

A photograph of the Statue of Liberty at night, illuminated with a blue light. The statue is shown from the chest up, holding a torch in its right hand and a tablet in its left. The background is a dark, clear sky.

the contemporary portrait

STORY BY VIRGIL ELLIOTT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOAN
DONAHUE

For a few days in May, the knowns and unknowns, the young hopefuls, the not-so-young hopefuls, and the ones who have reached the highest levels met, made new friends, perhaps learned a thing or two, and came away with renewed fervor to paint the painting that will surpass everything they had done



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his is what ASOPA conventions are all about. This year's event was particularly important, as Nelson Shanks brought to it a program geared toward advancing our collective awareness and appreciation of the finer aspects of representational painting and portraiture as it relates to the larger scheme of things in the world of art today, and of the years to come. That would have made coming to the convention worthwhile by itself, regardless of whatever else might have gone on. Yet there was quite a bit more, much of which bears mentioning before we return to the Shanks program in greater detail. In the interest of clarity and simplicity, I will try to report what transpired in chronological sequence.

Thursday night at the New York Hilton there was a roundtable discussion emceed by ASOPA Advisory Board Chairman John Howard Sanden, in which a panel of professionals addressed questions asked by members of the audience. Each member of the panel was asked to expound on what he or she felt was of particular importance to portrait artists today. Richard Whitney made the excellent point that the quality of one's work must be the supreme consideration, which he said should override all other concerns. Michael Del Priore stressed drawing from life as the key to mastery in art. Steve Doherty spoke of the importance of exceptional quality, emphasis on whatever sets a person's art apart from that of other artists, to distinguish oneself from the herd. Marketing and promotional considerations were dealt with by Mary Anderson of Portrait Brokers of America, Ruth Reeves of The Portrait Source, Steve Childs, LaRue Haigler of Leon Lord Commissioned Portraits, Karin Wells of A Stroke of Genius, Irad Ingraham, Sandra Carpenter, Michael Del Priore and John Howard Sanden.

Shelley Stansfield then gave a presentation on the New York Society of Portrait Artists, explaining how it began, what it is doing, and what its plans are for the future.

A critique session followed, with Carl Samson, Richard Whitney, Bart Lindstrom, Thomas Nash and Michael Del Priore offering constructive criticism of the works submitted, which lasted well into the night.

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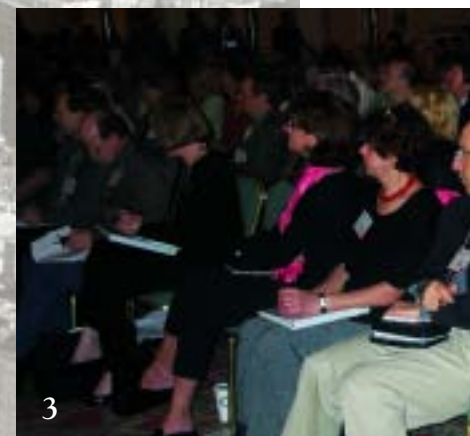
1 John Howard Sanden emceed a panel of professionals who addressed questions asked by members of the audience.



2 Another roundtable discussion featured painters including Steve Childs, Michael Del Priore, Irad Ingraham, David A. Leffel, Sherrie McGraw and Richard Whitney, who discussed topics such as their canvas preferences, mediums, procedures, practical matters and some of their views on art.



3 The audience got to hear firsthand Michael Del Priore's feelings on painting from life and Steve Doherty's emphasis on distinguishing oneself from other artists.



4 Karin Wells of A Stroke of Genius was available to answer questions about building web sites and bringing a portrait business into this age of technology.



5 After a critique session of participants' work, Thursday night's events ended late, which offered everyone a glimpse of the magic of New York City.



Friday's venue was the Hilton's Trianon Ballroom, where Mr. Sanden introduced distinguished guests, including Joseph Rossi and Ira Goldberg, respectively President and Director of the Art Students' League; ASOPA president Arnold McRae; Richard Schmid and his wife, Nancy Guzik; Nelson Shanks; Peggy Baumgaertner; Thomas Nash; Steve Doherty (Editor of *American Artist* magazine); Sandra Carpenter (Editor, *The Artist's Magazine*); Leona Shanks; Jean Dupont; Jennifer Williams; Richard Ormond; Sherrie McGraw; Richard Whitney; David A. Leffel; Carl Samson; Irad Ingraham; Ian Kennedy; Gregory Hedberg, Ph.D; Edgar Peters Bowron, Ph.D; Michael Del Priore; Zenos Frudakis; Dan Thompson; Scott Bricher, and Vivian Levi. Unfortunately, ASOPA founder Leon Loard was unable to attend, due to health problems.

