NATIONAL REVIEW

The State of American Portraiture Is Strong

David Hilliard, Dad, at Manmade Pond, 2020. Inkjet prints. (Collection of the artist © David Hilliard)

By **Brian T. Allen**
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The Outwin, the National Portrait Gallery's triennial portrait show, gives us a galaxy of distinct American personalities.

I wrote about the National Portrait Gallery in Washington a few weeks ago. It was an institutional profile, so I don't mind writing about the place again in the context of its new exhibition, *The Outwin 2022: American Portraiture Today*. It's the gallery's triennial look at the state of American portraiture, and this year, it's both elegant and seductive. That's a hard-to-achieve pairing. Stately galleries, pitch-perfect arrangement of the art, and, of course, very good art deliver an experience that's bracing at times as well as consoling, depending on your frame of mind.

The Outwin is funded by a bequest from Virginia Outwin Boochever (1920–2005), a docent at the NPG, a collector, and the widow of a Foreign Service officer. Every three years, the museum selects a committee to vet open-call submissions for its Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition. This year, the 42 best were selected from 2,774 submissions and awarded prizes. The jury is first-rate and includes Kathleen Ash-Milby, the curator of Native American art at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon, artists Catherine Opie and Ebony Patterson, and the art critic John Yau, whose work I read whenever I see it. Three NPG curators were jurors, too. All the portraits are from the last two or three years, so they're created in Covid's and the 2020 race riots' terrible pall.

The Outwin is a case of intelligent philanthropy. The money pays for the exhibition, which was filled with young people when I visited, a catalogue, prize money, and a commission specially for the NPG done by the first-prize winner. Mrs. Boochever sounds like a smart lady.

Every work of art in the exhibition seems to have found the best place, and I mean the most decorous and comfortable. The art doesn't jump on the wall by itself. The curators arrange it. The NPG's spaces, in the grand Old Patent Office Building, help. It would be a trick for art to look bad in these galleries, with their high, arched ceilings and gracious details. People were spending lots of time looking at the art. The art's good, but the curators created the best possible environment.

Left: Vincent Valdez, People of the Sun (Grandma and Grandpa Santana), 2019. Oil on canvas. (Collection of Alexa Brundage © Vincent Valdez)
Right: Donna Castellanos, Bertha, I'd like to know where you got the notion, 2020. Fabric, zippers, pin cushions, snaps, paper packaging, knitting needles, and other sewing notions. (Collection of the artist © Donna Castellanos) (Courtesy National Portrait Gallery)

The exhibition has two entrances, always a challenge, but most people enter to be welcomed by *People of the Sun (Grandma and Grandpa Santana)*, Vincent Valdez's portrait of his Mexican-immigrant grandmother and grandfather. It's got Old Master grandeur. The old man mowed lawns and the old lady was a homemaker. They're dressed in everyday clothes. It's an affectionate, warm portrait and a personable one, too. It invites empathy.

Valdez's painting is one of four or five, depending on how we count them, ancestor portraits. I loved *Bertha, I'd like to know where you got the notion*, by Donna Castellanos. It's a portrait of her grandmother, who as a young woman worked in a factory installing zippers. Castellanos stitched the portrait using "sewing notions" such as fancy buttons, snaps, and trims, and created one old-lady coquette. Like Valdez's portrait, it's got presence as well as charm and warmth. I looked at Castellanos's website. Her message on her homepage starts with "I was born in Elmhurst, Illinois, and never left." She has a strong sense of home, and that's nice.

