stripes on the figure. The socks on arms reminded me of sock puppets from my childhood. The sock arms went on to inspire many paintings; I was able to do so much with composition and pattern. It opened up a way for me to combine a modern aesthetic with figurative realism.

I bought an old house that is currently being renovated into my new studio. It's in the heart of the historic district of our town that has just recently become a national park. While the renovations are happening, I have been working out of my home studio. It's a small cozy room, with just the things I need to make my paintings. A table, a few easels, and my paints and brushes.

I was already headed down a little bit of a different path with my work pre-pandemic. In late 2019, I started a Patreon page. For 10 years, I had been selling primarily through galleries, but Patreon provided a way for me to do the work that I want to do and help mentor other artists without the pressure of making work for galleries. So I had a solid foundation on Patreon when the pandemic hit. The quarantine left a lot of my patrons isolated with extra time, so I began a painting challenge group. Each Friday I share a particular artist, painting, technique, or theme, and the following Friday we post our paintings in a private group. There are almost 200 watercolor artists in the group; it's grown into a watercolor community. We offer support to one another, troubleshoot, and encourage each other on our journeys as artists.

"I see a color or pattern in clothing, or look in someone's eyes and I get a rush of emotion and I have to paint."

Being inspired by the people around me has been a constant in my life. I see a color or pattern in clothing, or look in someone's eyes and I get a rush of emotion and I have to paint. It's a passion that's always been present in my life. One of the biggest things I've always wanted to portray in my work is the value of the human person. In painting my subjects with love, I hope to touch on the depth of a soul, the unseen in our existence.

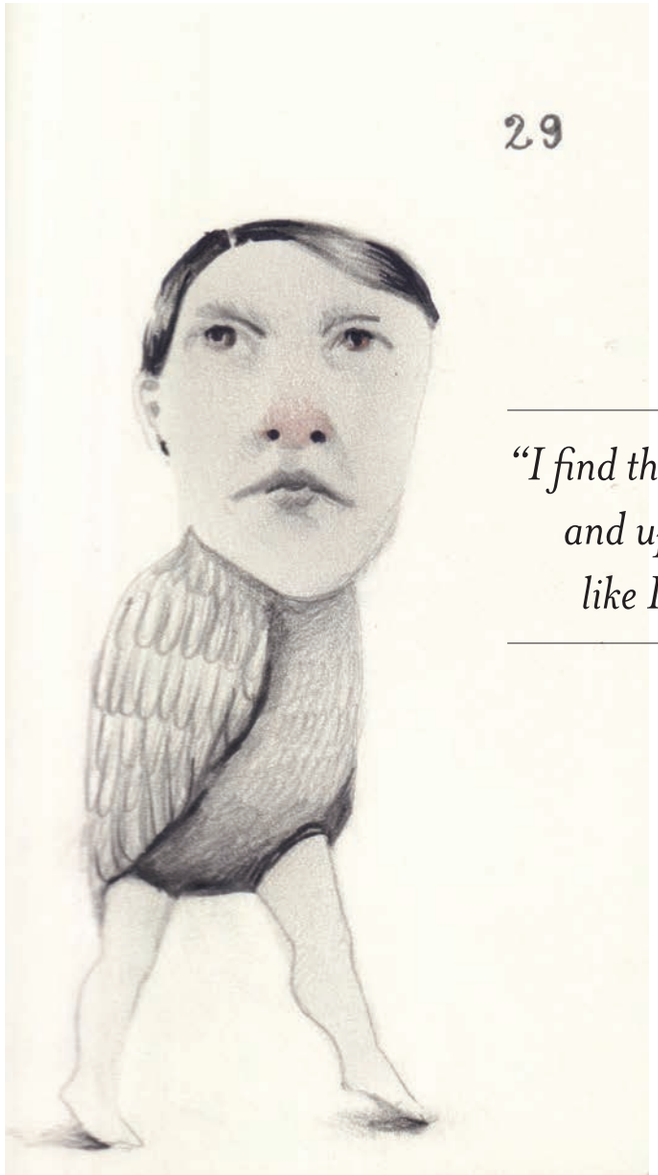
I was struck immediately by a sense of vibrancy and vitality when Danielle Krysa pointed my way to Ali's work, and the striped sock paintings felt like they were playfully leaping out of the canvas. It was like I'd landed in some rainbow-colored ether of childhood. I love the theatrical hide-and-go-seek quality of *A Brilliant Overlay*—the sock puppet gesture paired with that "I can't see you, you can't see me." Entering the frame, I immediately got the giggles, as if I'd actually become the energy of the portrait.