Next was another roundtable discussion, with Carl Samson (who sounds very much like Johnny Carson) introducing the panel of Steve Childs, Michael Del Priore, Irad Ingraham, David A. Leffel, Sherrie McGraw, Richard Whitney, Thomas Nash and Bart Lindstrom, along with Cedric Egeli, Richard Ormond and Greg Rudd, who were introduced by Mr. Sanden. The artists on the panel discussed their canvas preferences, mediums, procedures, practical matters and some of their views on art.

Sherrie McGraw followed, with a demonstration of her *alla prima* chiaroscuro method of painting from life. Sherrie painted with great dispatch, carving out a convincingly three-dimensional form almost immediately, by blocking in the larger shapes before attending to the more important of the smaller shapes, and then proceeded to develop it into a good likeness of her model. It is no easy task, painting before an audience with such a short time limit, and explaining what is being done at the same time. I thought Sherrie handled the challenge very well.

Displayed in the next room were the Finalists' paintings in the Portrait Competition, 24 in all this year, covering a wide range of styles, from very loose to painstakingly tightly rendered, and everything in between. Which would the judges favor?

After lunch, the program resumed with John Howard Sanden's glowing oratory, introducing Nelson Shanks, who had put together an educational lecture series, "The Grand Heritage of Portraiture" for our benefit. Shanks, not one to mince words, pointed out that ignorance and poor taste are the biggest problems representational artists, and particularly portrait painters, face today. The series he arranged for us was geared toward addressing those problems. Shanks introduced his first speaker in his program, art historian Ian Kennedy, who presented a lecture and slide show entitled, "The Renaissance and Baroque Portrait." Kennedy discussed the evolution of portraiture from Domenico Ghirlandaio through Michelangelo, Leonardo, Titian, Raphael,

Holbein, Van Dyck, Velasquez and Rembrandt. His talk included interesting bits of little-known information, such as how Titian benefited from the praise of Pietro Aretino, the first writer to derive a living solely from writing. He touched upon the Grand Manner, as practiced by Titian, whose subsequent influence is seen in the portraits of Velasquez, Van Dyck and Rembrandt, among others.

The next speaker in Shanks' program was Edgar Peters Bowron, Ph.D. Dr. Bowron gave a slide presentation on the 18th century Italian portrait painter Pompeo Battoni, in which he discussed Battoni's procedures and various other aspects of the portrait work of this under-appreciated Master.

Art dealer and scholar Gregory Hedberg, Ph.D, spoke on "Portraiture and the Art Market," predicting that realistic imagery and portraiture would be returning to the forefront of the art world, as the excesses of modern art have had their day, and there is nowhere for art to go but back to realism. He made a very compelling case, which no doubt raised the hopes of everyone present. Portraiture cycles in and out of fashion in the art market, he says, and it is just beginning to emerge from a cycle in which it has been out of favor. He avers that "retro" is the next phase; "modern" is out. Dr. Hedberg assured us we would all be doing very well in ten years. I'm not sure whether he was being somewhat facetious or totally in earnest, but it certainly brightened my day to hear him say it. It is long overdue.

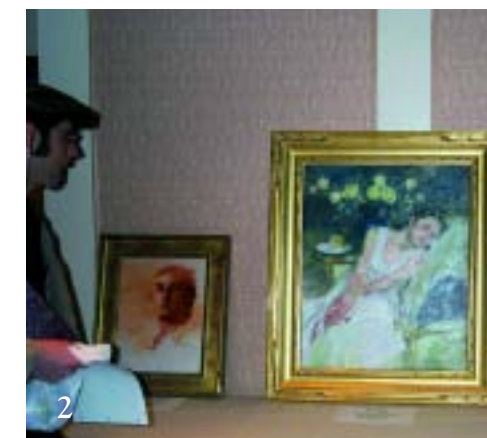
Shanks then introduced Richard Ormond, grandnephew of John Singer Sargent, who gave a very insightful talk on Sargent, touching on some of his working procedures, influences, etc., and how he played up the elegance, refinement and opulence of the settings and props in his portraits of his nouveau riche clientele. Mr. Ormond is a noted authority on Sargent, and his talks are always fascinating.