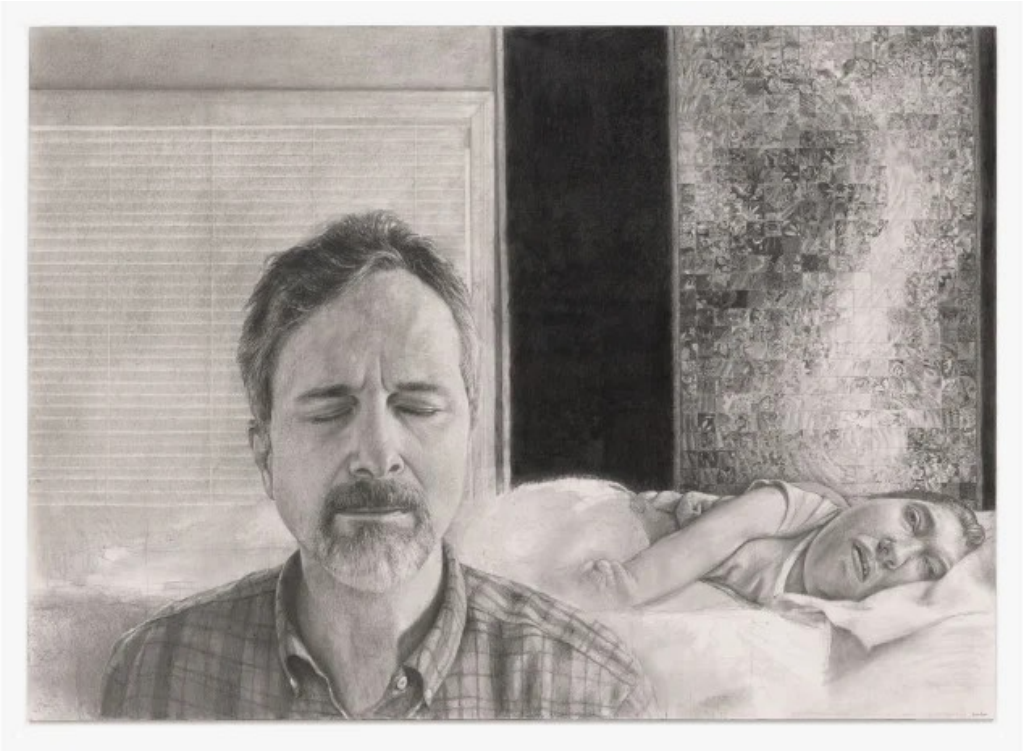
TR Ericsson's *Bride* seems wistful at first. It's a big expanse of white with a faint sepia image of a young woman. It's a portrait of Ericsson's mother, based on a photograph of her as a bride. His process is brilliant and different. It starts as a silkscreen based on the photograph. Ericsson then puts the silkscreen over a box packed with ashtrays filled with smoldering cigarettes. The nicotine in the smoke as well as the cigarettes' heat passes through the screen and burns a tarnished-gold-colored image.

Ericsson's mother, finally a suicide, was given to addiction. As a consequence, his art focuses on generations of his family in northeastern Ohio. I was initially drawn to *Bride* because it's tonalist. I like experiments with white-on-white or black-on-black. The technique's part of the narrative since his mother smoked like a jalopy tailpipe. It's a print but a monotype since each impression's unique. Ericsson gets the tones he wants through controlling the screen's exposure to the cigarette smoke. The work's beautiful but scarily so.

Dad, at Manmade Pond, by David Hilliard, is a triptych photograph and the last in a series Hilliard calls his "Dad Project," in which he photographed his working-class father living his everyday life from the 1980s until his death. "Everyday life" means photographs of his elderly father reading *Playboy* in bed, drinking beer from the bottle, swimming in a local lake, and sitting in a wheelchair, with dementia, in a nursing home. *Dad, at Manmade Pond* is elegiac. It depicts a box with his father's ashes resting on a table in a shallow pond. It's wistful and touching and a different kind of portrait.

All the galleries look great, but one gallery in particular is so balanced, so exquisitely arranged, so serene it feels like a chapel. Laura Karetzky's big *Toast* shows the artist's blurred reflection on a chrome toaster, a menorah in the foreground. It faces off across the gallery with Timothy Lee's *A portrait of the comet boy as a bearer of memories*, an oil painting with gold leaf, silk, and ink. "Comet Boy" is an imaginary character that Lee, gay and Korean-American, invented for anxiety displacement. Loosely, it's a self-portrait. Its golden palette complements Karetzky's.

The gallery glows. The lighting's perfect but the art, aside from Lee's and Karetzky's work, is part of it. Grade Solomon's *Shana* is a chiaroscuro-rich photograph. *The un-doing* by Adama Delphine Fawunda is a video showing a bust of a young black woman as she unravels her two braids. It's not big, but it's direct and riveting.



Tim Lowly, 2020 (Temma with her father and her Aunt Amy's quilt), 2020. Graphite on board. (Collection of Jackye and Curtis Finch Jr. © Tim Lowly)

There are so many other good things. Paul Mpagi Sepuya is one of my favorite young artists. His *Darkroom Mirror* is a double-portrait photograph and bewitching. Tim Lowly's *2020 (Temma with her father and her Aunt Amy's Quilt)* is a painful, haunting drawing of a man in the foreground, his eyes closed, and his obviously disabled daughter lying in bed in the background. The reckless, useless Covid lockdowns threw 50 million children from school, killed 100,000 small businesses,

enriched and coddled the Zoom class, destroyed the credibility of establishment science, and enthroned quacks like Fauci. It also marooned millions like this poor man, his eyes closed as he searches for his next helping of strength. *Glimpse* by Clarissa Bonet is a very snazzy photograph of a young black woman peering from the window of a modern Art Deco–style building. She's in a web of grids. It's a Covid-era work, too.