I am a rather huge fan of stripes myself—my eye gravitates toward striped things whenever I go clothes shopping. As I've gotten older, I've begun to feel (for reasons that I can't pinpoint) as if stripes aren't grown-up enough, that I "should" opt for patterns and colors that reflect more "maturity." But I can't seem to shake it, much like I can't shake my allegiance to fake maple syrup or fuzzy slippers or bad TV. I think they could be called "guilty pleasures," but lately, I've begun experimenting with eliminating the word "guilty" from my personal lexicon. Why should I feel guilty if I pour Log Cabin over my waffles or watch "Love Island"? Why can't I experience pleasure for pleasure's sake?

Ali's work reminds me that this is exactly what I should do, that pleasure and play are life-affirming, that I can embrace something as simple as stripes in order to access the very part of myself that feels unabated, unapologetic joy.

ARIS MOORE

Tough Bird, 2020



"I find that when I am scared and upset I draw more like I did as a child."

Tough Bird pairs a small bird stepping out delicately with an unflinching stare revealing strength and certainty about where she is headed. Whether the small bird is just trying to look tough or she really is doesn't really matter, she is doing what she needs to do to protect herself. Maya's take on this painting cracked me up and wowed me.

Drawing has always been integrated into my life. I often draw sprawled out on my bed or on the floor of my bedroom, just as I did when I was a kid. I move through my days with a sketchbook and pens and pencils always within arm's reach. I teach lessons and always draw alongside my students. There is little fanfare, no big set-up or beautifully organized studio, just a bunch of encounters throughout the day. It is a seemingly casual practice that I become completely immersed in. I can't imagine having it any other way.

The pandemic has been challenging and fruitful. I used to enjoy spending days at the library or cafes and bookstores drawing. I miss the energy of those spaces and the experience of being out in the world. At the beginning of the pandemic, London-based artist Matthew Burrows started the Artist Support Pledge, a thoughtful initiative that would help artists support themselves and each other. I was able to sell my work, grow my online presence, make more connections with my fellow artists in the Instagram community and buy the work of other artists that I have long admired. This was big for me. The realization that I can count on drawing as one of my more major sources of income was life changing. I have always worked full time as a teacher and the dream of spending more time drawing has become my new reality. This along with a growing sense of community has made me feel more connected and less isolated.

It's both awful and incredible that we are all going through this horrible pandemic together, alone. In addition to the pandemic, we have been dealing with a rise and unearthing of hatred and unrest in the United States. This has absorbed so much of my thinking and has made me feel angry, hopeless, heartbroken and fearful. These feelings have certainly had an impact on my work. I find that when I am scared and upset I draw more like I did as a child. My work is more raw and is less aware of being seen.

I hope my work helps people make connections to their inner selves and to the world around them, that there is enough space for them to climb in, wander around, and feel a tiny bit less alone and a little more understood. Basically I want them to feel what I feel when I get lost and found in another artist's work. What keeps me making art is the human condition, curiosity, and the connection to my inner child who often drew in search of understanding.

When I was 8 years old, I enrolled in a ballet class with my sister. Maybe it was the feeling of pressure, the first stirrings of recognition of what the societal messages of female identity were suggesting I be.