Three young artists who work and study with Nelson Shanks then presented a slide show and lecture entitled, "The Art of Studying Art." Dan Thompson (ASOPA's 2001 Grand Prize winner), Vivian Levi and Scott Bricher each related the paths that led them to study with Shanks, and expressed their sincere gratitude and appreciation for what they were able to learn from him.

Shanks himself was the next speaker, and he began his talk, "Remarks on the Past. . .Into the Future," with a bang. He said it is often a good idea to start things off with a joke. "So here is the joke. . ." he said, "Modern art." This drew a hearty round of applause. He went on to reiterate and expand upon the point he had mentioned earlier: that the cultural degradation so much in evidence today must be reversed before the connections with the most valuable aspects of our artistic and cultural history become irretrievably lost. He went on to say, "We are each of us the force



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5 On Friday evening the National Sculpture Society presented a slide show of the work of contemporary sculptor Zenos Frudakis, who "threw open a large window onto the activities of the National Sculpture Society."



6 Michael Del Priore and David Leffel continue to be audience favorites and an asset to the event.

to improve the future. The responsibility is squarely on our shoulders. Modernism as a paradigm is being rejected by a wave of the forward-thinking, bent on developing an art form relevant to their rational and spiritual world. And there is no more important medium for the artist than the portrait.” He related how deeply he was moved by the first Rembrandt portrait he had ever seen, long ago, in a museum in Kansas City; how the portrait gave the overwhelming impression of a living person, looking back at him, acknowledging his presence. “It welled up in me such feeling as I shall never forget. It demanded gently the depth of my own feelings and communicated in a profound way. Rembrandt—I shall never forget you! You have reached me in a way profound!”

Shanks, who is known for expressing his views frankly, does not tiptoe around other artists’ sensitivities in his criticisms of the art being produced today. “If painting is your idiom, then paint meaning into your work—not the Bo Peep or James Montgomery Flagg mentality; not the formulaic commercial aesthetic pervasive in portraiture today. Look at Eakins, Rembrandt, Ribera. Erase yourselves from the list of ‘cornographers’ who mock painting and real portraiture. Do not insult by cheap flattery, but flatter by honest respectful interpretation! Consider that your subject may have character, and may be more than simply the occupant of an expensive suit.” But his admonitions were constructive in intent, rather than destructive. It sometimes takes strong words to motivate people to strive to do better, and that is exactly what he encourages us all to do: strive to do better, to set the stage for a better future for art and culture. To what more worthy goal can an artist aspire? Shanks went on to say, “Examine, in the deepest sense you can, the meaning of the person or scene you confront. Allude to the nobility of being human, or to life’s frailty, sensitively—seeking out the aristocracy of shapes, forms, lines, expressions, the perfect nuances which constitute the details, but always first and foremost the larger meaning.” It was an impassioned speech, and he made many excellent points, with all of which I heartily concur. I will return to some of the best of them at the end of this article, as I feel they will put everything into its proper perspective.

Friday evening the National Sculpture Society presented a slide show of the work of contemporary sculptor Zenos Frudakis, which I regret I missed because I lingered over dinner conversation too long, and therefore cannot elaborate on the presentation. Jeanine Jackson has graciously provided the following account of this segment of the program:

“Mr. Zenos Frudakis of Chester, Penn. threw open a large window onto the activities of the National Sculpture Society.

Founded in 1893 by J.Q.A. Ward, this esteemed group of specialists continues the tradition of excellence in bronze, marble and other media to create impressive and enduring portraits. Technically foreign to most painters, sculpture involves its own process. A plan is made—often working from photo sources alone for posthumous commissions. Interestingly, while many painters prefer three-quarter or life-size, sculpture portraits are often designed to be larger than life, as they tend to look smaller in scale once installed. Instead of an underpainting, a wire form is created. This can become quite elaborate with supports that magically disappear in the final product. Enlargement of a smaller study to a full-scale installation was shown utilizing a twin-armed sculpting tool. Ingredients are key, especially when choosing clay, and Mr. Frudakis mentioned the precious Giudici brand he prefers, with its secret oil-based formula. This provides a slower drying time and the right consistency throughout a large piece. Partnering with foundries, experiments with finishes and patinas, and constant exploration go into each commission. Slide after slide, awe-inspiring installations were shared of prominent figures in government and business.” I thank Jeanine for that report.