Of course, we take the bad with the good, or, more precisely, the art that's not a portrait with the art that is. I very much oppose hierarchies placing, for instance, painting on Parnassus and photography on Mount Squirt, but I'm a stickler for genres. *Glimpse* is fantastic but it's not a portrait. We don't know who the subject is. She's a motif and design element. She's an abstraction. The work of art isn't about her essence as an individual. It's not about how she thinks of herself or presents herself. Aside from imprisoned, she's not defined.

Left: Rigoberto A. Gonzalez, Refugees Crossing the Border Wall into South Texas, 2020. Oil on linen. (Varmar Private Collection © Rigoberto A. Gonzalez)
Right: Clarissa Bonet, Glimpse (From the series City Space), 2019. Inkjet print. (Collection of the artist, courtesy of Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago © Clarissa Bonet) (Courtesy National Portrait Gallery)

Refugees Crossing the Border Wall into South Texas isn't a portrait. Rigoberto Gonzalez's life-size painting of a family of four climbing across the Trump border wall on a ladder uses models and is as big as an Old Master altarpiece, but it's not a portrait. Portraits aren't generic. A mother climbs a ladder. She holds her baby, wearing only his Pampers. A father and his five- or six-year-old follows. The mother figure holds a rosary, a bit of schlock I'd say borders on kitsch, but isn't the word "border" a dirty one now?

It's not a bad painting. Rather, it's B-movie realism like Soviet propaganda posters from the '30s and Maoist propaganda from the '60s. Why is it in the show aside from heroicizing illegal immigration?

Wild Flowers, by Maia Cruz Palileo, is a gorgeous, big painting depicting five women of varying ages shoulder deep in a pond in a lush, tropical setting. The label tells us it "speaks to the history of colonization, migration, and assimilation, and the resilience of Filipinos in relation to the United States." The faces are portrait-like, but isn't it a genre painting, showing a scene of everyday life, however exotic? How does it show resilience?

Essex Boston & Family 1, by Michelle Elzay, isn't a portrait. It's a suite of photographs of artifacts dug up in a 19th-century Nantucket trash pit on land that once belonged to Essex Boston, a late-18th-century freed slave who became a cordwainer, real-estate flipper, and father of ten. Do these photographs make a portrait? No, they're still lifes. Boston was once a slave, and slavery's an obsession, especially in groupthink D.C., where racism is the cause of everything. We don't know who owned these

scraps of material culture since many families owned the property. It's far-fetched. There's a difference between an imaginary portrait and an artificial one.

Josephine Sittenfeld, Growing Up Ethan, 2019. Digital video with sound (15:20 min). (Collection of the artist © Josephine Sittenfeld)

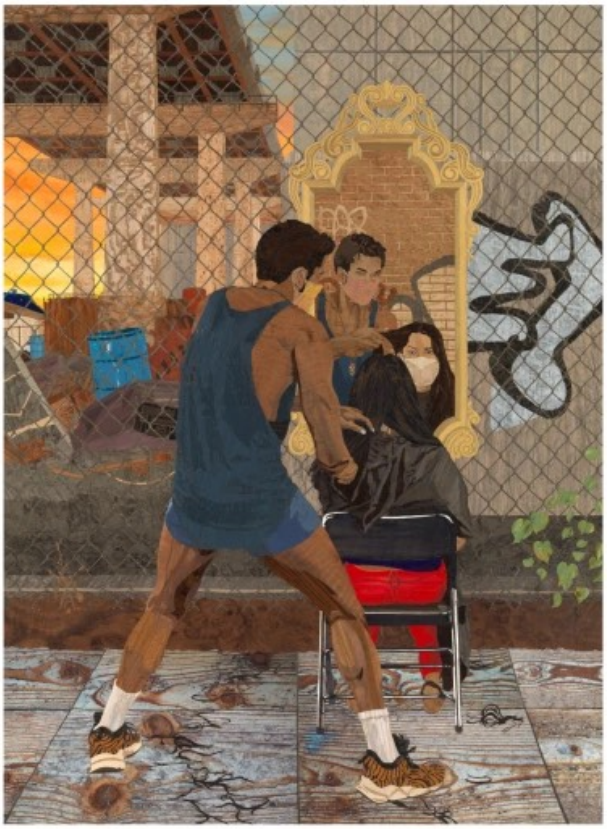
I saw three videos, all with great production values, in a comfortable niche in the middle of the exhibition. Rebecca Blandón's *Glen Eden* is a 12-minute video about Glen Eden Einbinder, an odd-looking man who collects objects labeled with the name "Glen Eden." These include a whiskey bottle but also horse ribbons, real-estate brochures, street signs, and fruit canned in Scotland, among hundreds of objects. He thinks of the project as one giant self-portrait, but, at the end of the day, who cares? *Growing Up Ethan* is a documentary about a young autistic man made by Josephine Sittenfeld. Is it a portrait? Yes. It's about autism but keeps a disciplined focus on the subject, who's very much aware he's the subject. The film's not diagnostic or