But it was clear from the very first class at the local ballet school that I was ill-suited for this. Despite my thin frame and athleticism, I felt lumbering, oafish, a low-bellied creature moving swamp-like in a sea of flamingos. Still I persisted, gutting it out for a few months and a handful of recitals. What I remember most was the sense of struggle, of unsteady moorings under my feet. I had a difficult time remembering the routines, or—this is the truer statement—understanding their relevance and relationship to my life. My growing ambivalence showed itself in the cracks of my performances, my frustration with the leotard, the perilous tracks my ballet slippers made across the studio floor.

Aris's work brings me right back to that tippy year, when I almost fell prey to the cultural demands of my gender, but somehow—by luck, by sheer determination, by the simple fact that my parents did not demand I continue the charade—stayed true to my better self. Hunting around for items for a suitable representation of *Tough Bird*, I tumbled back to the turbulence of my time with ballet.

For me, the stance of the figure is one of quiet rebellion—she is still in the outfit of her derision, but the wings (or in my case, the branches) somehow have become her shield, her protection, her way of warding off the insult of becoming someone she is not. I love the look of defiance in the painting, the "Who do you think you are"-ness of what she is being asked to do. Whatever hope I might have had of a love affair with ballet never took off; instead, it devolved into the antipathy I see transfigured in *Tough Bird*, a willful refusal to accept conformity. By the time of my last ballet performance, my heart had already moved on to another relationship, which is to say I returned to the person I was meant to become, a person I'd always be. And yet still to this day, I remember the ballet routine of my undoing (to the tune of "Hurts So Good") with a strange sort of fondness. A dance of farewell in one way, and of welcome in another.

KATHRIN LONGHURST

Pilot Girl Revisited VIII, 2018

The "Pilot Girl" series of work uses the imagery of female pilots and flying as a commentary on currently changing social norms and the pushback that is resulting from them. We're currently seeing the rise of advocacy groups for greater gender equality and equal rights for women. Ideas previously seen as pipe dreams or flights of fancy are suddenly within reach. But this is not happening without resistance and struggle. Just like the early flight pioneers, my female heroes are stepping out into unknown territory, breaking boundaries and are risking everything for a brighter future. The act of flying is symbolic of discovery, reaching the unknown and bridging large distances and divides. My flying heroines are courageous, daring and at the same time vulnerable. As they step out into the unknown, we can cheer them on and recognise ourselves in them.

I absolutely adored Maya's re-creation of my pilot girl. It reminded me how the art I create can often come across as very theatrical and staged and it shows me how important it is to be "keeping it real" and not to take myself too seriously. But it also excites me to see that my work creates a response in people and inspires to be copied and re-created. One of the loveliest pieces of feedback I got from a female collector was that she felt the painting she acquired reminded her of who she was and how she wants to be—a strong, independent woman.

"It excites me to see that my work creates a response in people and inspires to be copied and re-created."

As with most artists, everything in my life revolves around art and art making. I always preferred to have a home studio, so that I can spend every moment I am not looking after family or home with my art. We've been living in a warehouse home for the last five years now and I spend all my time, from the moment I get up to the moment I go to sleep, at the easel, including most weekends. I might eventually burn out but at the moment there is nothing I would rather do. (This might be a glorified way to say I don't really have a life.)

This past year was meant to be incredibly busy with international exhibitions and invitations to teach workshops overseas. My husband was also meant to be away travelling for most of the year, leaving me with children and a massive workload. So in a way, the pandemic has been a blessing and scaled away all the busyness. Instead, we have spent time cocooned in our little studio and family bubble and I have been

enormously productive. As a visual artist I have been privileged to still be selling work and receiving a large number of commissions. I am just coming out of that extremely filled-up period so I can concentrate on creating new work and taking my practice further, as we all need to keep developing. I think often the downside of success is that there is no time to be playful and creative as you just keep producing without stopping.

