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## Portrait of the Artist

Symbolized by this painting of his ex-fiancée, Vestal rising star artist Joseph Q. Daily lost his love, but found his voice

By Brendan O'Meara

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**FEBRUARY 2014**



# Portrait of the Artist

Painting through love and loss, Vestal rising star artist Joseph Q. Daily finds his voice  
By Brendan O'Meara



(Top) Joseph Q. Daily in his studio; (Bottom, left to right): *Ben*, the painting that put Daily on the portrait map; *Forest Song*; and *LaVoyce and Sidney Porter*

A couple walks into an art gallery. They are in Corning celebrating their twenty-first wedding anniversary when they notice activity in the West End Gallery. The gallery is closed, but people inside are setting up an exhibit to spotlight some new painters, one specifically, who had been tucked away in the hills of Vestal, New York, barely an hour away.

The couple lets themselves in. The wife, highly educated and of Eastern European descent, grew up in museums. Her grandmother curated the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. She speaks five languages. The husband, by his own admission, thinks his wife would call him an “ignorant bastard, having spent her entire adult life trying to civilize me.”

They are opposites in many ways, but when they walk around the gallery, climb the stairs, and sit on a bench, they are, at once, of one mind, smitten and arrested, rooted in place by an image of a woman with her long brown hair scrunched up in a bun. She, *Kathryn in the Studio*, peers out a window with her left hand poised on her neckline where her wedding ring reflects the light from the sun. The museum’s assistant director notices them staring at the painting. They want to know more about it, about its creator.

The couple, celebrating twenty-one years, who rarely agree on much, agree at once. “We want this one,” he says.

“This,” of course, is by the artist living anonymously in a guesthouse on his friend’s property atop a hill in Vestal.

“This” is a Joseph Q. Daily.

Joseph Q. Daily approaches a two-story shed and opens the door. He walks by a wood furnace, up a set of industrial-looking stairs, and opens the door to his studio. The door appears out of nowhere, as if revealed by a magician’s sleight of hand. His easels are at work holding linens of commissioned portraits. The studio’s modesty reflects his lack of ego.

Cups of brushes and tubes of paint

sit on his desk. A shelf of books shows his admiration for John Singer Sargent, an acclaimed 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century portrait painter. On the same shelf is a book on how to use Dreamweaver, the Web design program, an artifact from Daily’s dalliance into a different mode of artistic expression. In stark contrast to his linens and oil paint is an equally beautiful, in its own right, iMac computer. A painting of art supplies hangs above the door, done by his late father, Don. Tacked to his wall is a dusty postcard of a woman with long brown hair, wrapped in a blanket, staring at the sky.

Daily has the rangy look of un-muscled point guard. He’s oddly professorial for someone born in 1981, with a full beard, glasses, and wavy brown hair gently painted with gray. He was born in Philadelphia and grew up in Lower Merion, Pennsylvania, the son of two illustrators. “I was surrounded by art supplies,” Daily says. “I was drawing from the youngest age.”

He was into *Peanuts* and comic books as he advanced through his teenage years. By the tenth grade he took a traditional representational drawing class, taught by his high school art teacher, Mrs. Susan Jewett. “You draw a white box, then a cylinder, then an egg, increasing the complexity. It became clear I had serious talent and I take it seriously.”

From that hatched a desire to “capture what you see as a means of expressing the self and cultivate it as tools for expression,” Daily says. He rejected the “isms,” the didactic tenets of art school, and while at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, he found his way to the classroom of Marvin Mattelson, an esteemed and award-winning portrait painter, the kind Daily would soon aspire to be. For Daily, something clicked under Mattelson’s tutelage, something about portraits, about the face, about “the spiritual impression” of the subject.

During class, the students asked Mattelson to paint, to break down a painting as he built it up. He acquiesced and readied his easel as the students

peppered him with questions about his design. The model arrived and all the students scurried back to their easels to paint. All but one: Joseph Q. Daily.

“Joe was the only one who watched me paint,” Mattelson says, “even though he was one of the best in the class. He’ll have years of experience [to paint], but this was something he could benefit from. He wrote everything down from that demonstration. Since that time, it’s part of my teaching methodology. Joe really changed the way I taught.”

Mattelson saw Daily had ability. That much was apparent, but he wasn’t singled out. Other students, early on, were just as good. “A lot of people think, ‘You’re so lucky, so talented, you have this talent and it just manifests on its own.’ There’s a quote by Michelangelo that says, ‘If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery, it would not seem so wonderful at all.’ Point is, it’s like Larry Bird. It’s not because he was so gifted; it was because he was a gym rat. He out-worked everyone.”

And what Mattelson finds unsettling nowadays is the lack of hunger: the one trait universal among the great. “That’s where greatness comes from, that quality. You can teach people to be really, really good. That spark. The hunger is there, as a teacher it amazes me. I don’t see that hunger. Joe definitely had that. I consider him to be one of the top students I’ve ever had.”