Though it had been a very long day already, I did manage to catch James Childs’ informative talk on historic painting techniques, and the tail end of David A. Leffel’s demonstration. Leffel worked without a model this time, painting a simple egg shape to illustrate most of his points, eventually adding facial features to it and turning it into a face.

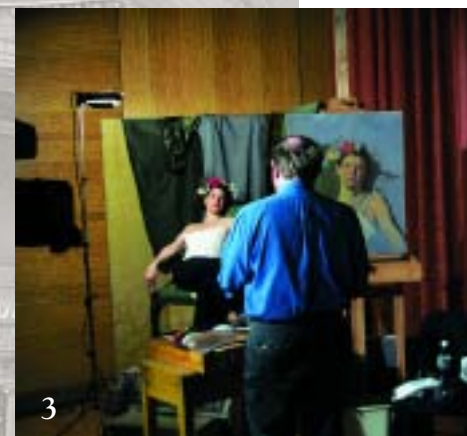
The venue for Saturday’s program was the auditorium at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Activities commenced with Richard Schmid’s slide presentation and lecture, “Freedom in Portraiture.” Schmid discussed his *alla prima* approach to painting, with the enthusiasm born of his intense love for what he does.

John Howard Sanden’s slide presentation and lecture, “The Premiere Coup Tradition in Portrait Painting,” traced the origins of *alla prima* painting, aka premier coup, citing early practitioners among the Old Masters, including Frans Hals and Antony Van Dyck. Once again I must rely on Jeanine Jackson’s account of this part of the program. “Mr. Sanden observed that while some of their works may look somewhat photographic in reproduction, they are clearly *alla prima* when viewed first-hand, with visible brushstrokes of perfectly placed thick paint. Examples of Raeburn, showing sharper contrasts, Zorn’s *Proust*, works by Sargent, Sorolla and Valentin Serov illustrated Mr. Sanden’s observation that ‘If any portrait is great, it is because of the character captured and projected.’ The power of these premier coup paintings in that

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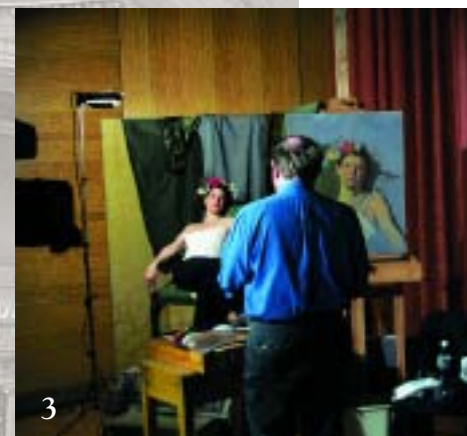
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3 Nelson Shanks put on a painting demonstration with Marisa Tomei, who was the perfect model, assuming an intriguing expression that did not fade throughout the entire sitting.



4 The likeness began to appear very early in the process, and the demonstration was a masterly display of serious painting. . .no one was interested in leaving the room until it was over.



5 Ms. Tomei and her grandmother seemed to have enjoyed the afternoon.



6 Shanks lingered to talk with audience members after the demonstration.



regard was clearly evident. His presentation went into how-to specifics for today's portraitist. Here are a few gems: 'Begin with an untuned or neutral ground, and attempt the final effect from the first application of color. . .Base work on observation alone. . . Make every stroke count. . .Proceed from large to small. . .Work with speed in a single session. . .Be careful and critical in final judgments. . .Don't overpaint. . .Leave highlights alone—either repaint or leave them sitting on top of the form. . .The stroke follows the form, in general. . .' I thank Jeanine Jackson again for helping out with the above account of Mr. Sanden's presentation, which I regret I missed while tarrying too long over fascinating conversation at lunch.

For the rest of the afternoon, Nelson Shanks put on a painting demonstration with Marisa Tomei as his model. Yes, Marisa Tomei, the extremely talented and lovely actress who stole the show in the movie *My Cousin Vinny*, among her many noteworthy roles. She was the perfect model, assuming an intriguing expression that did not fade throughout the entire sitting. Shanks, who spoke very little while painting, remarked that it helps to have the ideal model. The auditorium was filled to overflowing for this much-anticipated demonstration, as is always the case when Nelson Shanks is on any program, anywhere, and the reason this is so soon became apparent. From his first searching strokes, to establish the composition, angles and positions of key elements, etc., he began building his forms in full color, filling in each area with the general color. He addressed the picture as a whole before zeroing in too much on any one area, and saved the refinements for a bit later. The interplay of warm and cool soon established the forms in the lighter areas, and the likeness began to appear very early in the process. All in all, it was a masterly display of serious painting, and no one was interested in leaving the room until it was over.