I think most people want to leave a legacy behind. I am inspired by the question of what will people say about me in 150 years' time, what will my footprint on this planet be. My work is inspired by the relentless work of pioneers, activists and visionaries in dreaming up a better future for all and working to make it happen. Whether you dream of equal rights and opportunities for women, ending racism, poverty or homophobia, access to education for all or world peace, it always starts with a dream. Reality is that it always requires struggle and stepping out of your comfort zone. I dress my heroes in battle gear, ready to take on any challenges. My heroes are often children and women, not usually cast as the protagonist in epic battles or legends of great deeds. They are vulnerable but strong and courageous, reshaping female ideals and perception of gender stereotypes. My vision is to empower people, especially women to take destiny in their own hands and become agents of change, challenging the status quo that no longer serves them. Too long has history been told from a male perspective and art has been created by men, portraying men as the protagonist and women as a decorative by-product. My hopes for my art is to challenge that narrative and create new idols and stories that put women front and centre.

What drives me more than anything is the feedback I get and the impact I see on people that respond to my work. It is joyous moments of real connection I share with art lovers at exhibition openings, letters I receive from collectors telling me the story of their purchase, like when a proud dad bought a painting for his young daughter to tell her she can be anything she wants and there are no boundaries for her as a female. Or when a company CEO tells me that she keeps my painting in her office to remind her to fight on every day. You cannot replace these moments for any money in the world.

"I am inspired by the question of what will people say about me in 150 years' time, what will my footprint on this planet be."

A week after we'd moved, I was intent on finding that red purse and those ski goggles I'd decided on for Kathrin's *Pilot Girl Revisited VIII*. We'd unpacked the vital things; costumery and accessories were not, apparently, part of that list. But by then, my re-creations had begun to take on a role I hadn't anticipated, my great escape into a world absent of an unfolding pandemic drama. In short, it simply felt good at a time that most decidedly was lacking in good.

I was leaning on this practice of escape, had begun anticipating it each morning, had begun needing the electric sense of adventure that the portrait reenactments delivered, arming me with the superpower of combatting—no, forgetting—the mounting dread and uncertainty and fear that was encroaching closer each day.

For me, *Pilot Girl Revisited VIII* epitomized this instinct for transformation, however temporary it might be, as a way of meeting the precarious reality of our times. The facial expression of the subject I found especially striking. There are elements in it of observation, of witnessing at a distance. But the mouth is open, suggesting this is a woman responding to what she's seeing. Perhaps she's contemplating how or if she's going to take action. Perhaps she's on the verge of saying something, of engaging, participating, and we are catching her in the middle of it. Nothing has been decided. It is a moment of delicate reflection, of weighing the odds.

I should tell you that I could not get my head inside that purse, that the strap under my chin was too tight, that I was sweating in my jacket, that the ski goggles kept slipping down, that despite the focus I gave my gaze, I became so aware of the constriction of my props. I felt, I think, caught between escape and reality, which is perhaps an apt reflection on what it felt (and still feels) to be creating art in the midst of a worldwide crisis. *Pilot Girl Revisited VIII* reminded me that no matter the length or depth of the escape, it would be impossible to stay away forever. For me, Kathrin's portrait is about the wish to be separate—above the clouds, so to speak—but knowing that separateness isn't the answer. At some point, the plane runs low on fuel, and you have to come back to earth.

NAOMI DEVIL

Yolandi, 2018

I mix mainly Baroque paintings with contemporary elements. In the case of *Yolandi*, I took a Biedermeier portrait and transformed it into a fetish BDSM mouse. The inspiration for this character was the singer Yolandi from the music duo Die Antwoord.

I saw many people re-creating museum pieces and I found them amusing, as I also re-create artworks, but never in my wildest dreams did I think that one day I would wake up and find my work re-created on Instagram.

"I am good at seeing through people."

I am a workaholic. If I'm not painting, you will find me organizing exhibitions. I usually start the day in the gym at 8:30 a.m., then I go home, do some house cleaning and stuff that needs to be done and after that I start to work. I try to stick to working 8 hours a day, like normal people. I don't want to mishandle my freedom. I am most active in the afternoon and night. I go to bed early; I'm not a night owl. I work at home, I have a room that serves as an atelier.