Daily sat down and started painting Liz, a friend, for his senior project. *Liz* traveled with Daily wherever he went. *Liz* sat next to him on the subway as he commuted from Brooklyn into Manhattan. Exiting the subway, *Liz* turned sideways and got stuck in the door, but Daily spun *Liz* and ushered her out the door and to class. “I had some adventures with that,” he recalled.

Mattelson coached the voice in Daily’s work. Mattelson would ask Daily why he painted a certain way for a certain class. Daily said it was because the teacher said so. Mattelson disapproved and quickly differentiated between rules

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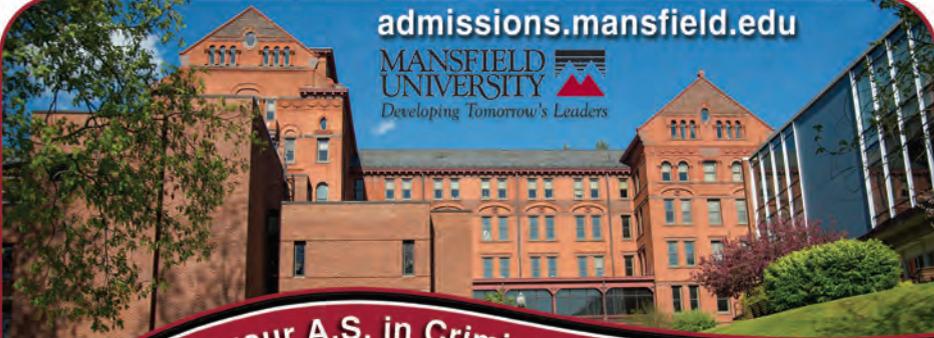
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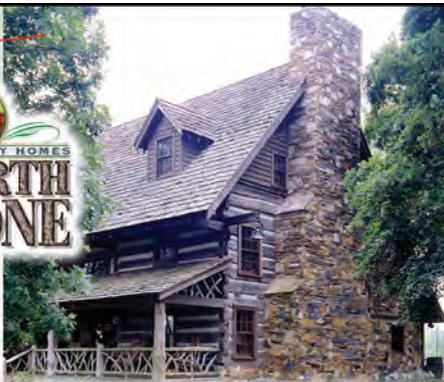


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and truths. “You cross a street during a red light,” he said. “That’s a rule, but the truth is you don’t cross the street when a car is coming. The light is symbolic. You have to look at the situation at hand. If the light is red and you cross, but someone is texting and misses the light, then it didn’t matter that you obeyed a rule. The truth is you got hit by a car.”

As a senior, Daily sold *Liz* to Liz’s family for a few thousand dollars, a validating experience that he could support himself in portraiture. It appealed to him in that he didn’t have to create, or be imaginative, he could just distill. Portraiture is the nonfiction of painting: the material is there to be scavenged and it’s up to the artist to distill it, refine it, broadcast it. It took the pressure off of having to go to the well for material.

Daily finds that the biggest mistake new painters make is to try and capture only what they see—adhering to rules—to not really *see* what they’re looking at. “You reproduce it in your mind already, a stock image of what you know you’re painting. A fir tree, this Christmas tree silhouette. You learn sensitive observing. You learn to see.”

And what he came to see, came to love, and, sadly, came to lose, was Kathryn, the dusty post card on the wall, maybe his best work of all.

Daily met Kathryn in 2004. Both were on the fringe of a shared circle of friends. They had shared interests and sensibilities for a time. Early in their relationship, Daily worked a few odd jobs: house painting, assisting a muralist, helping out in a furniture business. And he was at once struck by Kathryn’s father, Ben.

Ben has a Santa Clause beard and the look of royalty, even condescension, a lord casting a glance down upon a serf. An arresting presence.

Daily doesn’t feel compelled by many images. Clients commission him, he consults them, photographs them, poses them, paints them. Yet on this canvas,

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with Ben standing before a fireplace he built, Daily spent his own time, money, and paint to cement it. "It was something I felt compelled to do," he says.

The result was *Ben*, oil on linen, and it put Daily on the map. "My mom called and said it was accepted," as a finalist for Best of Show and The People's Choice Award at the Portrait Society of America's 2005 competition. It won both categories. Minnie Churchill, keynote speaker at the awards banquet and granddaughter-in-law to Winston Churchill, was so taken by Daily's work she called him on his cell phone two weeks later, while he was on a ladder painting a house, to commission him for portraits of her and her adult children...in England. Of course he would. "It was a wild ride," he wrote on his Web site.

But again, as with *Ben*, a painting that had no financial strings attached to it struck Daily when he saw Kathryn walking in a field on her father's property in the West Chester, Pennsylvania, area. She looked up at the sky, wrapped in a blanket, with the bamboo shoots she planted behind her. "That's it!" Daily said.