informational. Every shot has Ethan in it. It's not a cryptic or mysterious portrait, and the subject's hardly august, but this is American art.

Lois Bielefeld's *Thank you, Jesus, for what you are going to do* is a 13-minute video of the artist's mother, an Evangelical Christian, as she recites St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians while doing plank exercises. It's a freak show, and part of Philippians concerns St. Paul's opposition to circumcising converts, so it's got a kinky moment. Is it a portrait? I suppose, though at 13 minutes it gets tired fast.

Reading the catalogue essay, I think the curators led the jury astray in pushing a concept of portrait as collective. The essay is prone to look at the subjects of the portraits as symbols of races, genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. A portrait treats an individual, but the essay speedily drops the individual in a rush toward a community. Anti-Asian racism, Puerto Rican femicide, equity, social justice, systemic racism, and the struggles of working-class people of color and people here illegally are group dynamics. "Equity" annihilates the individual since we all have to land in the same place.

A portrait is about one unique person. I'd like to know what among the hundreds of finalists the jury ditched because the work was too idiosyncratic to hook to a fashionably beleaguered class. Today's John Singer Sargent need not apply.



Left: Alison Elizabeth Taylor, Anthony Cuts under the Williamsburg Bridge, Morning, 2020. Marquetry hybrid (wood veneers, oil paint, acrylic paint, inkjet prints, shellac, and sawdust on wood). (Collection of the artist © Alison Elizabeth Taylor)
Right: Pao Houa Her, untitled (man), 2019. Inkjet print. (Collection of the artist, courtesy of Bockley Gallery © Pao Houa Her) (Courtesy National Portrait Gallery)

The jury picked Alison Elizabeth Taylor's *Anthony Cuts under the Williamsburg Bridge, Morning* for first prize. Taylor works in the unusual medium of marquetry. It's a dynamic, life-size portrait of Anthony Payne, a Brooklyn hair stylist who lost his job when his shop was closed by Covid lockdowns. Payne's an entrepreneur, though, and a high-spirited guy, so he created a pop-up sidewalk salon.

The exhibition celebrates his altruism. Committed to social justice and moved by the George Floyd murder, he donated the money he made cutting hair to antisemitic, anti-cop, race-pimping Black Lives Matter, but his heart was in the right place. He didn't know his money would go into a pot to buy seaside L.A. mansions for BLM's greedy founders. I like Taylor's work a lot. Her *Anthony*

has elan and bounce, and it's nice to see an Old Master medium reborn.

Elizah Leonard, by the Wisconsin artist Tom Jones, won second prize. It's a photograph of a woman from his Wisconsin Native American tribe. He decorated the image with beads, rhinestones, and shells, giving it a touch of magic. It's beautiful and the effective introductory image at the show's second entrance.

I wrote about third-prize winner Pao Houa Her's work in the Whitney Biennial a couple of months ago. Born in Laos in 1982, she and her family came to the U.S. as refugees. She does portraits, some of family, some imaginary, and genre scenes in faux-Laotian settings. It's dreamy nostalgia with a bite. Her *untitled (man)*, a 52-by-42-inch photograph, depicts an elderly Laotian refugee living in a senior-care home in St. Paul. The artist interviewed him in her studio, which has a backdrop depicting a Laotian landscape. She asked him what it meant to be an American. He said, starting to cry, that he'd rather talk about what it meant to be given a second chance. Before describing group identity, he wanted to talk about the life-and-death push-and-pull that brought him and his loved ones here. Now that's got the makings of a portrait.

I enjoyed the exhibition, which runs until February. It travels after that, and so far it's going to two other East Coast venues. I hope it hits the heartland. Part of its success is in its galaxy of strong, distinct personalities — artists and subjects — from all over America.

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