During the lockdown, I painted a lot and my themes completely changed. I started to paint artworks related to the pandemic. I painted classical portraits with medical masks and people fighting for pasta and toilet paper in Walmart. I found the whole mass-psychosis rather funny, so I depicted these situations with an ironic touch. I must say the pandemic was good for my art, as I kind of felt I had been repeating myself and I didn´t have new explosive inspirational energy. Now I have a lot of new ideas and I hope this remains for a while.

Art is in my blood. If I don't paint for a week or two, I go crazy, I get depressed. It´s the force that keeps me alive. But where does this urge to paint come from? A mystery! I was born this way.

For me, fame is not important as it is for others. Of course positive feedback is important; I can't deny it. But at the end of the day, fame—for me—is just a tool, not the goal.
The future will decide where my art lands; museum collections are the result of a long intergenerational selection process. And if a few of my works survive this selection, then I will smile in my grave.

There were a few weeks in March, when news of the pandemic was gripping the nation, that I barely wanted to go outside for fear of accidental contagion. Instead, I spent many hours losing myself in artists' websites, looking for portraits to re-enact. Naomi was one of the first artists whose work Danielle dared me to re-create, and when I landed on *Yolandi*, I was gripped by an urgency I can't quite describe.

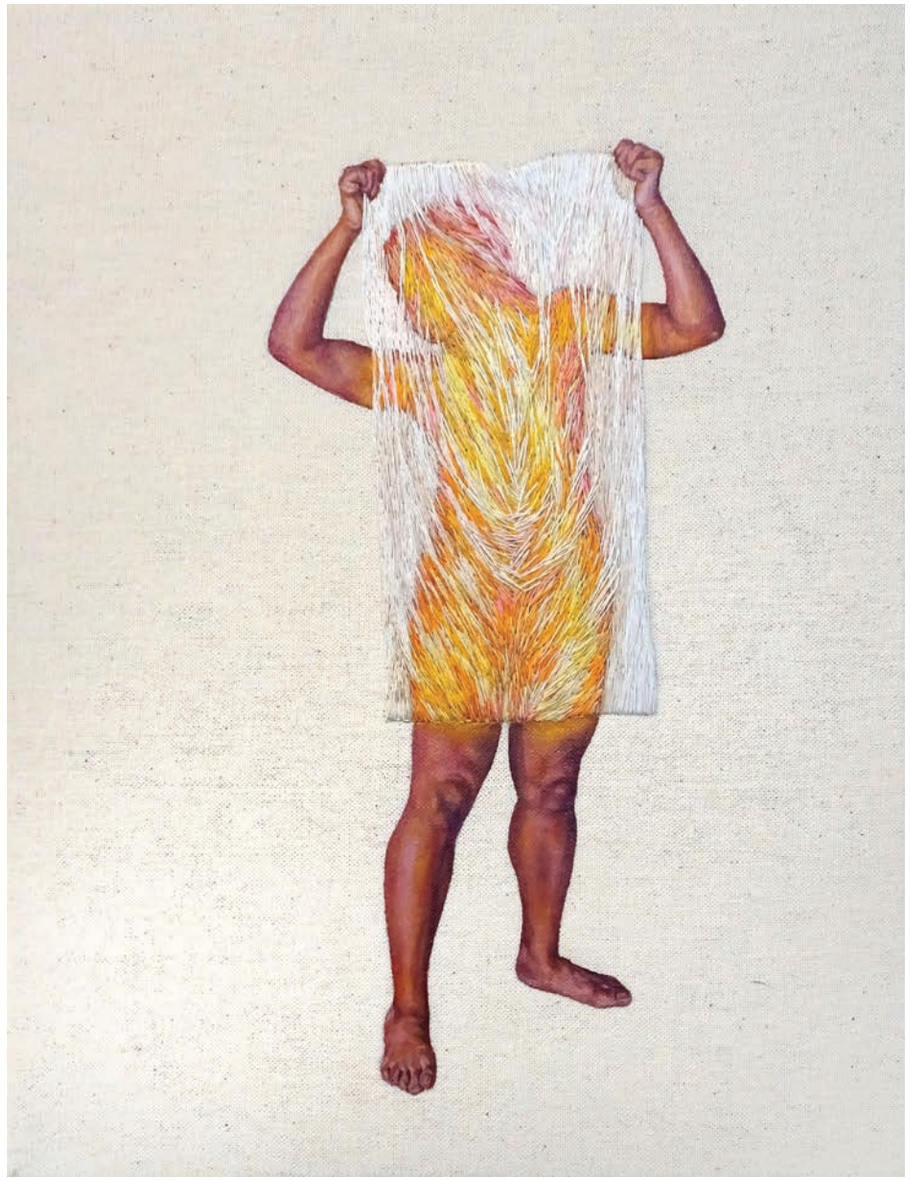
There was such oddity to the portrait, carrying this ambiguous aura of dominatrix and alien and clown. The painting was baldly unapologetic in its strangeness. There was a confidence in it, a swagger. I was disarmed, frightened, intrigued, horrified and amused all at once. I felt confronted by the subject, dared, perhaps in the same way Danielle had dared me.