It stands in the window of the West End Gallery, a dominating image you see while walking down Market Street. Daily considers it one of his best, if not his truly best, painting. Titled *Portrait of the Artist's Fiancée in her Maidenhood*, it is an image that had one woman ask, "What do I have to sell in order to buy this painting?"

Jesse Gardner, assistant director of the West End Gallery, could hardly believe that Daily lived so near. She couldn't believe she had never heard of him, let alone seen his work, but, "We found him when we were supposed to," Gardner says.

She realizes that an art gallery can be intimidating to the uninitiated. "I ask people, 'Do you like it?' That's all you need to know, all that matters. It could be brushstrokes, colors, or childhood memories."

Daily's pieces, once she saw them in person, rooted her in place, "He's one of a kind. His talent is unbelievable. 'I have to call this artist!'" she said. "What I love is people who wouldn't ordinarily come in stop dead in their tracks. The work brings in visitors. People come in and see it, then they bring family and friends back."

It could be that Daily's work is strangely hypnotic and ethereal. Gardner stands before his *Crowned with Flowers*, a sepia portrait of a young woman, Kathryn. "This is so peaceful, monochromatic, simple," Gardner says. "The feeling of the piece, I like that. The figurative pieces, they're less formal. I have a hard time with a portrait of people I don't know. It's not as personal. This is more inviting."

Kathryn and Daily married in 2005, but divorced in 2010. "She moved on," he wrote on his Web site.

"A lot of people I've met who have been married and divorced are bitter about the idea and concept of marriage itself," Daily says. "I express to people that I'm certainly not bitter

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on the concept of marriage. Through painting our relationship survives as an inspiration to people.

"My paintings have a life of their own," Daily says. He has taken the postcard down from the wall and looks at it and admires it more for what it represents. Kathryn, in *Maidenhood*, is a vehicle, a conduit.

"I'm grateful for all the experiences we shared together," Daily says. "Obviously I don't believe the end of a marriage is divorce. It's not difficult to look back, especially with regard to my paintings. When I see a painting, I don't go back to that time in our life."

Daily still lives where they lived and lives the life they lived prior to their divorce. As Daily says, she did move on, and still he endures. "I remember meeting with a lady who did our taxes and she asked, 'You done with marriage?' 'No, no, no! I believe in love!'"

Jesse Gardner stands outside her gallery and stares with reverence and awe at *Maidenhood*, maybe the apotheosis of Daily's young career, no matter how long he chooses to paint. He gave up his Kathryns to West End. Gardner asked him, "Are you okay with this? Are you ready to sell these?"

"It's time for a new chapter," he told her. But it was even easier than that.

"It wasn't difficult at all," Daily says. "If you talk to ten different artists about giving away their work, they say it's like giving away their children. For me, I really don't think of it as I'm painting for myself. It's meant to be out there. [*Maidenhood*] was the centerpiece of our home for years. I wasn't planning on selling it but with our relationship ending, the painting has a new life.

"Kathryn essentially left pursuing her own path," Daily recalls. "I hope she finds what she's looking for. I wish her well, and I'm sure she wishes me well."

Gardner continues to admire *Maidenhood*. She stands with her arms folded, completely absorbed by the piece. She sees, illustrated in the painting, the

fundamental tenet that unites artists across all genres. "Whatever motivates and inspires an artist to create, it translates into that. It translates in the work. It can't be explained. There is this innate need to do what inspires them. You can tell when a piece comes in inspired on a deep level."

And, of course, *Maidenhood* is a deep portrait worth, in dollars, as much as a Chevy. "I love that she's lost in her own world," Gardner says. "I saw it online. She's gazing. I don't know where her thoughts are. She appears to be in a beautiful state. I love the peace with it, the grandeur, the size."

You won't read what Daily's meaning of the painting is here, what he wanted it to represent because that would corrupt your meaning of it and that can't be polluted by the artist's vision because that is his subjectivity. Once you know the creator's intent it trespasses on your own translation. It could mean less; it could mean more.

One person feels moved to the point of selling off other properties; another is turned off by the "Madonna-facation" of the painting. "That painting turned off my wife, this whole idea of almost putting a woman on a pedestal made her untouchable. I don't think any woman can stand up to that pedestal."

That was Will, a private collector, celebrating his twenty-first wedding anniversary with Natalya. They spent a lot of time staring at their first Daily. Their second, *Preparations for Spring*, depicts two women, Kathryn one of them, as they tend a birdhouse with a cat, Sam, by her feet. Will felt it was, "Very romantic, it reverberates with a sense of renewal. It's cold, it's springtime, but not so cold it hurts."

They hung it in their bedroom, along with the other Daily piece, and it acts as "window of the world, that the world is better."

Mountain Home contributor *Brendan O'Meara, of Saratoga, NY, is the author of Six Weeks in Saratoga: How Three-Year-Old Filly Rachel Alexandra Beat the Boys and Became Horse of the Year.*

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