The evening program was the awards presentation ceremony over dinner at the New York Athletic Club, with musical entertainment by Judith Pannell and Steve Raiford.

Chris Forbes gave a slide show of art in his collection, much of which was commissioned from James Childs, and spoke of his great passion for art. The festivities drew to a close, and we were all left with mental overload, which would no doubt take some time to sort out, due to the great amounts of information and impressions concentrated into three days' time. In light of that, I will close with a few particularly relevant quotes from some of the speakers at this year's festival:

"Remember, broader knowledge serves to free one towards personal expression and style; the best antidote for ignorance!"
Nelson Shanks

"In ten years, you are all going to be SO RICH!" *Gregory Hedberg, Ph.D.*

"I realized, after speaking with Nelson Shanks, that I could not become a good portrait painter until I became a good painter." *Vivian Levi*

"Draw from life." *Michael Del Priore*

"Never give less than your very best." *John Howard Sanden*

"Even in mythological painting, the greatest appeal is that which makes the characters human or which relates to their humanity. It all comes down to human values." *Nelson Shanks*

"Early in an artist's development, there is a struggle with technique; later on, the struggle is more of an aesthetic nature." *David A. Leffel*

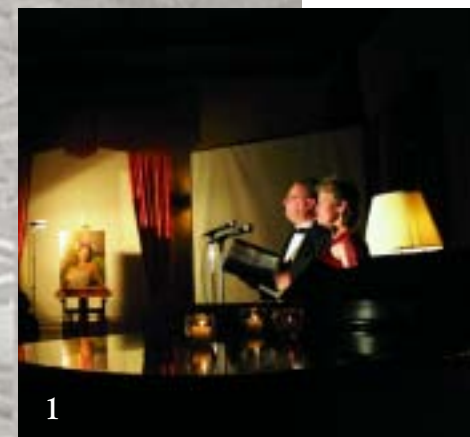
"We must agree that most contemporary art and culture today lowers society, and all of us with it. We must therefore imagine a better art and a better society, and act on it in a positive way. This is the business of an artist." *Nelson Shanks*

I could not have said it better.



Artist, writer and teacher *Virgil Elliott*, ASPA, a Signature Member of ASOPA, is one of 24 artists in the world certified by the American Portrait Society. He has had many articles published in *The Portrait Signature* and elsewhere, and is currently writing a book on advanced oil painting techniques and aesthetics. His portraits and other paintings hang in government, private and corporate collections in the United States, Europe and Japan. Elliott keeps a studio on a former winery in Northern California's Wine Country, where he paints, writes, teaches, and lives with his wife, singer/actress *Annie Lore*. Virgil Elliott is listed in *Who's Who in the World*. Images of some of his paintings can be seen on the following web sites:

- <http://www.virgilelliott.com>
- http://www.artrenewal.org/museum/e/Elliott_Virgil/page1.html
- http://www.gandynet.com/art/Virgil_Elliott/index.htm
- <http://www.portraitartist.com/virgilelliott/elliott.htm>



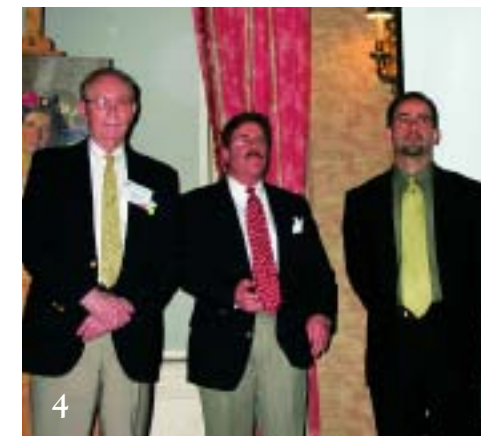
1 Judith Pannell and Steve Raiford provided musical entertainment for the awards presentation ceremony and dinner at the New York Athletic Club.



2 Chris Forbes (center) aided by Elizabeth Sanden (right) gave a slide show of art in his collection, much of which was commissioned from James Childs (left).