The opportunities for creative revisioning were plentiful here—there were so many accessories to try and drum up! I rifled upstairs in the closet where all of the gift wrapping was. Meanwhile, Amy was rooting around in her parent's laundry room and came back triumphantly swinging her mother's white brassiere. We located the perfect tablecloth in a sideboard. We took this photo in the atrium of my in-laws' condo, against a tall bush.

Aside from the elaborate pinning of fabric and the challenge of keeping it in place, one of the more difficult tasks was to give myself bigger lips than I actually have. This involved creating a pocket of air in front of my teeth and holding it there. Meanwhile, the toilet paper mask kept slipping so that my eyes were becoming obscured. The bobby pins holding up the bra couldn't manage the weight of it. The whole ensemble was precarious, and it was exceedingly difficult to keep a straight face. We kept dissolving into fits of laughter that wouldn't stop, tears streaming down our cheeks. It was a welcome respite of unbridled hilarity at a moment when we needed it most. It was enough, even, to nudge me outdoors the next day as the weather turned warm, where it became clear that spring had officially arrived. Was it my imagination or did the daffodils look especially defiant? As if daring me to be entirely myself, in spite of the strange new world I was now living in.

SARAH DETWEILER

Shine Through, 2019



I am interested in exploring identity and what can be revealed through what is concealed. Often, I use embroidery to bring what is being concealed into focus. I love the challenge that comes with "painting with thread" to capture the luminescence and vibrance of the light source. In *Shine Through*, despite the part of the woman's identity that is covered (whether self-imposed or by others), she continues to shine through.

My very first response in seeing Maya's reenactment was one of recognition. The kind you experience when you see a celebrity in person and feel you know them personally. My next thought was, "How did she find a photo that looks just like my art?" When I saw it was my own artwork being re-created, I cried. I was so moved that someone wanted to use my art as inspiration. I felt seen and celebrated.

"I have lived many lives, but art has always been the constant."

I have a young daughter who requires most of my attention during the day. I am a night owl and have always preferred working into the night anyway. I am fortunate to have a studio in my home and have a corner designated for my daughter's art making. She calls it her studio and I love that she takes ownership of that space. I do not have a door to my studio, which allows me to stay connected to my artist self during the day by being able to look in, knowing that it is there, waiting for me.

During the first months of the pandemic, I found myself even more engaged with connections that I had developed through social media. It was almost as if the pandemic had forced all of our relationships into long-distance ones. I was fortunate not to experience a creative stagnation; I think it helped that I had a show I was working toward and that the gallery was so proactive in navigating through the restrictions. Miraculously, it was the most success I have had in my art career—I sold all of the paintings in that show!

Getting recognition for my art is both validating and fulfilling, but what means the most is when someone tells me about their personal connection to something I've made. Working in the studio can be a very isolating experience; there is no greater feeling than when I put the work out into the world and feel celebrated for that time spent.

It may sound cliché, but the truth is that art makes me. I have lived many lives, but art has always been the constant. I only feel like I am thriving when I have a regular art practice. I have always worked in creative fields, but my fine art career did not begin to flourish until I became a mother. I suddenly did not have time to not be true to myself.

