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Shirley Gorelick: Perceptive Master of Portrait Painting

by Joy Perla

Portrait painting requires certain skills: precision in the artist's own style, in painting a subject's physical appearance; knowledgeable use of color. Psychological portraiture — painting a person so that we the viewers want to know him or her — demands that the artist understand the subject and convey that understanding in paint. Great Neck artist Shirley Gorelick enjoys a well-deserved, critically acclaimed national reputation for her psychological portraits.

Visiting her subjects at home, using photographs and slides that she has taken there, Ms. Gorelick returns to her large studio and begins her work of capturing a whole personality on canvas. The hands, a shoe, facial expression, each is done and redone until she achieves the desired effect. In "The Bensons I," part of the Benson family series, Ms. Gorelick redid the hands ten times. This particular painting is too large for the elevator in her Manhattan loft, so it remains in her Great Neck studio. The problem with any painting remaining there, she laughingly told us, is that she continually changes it.

Ms. Gorelick studies the environment of her subject and will only do people she knows well. She recently completed a painting of Dr. Tess Forrest, a North Shore analyst, seated comfortably at home. She has been creating realistic psychoportraiture since the 1960's, a period when there was little interest in realism. This past summer her work formed part of the "Contemporary Naturalism" exhibition at the Nassau County Museum in Roslyn.

One of Ms. Gorelick's most famous and most striking works is "Frida Kahlo," which formed part of "The Sister Chapel," a traveling environmental work by thirteen women artists completed in 1978. In the nine-by-five-foot painting of Kahlo, an artist and wife of the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, painted in vivid reds and blues, Kahlo is dressed in native costume, and stands against a background of Mexican shrubs. There is a smaller figure of Kahlo superimposed on the larger figure. *Newsday* art critic Jeanne Paris wrote that Ms. Gorelick "fused her own style with that of Kahlo's, including the varied personal symbolic forms always identified with Kahlo's work."

Grace Glueck, *New York Times* cultural news reporter, described "The Sister Chapel," of which "Frida Kahlo" was part, as a work that "attacked the traditional, patriarchal view of the world as expressed in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel." It was, Ms. Glueck wrote in the October 1980 issue of *ARTnews*, "an expression of 'feminist' emotion and autobiographical concerns." The entire "Sister Chapel" was exhibited at the Fine Arts Center, State University at Stony Brook and at P.S. 1 in Long Island City, under the auspices of the Institute for Art and Urban Resources.

There is an interesting footnote to the "Frida Kahlo" painting. Ms. Gorelick painted it while lying on her back, the result





"Gunny and Lee I"

of a fall that left her temporarily unable to work standing up. She took at least six months to complete the work, using Polaroid photos and mirrors.

Ms. Gorelick paints repeated studies of one person or one group, often in a series, because she has much to say about her subjects, too much, she feels, for one painting. There is her "Three Sisters" series, including the subjects nude against a background of dense foliage and the subjects dressed in loosely fitting bathrobes in the same setting. The three young women confront this viewer with a look close to disdain. They are self-assured and haughty. *Womanart* magazine critic Barbara Cavaliere says the series "closely parallels the combination of formal skill and emotional intensity which makes Degas the master of such work." But, unlike Degas, Ms. Cavaliere adds, the Gorelick work is marked by a sympathetic understanding of the teenage models who posed for this series.

Here as in the Benson series, Ms. Gorelick demonstrates her interest in the relationship between the people she paints and between those people and their environment. In her effort to understand her subjects, she paints them in different situations. "Gunny and Lee I," part of the Benson series, shows Gunny in her wheelchair, husband Lee standing behind and beside her. Afflicted with muscular dystrophy, Gunny's eyes are pained; her husband's face and position concerned and caring.

"Gunny and Lee II" might be a side view of the same painting, but here a bright light shines on the couple and suffuses the painting with warmth; just as Gunny's head

resting against her husband leaning over her, shows the warmth of their relationship. Finally in a complete change of mood, Lee sleeps on his sofa with his dog Taffy sitting on the floor cradled into his side. This painting, "Lee and Taffy" demonstrates the artist's extraordinary attention to detail: the intricately carved rattan fan chair, the handpainted coffee table, the potted fern with its delicate fronds.

The artist is interested in being as direct about her perception of someone as possible. She doesn't sentimentalize her subjects. As a result, her portraits are people we would like to know. In the words of *New York Times* art reviewer David Shirey, "Miss Gorelick has a gift for going beyond the physicality of her people, . . . While we certainly can't help but notice the stylistic precision in the rendering of eyes, a nose, a cheekbone or a hairline, the character of the individual prevails, inexorably imposing itself upon us . . ."

The artist has imparted her techniques and sensitivity to adults at the North Shore Community Arts Center, where she taught for the past 21 years. She began teaching in the Great Neck adult education program when she moved to that North Shore community in 1956. Betty Holliday headed the art program, bringing outside artists and critics from New York to teach.

Ms. Gorelick's early training started at Brooklyn's Abraham Lincoln High School. Her teacher got his students scholarships to study with such artists as Chaim Gross, Moses Soyer and Raphael Soyer, with

whom Ms. Gorelick studied. During these years she achieved public recognition when she won first prize in Macy's design competition for a float or balloon. "Dinny the Dinosaur" was her winning entry.

She went on to Brooklyn College and then earned a Master's Degree at Columbia. She also studied privately with Hans Hoffman in Provincetown, Mass.

In addition to painting, Ms. Gorelick has done sculpture and etchings. Currently she also works in silverpoint, the art of drawing with silver. Working on canvas, she creates portraits that are delicate and emotionally powerful at the same time.

Most recently she has exhibited in an invitational show called "Dialogues" in New York City. Her work has been shown at the Whitney Museum Downtown; Brooklyn Museum; the Museo Nacional of Argentina; and at SOHO 20, the cooperative New York City gallery; at Central Hall Gallery, Port Washington, which she helped found; and at Guild Hall, Easthampton. Her works are included in the collections of the Norfolk, Virginia Museum, the Phoenix, Arizona Museum and C.W. Post, Greenvale.

She was a recipient of the CAPS fellowship in Painting as well as awards from the Painters and Sculptors Society of New Jersey and the Rhode Island Arts Festival; and the Long Island Painter Exhibition award from Guild Hall.

With honesty, sensitivity and great technical skill, Shirley Gorelick has made her psychoportraiture creations of emotional perception and artistic mastery. ■



"Lee and Taffy"