3 Richard Whitney celebrates with his wife Sandy Sherlin.



4 Award winners in the Portrait Competition were announced.



5 Award winners in the Portrait Competition were announced.



6 Richard Schmid, Arnold McRae and Nelson Shanks smile over the success of the Contemporary Portrait.

the awards



People's Choice and First Prize John Michael Carter



Grand Prize for Best of Show Nickolay Blokhin



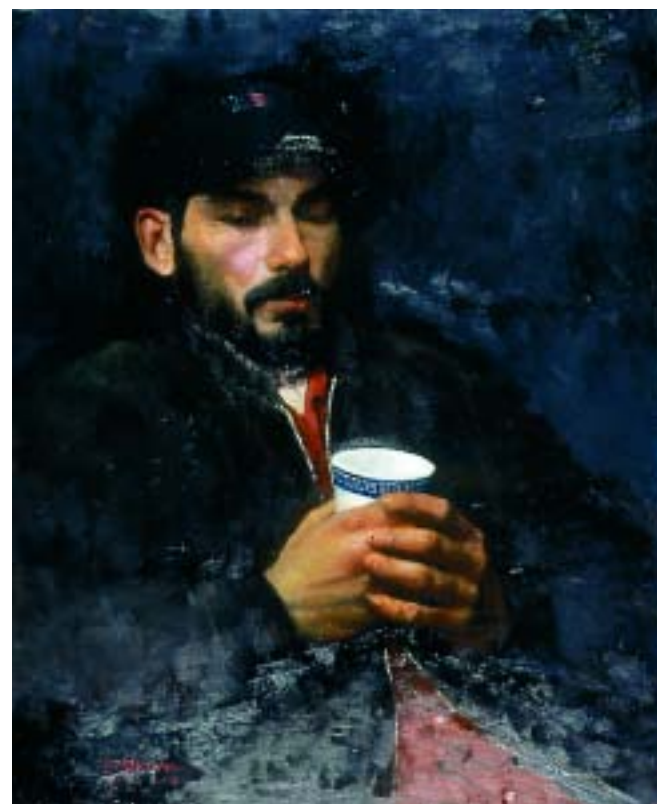
Third Prize Elena Flerova



Honors Albert Loewy



President's Award Zhang Li



Second Prize Sacha Mobarak



Honors Marvin Mattelson

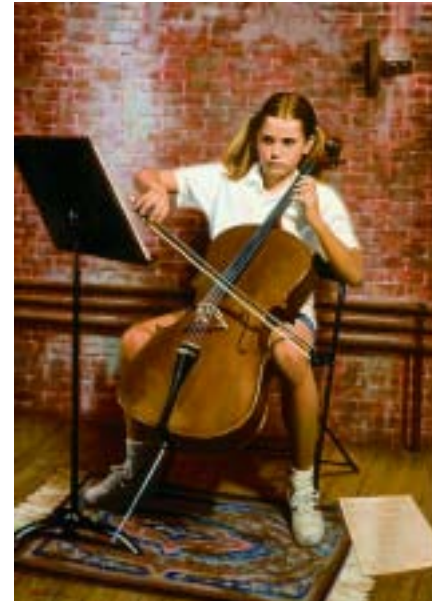
certificates of merit



Fernando Rengel



Jenny Rutherford



Raymond Olivere



Greg Rudd



Philippe Faraut



Timothy Thies



Loretta Kielar



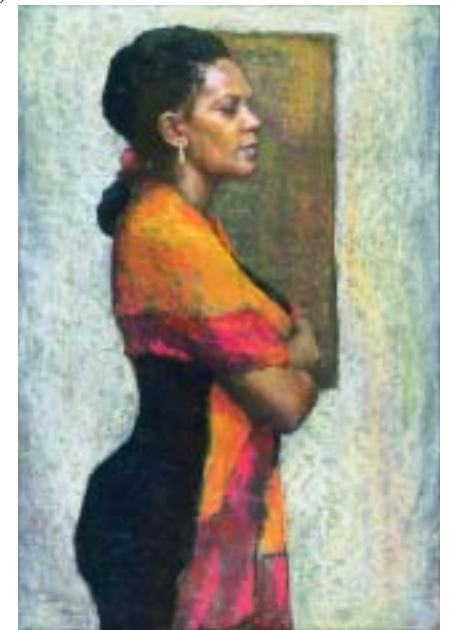
Virgil Elliott



Jaye Fox



Jason Bouldin



Naomi Campbell



Aapo Pukk



Jonathan Collins



James Childs



Mary French



Nafisa Naomi



Wang Hong Jian