There were so few props I needed to reenact Sarah's *Shine Through* that I thought it would be easy. But without the distraction of prop-finding, I actually had a chance to sit with this image longer, to really get inside of it. Once the photo shoot started, I actually felt quite vulnerable. It wasn't the fact that I had so much skin bared, but that my face was entirely hidden. It was as if the part of me that makes me *me* was obscured.

As I posed, I realized that something of this experience of obscurity, of being in hiding, reminded me of my first years of step-parenting. I always thought I'd have my own children—in fact, I was sure of it—already imagining their facial features, their personalities, their skill sets—but that isn't what happened. Instead, at the age of 40, I tumbled into a role that I hadn't anticipated at all, and I found myself floundering.

I kept most of my flailing to myself, largely because the focus seemed to be on how the kids were doing. I treaded softly around their grumpiness, tried to tune out (or at least tiptoe around) the chaotic landscape of my surroundings, with video games and mountains of sneakers and school lunch preparations, and on and on.

As I stood in the shower holding a kitchen garbage bag aloft with a yellow towel on my head, I was returned to those moments when I stayed quiet with the parts of me that felt anguished and alone. I protected the people around me from seeing my uncertainty, my discomfort, and the sense that I'd relinquished some of my own needs in order to better serve the family. There were moments when I felt a wave of grief—for the children I didn't have, for the mother I hadn't become. It's taken time—and there are absolutely moments I still come in contact with that rawness—but I see, instead, the uniqueness of the role I play in my stepsons' lives, and how integral they've become in mine.

Shine Through takes me right to that nexus of change, a place equipoised between past and present, and future, that veil we look through to understand where we've come from, where we are and where we might be going.

AFTERWORD

Notes from a Reluctant Art Director

It's hard to believe we are fast approaching a year since the beginning of this pandemic and the start of my wife's "museum at home" project, which seemed to snowball of its own accord as she explored the world of contemporary portraiture.

I knew at the start it was not a project she could do on her own. She needed an art director, or at the very least someone to snap the photo. To be honest, many days I was bothered by the interruption of fulfilling this role. I was already immersed in the 100-Day Project, making collaborative zines with our friend and artist Stefanie Renée. In years past, I had chosen a project that I could do rather quickly to prevent burnout and also to squeeze into our busy schedule. But 2020 was different, and I was luxuriating in the act of creativity because we had nothing but time.

So when Maya would pop a photo in front of me or request my help "for just a minute" to help her with her daily creations, I was less than enthused. I felt jostled and pulled away from my own artwork—feelings, I realize, that mirrored the effects of the pandemic on our whole life. I bristled at the intrusion and was often very reluctant to participate.

Still—and as always—I wanted to support her creative work, so we tried several methods to help alleviate my unwillingness. One strategy we adopted was that Maya would schedule my time, giving me a specific hour that we would devote to completing one of her re-creations. Another idea she had was to involve me more by having me choose the subject she would impersonate. But she would often dismiss my idea in favor of a portrait she had already researched, so that plan fizzled pretty quickly. I discovered, though, that my enthusiasm for my role bloomed once I was helping Maya round up the items she would need for the masquerade.

I also loved the challenge of getting it right. The lighting, the shadows, the makeup, the painted-on tattoos, the position of hands and feet and head. The pout of her lips or the slightest smile. I became obsessed with trying to get it as close to the original as possible so that at first glance the viewer would not know what they were looking at. I would retake shot after shot, looking at the artist's portrait and then looking at the photos I had taken, asking Maya to move a single finger or turn her head a tick to the left or right, squint her eyes a tiny bit more, or puff out those goddamn thin lips of hers! They were her most frustrating body part, and many of the subjects possessed much fuller lips than her. It made for some of our funnier moments when I'd shout with exasperation, "More lips, Maya, MORE LIPS." We'd dissolve into fits of giggles because there just weren't any more lips to give, at which point I'd resort to using lipstick to draw on her mouth.

