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# Leah Mantini: Meaningful Portraiture

**L**eah Mantini sits among her work, which is propped up on an easel, on a table, against walls and furniture in an attractive living room. She wears a cardigan and a knee-length skirt; her shoulder-length hair is straight; her eyes are clear. Her speech is thoughtful—her manner poised. She is as earnest as a volunteer espousing a cause. Despite the missing signifiers—no scarf-springing curls, no flowing skirts, no bracelets jangling against wildly gesticulating hands—she is an artist. It is not her job to be seen; her job is to see.

**T**he work surrounding her includes both oils and drawings, both portraits and landscapes. Each piece seems freed by light. It is that light that invites us into the work's considered shadows, invites us to experience the emotional life of the subject in all its complexity. The intimacy of the portraits urges understanding—How well do we know any person? Mantini makes what she calls “meaningful portraits.” Her work is a dialogue with those portrayed.

“I’ll pick up their personality by their demeanor, perhaps strong yet gentle, perhaps a tough exterior... I watch for juxtaposition, contemplation. Every piece is going to have a narrative,” Mantini says.

**A** riveting example of her interaction with a subject is her portrait of UGA basketball player Albert Jackson. “I walked by him one day, and I knew... I just stopped and asked if I could paint him.” Called “Master of My Fate I,” the resulting painting was reviewed by one of her mentors, Ted Reed of Virginia: “I’m captivated by the mystery of his moody, thoughtful expression and the ambiguity of the lost edges. Leaving the eyes and mouth in shadow enhances the mystery perfectly. The contrast between his contemplative expression and the aggressive tattoo roar suggests a man of many levels.”

**M**antini’s first portrait was a drawing of her grandfather made when she was in high school. She embraced the fine arts during that time, and as a babysitter she made drawings of her charges, which the parents bought. Mantini next entered Suwanee as a studio art major and is remembered by her professors there for the sophistication and sensitivity of her work. In her 2004 senior thesis, she wrote that her portraits “seem to share the common ties of humility and contentment in that they are individuals who do not seek to be sought.”

Suwanee professor Pradip Malde says, “She is still seeking out that sense of humility in her sitters, and it is this quality that seems to imbue her work with the sublime.” From her advisor, Edward Carlos: “Leah is guided by a perspective of honesty in rendition, a truthfulness to the individual’s countenance, and a heart full of compassion and reverence for the subject matter.”

**W**orking in the style of Classical Realism, Mantini’s paintings incorporate the values of the great traditions of Western art. Its emphasis is on craftsmanship, learned through disciplined

a master—a professional painter who trains them in an intense, hands-on environment. Thus, after college Mantini studied painting at the Art League School in Alexandria, VA, under master portrait and figure painter Robert Liberace, whose prominence in the art world is such that he won the 2003 Grand Prize Award in the International Portrait Competition from the Portrait Society of America. Witnessing Mantini’s growth, another instructor with the Art League, portrait and figurative artist Ted Reed, soon asked her to apprentice for him. Reed had noted her nuanced use of color, exceptional draftsmanship and the “unprecedented” speed with which she grasped “the



Leah Mantini's oil painting “Il Venditore da Taonnina.”

study of fundamentals such as light, form, color and composition; intense concentration on the human figure; and rigorous training in drawing and painting. As a student becomes adept, the technique becomes transparent, allowing her to realize classical ideals of beauty. This style is best taught in the Atelier Method, in which students learn under

classical technique of painting with thick, expressive brushwork in areas flooded with light, while barely glazing the surface in areas of darkness—a technique best exemplified by masterworks by Rembrandt and Sargent.” Soon Mantini collected a stable of clients for whom she painted commissioned portraits as she became an artist in her own right.

**M**antini married and moved to Athens in the spring of 2007; her husband is now a graduate student in psychology. Upon arriving, she went to Elements Art Supply to apply for a job. There she met with the owner, Irene Dodge, who is on the board of the Oconee Cultural Arts Foundation (OCAF), the Athens Area Arts Council and the Lyndon House Arts Foundation. A painter and sculptor herself, Dodge has worked in and around the visual arts for 32 years, from New York to Miami. After a conversation and a look at Mantini’s portfolio, Dodge announced: “You need to be teaching here.” Mantini is now teaching drawing, oil painting and portraiture at OCAF, where Elements classes found the light and space they required. Dodge describes Mantini’s teaching style thus: “She seems so timid and meek, but she has a ton of inner strength. She’s a fireball when it comes to teaching. This is her arena, and she is in control of her arena. She makes each student feel as if he’s the only one.”

Mantini herself says that she and her students “go on a little journey together for six weeks.” She learns from her students—“questions I wouldn’t have thought about”—as she passes along her classical training: “Absorb the fundamentals; don’t get overanxious. If you have these roots you’ll be freer in the end.”

**A**s Mantini teaches, she continues to work. Her landscapes are lovely, but she says “the portrait is the ultimate test of interpreting reality.” Her portrait of an older man, “Il Venditore da Taonnina,” recently won the 2008 Purchase Award from Lyndon House Arts Foundation. She obtains commissions by word of mouth, and her work may be found for sale at Elements Art Supply. She is still young; her potential stirs those artists who know her.

“It’s amazing to know someone like this now, because 25–30 years later it will be a privilege to have known her at this stage. In 32 years, I’ve met a million artists, many famous, but I can count the number of blue-chip artists on both hands,” says Irene Dodge. “She’s blue chip.”

Ted Reed says, “All of her instructors are lining up to take credit for her present and future accomplishments. I know. I’m jostling for my space in that crowd. I can count on one hand the number of young artists who I’ve met whom I believe the art world should watch. Leah stands foremost among them.”