My favorite portrait reimaginings were those that contained specific items such as a cigarette or goggles or animals. I think that was where my art direction really shined. I loved coming up with replacements for things we didn't have, sometimes subtle, sometimes ridiculous. A ball of yarn to stand in as a mouse, a bra for ears, a purse filling in for a helmet, a branch full of leaves posing as a bird wing, a crayon for a cigarette, a stuffed monkey for a cat. We would howl with laughter trying to outdo each other with our own eccentricity in finding replacements around our house (or my parent's house where we were staying at the beginning of the pandemic. My mother had an astonishing number of items that were perfect.) Then we'd look forward to seeing which items people noticed after the photos were posted on social media. The reward was always the viewers' delight.

But in truth, the biggest reward was our own delight. The weight of the pandemic was difficult. We were hardly leaving the house. We were washing down our groceries, not seeing our friends, family or my adult children, panicking about what would happen if one of us got sick—would we be one of the unlucky ones put on a ventilator? The fear was palpable. Like everyone else, we were overcome with grief and anxiety, wondering where and whom the virus would strike next.

Creating these portraits provided us with momentary relief in the monotony of our days. Maya could cajole me out of my moodiness, and we'd spend a few minutes pretending we were someone else. It felt like an antidote to the dire situation unfolding around us, a way to keep ourselves and anyone who stumbled on our reenactments entertained for the briefest of moments. Despite my reluctance, we were united by the task, and I was grateful to be with someone whose creativity was activated rather than extinguished by the grave reality around us, whose perspective was fresh, whose pleasure was simple, and whose willingness to overlook my disinclination was a life preserver I didn't know I needed.

—Amy Tingle

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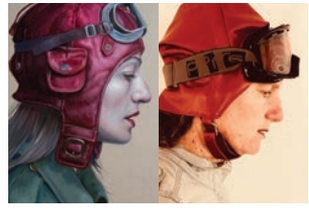

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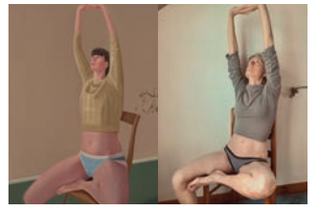

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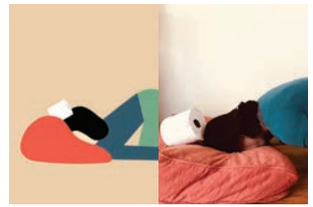

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maya Stein is a Ninja poet, writing guide, and creative adventuress. At nearly 9 years old (when the school picture at left was taken), she'd earned perfect scores on her spelling test 6 weeks in a row, an accomplishment noted in her report card by Mrs. Madison at Wenonah Elementary, and had discovered—for reasons unknown to her still—an aptitude for math that landed her in a class in the grade above with her sister Mikhal (who wasn't especially pleased about it). Other highlights from that year include watching Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* and being totally freaked out the next morning by a small gathering of crows on a nearby light pole, an obsession with Saturday morning cartoons and the discovery of two other TV shows—*Charlie's Angels* and *The Incredible Hulk*—that figured significantly into her playdates—and the arrival of her baby brother, Adam, to whom she begrudgingly sanctioned the occupancy of an upstairs bedroom across the hall from hers.

Forty years later (when the photo on the right was taken), Maya is living in mid-coast Maine in a house named Toad Hall with her artist wife, Amy Tingle. How can one summarize her past 4 decades in a single paragraph? Impossible. But perhaps it is enough to say that she can still solve mid-level math problems if needed, that conglomerations of birds still make her slightly uneasy, that the feeling of flexing her muscles (however puny) can still make her feel like she could lift a car off of train tracks if she had to, and that she loves her siblings fiercely. Other than that, she's written a handful of books, facilitates writing classes, is a stepmom to two incredible young men, and is trying to follow May Sarton's words of wisdom: "We have to dare to be ourselves, however frightening or strange that self may prove to be."

For more updated information about Maya's whereabouts and goings-on, visit mayastein.com.